3

DEI GRATIA

WORK ETHIC, GRACE, AND GIVING IN *INFINITE JEST*

don, *n.* 2: *Obs. rare*. A donation, gift.
—OED

WORKERS OF Wallace, unite; you have nothing to lose but your uniqueness. In this chapter I hardly seek to disagree with the critical consensus that *Infinite Jest*, in fusing techniques of avant-garde experimentation with elements of pathos and sincerity never before associated with postmodernism, marks a watershed in not just Wallace's career but the imperatives of contemporary fiction. At the same time, building on my first two chapters, I argue for substantial continuities between the Wallaces of the 1980s (especially in *The Broom of the System*) and 1996, including a preference for grounding his moral satires in figures associated with weight, work, and a respect for pragmatic, unintellectualized intuitions. Don Gately is the character who makes *Infinite Jest* a masterpiece: Wallace began the novel as early as 1986 and returned to it in 1988 and 1989; "none of it worked, or was alive," he writes, but then "in '91–'92 all of a sudden it did."[1] The book was catalyzed by Wallace's stay in early 1990 in Granada House, the model for Ennet House, but in particular the resident "Big Craig," a former burglar who became the basis for Gately and a major addition to the

novel-in-progress.[2] Like many critics of *Infinite Jest* (Elizabeth Freudenthal is one example),[3] I describe Gately as the exception to the novel's ethos of addiction, despair, and disembodiment, a man on the rise in comparison to Hal's deepening well of denial, but I distinguish Gately in terms—of work, weight, value, and unassuming virtues of gratitude and generosity—new to the proliferating discourse on Wallace's big book. The crucial act in *Infinite Jest* is working to raise one's felt value while respecting somatic, mental, and ecological limits and thus avoiding the trap that ensnares many—a belief in false forms of self-expansion and in the joke transcendence that is one vicious valence of the book's title. Such a jesting infinity lies in the falsely transcendent skies represented on the first edition's cover and in Tavis's waiting room at E.T.A., where "the wallpaper scheme was fluffly cumuli" and "overenhancedly blue sky, incredibly disorienting wallpaper" that makes Hal (in an echo of the ungrounded Lenore) feel "high-altitude . . . and sometimes plummeting" (*IJ* 509). The antidotes lie in Wallace's gospel of work but also in the new forms of alternative economy—new forms of work and living transaction—that he finds in the recovery methods of Alcoholics Anonymous.

As required by AA, Gately gets a "humility job" (*IJ* 361) as a janitor at the Shattuck Shelter for Homeless Males, where he cleans bathrooms, some of the men gathering behind him to "watch him jet feces off the shower-tiling, treating it like a sport and yelling encouragement and advice" (*IJ* 435). Gately's sober (though also quite comic) confrontation with the consequences of overindulgence lies in contrast to the book's many obsessive-compulsive cleaners (Avril, Joelle) and the absurd toxic-waste policy practiced in the Organization of North American Nations. There are also resonances of mythological heroism in Gately's labors: Burn identifies Gately with Heracles and his legendary twelve labors but does not mention the first of the penitential labors, the cleaning of the Augean stables by rerouting rivers, comically suggested in the shower scene.[4] For Wallace, Gately's job is an important source of growth: meaningful work has largely been lost as a practice and point of ethical reference in this society, and this novel demonstrates the power of becoming the "parents" doing the work of cleaning up after the wild party of postmodernism

(*CW* 52). Gately's narrative eventually centers on this sort of parental (house)work, more community oriented and less humiliating than cleaning showers, though often more frustrating: caring for the residents of Ennet House as a live-in counselor, including soothing the child addicts when they have bad dreams.

For Gately, read Gat——y, and for Don, read don in the mafia sense—that is, *Infinite Jest* rewrites the life of another man with a mob-connected past who is shot outside his house, Jay Gatsby. In *Girl with Curious Hair*, Wallace had dispersed across several stories his ambitious echoes of *The Great Gatsby*: of Faye he writes that her "cries rang out like money" (*GCH* 4), echoing Nick's famous line about Daisy Buchanan (née Fay). The ending of "Lyndon" rewrites *Gatsby*'s, while J.D.'s arches, "inclined like a child's severe eyebrows" over the horizon, rework T. J. Eckleburg's billboard eyes in "Westward," which also features a land speculator named Gatz (*GCH* 311). On the larger canvas of *Infinite Jest*, though, bidding to join the tradition of the Great American Novel (a capitalized cultural "dream" Lawrence Buell dissects using *Gatsby* and *Infinite Jest* as examples),[5] Wallace offers a positive outcome for his Gat——y: reconceiving the American story of opulence and inevitable crash, Wallace allows Gately to lay partial claim to a vast, redeeming wealth of a nonmonetary sort, centered on taking up the identity more thoroughly played on in his first name—the "don" as gift, the seventeenth-century definition given in my epigraph (again, "outdated," like the virtue of sincerity and the meaning of bedesman). Building on Mark's association with honored value, Don's payment for his humility takes the form of living currency that I unfold in this chapter around coinage and the galvanizing new Wallace subject of grace, the *Gratia* of my title. Through that idiosyncratic form of value Wallace seeks to counter the kinds of poisonous exchange that characterize not only the circulation of his title film but geopolitical and market formations in the neoliberal vein.

On the level of form, reading for value I also find partial confirmation for the bold claims Wallace made about the cohesiveness of his baggy monster. Of reviews calling the book excessive, he says, "There's nothing in there by accident."[6] "If it looks chaotic, good, but everything that's in there is in there on purpose" (*CW* 64). Echoing its author, Joseph Conte is

right to class *Infinite Jest* among postmodern novels that, rather than embracing chaos, "propose that out of the vortex of their disorderliness a capacity of self-organization may emerge." Such works "exhibit [great] surface complexity" but ultimately "reveal their principles of organization."[7] The dogged search for value production and a viable, sustainable model of self-expenditure—especially in relation to felt forms of nourishment and warmth—is an organizing principle allowing us to draw compelling through-lines from Hal's opening contortions to Gately's work and Fackelmann's ending windfall and Dilaudid binge. Moreover, as I argue in the chapter's conclusion, *Infinite Jest*'s meditations on its verbal economies and those of its characters give way to a vision of language as not just something encyclopedically weighty but as shared asset, as indivisible good.

Especially now as he vies for comparison to encyclopedic postmodern classics, mundane work, whether at Shattuck or Ennet, represents for Wallace a significant gap in the work of the predecessors who cast long shadows on the subject of Protestant America: Gaddis and Pynchon. In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon, showing malignant incursions of the Puritan vocabulary into American life, had pointedly named his protagonist Tyrone Slothrop, for sloth, a rejection of the Protestant call to work. Further credence comes in Pynchon's 1993 essay on sloth as a deadly sin, which almost entirely disregards the real impact of melancholia in a way Wallace never would, interpreting the state of *acedia* in terms of its anticapitalist and Luddite potential.[8] Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger write, "Calvinism's gospel was that, in [*Gravity's Rainbow*'s] phrasing . . . 'we are meant for work and government, and austerity.'"[9] The rest of the line they quote is even more critical of the call to work: work, government, and austerity "shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses," all things "found among the idle and mindless hours of the day."[10] Wallace, differing in his resistance to the capitalist order, sees such rebellious claims as exemplary of a 1960s social-liberation discourse that may have succeeded in "explod[ing] hypocrisy" but could not retain a positive value for the square values of discipline and work, which he continues to prize as fictional subjects (*SFT* 65).

Gaddis offers Wallace a more positive model on the possibilities of work. John Lingan, sounding as though he is analyzing *The Pale King*, writes

that for Gaddis, "work equaled an individual effort . . . to sort through the swarming cultural ephemera and create, with monastic persistence, something that no machine or business could adequately reproduce."[11] In an essay on American culture, Gaddis approvingly quotes Ernst Troeltsch's indictment of capitalism "'steal[ing] into the Calvinist ethic'" and distorting its meaning by regarding "'profit . . . as the sign of the Divine approval'" and of assurance of one's election.[12] Sykes in *Broom* spoke this language of profitable Christianity in only slightly exaggerated form. Characters in Gaddis's *J R* extend the argument with greater satiric force: "God damned Protestant ethic can't escape it have to redeem it," says Gibbs,[13] and another character laments that the "whole Protestant work ethic" has fallen prey to a "General Motors" philosophy of "utilitarian pragmatism" (*J R*, 530).[14] Wallace, too, I suggest here, sets out to redeem the Protestant ethic, though he does so by reinscribing the issues of American industriousness and utilitarianism (and the sadness of the slothful) in areas rarely touched on by Gaddis and other predecessors: psychological health in a pharmacological age, the spiritual implications of entertainment choices, and the general denigration of sentiment.

In chapter 1 I argued that Lenore embodied a baseline definition of work, energy, and weight lifting that could not be gainsaid, even by a decadent society. In *Infinite Jest*, the questions of how to rise and to lift (one's own) weight are endemic: how to grow, how to generate heat, how to be agential in a way objects are not. The story of a trainer dying locked in a sauna room, recounted ten pages from the end, recalls *Broom*'s greenhouse motif and alludes to the warp-speed cultivation of young people attempted at E.T.A. (*IJ* 971). As we will see, unbalanced and disabled figures drive the narrative, and a weight room is a key locale for wisdom and therapy. James's father counsels his son at the start of a devilish monologue to "see just how much force you need to start the [garage] door easy, let it roll up out open on its hidden greasy rollers and pulleys in the ceiling's set of spiderwebbed beams" (*IJ* 157). *Infinite Jest* looks intently at those dark, spiderwebbed spaces, trying to see precisely how the mechanism of the self and its rising (its opening up) works. A doppelgänger to Gately who also ends up hospitalized at St. Elizabeth's, Doony Glynn (read: D——on—— Gly——), provides a negative example on this score. He first appears in the text as

the filer of a fraudulent worker-compensation report, a Buster Keatonesque story (based on a decades-old joke) of lifting a load of bricks that testifies to his fall back into addiction (*IJ* 138–140). To establish the self, avoid relapse, and truly rise, one must actually work.

For his part, Hal believes that, rather than pulling on the pulley rope to lower one's emotional flag to half-mast, one can raise the pole itself, "to like twice its original height" (*IJ* 42). But with this unlikely feat, involving a signifier of the nation-state, he maintains a fantasy of feral growth, of manipulating the scale rather than actually changing the self, just as his country has Reconfigured the territories over which its flag flies rather than scale back. There are always in Wallace's corpus many paths to avoiding embodied relationships—their heat, their limits on derivable value, the work needed to sustain them—and nowhere is this more the case than in this sprawling novel.

In the first of this chapter's three major sections, I again, as with *Broom*, define the fictional world's prevailing relationships to value, and the economic ethos—for both persons and continents—aligned with abstracted and mathematicized value. This section culminates in an analysis of neoliberal "free trade" and another view of slavery according to Wallace. In the second major section I define the countervailing force of Gately and his connections to coinage, gifts, chance, and grace—all linked to elements of his work life that have been neglected in criticism focused on sincerity, irony, and limited aspects of the novel's spiritual themes. I then turn to Jonathan Lethem's gift aesthetics to complete this argument. In the concluding section I characterize the novel, major parts of which take place *on* Commonwealth (the Boston street), as a novel *of* commonwealth, unpacking Hal and Don's contrasting relationships to language as object of value, consumption, and inflation.

