

**David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as  
Contemporary Core Text:  
Re-Evaluating Postmodernism and  
Existentialism<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) is generally regarded as the most important representative of a recent development in American literary fiction, from the mid-1990s onward, that moves beyond the previous literary trends of the postmodernist metafiction of the 1960s and 1970s embodied, for example, by the work of John Barth, and the postmodernist minimalism of the 1980s and

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter derives most of its content from several of my previous publications on the work of David Foster Wallace. However, these elements have been brought together in the context of the current article (and the collection in which it appears) to address the new and specific matter of reading Wallace in relation to and as part of the canon of core texts in a liberal arts curriculum, focusing on the relation to postmodernist and existentialist philosophy and literature. Cf. Allard den Dulk, "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 325-345; Allard den Dulk, "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self." *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, edited by Marshall Boswell, 43-60. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014; Allard den Dulk, "Good Faith and Sincerity: Sartrean Virtues of Self-Becoming in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, edited by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, 205-227. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014; Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

early 1990s, for example, the work of Bret Easton Ellis.<sup>2</sup> The development that Wallace's work represents is increasingly recognized as an "aesthetic sea change"<sup>3</sup>: it entails a critique of the endless self-reflectivity and irony that originally functioned as the critical instruments of the postmodernist exposure of the contradictions and hypocrisies inherent in contemporary American (and Western) thought,<sup>4</sup> but that have come to fully pervade and be absorbed by American culture (and fiction), and have, as a result, come to be regarded as a "blind alley", a "dead end", by a new generation of writers.<sup>5</sup> Wallace's 1079-page magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996) can be seen as the key, pioneering novel of this new literary trend.

Initially, Wallace's work was received as typically postmodernist<sup>6</sup>, because of its use of footnotes, the abundance of (conflicting) information and

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'postmodernism' is surrounded by unclarity and disagreement. However, as it has become part of 'standing' terminology the term has to a certain extent become unavoidable. In order to clarify my use of the term, I would like to point out the two broad senses in which the term postmodernism is most often employed (and which the above-mentioned metafiction and minimalism, respectively, can be seen to represent): on the one hand, a theoretical postmodernism, signifying a predominantly 'academic' problematization and subversion of beliefs considered to be central to modernist thought or Western thought in general; and on the other hand, a popular postmodernism, referring to a broader, societal situation, consisting in the widely shared perception of reality as having become uncertain and devoid of value. However, there is a clear connection between these two forms of postmodernism, as the ideas and tools of the former came to pervade American culture in general, as expressed in the latter form. Cf. the distinction between "intellectualist" and "popular" postmodernism, drawn in: Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk. "Introduction: European Writers Reconsidering the Postmodern Heritage." *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Relativism*, edited by Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk, 7-23. Amsterdam: AUP, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symploke* 12, no. 1-2 (2004): 55.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 27, 182-183; David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again. Essays and Arguments*, 21-82. London: Abacus, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> A.O. Scott, "The Panic of Influence – Review of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*," *The New York Review of Books* 47, no. 2 (2000): 40; McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent," 55; cf. Daniel Grassian, *Hybrid Fictions. American Literature and Generation X* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003), 6-13.

<sup>6</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "Life in Cleveland, 1990," *The New York Times*, December 27, 1986. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/27/books/books-of-the-times-life-in-cleveland-1990.html> [Accessed 1 May 2016] (on Wallace's 1987 debut novel *The Broom of the System*, Kakutani writes: "From its opening pages onward through its enigmatic ending, [it] will remind readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon"; Toon Theuwis, *The Quest for Infinite Jest: An Inquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of*

characters, self-conscious narrative, and pop references. But gradually scholars came to understand Wallace as using these techniques for radically different purposes than his postmodernist predecessors. Instead, as has been proposed by several scholars, including myself, Wallace's work seems to re-assume key ideas from existentialist thought. Whereas postmodernism tends to celebrate the *fragmentation* of the self, existentialism emphasizes the importance of *becoming* a self. Wallace's characters, according to my argument, fit the second approach.

