

Interface, Excess, and Acquiring Many Exotic New Facts in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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“The reason people sing songs for other people is because they want to have the power to arouse empathy, to break free of the narrow shell of the self and share their pain and joy with others. This is not an easy thing to do, of course.”

- Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

It’s almost impossible to pick somewhere, a single sole point¹, at which to begin an analysis of *Infinite Jest*; the opening scene seems as good as any. Our first introduction to Hal Incandenza, the primary tether of one of the novel’s three main narrative strands, sees Hal in the midst of a frustrating failure to communicate: we, the readers, can understand² what Hal is attempting to tell the Directors and Deans at the interview, but for whatever unexplained reason they react as if Hal is completely irrational, as if the things he has said are in no way meaningful or sense-transmitting (*Infinite Jest* 12). Which is particularly unfortunate for Hal, because one of

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A bit of a note here before beginning, something in the way of a ‘Bridge Out Ahead’ warning sign or a marking that ‘Here There Be Dragons’ at the edge of a map: there will be footnotes in the pages ahead, and a whole bunch of them. Big deal, you might say – footnotes are pretty standard fare in academic discourse. But this is a discussion of *Infinite Jest*, a text where endnotes become something far more excessive and unlimited, breaking free of the stuffy confines that they are usually held within. And so the footnotes in this paper fall somewhere in between those two extremes, doing something more excessive than simply offering, “evidentiary support for scholarly contributions to knowledge” (Letzler 304). Hence why some footnotes function to simply provide explanatory support, and others see Italo Calvino pop up without warning and then disappear just as suddenly.

But there is a point to the excess of this paper’s footnotes that goes beyond mere shallow, rote mimicry of Wallace’s text. I will be developing an argument that the concept of interface, a framework that orders and regulates how one reads and navigates certain information, is central to *IJ*, and that the interface of *IJ* is crucially tied up with the idea of excess: the excess of the text, the excess of the modern encyclopedia, and the excess of information in postmodern America, i.e. the ‘real world’ out beyond the text. Thus, while standard practice is to use footnotes to tell, to provide evidentiary support, the footnotes of this paper might be understood better as showing rather than telling: the excess of the footnotes actualize and substantiate the paper’s argument of interface by ordering information in the way that *IJ* suggests is unavoidable in the digital 21st century. The interface that I argue is needed to navigate *IJ* is also the interface that orders this paper. Of course, my footnotes also do a large amount of telling to support the argument of the paper, but there is less of a distinction between the information presented in the footnotes and the information in the body of the text: *IJ* suggests that information always spills over beyond any boundaries we try to subject information to, making the distinction between body proper and footnote less relevant.

This might make more sense after reading the paper, which should put the arguments I’m referencing here into context. But hopefully, and this is the goal of even providing this note, being forewarned that the footnotes here are excessive *but not without point* will help avert any frustration that they might otherwise evoke.

² Well, this actually might be a bit of an exaggeration, considering Wallace’s penchant for words with more syllables than the average reader has years lived, a penchant that for most readers probably necessitates keeping a dictionary close at hand. But, ignoring Hal’s prodigious lexicon and the issue of whether it is perfectly shared by each reader, the statements Hal makes in the interview are basically understandable to us, whereas the adults in the room with him struggle to find any sensible meaning in them.

the basic theses of his speech to the interviewers is that he *wants* to be able to communicate, to be able *share his feelings with others*: he tells us that

I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex....I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't....But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table...I'm not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function....Please don't think I don't care (*Infinite Jest* 11-12).

The Hal we see here is chronologically the eldest Hal in the novel: the opening scene takes place in the Year of Glad, while the majority of the rest of the novel takes place in the previous year, the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Something has happened to him over the course of that time: in the Y.D.A.U. Hal is described as, "empty but not dumb," but the Hal we experience in the opening scene is anything but empty (*Infinite Jest* 694). He desires to be able to interface with other human beings.

The use of interface as a verb in the way we saw in Hal's speech is just one of Wallace's many creative linguistic inventions in *IJ*: to interface is to really truly engage another individual³. Usually through conversation, usually face to face. Hal's failure to be able to interface with the interviewers thus reveals one of the novel's primary concerns: how can we achieve, and foster the achievement of, true meaningful interactions with others? Presumably the reader shares Hal's desire to interface with others, especially when it comes to things near and dear to a sense of self, experiences and feelings and our most interesting opinions. We want to be able to do so, but what makes it possible? Whatever it is that makes interface possible, Hal has lost it when we first

³ We see the preferential treatment that is given to *interfacing*, as opposed to simply *talking*, when the older students at Enfield Tennis Academy are working with the younger students. Ortho Stice tells his Little Buddies that interfaces, true 'mano-to-mano interfaces', are privileged and meaningful; this is due to the shared value/language commitments and ground, as well as the sincerity of the dialogue, that interface implies (*Infinite Jest* 119-20).

meet him. Andrew Warren tells us that the possibility of interface is closely related to the issue of community: “local argot – e.g., the squeak, eating cheese, interface, eliminating one's own map, howling fantods...shoe squeezing, wiggling, titty pinching – that starts out as a way of modeling community within the novel becomes a tactic for organizing community outside of the novel” (Warren 397). Wallace’s unique language creates a connection between reader and text: the reader requires a unique vocabulary with which to interface with *IJ* and to navigate the text, a unique vocabulary that the text intentionally fosters.

IJ seems to suggest that these shared language and value commitments are important beyond the text as well. Ennet House, a halfway house for drug and alcohol rehab that locates another of the three primary narrative threads of the novel, functions to reveal the work done by interface in *IJ* – as well as revealing how the text conceptualizes interface functioning out in the ‘real world’. Simply put, interface in *IJ* seems to depend upon a commitment to sincerity and authenticity, with true interface between individuals only possible when they meet upon common, shared ground organized around sincere and open exchange. Thus, the framework modeled by Ennet House is important in revealing to us how to read *IJ* – it provides an interface for the reader to understand not only the sections focusing on Donald Gately⁴ and Ennet House but also the other sections of the novel, as well as allowing the reader to navigate the excessive informational overload that characterizes postmodern America out beyond the text.

In his afterword to David Markson’s novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, Wallace argues that “the existence, nay the very *idea* of language depends on some sort of communicative *community*” (“The Empty Plenum: David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress" 270). In other

⁴ The ‘protagonist’ of the Ennet House sections, and probably, along with Hal, the closest *IJ* has to a true central protagonist.

words, in order to be able to effectively, *meaningfully*, communicate with others, we require a common, shared foundation to ground our statements, to serve as a reference for our discourse. In order for meaning to be transmitted, the two individuals interfacing with each other need to share language and value commitments. *IJ* tells us much the same thing: Hugh Steeply's conversations with Rémy Marathe⁵ reveal that interface requires rules, codifications, and commitments in order to ensure that each interlocutor is able to gain something meaningful from the experience: Marathe's superiors, "had wished Marathe to require that [Marathe and Steeply] interface always in Québécois French," and Steeply relies on specific, hierarchically specified techniques of interface determined by the U.S. Office of Unspecified Services (*Infinite Jest* 89, 108). In order for their interface to be workable, each goes into it with commitments that exist in order to make interface possible.⁶

⁵ The last of the novel's three major narrative strands: Hugh Steeply is an agent for the U.S. Office of Unspecified Services, and Rémy Marathe is a member of the Québécois separatist group the Wheelchair Assassins (AFR) who is passing information on the AFR to Steeply and the U.S.O.U.S. in exchange for medical support for his wife. The text sees the two meeting to exchange information in April of the Y.D.A.U.

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Of course, we see that the two often do not share the same language commitments or value commitments: their fundamental inability to come to an agreement, or really even understand the other, in their discussions of freedom, choice, and free will underscores that each is approaching the dialectic from different social and cultural locations, creating gaps in their interface through which the meaning each is attempting to transmit can slip out and escape. This, however, merely reinforces the importance of shared commitments to facilitate meaningful interface, as we see Marathe and Steeply often fumbling in the dark in the absence of such a shared ground.

Furthermore, the conversations between Marathe and Steeply reveal that interface is not neutral – the organizing protocols and guidelines that one must follow to successfully navigate and utilize interface are hierarchical and directive, and prioritize certain forms of interaction. The order given by Marathe's superiors to communicate solely in French shows that interface does more than simply allow the transmission of information: interface orders and disciplines the information it gives individuals access to. Individuals need to play by the rules of the interface; interface makes it easier to organize and transmit information *as long as you follow the rules*. It is no accident that Marathe's failure to stick to the AFR's organizing principles of interface accompanies a profound failure of Marathe and Steeply to meet each on common ground and truly interface with each other; now, this breakdown is due to more fundamental failures than simply conversing in English rather than French, but the correlation is still worth noting.

The model of interface seen in Ennet House will allow us to understand more clearly why *IJ* depicts Marathe and Steeply as falling short of true interface.