IN-FIELD AND ECONOMICS: VALUE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Let me enter into this book's philosophical conundrums by first mapping the ground. Enfield, an invented locale, is "one of the stranger little facts

that make up the idea that is metro Boston," a "kind of arm-shape extending north from Commonwealth Avenue and separating Brighton into Upper and Lower, its elbow nudging East Newton's ribs and its fist sunk into Allston" (*IJ* 240). Showing Enfield to be grounded not in space but the *Tractatus*esque "little facts that make up . . . idea[s]," the description registers the reduction of the body to two dimensions that runs rampant here as well as a sadistic aggression of fists, elbows, and an arm suggestive of the players' hypertrophied limbs at E.T.A., used in pursuit of the next "plateau" of their ranked value (*IJ* 116). For Enfield, we might read "In-Field," with field signifying the gaming arena or—as in *Everything and More*'s mentions of "number-fields" and "field theory" (216, 218)—an abstract collection of data, say, the set of complex numbers or rational numbers (in my terms, values). In this context, Erdedy comes first in the main plot sequence because his name, combining the German for earth (*erde*) with morphemes suggesting "already" and "dead," summarizes the Field- and addict-driven destruction of the lived-in world: as with LaVache's misreading of Hegel and J.D.'s panning "No," nature's ground has been obliterated by perception. Eschaton, which lays a map on top of a map, is another example: it depends, a long endnote says, on calculus's "Mean Value Theorem" (*IJ* 323), which can deal "with anything that varies within a (*definable*) set of boundaries"—including (in a telling contrast between mathematical and moral values) "a certain drug's urine-level range between Clean and Royally Pinched" (*IJ* 1024n123).

Hal is the spokesman for the intimate stakes of In-Field sorts of value. In one of the most pithy descriptions of depression that Wallace ever wrote, Hal, contemplating the disjunction between embodiment and math, "finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being—but in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne" (*IJ* 694). Burn notes that *joie*, happiness, is ironically evoked by the initials of Hal's suicidal father, James O. Incandenza (*Reader's Guide*, 55), but "hull" here is also a near-homophone of "Hal." In the gap between "Hal" and "hull" is the suggestion that his hull is in fact empty, a mere shell, containing no "human being." "*Value*" is, like

"*joie*," invoked as mention rather than use through the distancing power of italics, and the foreignness of "*joie*" (which would call for italicization anyway) subtly marks "*value*" too as distant and strange. *Value*, in sum, is a foreign word in *Infinite Jest*: it ought to be a stabilizing term, naming what fills the hull of the self. Yet, as with Lenore's weight, value slips away from being a felt state and into abstraction; self-worth becomes a mere number. The younger players at E.T.A. suffer in these same terms, though with less self-awareness: "The idea that achievement doesn't automatically confer interior worth," Wallace writes, "is, to them, still, at this age, an abstraction, rather like the prospect of their own death—'Caius is Mortal' and so on" (*IJ* 693).

Tracking the terms of value tells us Hal's inner narrative, his sad passage through external forms of achieved ranking. Winning a school competition rife with Field-type valuations (and recalling Julie on *Jeopardy!*), Hal feels "an LSD afterglow . . . some milky corona, like almost a halo of approved grace, made all the milkier by the faultless nonchalance of a Moms who made it clear that his value was not contingent on winning first or even second prize, ever" (*IJ* 999n76). "Almost a halo" plays on his name, and the almost-halo's "milky" makeup is an embodied doubling of the "value" that Avril, the unnourishing mother, clearly *is* withholding and making "contingent" (see here as well the students' correct suspicions that the milk at E.T.A. is a powdered substitute). As we see in these densely poetic examples and in what I termed the (hypo)theses of value in "John Billy" and "Westward," Wallace frequently writes "value" sentences designed to produce dissonance—especially when states of embodiment and love cause the dissonance.

All these lost relationships to an inhabited value are aligned with the loss of ground and balance throughout this relentlessly axiological novel—where LaVache's leglessness has become epidemic. With imagery of bodies rendered more grotesquely than anywhere else in Wallace, this balancing book reads as a collective search for ground and a stable relationship to it; a good subtitle would be "Philosophical Groundlessness and the Unbalanced Male." The Incandenza brothers are all unbalanced. An iteration of the vulnerable Achilles, Hal has an injured ankle that requires him to

do daily "therapy" (a multivalent noun here) in which he stands on one foot: the "balance" "worked muscles and ligaments in the ankle that were therapeutically unreachable any other way" (*IJ* 851). He plays at times "terribly ankle-conscious"—a phrase suggesting a root, inbuilt fragility that most repress to get through the game of life (*IJ* 454). Middle brother Mario needs a police lock to lean on, especially when he saddles his head with a Bolex camera (*IJ* 315). His "block feet" are "too short to be conventionally employed," a state that, together with his delicate spine, makes Mario, no addict, walk like "a vaudeville inebriate, body tilted way forward" (*IJ* 313). The eldest, Orin, abandons tennis and its asymmetrical arms but ends up with an oversized right leg; he is off balance and vulnerable when he raises the leg as high as possible to punt (the metaphorical meaning of which—deferring responsibility and action—is crucial). These three imbalanced sons descend from a tall man nicknamed "the Stork," a top-heavy animal with long, thin legs (*IJ* 238). The discovery with which he in effect dooms North American ecology, annular fusion, arises from an abstracted vision of connecting to the ground: a spinning door knob "perfectly schematized what it would look like for someone to try to turn somersaults with one hand nailed to the floor" (*IJ* 502).

Infinite Jest is also the story of murderous men who have played a "nihilistic" game leading to the loss of the use of their legs (*IJ* 1058n304). Containing meditations on "ground-rule[s]" (*IJ* 338) and nightmares about a "face in the floor" (*IJ* 252), this novel constructs highly physical versions of the terror of philosophical groundlessness, depicting bodies with absorbing precision. The claim of one young player about stressful rankings—"I know just where I stand at all times"—embodies a naïveté that makes the E.T.A. scenes tragic: none of these children really know where they stand, or how (*IJ* 112). Freudenthal's ("Anti-Interiority," 192) claim that *Infinite Jest* insists on "anti-interiority" as the path to psychological health (that is, "a subjectivity generated by the material world" and "divested from an essentialist notion of inner . . . life") misses the way Wallace's expressionist idiom, inspired by Kafka, uses bodily deformity to vivify inward states: imbalance and leglessness are not realistic symptoms of psychology so much as a cultivated language for the psyche all its own.[15] For Wallace, the meta-

physical again resides in the physical, where it can be exposed to absurdist fictional examination.

The Field-inspired sense of personal value determines as well the sad weightlessness the addict endures, as though she has ceded the felt value of her own substance to the drug itself (often called, with a telling capital, the "Substance" [*IJ* 201, 273, etc.]). One resonance of Gately's DG initials is the decigram, a common measure for drug sales, the "tenth of a gram" cocaine customers beg for (*IJ* 561) (though for a much more salutary DG, see below). "Weight" is also street slang for drugs in general, as when "yr-struly" speaks of "who else is holding weight in Enfield or Allston" (*IJ* 130). In moments of extremity, characters assert their own weightiness according to mathematical measure, as though they seek assurance of their solidity. Joelle, on the verge of attempted overdose, resorts to quantifiable values: "I am 1.7 meters tall and weigh 48 kilograms. I occupy space and have mass" (*IJ* 234). The dyne is a unit of force in physics, and with the surname van Dyne, Joelle, like Lenore, struggles to inhabit her identity and feel her own weight.

Thus when Hal says in the book's stark, one-line second paragraph, "I am in here" (*IJ* 3), rather than a statement of location, it is the cry "I EXIST," familiar from Wallace's Markson review (*BF* 83).[16] I hear in this remark "I . . . in-here" or "I inhere," meaning there is a substantialness to Hal's valueless self, to his "Empty Plenum" (the title of the Markson review). Note, too, that Hal's opening revisits Lenore's crisis of leglessness through subtle effects of word choice and grammar. "I am seated in an office," he begins, turning a statement of ontology—"I am"—into a passive verb form, with "office" (as in bureaucratic role or function) reinforcing his distance from agency (*IJ* 3). Wallace, in Hal's review of his sitting poses, travesties verbs that the rest of the novel will show to be bereft of their traditional ardor: "I *believe* I appear neutral"; "I have *committed* to crossing my legs I *hope* carefully" (*IJ* 3; italics mine). How to stand and bear weight in such a world? How to believe, commit, and hope? How to avoid "feeling as though . . . every axiom of your life turned out to be false"?[17] When Hal tries to "rise" from his chair and incites "horror" in the administrators with his voice before one makes him "taste floor" (*IJ* 12), we see that

this encyclopedia of axiology, working back in time from this mysterious breakdown, will occur within that "agonizing interval between something falling off and its hitting the ground" discussed in the introduction (*GCH* 165). In lieu of a traditional *agon* of novelistic conflict, this agonizing interval is where we do interpretive work, identifying the opportunities Hal and others have to find ground and value. Can they do so by working? Can they do so by exchanging value for value? The next two sections address these questions in turn.

ECONOMIES OF SELF: THE PROTESTANT DRUG ETHIC

With all its troubled illustrations of internality, *Infinite Jest* depicts a quest not just to consume but to *contain*, to store up and accumulate, as though a concavity might be permanently filled. Bombardinis abound. But such quests for containment are often explored, ironically, through the well-managed appetites of the Protestant work ethic—a language applied, surprisingly, to the "discipline" of drug and alcohol use. Erdedy sets the pattern with his approach to (quitting) marijuana: he will "smoke the whole 200 grams . . . in four days . . . all in tight heavy economical one-hitters off a quality virgin bong." Like a good worker he will "start[] the moment he [wakes] up" and proceed with "discipline and persistence and will" (*IJ* 22).

Timothy Aubry also recognizes Erdedy's "injection of a Protestant ethic" into his addictive behavior (calling it "a dubious proposition"), but the reach of this thinking in the novel is tremendous, extending well beyond this early section.[18] In another scene of secret smoking, Hal's one-hitter has "the advantage of efficiency: every particle of ignited pot gets inhaled." The principle is even set off as a balanced economic equation: "Total utilization of available resources = lack of publicly detectable waste" (*IJ* 49). This is a family trait: James's alcoholic father tells his future alcoholic son in 1960 that his flask has "never had an errant drop, not drop *one*, spilled out of it" (except, of course, into him) (*IJ* 161). This patriarch speaks highly of economy in all things, from the "gentle and cunning economy behind" (*IJ* 158) Marlon Brando's actions to "maximum economy and minimum effort" in tennis (*IJ* 165).

The journalistic piece Wallace wrote with *Infinite Jest* in press, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," is sometimes used (for example, by Holland)[19] as an encapsulation of the novel's satire of pleasure industries. But the essay also contains less overt evidence of Wallace's belief in the Protestant work ethic as a counterforce. His persona expresses faux-humble anxiety over his assignment's cost to *Harper's*, and he keeps fumblingly trying to connect with workers—his diligent housekeeper and Tibor the waiter, for whom Wallace has "an almost reverent respect" (*SFT* 259). But the ship erases and distorts labor. Again proving he is in dialogue with Pynchon, Wallace sees an unearned Election everywhere, with the hard-working "preterite staff liv[ing] in mortal terror" of their bosses (*SFT* 266n13). "A Supposedly Fun Thing" views life under capitalism as innately eviscerating of workers' emotional states, as in the relentless "Professional Smile" Wallace laments (*SFT* 289n40). He understands, in his constant attention to the selling of the self, what Hardt and Negri call the "immaterial labor" of manipulated affects that neoliberalism demands.[20] In this environment, the Protestant work ethic serves superficial maintenance of a capitalist dream: "It's not an accident [cruise ships are] all so white and clean, for they're clearly meant to represent the Calvinist triumph of capital and industry over the primal decay-action of the sea" (*SFT* 263). Those on board the *Nadir* need awakening to the reality of work like Gately's at Shattuck.