An interesting parallel to this initial oversight of the existentialist aspects of Wallace's work, is that existentialist thought itself was at that point (mid-1990s) – and perhaps in some ways still is – regarded as out of fashion, “passé”, as Jack Reynolds and Ashley Woodward state. They quote Gianni Vattimo (in a text from 1993): “today's philosophical climate shows little interest in [the existentialist] subject and is in general unreceptive to the themes of ‘classic’ existentialism, such as the individual, freedom to choose, responsibility, death, and *Angst*”; and Jean Baudrillard (2001): “We have thrown off that old existential garb... Who cares about freedom, bad faith and authenticity today?”<sup>7</sup> However, Reynolds and Woodward also signal an increasing, more recent critique of postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophies as undermining agency, and in response to this, a reassertion of the importance of the subject.<sup>8</sup> This ‘return of the subject’ may be seen as the basis for a renewed interest in existential-

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*David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*. PhD diss., Ghent University, 1999. <http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/toon.html> [Accessed 1 May 2016]; cf. Tore Rye Andersen, “Covered in ‘P’: David Foster Wallace's Paratextual Curse” (Presentation at Infinite Wallace Conference, Sorbonne Nouvelle / Paris Diderot University, Paris, France, 11-13 September 2014) – Andersen addresses the influence of the paratexts of *The Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* on the initially dominant interpretation of Wallace's as in line with major postmodernist novels.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Reynolds and Ashley Woodward. “Existentialism and Poststructuralism: Some Unfashionable Observations.” *The Bloomsbury Companion to Existentialism*, edited by Felicity Joseph, Jack Reynolds and Ashley Woodward, 260-261. London: Bloomsbury, 2014; Gianni Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger*. Translated by C. Blamires, with T. Harrison (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 40-41; Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*. Translated by C. Turner (London: Verso, 2001), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds and Woodward, “Existentialism and Poststructuralism”, 275.

lism – an existentialism *after* postmodernism in which: (1) the misrepresentation of the existentialist view of subjectivity as ‘essentializing’ the self (e.g. Foucault, in his reading of Sartre) is corrected, as the existentialist view in many ways *anticipates* the ‘deconstruction’ of subjectivity as a fixed identity, while *retaining* a concern for agency; and (2) certain aspects of ‘classic’ existentialism itself are adjusted, especially with regard to the role of others.

Wallace’s work can be fruitfully read as not merely returning to and adopting the ideas formulated by earlier existentialists, but as, in certain aspects, updating and correcting the views of these thinkers. For example, whereas the latter can sometimes be seen to waver between, on the one hand, a view of the self as transcendent, as coming into being ‘in the world’, *among* other people, and, on the other hand, a latent desire for autonomy, leading to a *neglect* of the other, Wallace’s writing provides a harrowing portrayal of individuals who have become ‘encaged’ in themselves. His work thus makes clear that there is only one direction for meaningful existence: out of the self, toward the world and the other.

Wallace’s work, because it has pioneered a new trend in American literature and because of its relation to ideas from postmodernist and existentialist thought, provides a current and potentially productive addition to the canon of core texts in a liberal arts curriculum: in the context of the above-mentioned ‘return of the subject’, Wallace poses fundamental questions about the self and about who we are as human beings and how to live our lives. Furthermore, Wallace’s work also helps us question and critically re-interpret that canon, especially its postmodernist and existentialist texts, because Wallace sheds new light on both. In this paper, I would like to show, in line with the above-described renewed interest in existentialism, how Wallace’s work can be used to interrogate the postmodernist conception of the self, but also to re-evaluate the existentialist view of the self.

I will do so by first addressing the initial qualification of Wallace’s work as postmodernist (including Wallace’s own response to this) and how such categorizations might be used to invite critical student reflection. Then, I will address the postmodernist and existentialist views of the self and how we might position Wallace’s work in relation to these views, in order to subsequently illustrate and argue through readings of two crucial chapters from Wallace’s most important novel *Infinite Jest* its critique of postmodernism and its resumption and adjustment of the existentialist view of self-becoming.

