

# OUT OF SITE, OUT OF MIND: ESCAPING FROM AND INTO THE OCCULT IN *INFINITE JEST* BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE (Essay)

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*Infinite Jest* is about addiction, or at least that is what Anthony Quinn's blurb on my edition wants me to think. Druggies itching for a fix infest *IJ* – some inhabit the 'purgatory' of Ennet House as they suffer through withdrawals while those at ETA are on a 'conversion course' into drug culture. Wallace gives us the howling fantods when describing in grisly and maximalist detail the process and aftermath of addiction, thus rendering *IJ* a good after-school special on drug awareness. However, a closer reading of the text would reveal that the (death) toll of addiction is meant to alarm the reader of *something* more elusive than the typical closed circuit of psychoactive pleasure and bodily decay. In the scarce depictions of drug consumption in the novel, Wallace painstakingly illustrates the ritualistic preparation, culture, and gestures of drug addicts. Having to study some key moments centred around drugs will shed some necessary light on how Wallace decries one's submission into materialistic and dopamine-heavy *worship*. And on that note, although I rarely breach my promise to not entangle author and craft, Mary Holland believes 'we cannot help but read this novel only in the context of the agenda that Wallace [...] articulated shortly before its publication' (Holland 2006: 218). The agenda in question is, of course, Wallace's hellishly long battle with (pop-)cultural irony that serves as the *actual* backbone of *Infinite Jest*. His (Wallace's) coverage on irony spreads and stretches so far and wide that it is not within this article's province to study it through and through. Still, this venture into drugs as 'totems' of worship will go under the umbrella of irony as the main proponent of pathological and insatiable pleasure cycles.

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If you want to catch the drift of irony, you should look no further than shows like *South Park* or *Family Guy* which teem with the type of tropes that agitated Wallace. One popular gimmick they entertain is ‘stating the totally obvious’: think of any film scene in which, after running through a heavy downpour, the main character exclaims, ‘Lovely weather, isn’t it!’ While innocuous at first, the oversaturation with self-conscious irony and its application to more abstract subjects like love, friendship, etc. has a pernicious side effect. According to Wallace, irony has no end-product and aims ‘to make us uneasy and so “comment” on the vapidness of U.S. culture, and (3) most importantly, these days, to be just plain realistic’ (Wallace 1997: 250). By ‘realistic’, DFW perhaps implies ‘naked’ – the sort of nakedness that gives us licence to look at virtues squarely in the face and realise their limits; to make us aware of and slightly mock the truism that one of the core human virtues like love and friendship will be a solution to the world’s problems. For Wallace, this form of irony produces a temporarily liberating effect on the individual because it ‘splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities’ (Dulk 2012: 326). Unfortunately, its rehabilitative use can only go so far in ‘liberating’ us before it unveils how ‘critical and destructive, and ground-clearing’ irony becomes when it finally comes to contributing something ‘“new” ‘to the content [of an] individual’s self-becoming’ (Dulk 2012: 329).

In the grand scheme of emotional deprivation and feeling like a fish out of water, it becomes clear why drugs are so easily incorporated in a novel about irony, and vice versa. Wallace had possibly traced the corrosive damage irony shares with drugs after leading many uphill battles with American entertainment and escaping his own personal pitfalls on the side (see Max 2012). At the time of publication of *IJ*, TV had ‘gotten powerful enough to move from acronym to way of life’ and much of its addictive qualities were attributed to ‘an extremely canny and unattractive [ironic] self-consciousness [that] is necessary to create TV performers’ illusion of unconscious appeal’ (Wallace 1997: 190). A technique to achieve this appeal is the ever-popular self-referentiality trope, which helps a performer concede his/her own flaws to the audience and then go on performing with those same flaws. That is the first sign of resemblance to actual drug addicts who remain conscious of their dependent, crumbling mind. Wallace’s cause of alarm, however, is that in television self-consciousness vindicates the blame shot at those who utilise it and turns to the viewers as an offering of entertainment, whereas drug addicts simply and self-consciously shrug off the problem. In fact, *A Supposedly Fun Thing* opens with Wallace pointing out the issue of social gatherings around television only to criticise its banality. It is like a ball – irony – being tossed between self-conscious viewers and self-

conscious TV hosts. The point where entertainment addiction and drug addiction diverge is social and legal acceptance, but the point of collision is deliberate, conscious, and pleasurable consumption.