Work at E.T.A. is really working out, that ritual of postmodern gym culture and body perfection that defined the 1980s–2000s U.S. zeitgeist in which Wallace wrote. Mark Bresnan, studying the novel under the title "The Work of Play," argues persuasively that tennis at E.T.A., far from "liberating," becomes "surprisingly predictable" and leads to "anxiety and paranoia."[21] Bresnan does not tie such tendencies with play to the broader depiction of work in the book, however. Seen as a place of work, E.T.A. is obsessed only with potential, its name suggesting a flight not yet landed—still showing its Estimated Time of Arrival—and thus more states of Heideggerian thrownness. E.T.A. defines the youngsters' economic agency primarily as practice repetitions in service of an extended, all-or-nothing gamble on making "the Show" (*IJ* 53). Ted Schacht, suffering from Crohn's

disease, is a telling comparison for Hal and others on this point: Schacht disturbs classmates because his disease forces a confrontation with the body's porousness (and with feet: Hal broods on Schacht's "enormous purple shower thongs under the door of the [bathroom] stall" [*IJ* 103]). More importantly, though, Schacht's resignation to steady work as a dentist (this text's version of accounting) shadows Hal and others as they strive for a more glamorous adulthood—and Hal would do well to attend to the health of his teeth too (*IJ* 117).[22]

As the analogies between tennis and capitalist striving mount, we imagine the E.T.A. players as young workers who have difficulties—and who are systematically kept from—balancing their massive physical exertions with mental labor on the question of what all this body-work is for, the "question[] of *why*" (*IJ* 900). From this perspective, the weight-room guru Lyle becomes a sinister and parasitic figure. Associated with the underground and foundational, Lyle speaks pithy truths, among them a formula on work, lifting, and respecting embodied limits: "Let not the weight thou wouldst pull to thyself exceed thine own weight" (*IJ* 128). A floating listener and therapist, Lyle anticipates Shane Drinion in *The Pale King* and is, Holland writes, a "spokesperson for positive self-forgetting" ("'The Art's Heart's Purpose,'" 240n11). Yet note that Lyle's weight room is a scene for Himself's continued drinking (*IJ* 379), and compared to the mentors of AA, Lyle, his tongue out, is an invasive and suspect figure. His licking practice underscores the strange economy that keeps E.T.A. running: he upends the cliché of living off the sweat of one's brow; he in a sense lives off the sweat of *others'* brows, children's, a byproduct of their difficult thinking, however sauna induced the sweat seems. For while he does help the youngsters think, their capacities for it are underdeveloped compared to the outsized anxieties their obsessions produce. Lyle is an heir to Zusatz's hewing and has as a namesake the also levitating Lyle Bland of *Gravity's Rainbow* (290–291), Slothrop's Freemason uncle, responsible for selling his nephew for Pavlovian experimentation. Are the children of E.T.A., many essentially orphaned by negligent parents, new kinds of test subjects, expressive of their own culture's dark excesses? In Wallace's world, it seems so.

ECONOMIES OF NATIONS: "FREE TRADE," NEOLIBERALISM, AND UTILITARIANISM

Work is undermined in *Infinite Jest*; so too is trade, whether with other persons or other nations. Living transactions seem difficult or impossible to achieve. Individuals' frantic attempts to enclose the self are reflected in the fates of countries and vice versa: the geography of annular fusion—with borders Concave or Convex—takes on the vocabulary of the mirror in which the individual regards herself and finds the internal externalized, distorted, and seemingly manipulable. Examining this motif, Paul Quinn, in a Jamesonian reading, sees in O.N.A.N. "a society that, subsumed under capital" and exchange value, "cannot relate to anything outside itself," and Heather Houser, focusing on environmental terrorism and border manipulation, argues that the novel urges "not detachment from but attachment to other people and our surroundings."[23]

Reconfiguration also shows Wallace again refracting economic history close at hand. If 1980s economic crises are a backdrop against which to judge his first two books, in *Infinite Jest* he parodies NAFTA, major news in that 1991–1992 period in which the novel came "alive" again—including in the 1992 presidential campaign, the moment when the Democrat Bill Clinton's acceptance of the pact proved that neoliberalism would hardly be limited to Republican presidencies. Wallace gestures toward his own use of NAFTA headlines when he comments on fellow quasi-historian Mario's "parodic device of mixing real and fake [articles and] historical headers" in the service of "exposition" (*IJ* 391). Continuing in the wariness of a consumption-driven economy, Wallace essentially claims that the contemporary United States has no national product to export in a trade agreement but its own massive amounts of waste, the side effect of (and, in a recursive structure, fuel for) Himself's annular fusion.

Bradley J. Fest and Daniel Grausam historicize *Infinite Jest* as a product of the early 1990s and the confusions of the immediate post–Cold War period (thus, both discuss Eschaton and Himself's military work).[24] But while it seems a stretch to call this inwardly drawn novel a true follow-up

to *Gravity's Rainbow* or forerunner of *Underworld* as a nuclear text, the free trade promised in NAFTA's name cuts to philosophical and metafictional cores of Wallace's book, which coheres as an encyclopedia of coercive and death-oriented transactions and exchanges, from Erdedy's thwarted opening marijuana deal to "yrstruly's" trip to Hung Toy's, Pemulis's acquisition of the DMZ, and larger-scale developments. "Westward" stripped away the conventional buffering of money in order to confront grain, credit, and persons themselves as media of exchange. A focus on trade in *Infinite Jest*, not just commodification, allows Wallace similar liberties in assessing what can return in an exchange (always, it seems, some version of Freud's repressed). And making the reader probe networks of complicated exchange and return militates against the subliminal "messages" Wallace says he hears in TV: "'relax, we're going to give to you, you don't have to give anything back, all you need to do is every so often go and buy this product.'"[25]

The Entertainment, despite being an extreme embodiment of the consumer product, is notably never bought or sold for money or treated as a normal commodity as it circulates through the book; rather it is always unwittingly stolen, given freely (and sadistically), or "barter[ed]" (*IJ* 481). Someone (probably a vengeful Orin) sends it to the Middle Eastern medical attaché from Phoenix with the message "*HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!*" ("the medical attaché knows quite well that the English word *anniversary* does not mean the same as *birthday*," underlining the moment as a "gift"-giving occasion [*IJ* 36]). Elsewhere what we presume is the film becomes "barter" and, in a further link to annular waste, garbage: in a well-hidden transaction, Sixties Bob gets from Bertrand Antitoi a lava lamp and apothecary's mirror for the DMZ and a "waste bag" of cartridges (*IJ* 482).

NAFTA, negotiated throughout the late 1980s and ratified in December 1992, is widely seen as a signature extension of the logic of neoliberalism from the Reagan-Bush years into the Clinton era. As James McCarthy writes regarding the deregulatory and antistate logic behind such agreements, "These common neoliberal prescriptions [are] contributions to an overarching goal of increasing the flexibility and profitability of capital." McCarthy also notes the dire effects of such agreements for environmental regulation and health,[26] which Wallace toys with in depicting the Great

Concavity. NAFTA has been in place for several years already in the future setting of *Infinite Jest*; getting Canada to agree to be part of O.N.A.N. required a threat to make NAFTA "NULL," suggesting that the trade treaty's market success has overtaken decisions of sovereignty—a neoliberal effect (*IJ* 391). Domestically, the administration of Gentle, a Reagan figure who brings entertainment principles to bear in his presidency, is neoliberal to the core, with the government aiming to get a "'PIECE OF THE ACTION'" by nationalizing InterLace and selling the commonwealth value of the calendar itself through Subsidized Time (*IJ* 392). Freedom in such an environment is reduced to consumer decision making and made dependent on "appeals to an American ideology committed to the *appearance of freedom*" (*IJ* 1031n164). Reconfiguration, another historical pastiche, makes numerous allusions to past political flashpoints that have now all been subsumed by market logic: Nazi imperialism ("O.N.A.N.ite Anschluss" [*IJ* 421]); the Civil War (Lincoln's "Greater-Good-of-the-Union" decisions [*IJ* 402]); George H. W. Bush's broken 1988 "Read my lips" antitax pledge (Gentle: "Look into my eyes: no new [revenue] enhancements" [*IJ* 441]); and, with this last, even an uncanny prophecy of a future political meme ("Tea-party," the Secretary of Defense says of fears of a "tax revolt" over high-cost waste disposal [*IJ* 441]). The only question left for Gentle is how dubious governmental schemes "can be sold to the public": political persuasion has bowed to market principles (*IJ* 403).

Wallace excels at finding the longstanding philosophical values beneath topical contemporary expressions (consider his ability to read so much civic history through a single year's debate about tax policy). As I noted in the introduction, in *Infinite Jest* his object of intense and merciless scrutiny is the American religion of utilitarianism underlying the neoliberal. In debating Marathe, Steeply consistently advocates utilitarianism, whether the subject is indivisible soup or not. In the A.F.R.'s "malice" Steeply can see "no agenda or story," a metafictional point about Americans' antinarrative reduction of intentionality to sheer profit motives, not ardor, political, religious, or otherwise. Thus he wants from the A.F.R. "some set of ends we can make sense of . . . Then it's just business . . . We know which end is up when it's business" (*IJ* 422). Wallace appears to have considered the names

Inge (= ingot? or the start of "ingest"?) and Slott (as in what coins go in, at casinos in particular) before settling on Steeply, a name suggesting a steeple and thus the American church of economic utility.[27] A novel fundamentally "about belief" (Burn, *Reader's Guide*, 63), *Infinite Jest* is especially interested in those quasi-religions that go unacknowledged because to explore their worshipful stances, as Marathe does in discussing the etymology of "fanatic" (*IJ* 106–107), would disturb the notions of free will that undergird definitions of the sovereign liberal subject.

Steeply's name also suggests the steeply sloped yield curve of returns on investments, which are often rendered in terms of mathematical function as Y(t), or yield over time—hence a "steep Y" (= Steeply?). Thus does the Field-driven logic of abstracted curves produce dissonance with actual ground, seen clearly as well in the "cardioid" building curves that have replaced real hearts at E.T.A. (*IJ* 983n3). Steeply's difficult ascent in his high heels to the "outcropping or shelf about halfway up" (*IJ* 88) the incline in his first scene tells us that at stake in his dialogue with Marathe is the American response to a leveling of economic yields, a reconciliation with the impossibility of endless boom, perhaps keenly on Wallace's mind as he wrote in the recession years of the early 1990s that would lead Clinton to campaign against Bush on the slogan "It's the economy, stupid." The specter of diminishing returns looms everywhere in the novel, from drugs to tennis. From the "shaved[-]flat" hilltop perch of E.T.A., another plateau (and one ironically reminiscent of Winthrop's city on a hill), these players, as representative Americans, have nowhere to go but down (*IJ* 79).