### Typically Postmodernist?

I will begin with the above-mentioned fact that Wallace's work was initially regarded as typically postmodernist. While this qualification has by now been thoroughly re-assessed in the Wallace scholarship, the label still lingers on in more general overviews that refer to his work.<sup>9</sup> The persistence of this label influences, or may in fact *limit*, the ways in which Wallace's work is likely to be taught in academic curricula (especially in more general, core text programmes). Below, I would like to address how this initial reading, and also Wallace's response to it, can be used to stimulate students to critically reflect, in general, on the literary canon and the conventional categorizations of literary history, and, specifically, on the interpretation of Wallace's work in light of these.

The reason why, in light of such categorizations, Wallace's works at first might seem to provide the reader with 'merely' another postmodernist problematization of reality, is because they show us fragmented characters in a confusing world, and because they seem to employ typical "postmodern hardware", such as footnotes, an abundance of information and of characters (who sometimes provide *conflicting* information), self-conscious narrative, and pop references.<sup>10</sup> However, what many commentators passed over, in their rush to assign to Wallace a postmodernist label, was the possibility that similar means can have a *different* significance for a different literary generation, and can thus also be used to different ends.

In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", Wallace writes: "the belief that pop images are basically just mimetic devices is one of the attitudes that separates most U.S. fiction writers under c. 40 from the writerly generation that precedes us, reviews us and designs our grad-school curricula".<sup>11</sup> In an interview, Wallace adds: "I'm always stumped when critics regard

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<sup>9</sup> For example, John N. Duvall and Amy J. Elias discuss Wallace solely in the context of postmodern metafiction in their contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945* (John N. Duvall, "Introduction: A Story of the Stories of American Fiction after 1945." *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, edited by John N. Duvall, 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Elias, Amy J. "Postmodern Metafiction." *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, edited by John N. Duvall, 26-27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2000. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/22/books/critic-s-notebook-new-wave-of-writers-reinvents-literature.html> [Accessed 1 May 2016]. I will assume here as generally accepted that these elements and qualities are associated with postmodernist literature (and related to similar problematizations in postmodernist philosophy).

<sup>11</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 43.

references to popular culture in serious fiction as some sort of avant-garde stratagem. In terms of the world I live in and try to write about, it's inescapable. Avoiding any reference to the pop would mean either being retrograde about what's 'permissible' in serious art or else writing about some other world."<sup>12</sup> Many aspects of postmodernism have become part of popular postmodern culture and, therefore, part of everyday reality. So, a certain amount of fragmentation, mediation and self-consciousness in a contemporary novel is, in Wallace's own words, "just plain realistic".<sup>13</sup>

For writers like Wallace, who grew up with postmodernism, all these things are part of a reality of which, in their opinion, *certain aspects* have become problematic, which spark their *critique* of postmodernism. To describe these problems and explore their possible solution (and to perhaps 'overcome' postmodernism), requires an accurate description of the reality in which these problems are found, and incorporates techniques that were previously deemed subversive (as part of postmodernism), but are no longer considered to be so by this new literary generation. Nicoline Timmer offers an apt description of this situation, with regard to one of *Infinite Jest's* main characters, Hal Incandenza: "[he] is *already framed* by prevailing cultural thought in the story-world [...] [and] is struggling to break out and has to find other, alternative ways of conceptualizing what it means to be human".<sup>14</sup>

To give just one further example: *Infinite Jest* is populated by literally hundreds of characters.<sup>15</sup> In postmodernist metafictional novels the use of an abundance of perspectives, coupled with contradictory information, aims to effect an overload that constantly puts the reader off track, pointing out that one is reading something fictional. In *Infinite Jest*, on the contrary, the abundance of information and characters – all portrayed empathetically, and with a caring attention to detail – draws the reader into the story world, and convinces the reader of its reality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 148.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 43.

<sup>14</sup> Nicoline Timmer, *'Do You Feel It Too?' The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (PhD diss., University Utrecht, 2008), 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 118.