Wallace's designation of any sort of meaningful dialogue or dialectic as interfacing turns out to be an especially auspicious and useful turn of phrase. In his discussion of digital media, Alexander Galloway details what he calls the interface effect; he tells us that

the interface is ultimately something beyond the screen... The interface is a general technique of mediation evident at all levels; indeed it facilitates the way of thinking that tends to pitch things in terms of 'levels' or 'layers' in the first place... The social field itself constitutes a grand interface, an interface between subject and world, between surface and source, and between critique and objects of criticism (Galloway 54).

So underlying our interactions with any sort of media is an interface; this is somewhat more clear-cut in the digital forms that Galloway investigates, as the GUI⁷ is clearly visible on our computer screens and is indispensable in guiding us through our use of digital media. But this is just as true of more traditional media; in order to make it possible for a reader to interact meaningfully with a text, there must be an interface embedded within the text.

Matt Tresco describes *IJ* as an encyclopedic novel, but one characterized by a more modern conception of what it means to be an encyclopedia.⁸ *IJ* attempts to consume and order facts, yes, but does so fully aware of the impossibility of such an undertaking, the impossibility for a truly encyclopedic novel to exist within the information proliferation and overload of the 21st century. Tresco argues that, "it is possible for the encyclopedia to no longer imply totalization and containment, but release and an enlargement of possibilities. Structurally, both Wikipedia and *Infinite Jest* are always threatening to overspill, to negate the purpose of their organizing principles, if indeed they ever really had any" (Tresco 121). *IJ* is both working

⁷ Graphical user interface.

⁸ Fittingly, given Galloway's concentration on digital media, Tresco takes Wikipedia as his touchstone of what a thoroughly modern encyclopedia looks like. *IJ* is a *modern* encyclopedic novel – it is potentially limitless but also susceptible to misinformation, forcing the reader to be explicitly careful with interpretation. The problem we confront with the modern encyclopedia is also the problem we encounter with interface – we need to internalize the ordering principles and value commitments in order to navigate the interface, otherwise we run the risk of being led astray.

towards being encyclopedic and deliberately showing us the limitations of projects of aimed at amassing and ordering data⁹. So *IJ* is the encyclopedic novel that points not only within but also out beyond itself, recognizing that it cannot possibly contain everything there is to know about postmodern America and instead opening up the possibility of enlargement out beyond the text – and interface is the tool that allows us to grasp this duality, which the text suggests is essential to navigating the landscape of excess and informational overload we are forced to encounter in postmodern America. The conversations between Marathe and Steeply reinforce that the interface of the text is also an interface to navigate postmodern America, with the two discussing the unique identity Americans have constructed for themselves¹⁰. Still, though, whether it is ultimately limited or unlimited, one of *IJ*'s significant characteristics is an attempt to bring together and order a massive amount of data, meaning that we can understand *IJ* as doing work similar to the work done by the database.

Characterizing *IJ* as a database¹¹ is useful in moving towards a conception of the interface readers experience while reading *IJ* and need to successfully navigate the text. In a discussion of the digital Walt Whitman Archive, Jerome McGann tells us that, “no database can function without a user interface, and in the case of cultural materials the interface is an

⁹ Stephen Burn makes a similar argument via a comparison between Wallace and earlier postmodern writers like Pynchon: while these earlier writers saw encyclopedic novels as a basically positive undertaking, “*Infinite Jest* dramatizes the limitations of this attempt. Its fundamental process is to seek exhaustive accounts, and to dramatize the accumulation of information, but most of these efforts...prove empty and futile exercises” (Burn 28).

¹⁰ Steeply argues that American identity is rooted in freedom of choice and free will, while Marathe, more critical than his American counterpoint, argues that American freedom is a shallow and insincere form of freedom, and that appeals to free will are used to mask the insatiable (and, thus, not truly freely chosen) pursuit of pleasure that characterizes postmodern Americans. The text also sees Hal Incandenza musing upon what it means to be American: “to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goop-prone and generally pathetic...one of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia” (*Infinite Jest* 695).

¹¹ Even if this is necessarily complicated; a database is admittedly different than a novel-as-database, and in many ways *IJ* structurally pushes back against being solely and simply understood as a database, as Tresco and Burn point out.

especially crucial element of these kinds of digital instruments” (McGann 1588). *IJ* functions as a repository of cultural materials, the uniquely American culture that *IJ* both discusses and attempts to order within the text. Thus, the relationship between *IJ* and the reader cannot escape the realm of culture; cultural commitments and understandings are fostered by *IJ* in order to make the text meaningful, understandable.¹² McGann goes on to say that, “interface embeds, implicitly and explicitly, many kinds of hierarchical and narrativized organizations” (McGann 1588). So not only is cultural information both assumed and transmitted by interface, but crucially it also hierarchizes that information. If we think of this in terms of the value commitments that culture fosters, then the internalization of interface is a process by which values become hierarchical and ordered. For a reader to internalize the interface of *IJ* is for that reader to arrive at a place where she orders values in the same way as the text, where she is able to operate within the same hierarchized cultural framework.

Katherine Hayles helps us to place interface in the context of *IJ*. She argues that the modern world presents us with an overload of information, which is all the more true in the context of digital media. Thus the emergence of hyperreading as a way to make sense of the excess of information we are now always and inevitably confronted with: while close reading requires close and continued attention to a single source, hyperreading has readers navigating the multiplicity of fields of information that we are continually faced with. Hayles argues that hyperreading, “enables a reader quickly to construct landscapes of associated research fields and subfields; it shows ranges of possibilities; it identifies texts and passages most relevant to a given query; and it easily juxtaposes many different texts and passages” (Hayles 66). Quite simply, we

¹² Perhaps one of the easiest and simplest examples is *Subsidized Time*: the reader recognizes the (majority of the) products that have lent their names to the years in the novel. That recognition is shared culture. But more than that, there’s also the cultural understanding of America as increasingly powered by corporate concerns and interests; the joke of *Subsidized Time* works *only* because the reader is coming from that shared cultural standpoint, which allows for meaningful interface with the text.

are faced with an, “enormous amount of material to be read, leading to the desire to skim everything because there is way too much material to pay close attention to anything for very long” (Hayles 67).

Wallace recognizes this anxiety that the modern American is faced with; in fact, he straight up admits that, “concentrating intently on anything is very hard work,” and requires constant vigilance¹³ (*Infinite Jest* 203). Tresco and Burn point out that *IJ* is encyclopedic, but it is so in the context of 21st century hyperreading. The overload of information that we must constantly combat in the modern world is mirrored in the informational overload ordered and presented within *IJ*. In one sense, reading *IJ* is textbook close reading, insofar as readers are focused on a sole text. But *IJ* is hypertextual in the same way that Hayles tells us digital medias are: endnotes are scattered throughout the text and the need to continuously flip back to them disrupts the linear reading process, Wallace jumps rapidly from subject to subject, and most simply the text just contains *a lot* of information. This reinforces the claim made above, that interface is cultural: *IJ* is located within a culture of excess where hyperreading is essential, and thus hyperreading and excess also characterize *IJ*.

Galloway and McGann explain that interface is necessary for *any* sort of media, that it is impossible to operate without interface when interacting with media. And this holds true for *IJ*, only it is *more true* for *IJ* than for other texts. As we saw before, the text functionally demands that we think about the importance of an *interface* by making the idea of *interfacing*¹⁴ so ever-

¹³ “And Polo said: ‘The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.’” (Calvino 165).

¹⁴ The verb as Wallace uses it, referring to the meaningful interaction *made possible* by a functioning interface.

present. Hal feels, but is unable to find¹⁵ a way to interface meaningfully with his interviewers, to transmit those feelings. The rigidly and hierarchically structured AA-based format of Ennet House requires that members are constantly interfacing, whether formally or informally, as seen in the section entitled “selected snippets from the individual-resident-informal interface moments of D.W. Gately” where Don Gately, a counselor at Ennet House, interviews some of the other residents (*Infinite Jest* 563). The idea, and more so the *necessity*, of interfacing is so inescapable for the characters in the text that theorizing interface becomes its own necessity.

And with that said, let us turn to actually theorizing the interface of *Infinite Jest*. I will be arguing that the key to the text’s interface can be found in the section that runs from page 200 to page 205, wherein the reader learns that, “if, by the virtue of charity or the circumstance of desperation, you ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility like Enfield MA’s state-funded Ennet House, you will acquire many exotic new facts” (*Infinite Jest* 200).

In the Ennet House sections, the text primarily follows Don Gately, the former burglar and Demerol addict turned counselor at Ennet House. Gately, who begins the novel entrenched in a life of crime, is initially firmly opposed to the AA model/system; yet after a bungled

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This seems like as good a place as any to discuss the process of finding things in *Infinite Jest*, and, if I can be allowed to drop the rigor of academic discourse and be painfully frank for a moment, let me tell you that it is *absolutely impossible* to find anything in *IJ* when you’re specifically looking for it. E.g. if one is struck by the relevancy of a certain conversation between Marathe and Steeply, or between Gately and Joelle van Dyne, to the argument at hand, and one then wants to go to the text to be able to read the scene in its entirety and in its original context, one is pretty much assured of having to spend an almost unbelievably long time flipping through pages and consulting the internet before finally stumbling upon the sought after scene. And usually one then realizes that it’s actually not as helpful as initially hoped. A searchable e-book version of the text helps to somewhat remedy this problem but doesn’t make it go away, not by a long shot.