"A STRANGE KIND OF SLAVERY"

It must be noted, though, that the novel spurns identification of Marathe with antiutilitarianism, giving us, for instance, his gruesomely sadistic murder of Lucien Antitoi, punctuated by the multivalent word "*In-U-Tile*" (*IJ* 488). A keen understanding of U.S. economic values does not necessarily lead Marathe ("basically a fascist," Wallace says [Wallace and Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 157]) to see utility as a moral dead end. So too, given

his wheelchair-bound state, Marathe is far from immune to his own criticism when he indicts the "fanatic of desire" as "a slave to your individual subjective narrow self's sentiments; a citizen of nothing . . . You stand on nothing. Nothing of ground or rock beneath your feet. You fall; you blow here and there"—all riffs on the leglessness and, ultimately, valuelessness the A.F.R. encapsulate (*IJ* 108).[28] Describing the many variations on this "lost" state takes Wallace hundreds of pages, so let me focus, in the context of work and economic subjectivity, on slaves: "the slave who believes he is free," as Marathe says. "The most pathetic of bondage" (*IJ* 108). Wallace again seeks idiosyncratic variations on Hegelian bondage, a difficult state to transcend in the course of self-making. Marathe's comments reflect Wallace's own in a 2003 interview: "systems that work very well in terms of selling people products . . . do not work as well when it comes to educating children or helping us help each other know how to live," says Wallace. The "feeling of having to obey every impulse and gratify every desire" is "not happiness"—it is, rather, "a strange kind of slavery."[29]

While *Infinite Jest* obviously develops around analogies between addict and consumer, less obvious is the role played by slavery in defining the interface between the two. Wallace portrays the addict as one who lacks true economic agency to the point of being a slave—to being, in my terms, one who receives no value at all in return for his work. In a climactic realization, Hal notes, "The original sense of addiction involved being bound over, dedicated, either legally or spiritually. To devote one's life, plunge in" (*IJ* 900). These definitions were once the novel's starting point: an early typescript begins, in a Melvillean mode, with a set of dictionary entries for "Addict" and "Addiction." With spaces left for the phonetic pronunciations (to be filled in later by hand), the first entry reads:

> **'Addict—**( ) tr.v., To devote or give (oneself) habitually or compulsively. Used with to.—n. ( ) One who is addicted, especially to narcotics[Latin addictus, "given over," one awarded to another as votary or slave, past participle of addicere, to award to.' American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, New College Edition[30]

Here, the slave meaning, which merely shadows Hal's rendition in the published text, is explicit. At the etymological roots from which Wallace built his axiological narratives, his addicts, whatever their drug, are slaves, unable to secure value and subject to transactions in which it is they who are bought and sold (the *OED* has as meanings of the Latin *addicere* "to deliver, award, yield; . . . make over, sell").[31] This dependence of drug culture (and, by the book's logic, consumer capitalism) on transacting a person's body calls forth Wallace's renewed efforts to propose the human as currency for transacting in a different, salutary sense, as we will see with Gately.

Wallace provides no shortage of masters to underscore the general sense that many here are enslaved: the "Master" (*IJ* 489) copy of the Entertainment so many seek, generations of Eschaton "game-master[s]" (*IJ* 171), and the grim meanings derivable from Himself's former title of "Headmaster" (*IJ* 79)—the suggestion that he embedded the Entertainment in his own head, his enslavement to his mind, and so on. Add to these the numerous images of prisons (Orin under a bell jar, Gately in Billerica, many iterations of spiderweb and cage), and our sense grows that the fundamental state for Wallace's subjects is to be "bound over," in bondage.

A hallmark of historical typologies of slavery is the denial of the slave's right "to form contracts" and make legally meaningful promises.[32] Wallace thus registers the infuriating effects of the addicts' lack of agency in their desperate appeals to contract language, now rendered with greater emotional texture than in *Broom*'s use of the trope. One Ennet House resident raises the contractual to avoid the accepted meaning of AA's key identifier, also echoing the language of being "bound": "I'm simply asking you to define 'alcoholic'. . . . Is it *denial* to delay signature until the vocabulary of the contract is clear to all parties to be bound?" (*IJ* 177). Gately, by contrast, expresses skepticism that contracts work at all for recovering addicts: "The idea of a person in the grip of *It* being bound by a 'Suicide Contract' . . . is simply absurd," he thinks of Kate Gompert, because it "will constrain such a person only until the exact psychic circumstances that made the contract necessary in the first place assert themselves" (*IJ* 697).[33] The addicts and some of their caretakers cling to the contractual because it seems to allow for a set of principles that might prove manipulable because they are less

than grounded, less than axiomatic. Geoffrey Day recognizes this: "AA's response to a question about its axioms, then, is to invoke an axiom about the inadvisability of all such questions" (*IJ* 1002n90). At the same time, Wallace sees a general deracination of the liberal subject in these failures of contract, part of the novel's general anatomy of degraded freedom and other gateways to the soft fascism that first emerged in "Westward," emblematized here by the Gentle administration's reliance on the "*Totalitarian's Guide to Iron-Fisted Spin*" (*IJ* 404).[34]

The decline of all those crucial capacities that the enslaved addict shows in negative—capacities for contract, consent, devotion, and giving (of) oneself—might be traced along many paths in the novel: the unraveling of the verb *commit*, for instance, in Hal's worries over posture and Erdedy's repeated claim that he has "committed himself" (*IJ* 21) to his smoke-out, an early trend that the extended description of AA speaking "Commitments" tries to reverse (*IJ* 343). Hal also summarizes another aspect of slavery in climactic ruminations that occur, appropriately, on the floor: "We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly" (*IJ* 900). We might fill in "for free" after his obliterative "giving our lives away," linking his formulations back to slavery and lack of value. On the list of "object[s]" of this summative transaction—this so-called giving—from the diseased postmodern self, a human being ("some other person" [*IJ* 900]) enters only as an afterthought. What other forms of commerce for the self are possible? Enter Don Gately—and with him new forms of currency, work, and giving with which to make such transactions living, rather than compulsive erasures of life.

COINS OF GRACE

What's in your wallet? In *Infinite Jest*, more than that credit-card slogan suggests. Replying to the desperate quest to accumulate and building on tropes pioneered by Gaddis, the novel depicts uncanny wallets and purses that follow on Lenore's lottery-ticket-laden one, in most cases displacing the

presumed contents—money—with materials that have life-or-death value. Early on, a news article describes someone later revealed to be cross-dressing Poor Tony snatching a purse that holds a woman's artificial heart, which "ferried life-giving blood" to "her living, active body"—a living transaction indeed. The woman gives chase, yelling out "She stole my heart!", and passersby smile (*IJ* 143). Along these same lines, in portraying drugs' self-destructive pleasures and death by entertainment, Wallace registers an undoing of rational-choice theory and of the supposed appeal to self-interest and enhanced pleasure in new products. For instance, discussing videophony, he notes a "queer kind of self-obliterating logic in the microeconomics of consumer high-tech" (*IJ* 145). "Self-obliterating" has a double meaning here, like the one Wallace recognizes in "self-denial" in his Kafka essay: the self is the real casualty in the clash of narcissism and high-tech that obliterates videophony (*CL* 63).

Human consciousness, no embodiment of *homo economicus*, often resists so-called rational value, and in a novel making Menippean satiric use of quasi-scholarly essays (on TV heroes [*IJ* 140–142], on the roots of the A.F.R. [*IJ* 1055–62n304]), the analyses of videophony and the end of broadcast advertising (411–418) become Wallace's body-centered replies to the case studies of his undergraduate economics training (the account of tongue scrapers on TV arises as a memory of a "mammoth research paper" by Hal [*IJ* 411]). We might even regard the central conceit of the Entertainment, regarded in less fantastical terms, as an essay in economic theory, with the film an example of "inelasticity of demand," the concept Wallace defines in a 2006 interview: "the ideal piece of entertainment would be something that people would want to see over and over and over again and pay for each time. The analogy for me is . . . narcotics or addictive drugs."[35]

But monetary value itself, not just the products it purchases, is where the radical instability truly lies. Throughout his career, Wallace sought those seams within systems of externalized value where seemingly iron-clad rules of quantification and accumulation broke down. Having written of people as pounds, kopeks, and marks, in notes for *Infinite Jest* he pens intriguing paragraphs about yet another minimum unit of currency: the penny. As its materiality eclipses its role in exchange, the penny undoes

many assumptions about value, coming to stand for the abject human. Again, Wallace dwells in the axiological realm of assessing objects' glow rather than the abstract system that asserts their value:

> Pennies are about the most interesting unit of currency. They buy nothing, really, so they're less like a medium of exchange than just dun red objects. Other monies are so pregnant with possibility the physical aspect of bill and coin is lambent. Other money flickers, physically. Pennies sit there. They are metal lozenges and have weight. They fill dresser-top jars that become tough to lift. Banks disdain them, even, unless rolled and encased like sausage.
>
> Pennies are most interesting however because their primary value is that they keep you from getting more pennies. You either get rid of them or you get more. Woe bedite [*sic*] the penniless at point of purchase? Totals are always like $16.01 or $1.17. Darn, says the customer, I have no pennies. The cashier grins, happy to get rid of some pennies.
>
> Pennies and their weird inverse value are a powerful metaphor for something about human beings. It's not like pennies are like love, or little bits of your soul. They're a little like a kind of aggression, right?—Direct it outward lest it come your way but not exactly. Can you think what pennies are like? I'll pay you . . .[36]

This remarkable fragment defines a twisted "aggression" of giving away that structures much of *Infinite Jest*, in particular the "U.S.A.'s Experialistic 'gift'" to Canada (the whole pennies passage might be read, alongside Reconfiguration and the giving of the Entertainment, as an allegory of the sadistic generosity that besets those with low conceptions—just one cent—of self-worth) (*IJ* 58). At the base of the monetary system, its smallest constituent unit is not a stable building block but an inversion of the accumulation the system supposedly codifies, a "weird inverse value." In its suggestion that "giving" money leads to antivalue and that humans use small change to mask deeper issues, these paragraphs also form a foundation for the spiritual parable of Barry Loach begging "Touch me, please" but finding that people "substitute[] abstract loose change for genuine fleshly contact" (*IJ* 970).

While the pennies passage does not appear in the published novel, its spirit—and its reduction of a "medium of exchange" to "dun red objects"—often seems present. *Infinite Jest* periodically underscores currency as simply material signifier, subject to a displacement by the organic transactions—the shared human value—it ideally represents. Regarding Pemulis's relationships with Mario and Hal, for instance, the text warns, "friendship at E.T.A. is nonnegotiable currency" (*IJ* 155). An unidentified Ennet House voice says in a story that seems related to the pennies writing, "Our cult burned money for fuel. . . . We used Ones," with the cult leader, the "Semi Divine One," feeding a stove (*IJ* 729). James sees drops of his father's sweat as "small dark coins" (*IJ* 499), and Bruce Green's punched nose emits "coins of blood" (*IJ* 618)—both associations of coinage with the porous body and reminiscent of the "coins of water" that resemble "cancres" in "John Billy."

Wallace questions, in *Infinite Jest* more than ever, the value inhering in wealth. Throughout, a person's value and his social status are severed in favor of an understanding of self-value that must be built metaphysically, from the ground up. Poor Tony, for instance, is a homeless thief who wears a feather boa and heels and, never receiving help, ends up drying out from heroin addiction in a bathroom. Decoded as poor/toney, his name says much about this world: beneath signifiers of glamour, an inner poverty abides. The name of Aubrey deLint echoes the Boston street slang (presumably invented by Wallace) for having no money in your pockets, "*sporting lint*" (*IJ* 202). But deLint's deficiency is not of money but of three-dimensional standing and spine, that rarest of Wallace commodities: Hal "sometimes cannot quite believe [deLint] is even real, and tries to get to the other side of [him], to see whether [he] has a true z coordinate or is just a cutout or projection" (*IJ* 460). To exist in this world is to lie somewhere on an external scale of valuation, often monetary. The question becomes how to take the self's coin and express with it some other form of value.

D.G.

To answer that question, I return to Gately. Throughout, coins point to his search for value. In the earliest passage about him, Wallace begins a pattern

of rare-coin collections, rare-coin shops, and flipped coins in all his subsequent fictional works, portraying Gately the thief unconsciously hunting out not just any commodities but the one that mediates exchange. Gately's burglary of the ADA's house nets (notwithstanding the opportunity to pull the tainted-toothbrush gag) "a coin collection and two antique shotguns" (*IJ* 56), and before being gagged, Guillaume DuPlessis, the Quebecois leader, tries to tell Gately in French of "some antique pre-British-takeover Quebecois gold coins" hidden behind a painting (*IJ* 58). Late in the novel Gately will express "hate[]" for a drug-dispensing South Asian doctor who has "a weirdly classically white-type face you could easily imagine profiling on a coin" (*IJ* 885). But Gately must mature in relationship to value to gain the right to reinscribe the faces of coins; through such growth Wallace mediates the person-centered currency his books, in effect, issue to readers.