<sup>16</sup> As Frank Louis Cioffi writes about Wallace's fiction: "actuality and artwork have fully merged [...]; the artwork affects [the reader] in the same way as do 'real' objects; it has a truth that deeply

### Postmodernist versus Existentialist Views of the Self

I will now turn, more specifically, to the view of the self that can be discerned in Wallace's work, and argue that it can be seen as a critique of a postmodernist view and as a re-assumption of an existentialist view of the self. According to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) – who is widely regarded as the first existentialist thinker –, an individual is not automatically a self but has to become one. A human being merely embodies the possibility of becoming a self. For Kierkegaard, there is no 'true core' that an individual inherently 'is' or 'possesses' and that underlies selfhood. Becoming a self is the task of human life.<sup>17</sup> This insight seems to permeate Wallace's writing.

It is first important to acknowledge the difference between the existentialist and (what might be very generally labelled as) the postmodernist view of the self. Existentialist and postmodernist philosophies are alike in their denial of an *a priori*, unified self. Subsequently, postmodernist views state that this fragmentation (or 'de-centering') of the self should be brought out, recognized, even celebrated. We can find this view, for example, in the work of Michel Foucault, when he speaks of the passing of "the privileged moment of *individualization*" in "What Is an Author?" and of the effacement of the subject as a sovereign self, "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea", the famous last line from *The Order of Things*.<sup>18</sup>

However, the argumentation underlying such postmodernist – or poststructuralist – assertions contains a paradox: the postmodernist idea of celebrating the fragmentation of the self is based on the assumptions that: (1) the individual is not whole and cannot be made whole without being selective and therefore 'untruthful' to all the different things the individual is, and (2) that such an untruthful unification is always imposed and dictated by external forces. The self, in other words, is a fiction produced by cultural conventions. But this whole picture reveals a Romantic longing for the impossible authenticity of a fragmented, self-less 'entity,' free from forces that corrupt that 'genuine' state of fragmented diversity.<sup>19</sup>

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stirs [her]. It is in fact not art, but life" (Frank Louis Cioffi, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2000): 175.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. 2. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 250-251.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, edited by David Lodge, 197-198, 210. Longman: New York, 1988; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 422.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2008), 109, 113-119.

By contrast, for Kierkegaard and other existentialist thinkers, the fact that the self is something ‘made’ does not imply that it is a fiction, in the sense of an artificiality corrupting the diversity of the individual. What exactly is it that is corrupted when there is no pre-existing self? Kierkegaard says: the self is fragmented but should be made “whole”.<sup>20</sup> A human being has to take up his individual limitations and possibilities, and integrate them into a unified existence. If the individual does not take himself up in this way, he does not acquire a self.<sup>21</sup>

Wallace formulates a similar conception of the self in a talk he gave on Franz Kafka who, like Kierkegaard, is an important representative of the existentialist tradition. Wallace remarks that in our present age it is a common mistake to think “that a self is something you just *have*”. According to Wallace, we should realize the central insight of existentialism, “that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.”<sup>22</sup>

In short, whereas postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation and critiques attempts at ‘unification’ of the self and, as such, advocates a *lack* of self, existentialism emphasizes the need to *become* a self, even though that process (harmonization) can never be completed but, instead, entails a constant, ongoing struggle. Furthermore, whereas postmodernism stresses endless *reflection* on the fragmented self (in order to keep acknowledging its different parts), existentialism regards the self as taking shape through *action*, through what we might label a kind of ‘sincerity’, *choosing* to forge relations to a realm of uncertainty, that is, to the world and other people, and thus, as constituted by those choices and relations, developing a self.

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<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety. A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*. Translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 18; cf. “because [a human being] is a synthesis, he can be in anxiety” (155).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard scholar K. Brian Söderquist: “If life is lived without recognizing the limitations of the past, life becomes ‘hypothetical’ and ‘subjunctive’ and one loses a sense of ‘continuity’;” “In order to understand the self, a person must take ownership of the actualized past, which in turn conditions the present and future” (K. Brian Söderquist, “Authoring a Self.” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2009: Kierkegaard’s Concept of Irony*, edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser and K. Brian Söderquist, 157. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed.” *Consider the Lobster, and Other Essays*, 64–65. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2005. In this context Wallace’s statement, “Although of course you end up becoming yourself” – which became the title of David Lipsky’s 300-page ‘road trip’ interview book with Wallace, and also included in that book’s film adaptation *The End of the Tour* (2015) – has a strong existentialist ring to it; cf. David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself. A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 52.