This (arduous) process of attempting to locate specific information with the novel reinforces the previous claim that interface demands and needs codification, organizing principles that one must act within in order to navigate the information presented by an interface – *while also* at the same demonstrating the impossibility of totally encompassing all knowledge in postmodern America’s informational excess.

burglary resulting in court-ordered rehab at Ennet House he has experienced a startling about-face, and, after completing the terms of his own rehab, we find him positioned at Ennet as an in-house counselor, working to assist more recent arrivals at the House in their process of recovery. As Gately continues to internalize the values of Ennet's AA model, the reader is expected to as well: we see that the importance of community and sincere interfacing to the AA model and Ennet House is also important to the text as a whole. Timothy Aubry points out the importance of shared community to Ennet House, arguing that in *IJ*

AA offers members a tight-knit community of fellow addicts, an opportunity to exchange heart-wrenching stories about their experiences with substances, and a series of simple steps and clichés to help keep them sober. AA functions as an antidote, in the novel, not only to addiction, but also to a more general set of tendencies, in many cases concomitant with addiction, that prevail among the privileged in the United States (Aubry 106).

Ennet House is able to function as an antidote to addictions and the general hip 'emptiness' that plagues Hal Incandenza for much of the novel by committing itself to a sincere transmission of values in order to foster community¹⁶: each resident's goal is selfish insofar as they are primarily concerned solely with 'saving themselves', but Ennet paradoxically demands that they break free of selfish motivation and commit to a community as the method by which they save themselves. Interfacing becomes less of an honor, as we saw Stice present it as to his Little Buddies, and more of a necessity: the members *need* to be able to experience the process of overcoming addiction together in order for there to be any hope that they will actually make it through the recovery process.

Why it is that interface and interfacing is so boldly and explicitly important for the residents of Ennet House, rather than being implicit as it is in most of the novel's interactions, seems to be due to the substance that those going through the AA Program are impelled to focus

¹⁶ "I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral" (Saunders 46).

on. Wallace presents the AA model as treasuring above all else sincerity, participants willingness to be wholly open and honest and truthful with each other; a corollary of this focus on sincerity means that the AA model is downright hostile to irony. We see this as Gately realizes it himself:

Gately's found it's got to be the truth, is the thing. He's trying hard to *really hear* the speakers....The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle [emphasis added] (*Infinite Jest* 369).

So Ennet's interface is structured to prioritize speech that is sincere; members are trained and conditioned to recognize insincere or ironic interaction and to attack and criticize it. Irony, attempting to mask what one truly feels, attempting to game the system and exploit the interface while remaining still disinvested in the interface's hierarchy of values, has no place in the AA Program. This is an important part of the commitments that interface seeks to foster: value commitments. Specifically in the case of Ennet House, residents are expected to commit themselves to the value of sincerity, and they must do so in order to be able to interface with each other¹⁷. Of course, we see through the residents at Ennet House that this process of

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Here it's probably worthwhile to take a moment to address the question of just what it means to be sincere. Luckily Wallace has made it somewhat easier on us, as he clarifies his views on value-commitments in his nonfiction. In 'E Unibus Pluram' he writes that, "irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive....[I]rony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. This is why Hyde seems right about persistent irony being tiresome. It is unmeaty" ("E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" 67). Unmeaty is a particularly good description here. For Wallace, irony has its uses but transmitting anything *real*, anything *meaty*, is not one of them. If we can return to the novel's opening scene again for a moment, Hal Incandenza wants to be able to interface with the Directors and Deans interviewing him. He *feels*, and he wants to be able to *share* what he feels. Irony is a vehicle that is wholly incompatible with Hal's desires here. Irony is the younger Hal: "in fact he's far more robotic than John Wayne...in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing that all, he knows" (*Infinite Jest* 694). Smart and intelligent and witty, to be sure; hip and able to satirize anything and everything, but ultimately empty.

Wallace fears that such critique is ultimately not productive or life-affirming. Irony offers us no recourse save further irony:

Irony tyrannizes us. The reason our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is *impossible to pin down*. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit ‘I don’t really mean what I’m saying.’ So what *does* irony as a cultural norm mean to say?...Most likely, I think, today’s irony ends up saying: ‘How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean.’...And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *subject* is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself (“E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” 67-68).

A commitment to irony creates a world where interfacing is impossible. Ennet House’s AA structure makes it clear that interface’s primary purpose to be transmit *substance*, to make it possible for something of substance to be understood meaningfully and transmitted between individuals. However, irony seems to offer the ability to sidestep the issue of substance, to avoid answering the question of what one *means* by instead critiquing the *way* the question itself is formulated. And *IJ* suggests that America has embraced ironic cynicism: “American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels” (*Infinite Jest* 53).

Irony leads to us caring more about how we present ourselves to others than about actually connecting with others. In *This is Water*, Wallace connects this with the issue of attention, which we already saw receiving special focus in *IJ*: “as I’m sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head” (*This Is Water* 50). A culture of ironic pseudo-engagement redirects that attention, ensuring that appearing witty and hip takes precedence over anything of substance. Irony is the focus on the ‘constant monologue’ that is always running inside our own heads.

So how do we avoid this pitfall? Wallace answers, and actualizes his answer in his depiction of Ennet House and the AA Program in *IJ*, that a commitment to sincerity is the remedy to the all-consuming march of irony in postmodern America. Ironic hip disengagement, he claims, is the path that has caused such trouble for the residents of Ennet House, and it is the reason that each of them ended up needing the AA Program. Take Ken Erdedy, for example. Later we meet him as another resident of the House, but in his first appearance in the novel we see him in the throes of addiction and awaiting the arrival of his latest binge, 200 grams of marijuana. Incredibly, Erdedy is planning to go through this entire amount in a mere four days: “he would smoke the whole 200 grams – 120 grams cleaned, destemmed – in four days, over an ounce a day, all in tight heavy economical one-hitters off a quality virgin bong, an incredible, insane amount per day” (*Infinite Jest* 22). Erdedy does not, in fact, desire to smoke this much per day; or rather, his commitment to smoking the 200 grams is perversely motivated by a desire to once and for all quit the drug. He has decided that, “he’d cure himself by excess” (*Infinite Jest* 22).

This desire to cure himself through excess seems analogous to Wallace’s critique of irony. Erdedy is unable to look beyond the boundaries of the prison that he has imprisoned himself within. He has attempted to stop smoking before, many times before, but he always falls prey, not to a physical addiction to the drug, but to an addiction to overthinking and overhyping the constant internal monologue within his head. Erdedy’s problem is shared by other addicts: “most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking...The cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*” (*Infinite Jest* 203). He does not think too little about his problem, he thinks too much about it. He overrationalizes his (pretty silly, if we’re honest) plan to cure himself through excessive indulgence. Ironic detachment from the truth of his situation, i.e. his inability to recognize his addiction for what it is, takes the place of and prevents sincere engagement, e.g. any sort of *real* attempt to stop smoking. Joelle van Dyne, another resident at Ennet House, worked as the host of a radio program^a before she attempted to eliminate her own map^b and was sent to Ennet; Wallace describes the music on her program as, “suggesting expansion without really expanding. It leads up to the exact kind of inevitability it denies” (*Infinite Jest* 191).

As Aubry argues, Ennet House prescribes sincerity as the antidote to the hip ironic disengagement that plagues Ennet’s residents just as much as physical substance addictions do. Aubry tells us that, “the groups’ rejection of ‘analysis-paralysis’ for instance asserts the limitations of the intellect. Habitual self-analysis is dangerous, according to AA, in part because its members are so skilled at rationalizing their destructive behavior” (Aubry 106). The AA Program thus attempts to structure itself so as to prevent this overrationalization; the focus on sincerity is an attempt to close the avenues by which substance-addicted people relapse and return to their substance. Sincerity, for both Wallace and the characters engaged in the Program, appears to be about rejecting the purely ironic detachment that

a. Under the name ‘Madame Psychosis’, which elicits all that fun interplay with *Ulysses* and metempsychosis.

b. Another of Wallace’s unique phrases in *IJ*, to eliminate one’s map means to commit suicide.

internalizing value commitments can be a supremely precarious procedure: as Wallace says in *This is Water*, preserving and acting out one's commitment to sincerity is, "hard, [and] it takes will and mental effort, and if you're like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or else you just flat out won't want to" (*This Is Water* 88). So the interface required to navigate Ennet House demands not only that residents internalize values of sincerity¹⁸, but that they commit to the hard work of reinvigorating and reproducing these values, day after day.