The passages describing Gately's indoctrination into AA (*IJ* 343–367 and, with some interruptions, 367–379) have been frequently mined by critics, especially those tackling irony and sincerity.[37] This montage is subliminally concerned with AA's displacement of typical economic relationships in favor of an absolute value that cannot be accounted for in human ledgers—as if Wallace again proposes that eschewing irony is intertwined with adopting, with honoring, an unacknowledged kind of human currency and semantic value. As the AA scenes begin, in contrast with Hal's meditation on "giv[ing] our lives away," Wallace writes of the twelfth step of "Giving It Away," engaging in the network of speaking Commitments, as "a cardinal Boston AA principle. The term's derived from an epigrammatic description of recovery in Boston AA: 'You give it up to get it back to give it away,'" with sobriety itself "less a gift than sort of a cosmic loan" to be paid "forward" (*IJ* 344). Wallace draws together his images of the ritual of shared nourishment, the divine, and the fiduciary by locating these moments of sincere speech in "the Provident's cafeteria" (*IJ* 344). Provident here names a nursing home, but it is more often a name for a bank. As Aubry argues, in Wallace's AA "every act spreads its value in all directions," making "self-interest and generosity . . . symbiotic partners" (*IJ* 108).

These grand terms of rewritten value also find reflection in micromotifs, centered on Gately's wallet, that prove more practical, buffers against what could become an unreachable AA imperative to generosity. Building on the

image of a heart in a purse, Wallace has AA veterans "give [Gately] their phone numbers on the back of their little raffle tickets," which he carries "in his wallet" (*IJ* 353). The image, hearkening back to Lenore's lottery tickets, combines communication (phone numbers) with luck (the raffle). The numbers amount to a physical instantiation of "The Gift of Desperation," since if you are a new initiate who has it, you "carry [these] numbers talismanically in your wallet" (*IJ* 354). Wallace (ever metafictional) aligns the creation of his huge, decentered act of communication—*Infinite Jest* itself—with such contingencies by making the raffle prize a copy of "the Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (which, appropriately, the winner gives away to someone newer) (*IJ* 360). If Wallace links artistic success with winning the lottery, getting sober seems to work in the same contingent way, not entirely under agential control—as does the writing of the "Big Book" that emerges from the experience.

Less ennobling displacements of value are afoot in the pivotal AA passage as well. A hefty Irishman at an AA meeting says of "his first solid bowel movement in adult life," after getting sober, "'Twas a sone so wonefamiliar at t'first ay tought ay'd droped me wallet in t'loo" (*IJ* 351). Working with abject materials, Wallace often pursues the implications of Freud's famous claim that the seeming antitheses of gold and feces are united in the unconscious through the pleasure the child takes in both excreting and retaining a "precious" substance; "gold," Freud writes, "is seen in the most unambiguous way to be a symbol of faeces."[38] In Wallace's hands this conjunction militates against seeing money as a cold object or abstraction. In this AA speech, the wallet in the toilet not only denigrates the monetary but gestures toward the liberation of repressed, unconscious material occurring throughout these AA stories of traumatic origins.

Initials continue generating meaning for Wallace here. The joke meaning of Hal's HI initials is that he is high all the time, but there is also a sacred meaning available to him, an eastern variation on his incandescence: in Japanese Buddhism, the character transliterated as "ka" or "hi" means fire, one of five elements and associated physically with body heat and mentally with passion.[39] Gately's DG has sacred possibilities as well, for the letters

point to his most important coin association, an abbreviation seen, among other places, on the obverse of the British pound: along the edge it reads, "ELIZABETH II DG REG FD." The Latin phrase abbreviated here is "*Dei Gratia Regina Fidei Defensor*"—"By the grace of god, Queen and defender of the faith." A more common shortening (on the Canadian quarter, for instance) is simply the monarch's name and "DG," *Dei Gratia*. Wallace also gets meaning out of the initials' reversal, the GD signifying the opposite of divine grace, "God-damned": thus Gately encounters doppelgängers to overcome in the AA resister Geoffrey Day (*IJ* 1000–1003n90) and Guillaume DuPlessis (whose death from asphyxiation is both a kind of self-murder for Gately and a foreshadowing of his hospital muteness). These initial-based readings might seem mere coincidences, except that *Infinite Jest* makes much of the meaning of the phrase *Dei Gratia*, "by the grace of God," which, removed from the context of a sovereign's divine right, is used liberally in AA-speak—but to note the general *deprivation* of grace. As they get to know each other at AA, Joelle complains to Don about "these earnest ravaged folks at the lectern say[ing] they're 'Here But For the Grace of God'"—objecting not, as Gately expects, because of religious language but because the phrase, transposing a subjunctive as an indicative, is "literally senseless" (*IJ* 366).

Gately's reaction indicates his awe of Joelle's intelligence and connects him to the deadly Entertainment, with her veil seeming like "a screen on which might well be projected" a "smily-face," sign of both the film and his nightmare of being removed from AA (*IJ* 366–367). As Gately, in part because lovestruck, struggles to respond and as "his own heart grips him like an infant rattling the bars of his playpen" (*IJ* 366), Wallace continues paralleling Joelle and the "Militant Grammarian" Avril (*IJ* 288), making Gately's attraction a species of mother-love (in an attempt to repair a horrific childhood) and foreshadowing Joelle's role as the apologizing mother figure in the Entertainment. The challenge, for Gately, is to avert his panicked feeling that it is "inevitable" he is "going to get high again and be back in the cage all over again"; he must overcome fear and reach out for Joelle's love, rather than compensating for his vulnerability through relapse to addiction (*IJ* 366). In this moment, Gately demonstrates, unconsciously,

a means of resisting the Entertainment's deadly siren's call: remaining attached to, and not intimidated by, a love object, thereby not reverting to the narcissism of playpen/addiction-cage. In the context of the "Grace of God" conversation, Gately is also modeling a way, without overintellectualizing it, of accepting grace—for Joelle is a Mother Mary figure here, as opposed to in the film (note too that in Hebrew Joelle means "Jehovah is God"). This is also a moment of challenging (and deeply Lacanian) self-identification for Gately because, if my DG association is correct, he recognizes a version of "himself" (i.e., his initials) in the "Here But for the Grace of God" discussion—and recognizes as well his potential cancellation, according to Joelle's technical reading of the phrase.[40]

Several critics have illuminated the limited and pragmatic religious faith *Infinite Jest* endorses: Konstantinou claims that Wallace offers "not so much a religious correction to secular skepticism" as a "religious vocabulary (God, prayer, etc.) emptied out of specific content,"[41] and David H. Evans finds Wallace agreeing with William James's notion that "faith 'becomes' true by its results."[42] Burn argues that while *Infinite Jest* has a "religious subtext [that] is not explicitly articulated," the quasi-religious meanings that gather around Gately nonetheless "provide[] an enriching texture to the otherwise desolate narrative of Hal" (*Reader's Guide*, 63–64). In support Burn quotes Wallace saying that his interest in religious subjects often dissolves when the claims take on any specificity and shape: "the stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable."[43]

All these critics are persuasive, but I take from Wallace's comment on the inarticulable a more particular mechanism in *Infinite Jest*'s creation of muted or indirect religious meaning around grace—and the points of pressure are the Gately/coin nexus, the possibility of self-cancellation, and the intuitive approach to language the AA scenes endorse. Shortly after Gately's talk with Joelle, in a horrific account of incest, "It," and the Raquel Welch mask, the unnamed speaker remarks on her father remaining "oblivious (But for the Grace of God, in a way) to the fetally curled skinny form of the adopted daughter lying perfectly still in the next bed," i.e., the speaker (*IJ* 372). The phrase is inserted parenthetically, as though it comes

not from speaker or listeners but the all-important zone of shared identification between them. The phrase also comes with "here" or "there" shorn from the front and the doubt-inducing "in a way" added to the back. This grace formula or prayer thus functions ambivalently, freed from the solecism that enraged Joelle but nonetheless entangled in another of the text's many double binds. For, on the one hand, the father ignoring this woman *is* a moment of grace, since the speaker knows that, in her sister's absence, she would "get promoted to the role of Raquel" (*IJ* 372), but on the other hand, how can one find *any* sort of grace in this family, even the speaker, if—as suggested by many moments here—the speaker is herself implicated in the family's denial?

"But for the Grace of God" can thus refer to a moment being both infused with grace and utterly lacking it; there is a contingency to it that makes the original "correct" phrase seem presumptuous, full of that American arrogance about Election that Pynchon sees: "There but for the grace of God go I," the proper formulation, assumes one is chosen *not* to go "there." The strategic inarticulateness and ambiguity Wallace arranges around this prayerful formula, then, mesh with both Gately's contingencies and the many inversions he senses in AA's definition of freedom. The "smily-faced Sergeant-at-Arms[]" of his AA dream takes people *out* rather than keeping them in, with the seeming prison of the "Boston AA 'In Here' . . . protect[ing] against a return to 'Out There'" and its seeming freedom (*IJ* 374).

GATELY WORKING JUST FINE

We might say, echoing Evans's understanding of the importance of human will in religion, that in this atmosphere Gately must make his own grace—must enact it, regardless of theological arguments and without expectation of reward. Such a challenge for Gately mirrors the one faced by Wallace as he carves out for his writing an unorthodox spiritual and intellectual space on the subject of grace, all the while dwelling in ambiguities and inarticulateness and wondering whether the Protestant work ethic can

survive the ceding of its language to drug users. Wallace shares Gaddis's drive to "redeem" the Protestant ethic but operates in a less polemical and sardonic mode, more permissive of a range of possible religious ecstasies: tennis, for instance, as played by Roger Federer, could be an unexpected vehicle of bodily "grace" for Wallace (*BF* 8), "a 'bloody near-religious experience'" (*BF* 7), possibilities glimpsed too in the "animal grace" and "liquid grace" of *Infinite Jest* players (*IJ* 158, 652). In Weber's account of the origins of capitalist accumulation in Calvinist predestination, "it is solely by the grace of God"—that phrase Wallace plays with—that some are chosen for salvation.[44] The solution seems to lie not in redoubling the efforts of the will to work hard and earn money but in being able to redefine the monetary reward that—Gaddis, Pynchon, Weber, and Wallace all essentially agree—overwrote the spiritual at some point in American history. At the same time, there can still be no presumptions about grace or any other sort of redemption: in the context of an addict's recovery that Wallace has in mind, a secular embrace of existential contingency suffuses all.

Finding his position on this issue, Wallace laces scenes of Gately at his "humility" work with a human-centered, etymological link to divine *Gratia*, an action Gately *can* control: the often pointedly capitalized "Gratitude" (*IJ* 443, 446, 596) and "Grateful" (*IJ* 369–370, 468). Hal describes early on, via Hegel, a "belie[f]" that "transcendence is absorption," but an unexpectant Gately may find such a state in his janitorial work for Stavros, in terms Hal would probably regard as philosophically inauspicious (*IJ* 12). Often cited in *Infinite Jest* criticism is the scene of Gately having "nothing in the way of a like God-concept" but praying anyway "to the ceiling," yet rarely attended to are the less momentous means of transformation limned in the same sentence—and with Wallace we should always be on the lookout for unremarked elements of abiding, waiting, and working. Gately pretends "his sneakers were like way under the bed" in order to cover the appearance of praying,

> but he did it, and beseeched the ceiling and thanked the ceiling, and after maybe five months Gately was riding the Greenie at 0430 to go clean human turds out of the Shattuck shower and all of a sudden realized that quite

> a few days had gone by since he'd even thought about Demerol or Talwin or even weed.
>
> (*IJ* 467)

Wallace describes in this moment of absorption the unearned and even unthought nature of grace according to an ideal Protestant understanding of immersion in work. Here lies AA's real defeat of the rationalizing mind that counsels relapse. Gately, after his extremely early shift, "rides the Greenie back up the hill with his Gratitude-battery totally recharged" (*IJ* 435). "Greenie," meaning Boston's Green Line subway, suggests cash and is also street lingo for amphetamines, playing on the sources of value and energy in Gately's previous life (once addicted to downers, he now has a salutary daily upper). So too does a "Gratitude-battery"—in need of gradual reenergizing, ironically, by exertion—contrast with the "motherboard" understanding of the self that defines pleasure among the addicts: the declines of the latter are catastrophic, "the whole system" subject to being "shut . . . down," "all the circuits" "blow[n] out" (*IJ* 20, 53).