We can recognize the existentialist view of the self throughout Wallace's literary work. The classic existentialist motif of the individual *fleeing* from fundamental existential questions – most importantly, the task of becoming a self – plays a central role in Wallace's oeuvre. *Infinite Jest* describes a large host of characters who evade responsibility for their lives (symbolized by various forms of addiction). These characters are described as having no self, as being “empty” inside. However, the novel also portrays the possibility of changing one's way of life and finding meaning and becoming a human self.

### ***Infinite Jest* (I): A Critique of Postmodernist Hyperreflexivity**

Below, I seek to illustrate both *Infinite Jest*'s critique of postmodernism (in general, and its view of the self) and the (updated) existentialist alternatives it proposes, as I now turn towards the novel itself in more detail. I will be referring to the so-called ‘Eschaton’ chapter of *Infinite Jest* and subsequently to one of the novel's crucial ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ chapters. In the context of a core texts class, both (consecutive) chapters can be read quite effectively in isolation from the rest of the book.<sup>23</sup>

Firstly, how can we recognize the above-mentioned general critique of postmodernism in the novel? Wallace associates postmodernist philosophy and literature with endless self-reflection, required for postmodernism's endless process of critical unmasking and undermining.<sup>24</sup> In *Infinite Jest*, excessive self-reflection, leading to an alienation from reality and, finally, from one's own self, is called “*Analysis-Paralysis*”.<sup>25</sup> One of the moments in the novel when such paralyzing hyperreflexivity is clearly tied in with postmodernism is when a group of Tennis Academy students play a nuclear war simulation game called ‘Eschaton’ on a number of adjacent tennis courts. But during the game, it starts to snow, and a quarrel breaks out among the participants as to whether or not the snow falling on the tennis courts affects the nuclear war being simulated there – that is, whether it only affects the ‘map’ (the tennis courts) on which they are playing, or also the territory (that is, the world) represented by that map.

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<sup>23</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1996), 321-342 (‘Eschaton’), 343-374 (‘Alcoholics Anonymous’).

<sup>24</sup> E.g. the goals of Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and John Barth's postmodernist metafiction are not to *destroy* what they regard as the *both* illusory *and* indispensable notions of ‘presence’ and ‘reality’ that motivate philosophy and literature, but to maintain their *unresolvability*, endlessly revoking, postponing the determination of meaning. Cf. chapter 3 of: Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer*, 88-108.

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 203.

This debate about the relation between reality and representation needs to be read in light of Jorge Luis Borges's fable "On Exactitude in Science". This fable describes a map that completely coincides with reality (the territory described by the map), causing the territory (reality) to gradually disappear, leaving just the map (that is, the artificial representation). Borges's fable – also used by postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacres et simulation*, as an apt illustration of the contemporary, postmodernist condition – has come to symbolize the postmodernist idea that the 'artificiality' of representation infects or even completely usurps reality.<sup>26</sup> However, in the Eschaton episode in *Infinite Jest*, this distinction between reality and representation is quite clear. As one character, Michael Pemulis – the "eminence gris" of Eschaton –, says: "It's snowing on the goddamn map, not the territory [...]. Real-world snow isn't a factor if it's falling on the fucking map!" Still, the issue is exploited by some of the students to disrupt the game play. Pemulis characterizes the dispute as "equivocatory horseshit". One of the students is described as "[getting] lost in a paralytic thought-helix", "[finding] the real-snow/unreal-snow snag in the Eschaton extremely abstract but somehow way more interesting than the Eschaton itself", thereby signalling that the hyperreflexive inclination to abstraction and generalization leads to losing sight of the practice of the specific situation concerned.<sup>27</sup>