About a decade later Wallace returned to his observations on human idolatry. This time, he addressed Kenyon's graduating college class and stressed the need to have some deeper introspection before adjusting one's moral compass:

And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough... (Wallace 2005)

Throughout the speech, Wallace was aware of the load of cliches his message was delivering.<sup>1</sup> Cliches may give audiences a bitter taste and empty out cinema theatres but are never invalid *per se* – rather poorly expressed. Every year the film and game industry, for example, outdo themselves by supplying audiences with hypnotic and stupefying visuals that in reality varnish a plot-engine cliché. And since satisfying eyes always on the lookout for originality becomes incrementally difficult, any crack that exposes the ugly cliché is the culprit of one-star reviews. The antidote concocted by Wallace is being frank with cliches and understanding that core virtues rarely develop, do not expand and refine, or get sweeter and are best digested raw. It is debatable whether the encroaching demise of blatant pop-cultural virtues was underpinned by our perennial desire for novelty, but DFW believed that if one could not occasionally switch off the pleasure-seeking motor or find meaning in non-expendable *things*, one would never meet the demands of his or her own private religion.

In the context of *IJ*, the danger of ironic outlooks that undermine cliches is a recipe for death. Geoffrey Day, who just arrives at Ennet House, already taunts his readiness 'to learn to live by cliches [...] to turn [his] will and life over to the care of cliches' (Wallace 1997: 273). In response to his ironic self-scrutiny, Gately admits that if Day 'keeps on steering by the way things seem to him then he's a dead man for sure' (Wallace 1997: 274). Some characters like Gately resign to the intangible power of cliches but more on that in a minute. Prior to the escape from skid row, *IJ*'s characters need to break the self-perpetuating cycle of intoxication that is

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<sup>1</sup>'Stated as an English sentence, of course, this is just a banal platitude'

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this essay's point of interest: that drugs in *IJ* are, generally speaking, the totems of culture of addiction that reorganises the spaces our characters inhabit.

Wallace wrote *IJ* at a time when sociological investigation into drug culture was still in its infancy and unsatisfactory. In some countries, such as France, the spread of cannabis, heroin, and LSD dates back to the early 1970s but drug culture itself received very little scholarly attention until the 1990s, when specialised social sciences units were first established (Bergeron, Hunt, Milhet 2012: 96). Prior to this surge of interest, drug culture 'remained by definition marginal and little known' for the average non-consumer (Hunt 2012: 97). Drugs and drug users were contained to a hermetic space of either solitude or peers, away from public scrutiny; it is only when drugs entered public life that they obtained infamy. Within this liminal space an array of preliminary rituals is executed that makes Hunt assert that:

When the ritual is successful in reaching a sufficient degree of reciprocal entrainment [...] it results in feelings of membership and boundaries of social rank; objects at the center of ritual awareness become sacred objects, symbols representing the group. a primal level of morality is established, between those who defend the symbols of the group, and those who defame them [...] The successful ritual pumps up its participants with [...] feelings of confidence and enthusiasm for activities channeled by the ritual; hence a sacred object acts as a repository for these feelings, and a reminder of where the individual can go to renew their motivation (Hunt 2012: 113)

Right from the get-go, Wallace deposits the great anxiety of an upcoming ritual. The case of Erdedy struggling to purchase some high resin weed is most comically depicted to microscopic detail:

He had tried to stop smoking marijuana maybe 70 or 80 times before [...] One last final time he'd search out someone new [...] because he'd told every dealer he knew to cut him off [...] She'd promised to come at one certain time, and it was past that time. Finally, he gave in and called her number, using just audio, and it rang several times, and he was afraid of how much time he was taking tying up the line [...] He had to modem into the agency and say that there was an emergency and that he was posting an e-note on a colleague's TP asking her to cover his calls for the rest of the week [...] He had to put an audio message on his answering device saying that starting that afternoon he was going to be unreachable [...] He had to clean his bedroom [...] He had to throw out all his beer and liquor [...] He'd had to lay in supplies. He had had to buy soda, Oreos, bread, sandwich meat, mayonnaise, tomatoes, M&M's, Almost Home cookies [...] He'd had to log an order to rent film cartridges [...] He'd had to buy antacids for

the discomfort that eating all he would eat would cause him late at night (Wallace 1997: 17 – 21).