With gratitude thus underscored, it becomes important that *Infinite Jest* essentially twice erases Thanksgiving, the American holiday of thanks: the WhataBurger tournament (named for a grim fast-food feast) occurs just before Thanksgiving break (*IJ* 52), and thus the narrative "ends" right before that holiday in both the Year of Glad and the Y.D.A.U. The one Thanksgiving we do witness is a prime date in the disintegration of the Incandenza family. In a parallel move, Steeply and Marathe dialogue while May 1 dawns, but the "young persons" gathered around a bonfire "ring" (*IJ* 423) below are celebrating not International Workers' Day but *Walpurgisnacht*, the witches' revels of April 30 associated with the German Brocken (see the "*Bröckengespenst*-shadow," Wallace's reference to Goethe by way of Pynchon [*IJ* 89]) and symbolic of a consumerist apocalypse, like J.D.'s party.

Wallace also uses the semiopaque, intransitive verb "work" to oppose AA's powerful pragmatism to forces of "congenital skepticism" (*CL* 272). If "you ask the scary old guys How AA Works," "they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story" (*IJ* 350). In still

more koan-like terms, in one of the clichés Wallace prizes, an AA slogan says, "It works if you work it" (*IJ* 270). This is another Wittgensteinian placement of a word in context, so that meaning may not go on "holiday." Note, especially in the "Just Fine" example, the short-circuiting of the calculating, observing mind by pragmatist action—whatever works, as that philosophy is sometimes summarized.[45] We might even read the name of Ennet House itself as a cue to the addicts to take up this felt or intuitive relationship to truth value, what eluded Karrier in "Crash of '69" and will here elude Fackelmann (who says "That's a goddamn lie" to the most obviously true assertions [*IJ* 935]). That is, for Ennet, read "Innit," slang for "isn't it" (often associated with a lower-class British context). The word gestures toward a constant, minute-to-minute elaboration of tiny truth values rather than any singular Truth. Notably, too, "innit"—heard as "ain't that the truth"—seeks communal validation and "Identification" with others, in the oral form AA prizes (*IJ* 345). But some of AA's authoritarian resistance to newcomers' backtalk inheres in the pun too: "innit," as in "isn't it so?", is a rhetorical question that shuts down further queries, much as the Crocodiles do with Gately and Gately does, in turn, with others.[46]

Yet in spite of their importance, work and will are never enough for redemption in Wallace; as with the lottery in *Broom*, one needs that secular aspect of grace that goes under the name luck, a force that can cut in both positive and negative directions. Gately may begin the novel as a thief and manslaughterer and end it having sacrificed himself to protect Ennet House, along the way serving Ennet House as a Frank Furillo–like "hero of *re*action" (*IJ* 141). But before anointing Gately as redeemed hero or saint, we should note that, in this book's networked complexity, he is often linked with the accidental, with bad luck and gracelessness. This DG is often without *Dei Gratia*. For whatever the virtues of his recovery, Gately is in a sense responsible for the threat that looms over the whole narrative: he unwittingly puts the Entertainment into circulation in Boston ("this alleged Master copy from the DuPlessis burglary" [*IJ* 489]), as Michael North's tracking confirms.[47] His deep affection for Pat Montesian's 1964 Ford Aventura (a car model made up by Wallace) is a sign of his association

with adventure and the adventitious, and his Aventura scene ends as he zooms past Lucien Antitoi, about to become a brutal victim of the quest for the Entertainment that Gately set in motion (*IJ* 480).

In this context, Wallace insinuates that finding a limited grace means combining hard work with an essentially aleatory view of the self that is reminiscent of existentialism. Gately adopts the language of the sports streak for his sobriety but does so with luck and the inadequacy of will alone in full view: he "still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture. He feels about the ritualistic daily *Please* and *Thank You* prayers rather like like [*sic*] a hitter that's on a hitting streak and doesn't change his jock or socks or pre-game routine" (*IJ* 443). Gately is thus a counterweight in a narrative of planning, ritual, and endless repetitions of tennis serves; far more than any E.T.A. player, Gately enacts Schtitt's joyful embrace of the "chance to play," which rings as well with a resignation to the *play of chance* (*IJ* 84). In this way Gately also overcomes the "*Analysis-Paralysis*" of addicts who try "to prepare for all the contingencies and consequences" of every action (*IJ* 203). Wallace, still stressing the lotteries of life and inspired by Sartre's *Nausea* as much as Pynchon's schlemihls, vacillates between endorsements of strong will and extreme contingency, placing *Infinite Jest* on that "fault line[]" in the national character described by Jackson Lears in his history of gambling in America, where "an impulse toward risk" and "the longing for the lucky strike have been counterbalanced by a secular Protestant ethic that has questioned the very existence of luck."[48]

We should see Gately as, like Nunn in "John Billy," a "goodluck badluck man," a gambler in the Dostoevskian mold.[49] No wonder, then, that Wallace chooses certain images in the Pamela Hoffman-Jeep shaggy-dog story that ends this novel with so many key questions unanswered: in his evil past, Gately served as a creator of fake ID's and a murderous enforcer for Whitey Sorkin, who (like his namesake Whitey Bulger) fixes bets and, with "MA-Statehouse bagmen-cronies," the state lottery (*IJ* 927). For Wallace, in both of his first two novels, there can be no fixing of the lottery of art, communication, and life. There is only the chance to play.

GIFT AND GIVEN

In addition to grace and gratitude, *gratia* has a connection to the gift: the Latin means "favor," and the *gratis* is literally done "for thanks" (i.e., no payment). Kelly, pessimistic about a trope I have invoked positively several times already, makes a powerful argument aligning Wallace's understanding of the impossibility of sincerity with Derrida's claim that the true gift is impossible—the gift as, inevitably, an aporia, since it necessarily produces an expectation of return or reimbursement. As Derrida writes in *Given Time*, "If the gift appears or signifies itself, if it exists or if it is presently *as gift*, as what it is, then it is not, it annuls itself."[50] Describing *Infinite Jest* and parts of *Brief Interviews* in the language of double binds that populates both texts, Kelly finds Wallace's fiction agreeing with Derrida that the true gift giver's necessary lack of calculation regarding return cannot be separated "from conditionality, from the self-conscious anticipation of how the other will understand the gift"; these "two poles thus become interminably entangled in any action, and we can never know for certain . . . if any single event of giving or receiving is the genuine article or not," just as avowals of sincerity are no guarantee of the thing itself. Beyond the aggressions of pennies, the ample evidence of this suspicion of giving in *Infinite Jest* would include the United States' sadistic "gift" to Canada, the failure of Barry Loach's experiment, and Hal's use of "giving . . . away" to define a solipsistic compulsion toward oblivion. Especially in moments when givers wrap themselves in the mantle of generosity or "do a service for somebody's gratitude" (*IJ* 286), the gift in *Infinite Jest* does have an inverted meaning exemplary of what Kelly calls Wallace's "impatience with rhetorical innocence."[51]

Again, though, we should acknowledge Wallace's continuing urge to stage conflicts with poststructuralism rather than wholly embrace its destabilizing drive. There are parallels here to the existentialist language of action with which Wallace complicates his overview of poststructuralist sureties about the death of the author in the final sentence of "Greatly Exaggerated": "critics can try to erase or over-define the author into anonymity for all sorts of . . . reasons, and"—in a quote from William Gass making

an AA-esque assertion—that "'anonymity may mean many things, but one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*'" (*SFT* 144–145). Likewise, untenable rhetorical avowals of the gift do not exhaust all the instances of generosity a reader can glimpse in *Infinite Jest*: people do it, people give, and one path to being sincere and generous for Wallace seems to lie in remaining absorbed in work and not recognizing a need to avow an intention at all.

A parallel with Lenore's LB is relevant here: Lenore, in the displacements of *Broom*'s many nesting stories, had to say "See, she weighs about one pound" rather than "I am one pound," a position of balance-scale authority from which she might have wielded a transcendent moral authority (or—such is the sinuous ambiguity of Wallace's construction—seen herself as weightless, ontologically cancelled). Neither can Don recognize his own name's ancient meaning (limned in this chapter's epigraph) and say, "I am the gift," or even "I am generous"; that path remains suspect for Wallace on into *The Pale King*, which depicts the "pathological generosity" of Leonard Stecyk (*PK* 544). Such pathological people are, to decode Stecyk's emblematic name (Ste.-cyk?), sick saints. But these extreme characters also expose a domain of existential generosity that, while difficult to occupy, may be said to slip from linguistic purview rather than fall necessarily into aporetic impossibility. Harris, a friend and teaching colleague of Wallace at Illinois State, describes this domain in a biographical mode when he says the "ethical imperative" of Wallace consisted in "other-directed acts of unostentatious empathy."[52] Max describes further extratextual evidence: when awarded his MacArthur, "no sooner did [Wallace] have the funds than he tried to get rid of them," paying for the college tuition of friends in his recovery group and funding others' projects (*Every Love Story*, 239). Novelistic language can still be marshaled in the representation of this sort of empathetic humility. In fact, the intricacy with which Wallace hides the *Dei Gratia* meaning of Don's initials functions as something like a bulwark against too easily accepting an orthodox set of Christian motives, against failing to see, as Dostoevsky did, the radical uncertainties of being a true Christian (many of them laid out in the question-laden interludes of "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky").

Another effective approach to the gift and Gately can be found in labor, will, and absorption as defined by Hyde's *The Gift*, in which Wallace underlines and marks the majority of a passage on the "labor of gratitude," even circling the page number (something he reserved, his library shows, for pages especially important to him). Hyde writes,

> In speaking of gratitude as a "labor" I mean to distinguish it from "work" . . . Work is what we do by the hour. It begins and ends at a specific time and, if possible, we do it for money. . . . Washing dishes, computing taxes, walking the rounds in a psychiatric ward, picking asparagus—these are work. Labor, on the other hand, sets its own pace. We may get paid for it, but it's harder to quantify. "Getting the program" in AA is a labor. . . . Writing a poem, raising a child, developing a new calculus, resolving a neurosis, invention in all forms—these are labors.
>
> Work is an intended activity that is accomplished through the will. A labor can be intended but only to the extent of doing groundwork, or of *not* doing things that would clearly prevent the labor.[53]

Amid annotations in many different pens suggesting multiple rereadings of *The Gift* (common in Wallace's beloved books), the red fleer-tip with which he marks this passage is the same one that he used for later marginal notes that say "IJ" and make explicit connections to the novel's characters.[54] Even without the allusion to AA, the passage above reads as a set of clues to the construction of Gately (or Wallace's later reflection on that construction). The passage seems to apply particularly to Don after he graduates from custodial work and takes on the truly humbling job of managing Ennet House. The passivity of the laborer in gratitude that Hyde describes also bears some connection to Mark's transformation in "Westward," which depended on passive verb forms—"Only that can be only given," "You are loved"—rather than allowing free rein to the overbearing "I." For Don, one more dimension of his name is the French *donné*, meaning, in addition to gift or endowment, the given of a system. In finding Don's labor of gratitude, we should look anew to those unassuming, more passive moments of *Infinite Jest* that usually escape critical notice—

but where Wallace again explores the axiological overlap of giving of the self and becoming a given.