In the rest of *Infinite Jest*, addiction is the main metaphor for this problem of excessive self-consciousness (which is shown to be the essential characteristic of addiction). Almost every character in the novel is addicted to thinking, *obsessing* about themselves, in a myriad of ways. This 'addictive-type thinking' is sometimes called 'Marijuana Thinking'. Characters "Marijuana-Think themselves into labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning".<sup>28</sup> Slowly, this leads to an alienation from one's own thoughts and feelings, as becomes clear in the following description of the mental life of Ken Erdedy, one of the novel's many addict-characters:

*[Erdedy] thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances and [...] would surely have to be called his problem.*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> It is also relevant to note that Borges is one of Barth's main literary forebears. The idea of reality having been replaced by artificial representation is akin to the notions of 'absence' and 'unreality' described by Derrida and Barth.

<sup>27</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 333, 334, 335.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 335, 1048.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 26-27.

In the end, the addict's hyperreflexivity leads to a total alienation from the self, where "[the] cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché."<sup>30</sup> *Infinite Jest*'s addict-characters (self-reflectively) ridicule notions of a 'lack of identity' or 'inner emptiness' (rejecting them as 'outdated clichés'), but it is exactly this avoidance of the existential task to become a self that empties out their lives, and when they realize the reality of that supposed cliché, the addicts are thrown into deep despair.

### ***Infinite Jest* (II): On Existentialist Self-Becoming**

This brings us to the existentialist theme of the need to become a self. In *Infinite Jest*, this realization is embodied by Don Gately, one of the novel's main characters. Gately is a former drug-addicted criminal, who now works as a resident staff member at a halfway facility for recovering drug addicts, and he is an active member of 'Alcoholics Anonymous' (AA). The novel traces the development of this character from an existence defined by addiction, to a different life-view, that seems in many ways in line with existentialist virtues.

Above, we have already seen the need to become a self (to make the self 'whole', instead of celebrating its fragmentation) expressed by Wallace, and that in *Infinite Jest* characters who do not take up this task are described as alienated and 'empty'. Conversely, Gately, who *does* take up this task, is described as "returned to himself".<sup>31</sup> The process that leads up to the realization of the need for self-becoming is described in a crucial AA chapter, focalized through Gately's perspective. In this chapter, Kierkegaard's contention that true despair leads to choice is evident in Gately's description of the situation that the addict eventually finds himself in, the "cliffish nexus of exactly two choices, this miserable road-fork Boston AA calls your Bottom". Actually, there is only one choice because the other – addiction – comes down to not-choosing (fleeing from one's despair): "It's all optional; do it or die". In fact, the term 'Bottom' is not quite right in this respect, Gately thinks, because it feels more like "someplace very high and unsupported: you're on the edge of something tall and leaning way out forward..."<sup>32</sup> Compare Jean-Paul Sartre's description of the concept of anguish: "First we must acknowledge that Kierkegaard is right; anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before

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<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 204.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 860.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 349, 357, 347.

myself. Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over”.<sup>33</sup> This anxious despair is the moment of the Kierkegaardian leap, or as Gately formulates it, the “jumping-off place” for almost every addict’s recovery.<sup>34</sup>

A crucial aspect of Gately’s development of a self, is the role that AA plays in it. *Infinite Jest* portrays a society in which “stuff that’s really real”, real emotions, grief and meaning, are regarded as outdated, as clichés that are to be ignored. AA is an exception, as a community in which the importance of such clichés, of real things *is* pointed out. AA brings fellow-sufferers together and opens them up, inviting them to be honest with others – if only through that one sentence, ‘I am an addict’ – and, in the course of doing that, learning to be honest with themselves, and as such *becoming* selves.<sup>35</sup>

Becoming a self is not something that happens instantaneously; it is portrayed as part of a process that AA members are encouraged to ‘do’, in the presence of each other, gradually realizing the openness, honesty and self-becoming described above. According to Gately, each AA insight or guideline initially incites aversion in the addict, because it seems such a cliché (just like the ‘real stuff’ of existence, that the addicts have neglected for years and that has to be brought back into sight again by these guidelines).<sup>36</sup> ‘Just Do It’ and ‘Keep Coming’ are two of those clichéd guidelines, but everybody is encouraged to keep *doing* them, to *keep coming*, and ultimately see the real stuff behind the supposed clichés. As Gately describes, the “clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say”.<sup>37</sup> This statement echoes Kierkegaard’s famous claim, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), that “subjectivity is truth”. Concerning the question of meaningful existence, Kierkegaard writes that ‘objective truth’ (aspired to in ‘objective *reflection*’), “turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something”, while “it is an existing spirit who asks about truth, presumably because he wants to exist in it”; subjective truth lies in what it means to *exist in* that truth.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2010), 53.