Ennet House also reveals the importance of something mentioned briefly above: interfaces are necessarily ordered and codified. Marathe and Steeply are both following orders w/r/t how they interface with each other, in order to make the information being transmitted meaningful to each other's organization, and similarly the very core of the AA model depends on

prevents true interfacing and which informs modern America's tendency towards addiction and the pursuit of pleasure. Those committed to sincerity are those, "who have the childish gall to actually endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. ...[Those who] risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness" ("E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" 81). In 'Octet', one of Wallace's short stories which begins innocently but rapidly descends into metafiction, sincerity is analyzed in terms of the relationship between author, text, and reader. The narrator of 'Octet' asserts that the text provides the ground, the *interface*, for a relationship between author and reader, but in order for the author to be able to make this real, "you'd have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked — more like unarmed. Defenseless" ("Octet" 154). Thus, sincerity appears to imply the lowering of the defenses that ironic detachment raises: "we are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from goeey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté" (*Infinite Jest* 694). Sincerity for Wallace and Gately and Ennet House means to cast aside such masks, to open up the possibility of actually and truly interfacing with others. After he has spent some time in AA, we find that, "Gately's most marked progress in turning his life around in sobriety, besides the fact that he no longer drives off into the night with other people's merchandise, is that he tries to be just about as verbally honest as possible at almost all times now, without too much calculation about how a listener's going to feel about what he says. This is harder than it sounds" (*Infinite Jest* 370). It's tough to be sincere in the way that AA mandates, but the text seems to be working towards a sincere relationship with the reader.

More on sincerity later, but it is important to point out here that *IJ* is a novel that is filled with irony and metatextual trickery – so it is not so much that irony is unabashedly and always evil, but rather that it is *undiluted, indiscriminate, and comprehensive* irony that we must be wary of. The sincerity/irony opposition is thus not an either/or situation, and *IJ* presents sincerity not as a complete and wholesale alternative to irony, but rather as a counterpoint to irony, which allows us to balance out irony's excess and reopen avenues through which we can communicate authentically. Irony alone might be unproductive, but irony is also inevitable in postmodern America, and thus sincerity alongside that inevitable irony allows for productive dialogue and action.

¹⁸ Specifically, residents are asked to confront their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, so as to allow themselves to open up to other residents (and others out beyond Ennet) and confront the outside real world without needing to fall back on recreational drugs.

whether the members are able to adhere to a rigid set of rules. This can be seen in the Program's maxims, which members are expected to universally adopt whether or not they even understand them at first:

The desperate, newly sober White Flaggers are always encouraged to invoke and pay empty lip-service to slogans they don't yet understand or believe – e.g. 'Easy Does It!' and 'Turn It Over!' and 'One Day At a Time!' It's called 'Fake It Till You Make It,' itself an oft-invoked slogan.... You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it.... There are some definite cultish, brainwashy elements to the AA Program (*Infinite Jest* 369).

In order for those participating in the AA Program to be able to be able to meaningfully connect, to truly interface with each other, they are expected to strictly stick to the *way of communicating* that is approved of by the House. So not only are the shared value commitments essential for Ennet House's inter-member interface, but shared language commitments are as well. It is meaningful for Gately to speak of being 'Grateful' or 'Lucky' that he is still sober, or to remind himself to 'Keep it Simple', because the communal ground created by Ennet House and the AA model have structured those utterances to be meaningful. Plus, Gately's thoughts on the AA Program's maxims again reveal that interface becomes internalized: members are expected to invoke the slogans 'until they start to believe' in them. Interface not only fosters commitments (which make it function effectively) but it also requires an a priori commitment: the residents must commit themselves to acting through the social roles designated by the AA model.

Ennet House is explicitly committed to the work of making interfacing possible, and even more so is explicitly committed to an interface motivated by sincerity. Thus, Ennet House seems like a more likely ground to reveal the interface of *IJ* than Enfield Tennis Academy or the

dialogues of Marathe and Steeply¹⁹. Although, it's important to note that claiming that Ennet House more easily reveals the text's interface is *not* the same thing as claiming that the text's interface *only exists* when we turn to Ennet House. Rather, the argument is that the values of Ennet House and the AA Program align with the text's interface in a way that makes the text's interface especially visible.

Nowhere is this interface more visible than when the reader is acquiring many exotic new facts²⁰. Most basically, this language of 'acquiring many exotic new facts' is intriguing, for what is *II* itself but a codex of many exotic, probably new, facts for the reader? Unless the reader has been trained as a doctor or a pharmacist, it seems unlikely that the reader would have already known the very in-depth, almost itself professional, information on recreational drugs that is presented in Notes 8 and 12 (*Infinite Jest* 984). Similarly, the text's exhaustive information on the rules and etiquette of tennis, for example, or high-level mathematics, is probably also going to be new for most readers.

But then the question becomes why is this one, specific section, and a short section at that, marked out as transmitting many exotic new facts, when in fact we encounter many exotic new facts throughout the entirety of the text? What is unique about the MENF section seems to be its comparative *honesty* and *explicitness* about its transmission of exotic new facts. The text is explicit that learning is happening in these sections; it begins by telling us, "you will find out that once MA's Department of Social Services has taken a mother's children away for any period of

¹⁹ Marathe and Steeply reveal the workings of interface, as well as the ways that interface controls and limits access to information^a, but are also guarded with each other, the deceptive nature of their work demands that they stand back from fully committing to an interface of sincerity. The students at Enfield, on the other hand, are left mired in the unadulterated ironic detachment that the AA Program is so militantly opposed to.

a. It is also worth pointing out that Marathe and Steeply serve to parody the uncritical acceptance of hierarchical interface, and they contrast with the extremely critical thinking that Gately does on the interface presented by Ennet House.

²⁰ For simplicity, I'm going to start referring to this section as 'the MENF section' or simply as 'MENF'.

time, they can always take them away again, D.S.S., like at will, empowered by nothing more than a certain signature-stamped form.” (*Infinite Jest* 200). That language of ‘you will find out *that...*’ is what makes the text explicitly pedagogical²¹. The text again echoes the interpretations

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Here it might be worthwhile to comment on what it means for the text to be pedagogical, and what it means for MENF specifically to be pedagogical. The second seems simple: the MENF section is pedagogical because it seeks to tell us what we will learn, and presents us with those facts in an instructional and informational format: we will learn *that...* and *that...* and *that...* etc.

But it remains to be seen whether that is a useful label to apply to MENF, i.e. whether describing it as pedagogical tells us anything about the section or sets it about from other sections. For, in truth, *IJ* is an incredibly long book filled with many, many exotic new facts, and there are other sections which can also rightly be understood as pedagogical: Madame Psychosis’ radio broadcasts, the dialogues between Marathe and Steeply, and, most obviously, the advice of Lyle the sweat guru. Lyle lives in the weight room of Enfield Tennis Academy^a and, “if you let him lick your arms and forehead, [will] pass on to you some little nugget of fitness-guru wisdom” (*Infinite Jest* 128). Hence the moniker ‘Lyle the sweat guru’: he exchanges his teachings for the sweat of the students at the tennis academy, which he apparently lives off of. We see the students at ETA coming to Lyle for advice several times throughout the text: just a few pages prior to MENF, Graham Rader comes to Lyle for advice. Rader is worried that he has plateaued^b, and is coming to Lyle for advice for both how to deal with his fear and how to continue to improve his game. Lyle asks, if given a key ring with one hundred keys on it and told that one of those keys would unlock the door that leads to success, how many Rader would be willing to try; Rader answers that he would try every single one. Lyle then replies that, “then you are willing to make mistakes, you see. You are saying you will accept 99% error. The paralyzed perfectionist you say you are would stand there before that door. Jangling the keys. Afraid to try the first key” (*Infinite Jest* 199).

Immediately there are echoes here of the pedagogy of Ennet House and the AA Program, which also warns participants to be wary of *Analysis-Paralysis*. But both seem to be cautioning against the same phenomenon for vastly different reasons. Ennet, as discussed above, warns its residents against overrationalization and giving too much credence to their own thinking and justification; AA’s basic stance is ‘look where your thinking got you Out There’. In Boston AA, you can, “do exactly as you please – if you still trust what seems to please you,” and AA is structurally set up to constantly remind the participants that they should *not* trust their own thinking, that they should doubt themselves when their minds seem convinced that a certain pleasure would be worth pursuing (*Infinite Jest* 356).