For instance, at Ennet House, Wallace makes comedy of Don's cooking, a scene of caritas underwritten by eros, a warmth and incandescence that is not wasted by a supposedly efficient marijuana pipe. Here, again, the *oikos* of home and hearth is renewed in the economics of the close-at-hand. Don's terrible food arrives

> with [his] big face hovering lunarly above it, flushed and beaded under the floppy chef's hat . . . his eyes full of anxiety and hopes for everyone's full enjoyment, basically looking like a nervous bride serving her first conjugal dish, except this bride's hands are the same size as the House's dinner plates and have jailhouse tats on them, and this bride seems to need no oven-mitts as he sets down massive pans . . .
>
> (*IJ* 469)

In Gately's flush lies another path to that Luddite electricity of "interfacing" that *Infinite Jest* valorizes (*IJ* 190): the "voltage or energy . . . hanging between you" that Lenz fears when saying he likes someone (*IJ* 554). These are the kinds of heat that Wallace associates with the physics of work and opposes to capitalist greenhouses. The natural contrasts to Ennet meals are Avril's macrobiotic dietary restrictions (and her bad parenting) and all the weightless addicts. Later, Hal has a vision of a food room that, indebted to *Nausea*, recaps the pathology of hoarding and opposes Gately's second-by-second Abiding: "Day after day after day. Experiencing this food in toto" (*IJ* 897).

Don's immensity puts Wallace back in the "John Billy" and "Westward" realm of the tall tale, the epic hero, and archetypes of sacrifice, but now with a mature realism. One Wallace strategy against mere avowals of generosity is to enforce the physicality of the "Big Indestructible Moron[']s" donation to Ennet House (*IJ* 448): "Gately'd bled all over" Ennet House and in Pat's Aventura (*IJ* 821). "How much does Don fucking *weigh*, anyway," as Thrust asks (*IJ* 821), for Gately gains yet more metaphorical solidity here, just as Wallace hopes his reader will from feeding on this text: "The reader walks

away from real art heavier than when she came to it" (*CW* 50). What was a momentary, heavy-handed effect in Lenore's sudden ontological nosebleed has now, a novel later, a boldly tragic texture.

Burn links the hulking Gately to Heracles, while Max sees him "taking on, in a Christlike way, the sins of his flock" (*Every Love Story*, 215). The latter association allows Wallace to offer one more doppelgänger for Don in Tiny Ewell, whose name combines meanings of Christ as sacrificial lamb (ewe), an object of ritual incandescence and the hearth (the Yule log), and this world's diminishment of both. The idea that Don has been in search of home and a steady log in the hearth—a strong *oikos*—will solidify further in the grim scenes of his cooking binge with Fackelmann, where a film of "shots of small flames" (*IJ* 974) (probably Himself's looping *Various Small Flames*) plays over their drug-felled forms. At Don's bedside, Ewell begins the book's late turn to deeply situated memories for both protagonists, fulfilling Wallace's axiological wish for a structure that moves not toward the future but back toward foundations. Ewell takes us back to where Don began—thieving—by telling of his "Money Stealers Club," the boys he led in a false charity scheme leading up to the Christmas holiday his name travesties (*IJ* 810). Ewell speaks, in line with the perversion of gift language, of his "gift for bullshit," his "gift for it, the emotional appeal of adult rhetoric," that distrusted opposite of sincerity (*IJ* 811). Ewell "revel[s] in the fraud of it, the discovery of the gift," "the verbal manipulation of human hearts" (*IJ* 811). The Money-Stealers Club thus serves, in the transactional logic of the text, as an early-life allegory of insincere economics that the "Provident" world of AA has fought against for both Ewell and his sacrificial redeemer, the bloody lamb and restored gift: big, indestructible Don.

To complete this consideration of gift aesthetics in a central contemporary novel, let me turn for a few pages to a writer who, responding to Wallace's influence, embraces many of his values but also trenchantly criticizes him. Jonathan Lethem, who calls Hyde's 2007 reissue of *The Gift* "epiphany, in sculpted prose," has been far more radical than Wallace in interpreting the book's implications, particularly on the idea of a shared artistic commonwealth.[55] In "The Ecstasy of Influence," Lethem offers a

daringly performative defense of artistic plagiarism constructed entirely from stolen sentences, in which "E Unibus Pluram" is twice a source.[56] Hyde gets credit (in the notes at the end) for Lethem's vision: "Above any other book I've here plagiarized, I commend *The Gift* to your attention" (*Ecstasy of Influence*, 114). The theme of generosity and gift in Wallace, from *Broom*'s bedesmen to Barry Loach, almost always comes tied to a suggestion of a spiritual ethic, often Christian. By contrast, Lethem takes his gift in secular terms, the force of magic clinging to it that of comic books and fantasy. Lethem's ecstasy is aesthetic, and his models of community are intense friendships, bands, virtual communities, and likeminded cadres built around shared art, not Wallace's groups of solipsists brought awkwardly together by work, common suffering, or halfway-house living rooms.

Burn has already recognized the references Lethem makes to Wallace in *Chronic City* (2009): Ralph Warden Meeker's giant novel *Obstinate Dust* and the marijuana supplier Foster Watt, who shares one name with Wallace and one with an actor in Incandenza's films (*Reader's Guide*, 4). But what is the full significance of these allusions? First, the intricate renaming: it begins (Ralph Wa——) to identify Wallace as our twenty-first-century Ralph Waldo Emerson, a view with which Giles would agree.[57] But the name resolves into a suggestion of imprisonment by meekness, resonating with Lethem's suggestion, in a direct written analysis of his work, that Wallace's power derived not from his "philosophical speculation" but from his "master[y]" of an etiolated "self-conscious remorse *at the fact of* self-consciousness" (*Ecstasy of Influence*, xv). On the question of how to inhabit a public persona as novelist, it would be hard to imagine a figure more opposed to the self-conscious Wallace than Norman Mailer, one of the "Great Male Narcissists" (*CL* 51). But in fact, with two M——er names, Lethem implies a Mailer/Meeker (and thus Mailer/Wallace) binary, one bold, the other meek. Lethem's allegiance is with Mailer, a quite rare position in contemporary U.S. letters: he takes Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* as his model for the structure of *Ecstasy of Influence* (xx), and a sign of Mailer's pervasive presence in *Chronic City* comes in a summary of Perkus Tooth's rants: "Norman Mailer on Muhammad Ali, Norman Mailer on graffiti and the space program . . . Mailer, again and again."[58]

With *Obstinate Dust*, though, this equally complex allusion demonstrates that Lethem's contentious relationship to Wallace finds partial resolution in their bond as fellow exponents of *The Gift*. Lethem largely denigrates *Obstinate Dust*, from the abject name forward: the "gigantic" (*Chronic City*, 43) book goes unread (a bookmark never advances beyond "a quarter or a fifth of the way through" [*Chronic City*, 100]), and the parts we see are warmed-over Joycean lyricism (though not close enough to Wallace to be considered a parody of him). Lethem, when asked about his intent, overcompensates for what are fairly clear digs at Wallace's unreadiness: Lethem says *Obstinate Dust* is part of his interest in "endlessness and inapproachability in art" but "also a joke about the way unread books can become cultural tokens." When Wallace died during the composition of *Chronic City*, the references "became strange," and Lethem considered cutting them altogether. "It seems possible to think I'm dishonoring *Infinite Jest*," Lethem says, but he protests that what may seem like "attack[s]" are just the "scuff marks" of his engagement with a work he finds has "tremendous value and interest."[59]

Lethem says he salvaged the allusions by "putting [*Obstinate Dust*] in again at the end to make it mean a little more" (Clarke, *Conversations*, 174), but he actually turns dishonor into respect earlier by calling on Hyde, in a scene that inters both *Obstinate Dust* and, symbolically, Wallace himself. *Chronic City* in general critiques memorial practices, skewering the abuse of 9/11 memory by public institutions and examining remembrance on many scales, from a hollow funeral for an iconic science-fiction writer to Chase's book-long commemoration of Perkus. The official response to 9/11, the death of a writer, and improvisatory gestures all commingle when Chase and his girlfriend visit the artist Laird Noteless's *Urban Fjord*, a giant crevasse cut into the Bronx and a clear parody of the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero. The neighborhood African American boys who lead them from the subway to the dispiriting site ask, "What you gonna give?" as they gesture toward the trash visitors have thrown into the so-called artwork (*Chronic City*, 110). Chase hurls in *Obstinate Dust*, seemingly in one last jab at Wallace. But the verb the boys choose, "give," is important: Noteless, commissioned by wealthy Manhattanites, is alien to this poor African American community, and he violates the maxim from which Hyde builds his vision of artwork as gift: the idea that "a circulation of gifts creates community"

(Hyde, *The Gift*, 194). Unlike these trashed commodities for which neighbors think this artwork an appropriate home, "the gift is not used up in use," Hyde writes (189). It is thus the common bond to Hyde's sense of artwork as gift that makes *Chronic City* a muted Wallace tribute—no trashing or dishonor intended. Both novelists are keen to expose the untapped potential of ideas of (another of Hyde's subjects) a cultural commons or commonwealth. I now close this chapter by examining *Infinite Jest*'s coded use of that word.

WAYS OF LIVING ON COMMONWEALTH

In creating Enfield, seeking to hint at how this degraded world might make its way back from deracinated gifts and "*Low-Temperature Civics*" to real communal bonds (*IJ* 687), Wallace does not disturb one feature of existing Brighton-Allston geography: the long spine of Commonwealth Avenue. Enfield Marine is "just off" it (*IJ* 87); E.T.A. students jog along it "in a pack" (*IJ* 173); its length and variety provide Gately with mental stimuli (*IJ* 476–477). Wallace intends a cumulative force from all the mentions of both this street and the state name it follows from, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "Comm.-Ad." (*IJ* 51, 80, 95, etc.), recurrently used for E.T.A.'s "Community and Administration Bldg." (*IJ* 52), doubles the frequent use of the abbreviation "Comm. Ave." (*IJ* 53, 83, 152, etc.) but also points toward a deficit of community at E.T.A., which is administered so as to increase isolation and competition. In these shortened uses, connections between community, commonwealth, and another "com," communication, also arise. As I claimed in the introduction using Hardt and Negri, for Wallace, language is the ultimate commonwealth, and he uses the awareness of complex networking and causality that economic understanding calls for to offer a metaphor for the human sharing of language while still honoring the Wittgensteinian edict against attempting to see to the edges of our all-encompassing medium.

With that claim in mind, and surveying the perspectives on many types of economy gathered in this chapter, I present a final contrast between Hal and Gately. Whereas Wallace critiques the idea of language as property

or fantasized incorporation into the self, Hal treats words as consumable objects. Indeed, from his childhood mold-eating forward, his instinctual response to the world is to eat it, regardless of whether something can be actually assimilated. Hal raises Bombardini's specter of cannibalism when he exclaims about finding his father dead, "*something smelled delicious!*" (*IJ* 256). Avoiding that trauma, Hal "chew[s] through" books on grieving in order to perform sadness for his therapist (*IJ* 254). "The boy reads like a vacuum," an E.T.A. staffer says. "*Digests* things" (*IJ* 15). As with the lines about "*value*" being part of "rarified equations" (*IJ* 964), in his dictionary digestion Hal experiences no felt incorporation of words' meaning, nor is he always correct with his definitions.