<sup>34</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 349.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 592, 369.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 446.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 358, 273.

<sup>38</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* vol. 2. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 203, 193, 191.

The attitude, and the resulting self, that AA strives towards, can only emerge from acts in the world, even though the start of such actions can only be dutiful at best – AA calls this ‘Fake It Till You Make It’. At meetings, every speaker

*starts out saying he's an alcoholic, says it whether he believes it yet or not; then everybody up there says how Grateful he is to be sober today and how great it is to be Active and out on a Commitment with his Group, even if he's not grateful or pleased about it at all. You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like this [...] until you start to want to go to all these goddamn meetings.<sup>39</sup>*

We can connect this to Kierkegaard's and Sartre's assertion that we can never *know* what we believe. Faith (in the Kierkegaardian sense, or *good* faith in the Sartrean sense) means that we take a risk, that we venture to believe in something about which we cannot possibly acquire absolute certainty – such as God (in the case of Kierkegaard) or friendship (in an example that Sartre gives) or (in *Infinite Jest*) the fact that AA works.

In AA this means that a new member can recognize that the program might help him, as it seems to help others, but this does not immediately take away his desperation concerning himself – for that, he will have to commit and have faith. In Gately's case, after about five months, he had realized that for several days he had not thought about drugs at all – that he did not feel the constant, compulsive need to get high anymore: he was “Free”, the “first time he'd been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten”.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Infinite Jest* (III): Correcting the Paradoxes of Earlier Existentialism**

However, *Infinite Jest* does not simply return to and adopt these existentialist ideas without alteration. As mentioned in the introduction, despite their emphasis on the self as transcendent, as coming into being ‘in the world’, philosophers like Kierkegaard and Sartre can also be regarded as sometimes displaying a paradoxical desire for autonomy. In Wallace, this problematic paradox is, in my opinion, corrected.

For example, Kierkegaard regards ‘society’ as a primary source of corruption, offering roles to which civilians obediently comply, thus preventing true self-becoming. As K. Brian Söderquist explains, for Kierkegaard, the individual has to ‘liberate’ himself from “the unwarranted authority of the intersubjective world”. For Kierkegaard, in the end, it is not in dialogue with the “*human* other” but with the

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<sup>39</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 369.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 467-468.

“*divine* other” that the individual constructs his ‘self’.<sup>41</sup> When formulating his suspicion of human intersubjectivity, Kierkegaard has in mind the obedient, unreflective commoner of his time (the ‘*spidsborger*’ eager to fulfil pre-given social roles) – which for Kierkegaard meant that authentic existence would have to come from *beyond* that general, social order. However, what *Infinite Jest* suggests is that in the current Western societal situation the individual has become an *excessively* self-reflective being. As a result, the problem has shifted from the *social* corruption of the individual that Kierkegaard sketches, to a sort of *solipsistic* corruption of the self: the problem for the characters in *Infinite Jest* is, above all, that from their self-reflective isolation they cannot possibly attain a meaningful existence. Seen from this situation, the leap towards the world and to the other symbolized by the interaction in AA, actually resembles, in its liberating return to the real, Kierkegaard’s religious leap.