And so on for the next eight pages. Although Erdedy appears for a brief moment in the beginning of the novel, his experience with drugs is seminal to the study of drug culture.

In every minute or large detail of his drug-ingesting journey, he tries to shut himself out/off from the world. The need for privacy and intimacy with the drug that we represent as the totem of worship forestalls any sort of interventions by intruders from outside the sacred space of worship. We read that Erdedy ‘considered himself creepy when it came to dope’ but I wouldn’t presume his shut-ining is driven by social anxiety, but rather by the subconscious desire to fail quitting dope (Wallace 1997: 24). As noted by Hunt: ‘Whether an individual becomes attached or addicted to a psychoactive substance [...] is the result of successful or unsuccessful rituals in that individual’s personal life trajectory’ (Hunt 2012: 115). Since we find Erdedy sprawled on the floor, ‘entombed between the two sounds’ of the buzzing door and ringing telephone, Wallace denies us any info on whether Erdedy’s dependency is satisfied or not (Wallace 1997: 25). Needless to say, when his mental capacitors are ‘under the power of ritualism, the highest value is in sacrificing one’s mundane benefits for a sacred attachment’, so it is somewhat irrelevant to know if the circuit has been closed or not (Hunt 2012: 115). The single point Wallace endeavours to make is that worshippers do not know physical or mental harm when it boils down to procuring reverence to their object of worship: ‘He began to grow disgusted with himself for waiting so anxiously for the promised arrival of something that had stopped being fun anyway’ (Wallace 1997: 27).

Most drug-afflicted characters in *IJ* are rarely portrayed *shooting, dropping, or smoking* their drug of choice. In fact, the greater chunk of *IJ* is devoted to the anxiety drugs foster rather than actual consumption. Like Wallace, Fiona Hutton highlights the social impact of drugs in her *Culture of Intoxication*:

They are intricate, rich lattices of objects, habits and sensory experiences out of and into which humans weave our symbolic, cultural, economic and social lives. They are chemical substances to which the ability to change the relationship between self and environment are attributed. They are powerful mediators of social life (Hutton 2020: 70).

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From Erdedy analysis it is inferred that drugs can be symbolically congenial to totems. Now, it is a matter of understanding how exactly these totems communicate the idea of self with the environment.

Randy Lenz has a knack for crack cocaine. Lenz suffers an intense cocaine withdrawal that he tries to appease by manually eradicating street vermin:

When Lenz brought another down on the head of the rat he consciously discovered what he liked to say at the moment of issue-resolution was: ‘*There.*’ Demapping rats became Lenz’s way of resolving internal-type issues for the first couple weeks of it, walking home in the vermin dark [...] The ‘*There*’ turned out to be crucial for the sense of brisance and closure and resolving issues of impotent rage and powerless fear that like accrued in Lenz all day being trapped in the northeastern portions of a squalid halfway house all day fearing for his life, Lenz felt (Wallace 1997: 245).

The variety of drugs on the market would imply a variety of ritualistic consumption (e.g. weed is predominantly portrayed as a communal drug in contrast to heroin). For cocaine users specifically, Hunt mentions in his *Drugs and Culture* how ‘cocaine also has individual users withdrawing from society to enjoy their private intoxication. This would be analogous to the solitary opiate-user’ (Hunt 2012: 115-116). But because opiate has an archaic taste to it, the closest present-day example of solitary drug use we have is pipe/cigarette smoking. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, solitary opioid smokers were highly regarded as upscale members of the prestigious ranks who would normally sneer at poorer opioid hobbyists attending public dens (Hunt 2012). The whole prestige about it is that you never have to inhale the same pipe smoke some blue-collar fella exhales. It is no different with cocaine, though Hunt observes communal customs amongst cocaine users in the 70s which revolve around sharing – he who shares the most is conferred the most praise. The deal with Lenz is that he’s most akin to the old-fashioned cocaine user. He, like the upper-class opiate user before him, bleeds with ego and has quite the dismissive attitude towards Ennet’s set of principles and beliefs. The valid reason *why* his socially aloof, substitutional form of addiction is necessary draws clues from Lenz’s unpleasant stay at Ennet. In order to function within the societal space of Ennet, he must complete his own personal cycle of *resolution* before he returns to Ennet House. Once the cycle is interrupted, he gets antsy and conflicted:

Plus it agitates Lenz that he has the feeling that it really wouldn’t be any big deal to Green that much one way or the other, and that Lenz feels like he’s spending all this stress tensely worrying

about his side of something that Green would barely think about for more than a couple seconds, and it enrages Lenz that he can know in his head that the tense worry about how to diplomatize Green into leaving him alone is unnecessary and a waste of time and tension and yet still not be able to stop worrying about it, which all only increases the sense of Powerlessness... (Wallace 1997: 410)

Lenz's surrogate solution to cocaine withdrawal once again requires solitude and distance from social life. His *thing* (or *there*) is 'demapping' rats as a form of mental detox, and since there's practically no escape out of the template of worship in *Infinite Jest*, the only way not to 'demap' yourself or erase your own map is by transcending your addiction and moving on to a more 'innocuous' form of worship.

The premise of worship is manifold and irreducible to one single function. Life in Ancient Greece or Rome is the brightest example how far and wide the purpose of worship branches out. However, Hutton makes a valid point on drug-based worship as a transformative experience. By using Levi-Strauss' distinction between cooked and raw civilisation, Hutton argues that 'drugs are likewise cooked, transformed' and transcend the experience of transformation to the user, meaning that

'Cooking' is defined [...] as the combination of preparation, memory and body work that goes into preparing intoxicants, producing intoxication experiences. Both the drug and the user's body are 'cooked' in this process, transformed and turned into a system for drug consumption. 'Cooking' transforms the user between two states: sobriety and intoxication [...] The subject goes through death and rebirth, visits the spirit world and returns with his/her status changed permanently (Hutton 2020: 71).

It is because of the visceral sense of pleasure Ennet's residents have trouble adapting to the Higher-Power principle imposed every day. Once an addict parts with 'the somatic feedback element [that] is a mediator of sensual practice, exploring the combination of preparation, sequence, setting' clinging to abstract make-beliefs becomes a rite of passage for only the worthiest abstainers (Hutton 2020: 71). Unlike Lenz, Gately confesses his internal struggle with finding his Higher Power but, regardless, finds strength to move on with his search:

Don G., up at the podium, revealed publicly about how he was ashamed that he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power [...] you might think it'd be easier to sort of invent a Higher-Powerish God from scratch and then like erect an understanding [...] His sole

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experience so far is that he takes one of AA's very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You [...] when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing — not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he came in with (Wallace 1997: 368)

A few pages ago it was cited that choosing anything situated beyond the world of bodily pleasures will save you from being eaten alive. In a very general and half-baked sense *Infinite Jest* is a novel about people in half-life who were lucky enough to be spat out on time. The issue at hand is that they have already crossed the threshold of addiction and are in for a very slow and unnerving return. As it is with irony which, as we have found out, negates everything there is to negate, drugs induce an unprecedented mental shift where 'the given actuality [of the real world] has lost its validity entirely' and which is reduced to the sacred space of consumption (Dulk 2012: 329).

David Foster Wallace manufactured a novel of an unfathomable breadth and virtuosity. It is filled to the brim with excitement and prescience that get constantly reified as our tech-savvy and, sadly, ill society advances. The question of worship, specifically, has managed to stay as relevant today as it was in the time of *Infinite Jest*'s publication. Whether it is entertainment or a spoonful of snow, DFW makes the case that it is our tallest and most privileged task to think through our priorities. Because, as exemplified above, under no circumstances is worship harnessed and navigated by us personally. Worship reshapes the world around the worshipper, it leads him or her by the hand, and unless the worshipper desires to sink in utter dismay and self-loss, s/he will never let go.

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