ETA, on the other hand, seems to be warning against *Analysis-Paralysis* precisely in order to further strengthen addictions. In *IJ*, obsession and addiction are flip sides of the same coin; Wallace’s placing ETA and Ennet House literally on opposite sides of the same hill reinforces this understanding. The students at ETA eat, sleep, and breathe tennis... and it is a short jump from obsession to addiction^c. And *IJ* is very clear that addictions can be many and varied: the obvious addictions in the text are those to drugs, but Marathe criticizes the American culture as fostering a more general addiction to pleasure (*Infinite Jest* 318). And Lyle’s advice to Rader suggests that obsession is worth it, that the commitment to tennis at the cost of just about all else is worthwhile if it allows him to open that door to success. Overthinking is encouraged if the subject of that thinking is tennis, i.e. the addiction worth fostering. So Lyle’s pedagogy sees obsession as basically positive if the ends can justify the means, while Ennet’s basically tasks residents with guarding against a return to obsessive thinking and behavior. If we return for a second to the previous

a. Or, presumably lives either within the weight room or somewhere nearby; “nobody knows where he comes from or why he’s allowed to stay, but he’s always in there, sitting yogic about a meter off the rubberized floor of the weight room” (*Infinite Jest* 127-28).

b. We see the language of plateaus introduced by John N.R. Wayne to his Little Buddies. His theory, as parroted back by LaMont Chu, is that, “you proceed toward mastery through a series of plateaus, so there’s like radical improvement up to a certain plateau and then what looks like a stall, on the plateau, with the only way to get off one of the plateaus and climb up to the next one up ahead is with a whole lot of frustrating mindless repetitive practice and patience and hanging in there” (*Infinite Jest* 115).

c. This is made especially clear by the recreational drug habits of the students at Enfield.

that label it as encyclopedic: it, in an organized and orderly fashion²², goes through tells us all the things that we will learn. We will learn,

that there's a certain type of person who carries a picture of their therapist in their wallet...that you can cop a sort of thin jittery amphetaminic buzz if you rapidly consume three Millennial Fizzies and a whole package of Oreo cookies on an empty stomach...that the chilling Hispanic term for whatever interior disorder drives the addict back again and again to the enslaving Substance is *tecato gusano*, which apparently connotes some kind of interior psychic worm that cannot be sated or killed (*Infinite Jest* 200).

About five pages of sentences, almost all of which begin with that signifying *that*, all of which seek to tell us things *that* we will learn. And, of course, we are learning these things precisely by the text warning us that we will learn them. We will learn, for example,

That it is possible, in sleep, for some roommates to secure a cigarette from their bedside pack, light it, smoke it down to the quick, and then extinguish it in their bedside ashtray – without once waking up, and without setting anything on fire. You will be informed that this skill is usually acquired in penal institutions, which will lower your inclination to complain about the practice (*Infinite Jest* 200-01).

Interestingly and importantly, these are not facts that we *might* learn or *might* acquire. These are facts that we *will* learn; there is nothing potential about this learning, it is a *necessity*. Simply by dint of spending time at Ennet House, and, stepping back, simply by dint of reading *IJ*, these are facts that we will have no choice but to learn and internalize. And furthermore, this is a process of learning and internalizing information: you will learn that, “it is possible, in sleep, for some

discussion of sincerity, especially w/r/t Wallace's writing elsewhere on sincerity, it seems that the value commitments that Ennet attempts to teach are more in line with what Wallace calls for in 'Octet' and 'E Unibus Pluram'.

But there's also a structural difference, beyond the disparate substantive values that each evokes, between the MENF section and the other instances of blatant pedagogy in the text. What sets the pedagogy of MENF is that it is comparatively unmediated when set alongside the text's other pedagogical passages. When we are within ETA's weight room, it is Lyle the sweat guru who is disseminating advice. When we are atop a rocky outcropping overlooking Tucson and the neighboring desert, it is Rémy Marathe or Hugh Steeply who are making arguments. But when we are told of the many exotic new facts that we would learn in Ennet House, there is no *identifiable* speaker. This is more important than it might seem; it means that the facts being transmitted in the MENF section, the pedagogy that the reader is experiencing, are unmediated, or at least *appear* to be *comparatively* unmediated. The narratorial voice is not framed by the flawed interfaces seen in the novel's other sections, and is speaking directly through the text, rather than through a flawed intermediary character with her own specific set of biases.

²² Well, more orderly and organized than we might have expected given the first two hundred pages of the text.

roommates to secure a cigarette... smoke it... and then extinguish it," and *then*, only after learning this information, will you, "be informed that this skill is usually acquired in penal institutions" (*Infinite Jest* 200-01). So this is not just a one-off event that occurs, information acquired and that's that; this is an ongoing process where the resident (and the reader) continually learns to experience the House (and the text) through the facts and commitments that are progressively encountered. This echoes the work that Galloway and McGann theorize is done by interface: interface is a continuing commitment; the process must always be ongoing in order to ensure that the shared communal space does not disappear. These facts, about Millennial Fizzies and therapists and penal institutions, are facts that construct the communal space that is Ennet House. Internalizing them, *acquiring* them, is an informational commitment that allows residents to successfully navigate and deploy the interface of the AA Program. So the text places the reader in a position similar to Ennet's residents: we are expected to internalize the commitments demonstrated by the text so as to successfully navigate its interface and understand its organizing principles.

But just as important about the language of this section is that it stands in stark contrast to the style(s) seen in elsewhere in the text. A corollary of calling *IJ* encyclopedic is to recognize that it is excessive. In his analysis of *IJ*'s endnotes, David Letzler points out that much of the information contained within is essentially cruft, which he defines as excessive and superfluous junk. He argues that cruft is, "not 'wrong' per se, but it is excessive to no clear purpose, simultaneously too much and too little.... In most cases, the information dubbed "cruft" by editors is not inaccurate, but simply of minimal use, whether because it is trivial or simply

incomprehensible” (Letzler 308)²³. However, the MENF section is weirdly free, or at least more free, of the excess that typifies the rest of the text. Gone is Wallace’s penchant for metafictional trickery, and instead the text now claims to simply tell us, upfront, what will be learned, with no ifs, ands, or buts about it. We will learn *that...and that...and that...*, and moreso we are *explicitly told* that these facts are exactly what will be learned. The text is forthright and open with the reader. In a word, in the MENF section the text is sincere: it promises redemption through a commitment to sincerity and assures the reader (and resident) of the community and communal support that enable productive engagement and dialogue. Rather than confounding the reader, as Letzler argues the excess of *IJ* does, or dancing circles around the reader, like the rapid-fire switches between characters and points of view we see in the first two hundred pages, the text opens up and reveals its secrets without forcing the reader to do all that much work. But that’s not to say that this section doesn’t prompt work; in fact, if we treat the section as revelatory of *IJ*’s interface and look at it for value commitments, we see precisely the opposite, a demand that the resident and reader commit themselves to the hard work of sincere interaction.

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Here it’s probably worth pointing out that I agree with Letzler but only to an extent. While the text is certainly excessive, I disagree with his jump that the excess is superfluous. He characterizes the craft of *IJ* as essentially of lesser value and argues that we must learn to ‘read between the craft’, but my argument is that there is importance to the text’s excess. Hayles’ analysis is useful to demonstrate one reason why it seems hasty to dismiss out of hand *IJ*’s craft as superfluous: it serves a purpose precisely by being excessive, as it recreates the experience of hyperreading despite being the reader being closely focused on a single text.

Furthermore, there’s also the fact that we can look at the text in its entirety as a way to acquire many exotic new facts. Letzler points out that the majority of readers will probably not be innately familiar with the information presented in much of the text, and takes as his example the endnotes focused on drugs, which are extremely precise and scientific in their language. He says that, “if one does not have a background in pharmaceutical chemistry and/or practical knowledge of synthetic street drugs, one simply cannot,” understand these endnotes (Letzler 308). First, I’d argue that this simply isn’t true: I might not be a chemist but I still know what MDMA, psilocybin, and GHB are. Second, this might be entirely the point: to confront the reader with many exotic new facts that were previously unknown. The interface of *IJ* functions to make these unfamiliar facts known, to create community commitments around these facts through their unavoidable proliferation.

As we proceed through the MENF section, the facts that we are acquiring gradually begin to change in nature. At the outset, our education is purely particular and specified; the facts that we are told are specific to Ennet House and the AA Program. Knowing that Millennial Fizzies and Oreos can be used in a pinch to substitute for an amphetamine-like buzz is knowledge that isn't particularly useful or relevant unless one is an amphetamine user, and specifically an amphetamine user who is unable to get access to the real thing and thus has to settle for a sort of 'thin' alternative. Similarly, all of the information about substance addiction and the jargon that surrounds substance addiction is unlikely to ever be very relevant to the reader; it's all extremely important in revealing the interface and community commitments of *Ennet House*, but not so much in revealing the interface and commitments of the text proper.

As we proceed deeper into the informational and value commitments of Ennet House, though, this begins to change, and what is important to community *within* Ennet House starts to look pretty similar to what is important to community *outside* of Ennet House. The text moves from telling us that the, "idiom of choice for the male sex-organ," in the metro Boston area is 'unit' and pointing out that this is why, "Ennet House residents are wryly amused by E.M.P.H. Hospital's designations²⁴ of its campus's buildings" to then telling us,

that certain persons simply will not like you no matter what you do. Then that most nonaddicted adult civilians have already absorbed and accepted this fact, often rather early on.