Similarly, Sartre – despite the fact that (contrary to the popular perception of his existentialist philosophy) he refers regularly to the importance of social context – does not really elaborate his references to the importance of the other in a systematic way. As a result, Sartre might be seen to suggest that relations with others are necessarily characterized by conflict – as famously expressed by the line “Hell is – other people”, from the play *No Exit* (1944).<sup>42</sup> Although, as Gail Evelyn Linsenbard explains, a social outlook (that is, the individual’s real understanding of himself as dependent on others) is implied in Sartre’s basic conception of the self and consciousness, Sartre, like Kierkegaard, fails to adequately integrate the important role of community, of forming connections with others, into his philosophy.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, *Infinite Jest* describes addicts like Don Gately as trying to form a stable self via the community that AA offers – that is, on the basis of the insight that other people can often “see things about you that you yourself cannot see, even if those people are stupid”.<sup>44</sup> The novel shows how others are often in a much better position to establish that something is wrong with a person (for example, that he or she is in terrible mental pain), while that person is still in deep denial about this.

Interestingly, Zadie Smith describes this ‘surrender’ to the other in Wallace’s work as a form of prayer: “It’s true that this is prayer unmoored, without its usual object,

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<sup>41</sup> Söderquist, “Authoring a Self”, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit, and Three Other Plays*. Translated by S. Gilbert and I. Abel (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 45.

<sup>43</sup> Gail Evelyn Linsenbard, *An Investigation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Posthumously Published “Notebooks for an Ethics”* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 155-156.

<sup>44</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 204.

God, but it is still focused, self-forgetful, and moving in an outward direction".<sup>45</sup> This indispensability of the *human* other for the individual's meaningful existence underlies Wallace's entire body of work. As a result, we should regard Wallace as offering not just a resumption but a rethinking, a *correction* of key existentialist ideas.

### Conclusion

It is my hope that the preceding lines of argument have offered an impression of the critique of postmodernism, and the resumption and partial correction of the existentialist view of the need for self-becoming, in Wallace's work. As such, Wallace's work provides an excellent potential addition to the canon of core texts generally taught in liberal arts curricula: Wallace is increasingly regarded as pioneering a new development in contemporary literature and thus his work could be a crucial new entry into the canon itself; but his work also sheds new light on important 'movements' or 'schools' already included in that canon, namely postmodernism and existentialism.

To summarize: initially, Wallace's writing was regarded as typically postmodernist, and the strong existentialist dimension of his work was neglected in the critical scholarship – perhaps due to the relative 'unpopularity' of existentialism in the 1990s. However, more recently, Wallace scholars have come to agree that his work uses certain techniques to radically different ends than postmodernism: namely, to point to what is real and meaningful, instead of merely unmasking what is problematic and artificial – and this 'engagement' of Wallace's work can be seen as aligned with existentialist ideas. The connection between Wallace and existentialism is perhaps clearest in their shared views of the self. Wallace's works criticize the postmodernist celebration of the fragmentation of the self, brought about by constant self-reflection, as leading to existential despair. In *Infinite Jest*, this critique is symbolized by the many addict-characters who suffer from a paralyzing hyperreflexivity and who, as a result, are 'empty', without a self. In response, Wallace's works seem to express a view that resembles that of existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre. In *Infinite Jest*, characters are confronted with the existential task of becoming a self. For example, Don Gately comes to realize the dead-end of his addict-lifestyle and the accompanying 'Analysis Paralysis' of hyperreflexivity'. In AA, in community

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<sup>45</sup> Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace." *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, 298. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009.

with others, Gately regains the ability to commit to reality and realize meaningful connections to the world and others. Finally, it was suggested above that Wallace's work does not just reassume these existentialist ideas, but that it, especially in its emphasis on the importance of others, in fact adjusts (or even: corrects) certain tendencies in some of the canonical existentialist views. Kierkegaard and Sartre do not succeed in integrating the importance of the other into their views of the need to become a self. Wallace corrects this and shows that for the individual there is only one route towards a meaningful existence, and that is in connection with others.

*Infinite Jest*'s re-evaluation of the notion of the self is aptly expressed in the novel's final line. Earlier in this article I referred to Foucault's famous expression of the effacement of the subject as a sovereign self, "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea". Compare this formulation to the last line from *Infinite Jest*: "And when [Gately] came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out".<sup>46</sup> In the chronology of the story, this marks the start of Gately's recovery from addiction, his 'return to himself'. Instead of his 'self' being 'washed away,' the 'tide' is in fact way out.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, 981.