Consider an error Wallace slips into Hal's dictionary research, leading into a chain of codes filled with commonwealth meanings. As he travels to what he thinks is a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, Hal muses on a reversal of spelling in the history of "anonymous": the word "was joined way back somewhere at the Saxonic taproot to the Olde English *on-ane*, which supposedly meant All as One or As One Body and became Cynewulf's eventual standard inversion to the classic *anon*." The etymological change from *on-ane* to *anon* only "maybe" occurred (*IJ* 797), Hal says, and in fact Wallace is giving a bogus etymology. But he does so wanting the close reader to recognize in this false history the hope for a possible cultural shift from O.N.A.N. ("*on-ane*") to Alcoholics Anonymous ("*anon*")—from masturbatory solipsism to an idea of "All as One" and "One Body," those commonwealth practices of paying it forward that mark AA's economy. Hal's adherence to onanistic principles of ownership is reinforced by the location of his meeting, "Quabbin Recovery Systems," a vaguely corporate setting that plays on the Quabbin Reservoir, the primary water source for metro Boston. The Quabbin Reservoir lies hundreds of miles farther west than Natick, where this passage locates it; in fact the reservoir is just eighteen miles from Northampton, home of Amherst College. As Burn notes in his *Reader's Guide* (50) while detailing this geography, Wallace hopes to invoke the role played by the historical Enfield, Massachusetts, in the creation of the reservoir. Quabbin, a public utility, thus partakes in *Infinite Jest*'s subtle communication of commonwealth values: the reservoir was created in 1938

when, over objections from residents, the Swift River was dammed and the valley inundated, leading to the submersion of four towns, including the historical Enfield, Massachusetts. The majority of Enfield's town center rests today, Atlantis-like, underwater. In transporting Enfield east to Boston, Wallace resurrects a moment of municipal sacrifice and the sharing of public resources and offers a counter to the In-Field meanings of value I discussed earlier in this chapter.

Hal gets the kind of value he expects from his Quabbin: he enters ready to pay for membership and with an "appraising" eye, carrying a money-filled wallet contrasting with the ones seen at AA (*IJ* 799). This increasingly salivaless boy, having just eaten two bran muffins without "tonic," could use some of the Commonwealth's drinking water (*IJ* 796). In more emotionally straightforward terms, Hal's chosen pseudonym suggests who needs to accompany him: "'My name's Mike,'" Hal practices in the rearview mirror (*IJ* 797). Pemulis, despite having suffered horrific parental abuse, never submits to therapies at all—though he has a symbolic double in the novel's final AA scene, a monologue by a "Mikey" (*IJ* 958). This may be Wallace's elliptical way of turning Hal's friendship with Pemulis into negotiable currency, through the power of AA's idealized economy. As with Poor Tony's unaided drying out and its contrasts with Gately's recovery, Wallace—attending to various kinds of value in his epic, at least elliptically—includes class differences and those excluded from even the free AA economy.[60]

In earlier developments around the idea of language as currency, the E.T.A. boys reflect Hal's misrecognition of value and collectively claim that there is such a thing as "word-inflation" (*IJ* 100). But language's value does not operate like money's, Wallace again implies. Implicitly responding to Barth's idea of "the felt exhaustion of certain [literary] possibilities,"[61] Wallace has the tired boys begin trading synonyms after practice. "'Tard tard tard,'" says Stice:

> Group empathy is expressed via sighs, further slumping, small gestures of exhaustion, the soft clanks of skulls' backs against the lockers' thin steel.
>
> . . . . .

> 'So tired it's out of tired's word-range,' Pemulis says. 'Tired just doesn't do it.'
>
> 'Exhausted, shot, depleted,' says Jim Struck . . . 'Cashed. Totalled.'
>
> . . . . .
>
> 'Beat. Worn the heck out.'
>
> 'Worn the *fuck*-all out is more like.'
>
> 'Wrung dry. Whacked. Tuckered out. More dead than alive.'
>
> 'None even come close, the words.'
>
> 'Word-inflation,' Stice says . . . 'Bigger and better. Good greater greatest totally great. Hyperbolic and hyperbolicker. Like grade-inflation.'
>
> (*IJ* 100)

This scene portrays a "group empathy" subtly different from the "Identification" (*IJ* 345) of AA meetings, for shared language here, even as the boys collectively define their state, complicates the mute agreement of "sighs" and "shared gestures." Stice's "word-inflation" both ends the group's language game and gets its rules wrong: Stice expands language not through synonym proliferation but (like Karrier in "Crash of '69," who said "It's great" rather than "It's good") through comparative valuation, proposing superlatives. Lurking in this scene is the inflated language of advertising, and grades signify yet another model of external valuation.

But while the players think their words for exhaustion are, like them, exhausted, the accumulating words actually testify to the vitality of language's immense (infinite?) variety. Wallace Stevens writes, "Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined";[62] Wallace suggests that even the exhaustion of language has to be spoken of in (voluminous) language. Reflecting the novel's detail-rich, maximalist aesthetic, the scene as a whole belies any idea of words' inflation in the economic sense (i.e., devaluation) by using the same method of paratactic synonym variation to describe the environment. For instance, Hal—reflecting on human waste, a parallel to exhaustion that calls out for language's fullness—muses on the spiritual implications of Schacht on the toilet (and in the process Hal proves himself a footwear-minded descendant of Lenore):

> Luther's shoes on the floor beneath the chamber pot, placid . . . Luther's 16th-century shoes, awaiting epiphany. The mute quiescent suffering of generations of salesmen in the stalls of train-station johns, heads down, fingers laced, shined shoes inert, awaiting the acid gush. Women's slippers, centurions' dusty sandals, dock-workers' hobnailed boots, Popes' slippers. All waiting . . .
>
> (*IJ* 103)

The toilet, grounding us all each day, is universal, and language's plenitude here is a palpable extension of the sharing of human experience across centuries and social positions, something the novel's multithread structure suggests on a larger scale. Moving in an opposing logical direction, Troeltsch later adds to Stice's thought, regarding Avril's prescriptive-grammar exam, "Phrases and clauses and models and structures. . . . We need an inflation-generative grammar" (*IJ* 100). The hyphenation here produces ambiguity: Troeltsch calls for a grammar that *itself* generates inflation, but his phrase ends up invoking Noam Chomsky's well-known idea of a generative grammar. Generative grammar inflates the language *not* in the sense of monetary valuation, though; rather, it offers grounds for a never-ending expansion in the mind of possible word combinations—language is indeed infinitely expandable.[63] Language's value is inflation proof (says the encyclopedic novelist) because it arises from a naturally inflatable grammar.

Gately's wraith scenes work toward correcting these E.T.A. ideas about language, value, and possession by proposing a radical openness with words. Gately's hospital experience with the wraith would "belong" to Hal in a more psychologically conventional novel (the kind of workshop product Wallace acidly says contains "no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past" [*BF* 40]). But the great twist on *Hamlet* here is that the ghost of Hamlet Senior appears only at the end and to the wrong man, for Wallace wants the reader to reassess her own involvement in making the text "communicate": while she readily recognizes the wraith as Himself, Gately cannot. Here is another turn on Gately as contingent agent and, potentially, full of grace, if he proves a keen listener and is able to interpret

the wraith's story and explain Himself's intentions to his son. At the same time, what makes Don human and compelling is the extreme volatility of his agency and intention: in the perplexing scene fleetingly co-created by his dream (*IJ* 934) and Hal's mention during his breakdown of "John N.R. Wayne . . . standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" in the Great Concavity (*IJ* 16–17), we should note the echo of Don in a clown mask unwittingly sending the Entertainment into circulation by first stealing it from DuPlessis. In the exhumation, presumably a search for the masters that, according to Joelle, "were buried with him" (*IJ* 940), Don, perhaps trying to do good, risks releasing the Entertainment in an even more deadly—because copyable—form (though Don's premonition, if trustworthy, says they arrive "*Too Late*," maybe a sign Orin beats them there [*IJ* 934]). With Don's readerlike task thus left ambiguously fulfilled and, in essence, up to the *actual* reader, the wraith scenes corroborate Boswell's recurrent claim that Wallace's structures push readers into "the world of the real, the world outside the text."[64]

Moreover, Gately's experience of "lexical rape" by the wraith acts as a foil to Hal's eidetic dictionary consumption: Hal possesses words, while Gately is possessed *by* them. "Terms and words Gately knows he doesn't know from a divot in the sod come crashing through his head with . . . ghastly intrusive force" (*IJ* 832). Aubry claims that this scene indicates Wallace's chagrin about his own mind (so much more knowledgeable) "usurping [characters'] status as the primary actors in the drama," but such a reading undermines that respect for unintellectual intuition that Wallace urges on us (Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 116). Wallace is trying to get us to wonder not about characters' minds but about ours as readers, about what happens when we encounter words—words we know, words we think we know. With Wittgenstein's maxim of contextual use as meaning in mind, we read novels like *Infinite Jest* looking to "acquire" language all over again—a task no drug can accelerate, a task for which metaphors of ownership are radically insufficient.

"So yo then man what's *your* story?" (*IJ* 17). The fact that 1,000+ pages containing hundreds of different people's stories follow this question shows this italicized "*your*" to be another of Wallace's implicitly foreign terms,

about to be translated, over countless joined narratives, for the reader's consciousness. *Your* story is not your property and not singular; language escapes us, decenters us, connects us. Stories, like the language they are made of, belong to everyone, participating in an economy that resists quantification even as the bound book goes to market under a single artist's name. Language is commonwealth, and *Infinite Jest* is an example of the novel as "a node in a network" (Burn, *Reader's Guide*, 6). Even before the text-proper begins, *Infinite Jest* is "about" Gratitude for the stories it treats as common property, in Wallace's canny use of the copyright page's acknowledgments: there, he effaces the autobiographical aspects of the novel by implying that his material was gleaned from "Open Meetings, where pretty much anybody who's interested can come and listen . . . A lot of people at these Open Meetings spoke with me and were extremely patient and garrulous and generous and helpful," the acknowledgments continue. "The best way I can think of to show my appreciation of these men and women is to decline to thank them by name." We know now what the interviewers of the 1990s to whom Wallace repeated variations on this background (see, e.g., *CW* 59, 79–80) did not: Max's biography reveals that Wallace, a member, attended AA meetings from the late 1980s onward; he was, though, contra the copyright page, distrusted by some, with Big Craig telling Max he suspected his roommate "was looking for material for a book" (*Every Love Story*, 317n5).

I wish not to impose any autobiographical reading but to show the interrelationship of Gately's openness to words, his education in Gratitude, and Wallace's reflections on the novel's composition. In the top margin of many of the looseleaf pages on which he drafted *Infinite Jest*, Wallace writes in block capitals "NOBODY." Was this reassurance, undone now by Ransom Center visitors, that nobody would see these drafts, where he was striving for "CLARITY," a word he often wrote alongside "NOBODY"?[65] Was he reminding himself *he* was a nobody, under no pressure to produce a great work? We cannot know. But I have argued in this chapter for a way of reading "NOBODY" as the signature of the anonymous collective—the "One Body"—that coauthors this commonwealth text.

Many interlocking stories, rather than one Hideous Man's, will still be on Wallace's mind as he turns back to the short form. In "Octet," at the

center of *Brief Interviews*, Wallace returns to Marathe's economic problem of the undividable good, now in tragic terms that echo biblical parables: the story opens outside "the Commonwealth Aluminum Can Redemption Center" as two "terminal drug addicts" spend the night under a single coat, setting up a question of moral calculus that has no answer and hence no question mark, "Which one lived" (*BI* 131). "Octet" imagines an attempted merger between these bodies, "pressed right up against" each other, at the base of commonwealth redemption (*BI* 131)—an exchange of heat that cannot be assimilated to mathematical or monetary division. Depicting exchanges that produce neither a scarcity for one side nor a balance of divided value, Wallace seeks in language a sharing of wealth that transcends accounting and money's privations. Only in that transcendent state can we achieve redemption and truly meet the other, the task that is the next chapter's major subject.