That no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that (*Infinite Jest* 201)

The text moves from a fact, and joke, that is *specific to the residents' social location within Ennet House*, to a statement that seemingly has nothing to do with Ennet House. We have transitioned from facts that one will acquire in Ennet and AA, facts that can *only* be acquired

²⁴ The buildings are identified as 'Unit 1', 'Unit 2', etc.

within Ennet and AA, to facts that the text seems to think are larger, facts that are relevant to life out beyond Ennet House.

The claim that, “no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that,” echoes the already noted distrust of overreliance on rationalizing and one’s own thought processes²⁵ by the AA Program. So, just like the fact that some people simply won’t like you, this fact also seems to be presented within the specific context of facts that will be acquired within Ennet House while are also just as relevant to life out beyond Ennet. Except, there is a crucial difference. While most nonaddicted adult civilians have accepted that some people simply won’t like them, this appears to not be the case for the second fact; most nonaddicted adults have not recognized that they are way less smart than they think. In *This is Water*, Wallace tells us that the, “so-called ‘real world’ of men and money and power...the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying,” points us precisely towards self-absorption, leaving us nothing more than, “lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation”

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And we see the text again illustrate the dangers of overthinking and overrationalizing in the MENF section. In an endnote to the section the text tells us that there are “some hard-line schools of 12-Step thought” that caution against pursuits as varied as

yoga, reading, politics, gum-chewing, crossword puzzles, solitaire, romantic intrigue, charity work, political activism, N.R.A. membership, music, art, cleaning, plastic surgery, cartridge-viewing even at normal distances, the loyalty of a fine dog, religious zeal, relentless helpfulness, relentless other-folks’-moral-inventory-taking, the development of hard-line schools of 12-Step thought...[and even] 12-Step fellowships themselves

as being potentially dangerous addictions that could lead one back to substance addiction (*Infinite Jest* 998). This is pretty silly and ridiculous – especially as this line of reasoning apparently leads to certain schools of 12-Step Programs who are so hardline and rigidly ascetic that participants, “end up sitting in a bare chair, nude, in an unfurnished room, not moving but also not sleeping or meditating or abstracting, too advanced to stomach the thought of the potential emotional escape of doing anything whatsoever” (*Infinite Jest* 998).

While it is the AA Program that cautions against the danger of overthinking and overrationalizing one’s actions, the text is careful to point out that the thought processes behind the AA Program are not themselves immune to such overthinking. The community language and value commitments fostered by Ennet House might function as an antidote to the various addictions seen in the text, but it is worth noticing that this antidote is not sacred or untouchable: it is vulnerable to the same tendencies that it criticizes, hence the development of hardline programs.

But the text still shows us the shortcomings of such hardline programs. While refusing to do ‘anything whatsoever’ is certainly a method to avoid obsession and addiction, the text is just as wary of taking solipsism as an alternative to obsession, hence the unflinching criticism of Hal’s cynical emptiness. Doing nothing whatsoever is the easy but ultimately *empty* out, and Ennet House and *IJ* task us with the much harder but also much more productive path of *sincere* engagement with the world.

(*This Is Water* 115-19). So most nonaddicted adult civilians are encouraged to lose themselves within their own thinking; they are not encouraged to look beyond themselves in the way that the AA Program sees as necessary to recognize the limits of one's own smarts.

This point is useful to set up a discussion of the text's interface. Learning that one is 'way less smart than one thinks' is probably relevant to life outside of the AA Program, but this fact can *only* be acquired once within the context of Ennet House. If we apply that statement to the world as it is presented within the text, then we come up with this similar argument: the facts in the MENF section are by necessity being presented within the context of Ennet House, but are just as relevant to the sections of the text that deal with Hal and the ETA, and those that focus on Marathe and Steeply. It is simply that the readers must see these facts within Ennet House first; it is necessary to internalize the commitments presented within the Ennet sections in order to then be able to understand the ETA and AFR sections *in the context of these commitments*. In other words, the Ennet sections, and most specifically the MENF section, are able to reveal the text's interface, and that interface is what readers must use in order to parse through the rest of the text. As Marshall Boswell tells us, "readers can, and even *must*, devise some way to read through the book that allows them to keep their focus on the story while also mining the notes for all their information, comedy, and pleasure" (Boswell 120). Internalizing interface is the means by which readers learn to effectively read through the text, in all of its excess.

So what are these value commitments that function to make up the text's interface? They are many and varied is the safest answer, but at their simplest they all come back to the idea of sincerity that seems to be at the core of Ennet House and the AA Program.

We will learn that, "*sharing* means talking, and *taking somebody's inventory* means criticizing that person, plus many additional pieces of Recoveryspeak" (*Infinite Jest* 201). Again,

these are language commitments specific to Ennet House, but they have implications for life beyond the Program: linguistically equating ‘sharing’ with ‘talking’ brings us back to the privileged role of interfacing seen in the text. Out there in the ‘real world’ as Wallace calls it, beyond Ennet House, talking does not necessitate sharing; talking can occur without the individuals needing to sincerely share anything through the conversation²⁶. But within Ennet House the two are synonymous, and the interface of the Program provides no way to understand talking *except as sharing*.

We will learn that, “you do not have to like a person in order to learn from him/her/it...[and] that it is possible to learn valuable things from a stupid person” (*Infinite Jest* 202). A corollary of one being way less smart than one thinks is that others are probably smarter than one gives them credit for being, and that these others are often probably worth learning from, but the interface of the ‘real world’ leaves people too insularly wrapped up within their own thinking to learn from others. We also will learn that, “loneliness is not a function of solitude” (*Infinite Jest* 202). In other words, being physically alone is not the only barrier to community, interfacing can break down even when one is surrounded by others. Avoiding solitude matters, but just as important is ensuring that you are able to operate within the same cultural framework as others, able to demonstrate the same sort of value commitments, in order to create the shared ground necessary to interface.

We will learn that, “logical validity is not a guarantee of truth” (*Infinite Jest* 202). To be sociological for a moment, cultural and social norms must be taken into account as well: cultural norms, which determine which actions make sense and which are nonsensical, regulate how we understand the statements of others. If two individuals are operating under different cultural

²⁶ As we shall see soon in the scene where Hal’s father disguises himself as a ‘professional conversationalist’ and meets with Hal.

norms, a statement that seems perfectly logically valid to one might appear as nonsense to the other. The ability of these two individuals to sincerely communicate, the *guarantee* that both are able to understand the interface as sincere, depends on shared cultural norms, shared language and value commitments. Later we are told that, “no one who has been to prison is ever the same again,” which reinforces the importance of community values and norms: spending any amount of time in prison necessitates internalizing the community’s value commitments and learning to navigate the interface of prison life (*Infinite Jest* 204). No one who goes to prison is ever the same again for the same reason that no one who spends any time at Ennet House is ever the same again: they have become a part of that community, with all that that community entails.

We also learn that, “it takes effort to pay attention to any one stimulus for more than a few seconds,” and then a bit later that, “concentrating intently on anything is very hard work” (*Infinite Jest* 202-03). And that, “you don’t have to hit somebody even if you really want to” (*Infinite Jest* 204). And that, “there is such a thing as raw, unalloyed, agendaless kindness” (*Infinite Jest* 203). And that, “there might not be angels, but there are people who might as well be angels” (*Infinite Jest* 205). And that, “no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable” (*Infinite Jest* 204).

Taken together, these pieces of advice, presented as facts²⁷, suggest an ethics of sincerity that depends on community understanding and being willing to simply *pay attention* to others. In *This is Water* Wallace suggests that we are often more willing to characterize other people invidiously simply if they happen to be in our way; attentiveness to others allows us to avoid this

²⁷ This is an important distinction. If we were to look at nonfiction texts^a that attempt to promulgate arguments along this same line, for sincerity and openness and honesty and community, we would not see them presented as facts. Rather, we would see encouragement, suggestion, recommendation. We would see *advice* that we work especially hard to pay attention to what matters, but this would be no more than advice, which is very different than the claim that we *must* work hard to develop an ethics of attention. *IJ* presents its ethics as fact, which helps distinguish that these value commitments comprise the text’s interface, given that we already saw how non-negotiable interface is.

a. Self-help books or things of that sort, etc.

insidious trap (*This Is Water* 77-78). Adam Kelly tells us that in Wallace's texts, "the possibility of sincerity depends upon its becoming dialogic in character, always requiring a response from the other to bring it into play" (Kelly 141). Sincerity requires a community, and more than that Ennet House reveals to us that it is a community *itself built around being sincere* that is needed to enable sincere communication. And in order to properly function, community requires a well-constructed interface, one which is structured so as to facilitate the internalization and then deployment of the norms and values of the community.

Galloway and McGann told us that interface does not function on its own; interface is built into and intertwined with the media that it enables²⁸. So it's not sufficient solely to demonstrate that the MENF section reveals value commitments; in order to argue that these are the *text's* value commitments it is necessary to apply the interface demonstrated by the MENF section to the rest of the text. Letzler and Boswell tell us that we must find ways to parse through the excess of the text – we must be able to navigate the interface of the text in order to more accurately understand its organizing principles and so engage in sincere dialogue with the text²⁹. Thus, the text's interface is not about enabling us to sift through the craft, as Letzler claims, but rather about *making sense* of the text's excess. So now the question is whether the value claims demonstrated by the MENF section help us to make sense of the rest of the text and allow us to parse the text in a way that promotes understanding and sincere dialogue.

²⁸ The medium is the message, yadda yadda yadda.

²⁹ Kiki Benzon argues that, "chaotic indeterminacy and 'orderly-disorder' inform the narrative structure of *Infinite Jest* and the cyclical and irresolvable social formulations it contains" (Benzon 109). Here, we see a little bit of a push back against Letzler's thesis: Benzon argues that much of *IJ* is excess and craft, but that it is excess *with a purpose and a direction*.

Let's start with attention. Daniel Turnbull draws attention to the importance of attention as the central tenet of Wallace's ethics in *This is Water*. In the speech, Wallace argues that, "learning how to think' really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (*This Is Water* 53-54). Turnbull then points out that we should view Wallace's speech not as, "detached from his fictional work...[but rather] as much more integrated than that as it both flows from, and illustrates, the concerns that Wallace suggests are central to his wider artistic and moral mission" (Turnbull 217).

Analysis of *IJ* shows us that the issue of attention is just as important and significant in *IJ* as it is in *This is Water*. First, let's return to the MENF section, as the importance (and difficulty) of attention is declared here, and interestingly enough it is mentioned more than once. First the text tells us that, "it takes effort to pay attention to any one stimulus for more than a few seconds" (*Infinite Jest* 202). This echoes what Wallace tells us in *This is Water*: that it is tough break free of our constant internal monologue and exercise some *choice* over where we direct our attention, and furthermore that it requires *effort* to do so, i.e. conscious sustained choice. But then, half a page later, the text again tells us that, "concentrating intently on anything is very hard work" (*Infinite Jest* 203). Within half a page, the text tells us two facts that are *almost exactly the same*, both boiling down to the claim that exercising conscious control over one's attention is hard work, especially in postmodern America's culture of hyperreading and excess. Of course, there are other subjects that also appear multiple times in the MENF section: substance addiction, God, Recoveryspeak, etc. But when these subjects get revisited, it is to tell us new facts about these already introduced subjects, new pieces of Recoveryspeak or new details about substance addiction; when the text revisits attention, it is apparently somehow necessary to

repeat, to hammer home, the *very same idea*. So attention is crucial enough to the community of Ennet House, and to the experience of reading the text³⁰, that this repetition can be justified.

While these two facts tell us that attention is important, they don't *themselves* go so far as to tell us *what* to pay attention to; the *what* of attention is then clarified by the other value commitments revealed in the MENF section. However, if we deploy the interface drawn from MENF to read through the rest of the text, we see that the issue of *what* to pay attention to is also clarified throughout the text. About halfway through the novel, Don Gately is shot, and we then lose track of Gately for almost two hundred pages³¹. When the text finally returns to Gately, we find him in a hospital bed, dealing with the pain of the gunshot while attempting to remain sober: despite the pain he is in, he is systematically refusing any pain medications that the doctors continue to insistently offer him. This, as you can probably imagine, is extremely difficult for Gately to do. In fact, Gately even *dreams* about offers of pain medication: so scared is he of the offer that, in his dream, he preempts the doctor again offering him pain medication by thrusting his hand out and, "fastening onto the guy's balls and bearing down," attacking the doctor before he can again propose a Dilaudid drip (*Infinite Jest* 889). But Gately's motive here, "isn't rage or the will to harm so much as just [having] no other ideas for keeping the bastard from offering something Gately knows that he's powerless at this moment to refuse" (*Infinite Jest* 889). Ennet and AA have forced Gately to recognize the importance of choice, which is why here (in his

³⁰ As Turnbull allows us to generalize.

³¹ Which, speaking from a reader's perspective, is actually pretty stressful, given that the previous section ended with him shot and bleeding out and then the text offers no confirmation whether he lives or dies until a full two hundred pages later.

dream)³² he acts so radically to preserve that choice, to prevent the offer that would strip him of that choice and doom him to relapse back into the addiction.

Though Gately here sees himself as powerless to refuse the offer of drugs for the pain, he soon finds out that this is not entirely true. And, ironically enough, he finds the strength and method for dealing with the pain and avoiding the doctors' offers of drugs by looking back to his prior experiences detoxing, and he has, "some evil fucking personal detoxes" to look back upon (*Infinite Jest* 859). The experience of, "feeling the edge of every second that went by. Taking it a second at a time. Drawing the time in around him real tight...He had to build a wall around each second just to take it...An endless Now stretching its gull-wings on either side of his heartbeat...Living in the Present between pulses.... living completely In The Moment" (*Infinite Jest* 859-60). In the MENF section the text tells us that, "no single, individual moment is in and of itself unendurable," and in his hospital bed Gately discovers this to be true. He has the power to abide, and the method to do so, to ride through the pain, lies with his conscious choice of what he is willing to pay attention to and consider. For him in that hospital, "what's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all...everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present but hopping the wall and doing a recon and then returning with unendurable news you somehow believed" (*Infinite Jest* 860-61). The pain seems unendurable to Gately *only because* he allows himself to consider the fact that he has so much more to go through, that it will be an eternity, just about, before he has recovered and the pain has receded.

After looking at the addictive relationship substance addicts have with their own thinking, the MENF section then tells us that, "99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself" (*Infinite Jest* 204). And this is precisely what

³² And despite the fact that this is all happening inside Gately's head it nevertheless shows him not overthinking but rather acting in the moment.

Gately discovers when coping with his pain: that his pain only seems unendurable because he is intentionally choosing to think about how scary his pain is. Once he compares the pain in the hospital to his previous pains while detoxing, we are told that he gets a

a personal prickly chill all over from his own thinking. He could do the dextral pain the same way: Abiding. *No one single instant of it was unendurable*. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was unendurable-with was the thought of all the instants lined up and stretching ahead, glittering...It's too much to think about....But none of it's as of now real. What's real is the tube and Noxzema and pain. And this could be done just like the Old Cold Bird. He could just hunker down in the space between each heartbeat and make each heartbeat a wall and live in there [emphasis added] (*Infinite Jest* 860).

Gately comes to the same conclusion that we saw in the MENF section *almost word for word*: no single instant is ever itself unendurable. He can survive the unendurable through his conscious decision about what he wants to pay attention to. In fact, the text goes so far as to suggest that things *only become real* when we choose to pay attention to them³³, and Gately has discovered and decided that the inevitable future pain is not real, that the only thing real is the here and now, the 'tube and Noxzema and pain'.

Here we see the importance of paying attention, but we were prepared to recognize this by the MENF section. In fact, so many of the value commitments made clear in MENF can be seen in Gately's struggle in the hospital; we are better able to understand Gately's actions and thought processes through the interface we've teased out through the language and value commitments demonstrated by the MENF section.

And then while in the hospital Don Gately meets the wraith of James Orin Incandenza.

JOI is Hal Incandenza's late father, who committed suicide by, "sticking his head in a specially-dickied microwave in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar," about five years prior to the main action of the novel (*Infinite Jest* 694). We are told that Hal is uncertain what could have

³³ "I control the world so long as I can name it" (Lively 51).

led his father to suicide, but that he, “is pretty sure it wasn’t because of standard U.S. anhedonia,” before the text then goes on to tell us just how anhedonic Hal himself is (*Infinite Jest* 694). Hal’s loneliness and emptiness provide another avenue with which to read the text through the MENF interface.

During Gately’s conversations with JOI’s wraith, the wraith asks Gately to

just imagine the horror of spending your whole itinerant lonely Southwest and West Coast boyhood trying unsuccessfully to convince your father that you even existed, to do something well enough to be heard and seen but not so well that you became just a screen for his own (the Dad’s) projections of his own failure and self-loathing, failing ever to be really seen, gesturing wildly through the distilled haze, so that in adulthood you still carried the moist flabby weight of your failure ever to make him hear you really speak, carried it on through the animate years on your increasingly slumped shoulders – only to find, near the end, that your very own child had himself become blank, inert, silent, frightening, mute. I.e. that his son had become what he (the wraith) had feared as a child he (the wraith) was (*Infinite Jest* 838).

In other words, JOI recognized in Hal what no one, not even Hal’s mother³⁴, was able to recognize: his essential emptiness, his inability to truly feel and communicate those feelings to others. Hal is able to fake it, to pass if off as if he is not fundamentally empty and to trick most people that he interacts with, but, in the language of AA, he has not been able to ‘Fake It Till He Makes It’ because he remains empty when we see him in the novel. Furthermore, JOI’s wraith reveals that, “toward the end, he’d begun privately to fear that his son was experimenting with Substances,” a fear that resonates with both Gately, the recovering Demerol addict, and JOI, who in life was an alcoholic (*Infinite Jest* 838). And, as the reader has seen, Hal has pretty much become addicted to marijuana, and moreso is addicted to smoking *in secret*: “Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he’s as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high” (*Infinite Jest* 49). He is addicted to solitude, to isolation. JOI’s fears that Hal is fundamentally

³⁴ In an earlier scene in the text, Hal thinks to himself that, “one of the troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being, and an internally worthy one at that, when in fact inside Hal there’s pretty much nothing at all, he knows” (*Infinite Jest* 694) .

unable to communicate, to share in a community and truly interface with others, and to feel suddenly seem much more realistic than his family gave him credit for³⁵.

JOI then tells Gately that he, “spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*,” that he wanted, “to concoct something the gifted boy couldn’t simply master and move on from to a new plateau” (*Infinite Jest* 838-39). So JOI has recognized what AA forced Gately to recognize: both the importance and difficulty of a communicative community. The fabled Entertainment³⁶, then, is revealed as JOI’s attempt to create a medium that can break Hal out of his shell, to construct some way that he and his son can *interface*. For JOI, the Entertainment was, “a way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it [be] *heard*” (*Infinite Jest* 839). Gately’s experiences in AA already reminded us about the difficulty of *truly listening* to people, of *truly hearing* them; JOI’s failed attempts to interface with Hal merely reinforce this lesson. The Entertainment was JOI’s attempt to create an interface that would have been open to Hal; all of his previous attempts had failed, he had been unable to converse with Hal due to Hal’s failure to internalize the community commitments and operate within those previous interfaces. The Entertainment was designed as something so wickedly entertaining that Hal could have *no choice*³⁷ but to internalize it, to operate within its interface, and so would create an opportunity

³⁵ They thought his fears demonstrated that JOI had become unstable and that he, “had gone bats from Wild Turkey-intake and needed to try to get sober” (*Infinite Jest* 838).

³⁶ The last movie that JOI directed in life, a film that is apparently so addictively entertaining that anyone who watches it loses any motive to do anything but watch the film, over and over and over again. The search for the master cartridge of the Entertainment, which can be copied and reproduced infinitely, drives one of the novel’s plot strands, as the AFR want to find the Entertainment to use it in their Québécois separatist movement – the idea being that they could use the master cartridge to produce a large number of copies of the Entertainment and then distribute them throughout the U.S., using the American fascination with the pursuit of pleasure to totally stultify the country.

³⁷ This, of course, is our first hint that JOI’s understanding of interface is troubled and incomplete. A method that forcibly strips Hal of his choice clashes with the previous lessons about the importance of choosing what to pay attention to, as JOI would essentially be taking away Hal’s ability to consciously direct his attention; however, what is important right now is JOI’s *motivation* for the Entertainment, which is simply the desire to have a real interface

for JOI and Hal to operate from within the same ground, would create an opportunity for them to truly communicate, even if the subject matter would necessarily be strictly limited.

And near the beginning of the novel we see an example of why JOI is so fearful and desperate: a failed and insincere conversation³⁸ between Hal and his father³⁹. Hal arrives at what he thinks is a dentist appointment, scheduled for him by his father, only to discover that there is no dentist or doctor, but rather a ‘professional conversationalist’ there to simply speak with Hal (*Infinite Jest* 27-31). Hal is not there for any traditional sort of medicine, but rather is there to ‘simply converse’. And, near the end of the scene, Hal realizes that it is not even actually a professional of any sort that he has met with, but is in fact his father in disguise.

At this point the conversation goes rapidly downhill, as one could probably predict, and the scene ends quickly afterwards. But to call the dialogue between JOI and Hal, even before Hal realized the deception, a conversation might be overly generous, and it certainly doesn’t meet the standard of a true ‘mano-to-mano interface’. Hal describes himself as, “a continentally ranked junior tennis player who can also recite great chunks of the dictionary, verbatim, at will,” and that turns out to be a pretty good sign of how JOI’s attempt to converse with Hal will go: Hal’s contribution to the ‘conversation’ consists mainly of spouting off definitions and explanations straight from the OED (*Infinite Jest* 28). Hal hones in on the words that JOI uses, while JOI seems to want a conversation that *has meaning beyond the definitions of the words making up the*

with Hal. JOI responds by telling Gately that, “any conversation or interchange is better than none at all, to trust him on this, that the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness on either side” (*Infinite Jest* 839). So in his last ditch efforts, JOI is willing to go to any lengths to construct a workable interface, regardless of what that interface entails, simply for the possibility of conversation. Again, this is problematic – more on that in a bit.

³⁸ Although at the time it seems like JOI is the crazy one and that there is nothing at all amiss with Hal or his ability to converse and interface. Only later on, once we learn of Hal’s essential emptiness, do JOI’s statements and actions in this scene make more sense.

³⁹ The scene takes place in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, about six years prior to the main action of the novel.

conversation. He wants to be able to interface with Hal, but Hal's understanding of a dialogue remains shallow and unsubstantiated, damning JOI to fail in his attempts to connect with his son.

But is this truly the same process of interface that we see promoted by the AA model and the MENF section? Not really, is the simplest answer. While JOI might have developed the Entertainment in an attempt to provoke Hal to sincerely 'hear' JOI's words, the Entertainment itself seems less than sincere. Even if it would force Hal to recognize something beyond the shell of his self, how much sincerity is there in a relationship between a lone viewer and a TV⁴⁰? But JOI, his failures to communicate with Hal rendering him increasingly desperate, stoops to increasingly ridiculous and insincere *methods* to interface with Hal – thus the impersonation of a 'professional conversationalist' and eventually the creation of the Entertainment. The Entertainment, which essentially dooms the watcher to a solipsistic life of nothing more than one-way viewing, the pinnacle of JOI's attempts to interface with Hal, reveals that JOI has confused motive and method – JOI's motivation is legitimate, but he ignores that the framework of interface is just as important as the substance transmitted by that interface. An insincere interface, like that of the Entertainment or the deceptive professional conversationalist, might allow Hal to look beyond himself, but would not allow truly sincere dialogic communication. Even if JOI's aim is a sincere exchange with his son, the insincerity of the method would shape and warp anything being transmitted. Even if the Entertainment might allow Hal to finally and truly hear JOI, it would not be able to support a truly dialogic relationship; the Entertainment would allow Hal to hear JOI but would be unable to allow *JOI to hear Hal in return*, and so breaks down into the same solipsism that Hal is already entrenched within.

Thus, the key difference between JOI and the model revealed by Gately and Ennet House lies not so much with the information being transmitted – JOI shows himself to want,

⁴⁰ In 'E Unibus Pluram', Wallace suggests that the answer is usually 'not much'.

desperately, to have a sincere conversation with Hal, about truly important things rather than just rote information gleaned from a dictionary – but rather with the framework utilized to allow interchange between individuals. Ennet House recognizes the importance of a sincere framework to sincere interface, and instills in the residents the importance of internalizing and committing to the AA model of dialogue, a model that demands participants to truly *hear* and *listen* when others speak (*Infinite Jest* 369). Thus, *IJ* suggests that a commitment to sincere conversation is not enough: only when there is an interface in place that allows sincere conversation, a framework designed to foster a commitment to sincerity and authenticity, are individuals able to participate in a sincere communication.

IJ seems to position itself much like JOI positions the Entertainment: it is an attempt to make the reader break free of the shell of the self, but it provides an interface that is more sincere and productive than that provided by the Entertainment. Lee Konstantinou tells us that, “Wallace uses fiction in what can often seem like a last desperate effort to make us believe something, to feel anything” (Konstantinou 106). JOI’s Entertainment was a last desperate effort to make Hal Incandenza feel *anything*, and the AA Program is also a last desperate effort to shock addicts out of themselves and give them something to believe in other than drugs, namely an interactive community with shared value commitments. But more than simply trying to make the reader feel *anything*, the text seeks to construct a sincere relationship with the reader, a commitment to sincerity that the reader can then take beyond the text.

But in order to construct any sort of sincere relationship with a reader, there must be effort on both sides: again, as Murakami points out, breaking free of the “narrow shell of the self” and arousing empathy in others is a supremely difficult thing to do, and it requires constant

and reciprocal effort to succeed (Murakami 239). There must be a dialogic relationship between the text and reader: both must provide something to make such a relationship workable, and there must be a place where both can exist side by side, a common ground that allows the exchange between text and reader to be formulated within shared languages and values. When we are told of the many exotic new facts that we will learn in Ennet, *IJ* is revealing the many exotic new facts that a sincere exchange with the text will teach the reader. The value commitments seen in the MENF section show us an interface predicated on attention, choice, and sincerity, an interface that allows us to understand and make sense of the rest of the text and the world out beyond the text, as it allows us to understand exactly *why* the text chooses to focus on what it does. And, more basically, this interface allows *Infinite Jest* to Entertain us.

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