

NARRATIVE INFINITY IN THE ENCYCLOPEDIA NOVEL: MANIPULATIONS OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *DIVINA COMMEDIA* IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S
INFINITE JEST

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ABSTRACT

FRANCES HIGGINS: Narrative Infinity in the Encyclopedic Novel: Manipulations of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*
(Under the direction of Jessica Wolfe)

David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* includes an allusion to Dante's *Divina Commedia* that points the reader back to Dante's opening lines of *Inferno*. Dante's *Commedia* provides a framework for Wallace's own novel in that the allusion is not only an indication of Wallace's attempt to place himself with Dante in the literary category of the encyclopedic novel, but also a reminder to the reader of *Infinite Jest*'s circular narrative structure. This structure, which Wallace borrows from Dante, relies on the resolution of the narrative embedded in the beginning sections. Wallace's gestures toward the medieval text serve as an ironic reinterpretation of stable allegory and they introduce the promise of truth only to disprove it later. In place of Dante's four-fold allegory, Wallace allows his characters to believe in the inherent stability of mathematics and the recovery methods of Alcoholics Anonymous but he ultimately undercut's the reliability of these systems.

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Introduction

David Foster Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest*, which was published in 1996, includes an allusion Dante's *Divina Commedia* that allows Wallace to use unstable irony and to revise the medieval model of stable allegory. The allusion appears in one of Wallace's endnotes and highlights a secondary character, Michael Pemulis, as he claims to have found reliable and fixed truth in mathematics as a means to emerge from the "dark wood" (Wallace 1072) of false promises. Wallace does not support this truth as the narrative develops and he uses Pemulis's declaration ironically to undercut the idea that a fixed truth system is possible. Wallace uses Dante's *Commedia*, begun in 1308, to provide his novel with a model for a circular narrative structure that contains a presentation of infinity within the bounded space of the text itself.

However, Dante is not the only canonical work that Wallace calls upon in *Infinite Jest*. He no doubt has Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in mind for the title of the work. Hamlet's speech about poor Yorick, "A fellow of infinite jest" (V.i 178), brings up the issues of pleasure and death, which is a union of opposites that Wallace employs in his work to thematically introduce circularity. Wallace's main character, Hal, shares his name with *Henry the Fourth Part One*'s Prince Hal and both Hals are preoccupied with discovering a sense of self in relation to their fathers.

Infinite Jest also demonstrates the clear influence of Joyce, particularly the motif of metempsychosis. Wallace acknowledges the influence playfully in a name a character uses for her radio personality: Madame Psychosis. The influence is not limited to naming, however, as Wallace develops an allegorical structure within his narrative that takes cues from Dante's work in the way that Joyce uses metempsychosis, not as a belief system he relies on, but rather as a way to center his narrative on Homeric allusion through metaphor (Schwarz 16).

The extensive influence that both Shakespeare and Joyce have on Wallace's novel provides layers of meaning. Wallace fills his work with these influences and references to both popular culture and other literary works that he uses to challenge the reader to engage with his text. Many of his references do not provide clear expansion of themes that are important to Wallace. Instead, these red herrings allow Wallace to play games with his reader by leading them away from a path that will lead to meaning.

This gaming is essential to the structure of Wallace's narrative and is present even when he draws the reader's attention to Dante in partially hidden references. He intentionally obscures the meaning of these references as a challenge to his reader. Wallace's allusion to Dante that appears in *Infinite Jest* in endnote 324 is unconnected to the main narrative, and is an example of the dedication Wallace requires on the part of the reader to his narrative structure.

Wallace challenges his reader to follow through with the allusions he includes and meanwhile complicates their presentation. Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, includes a reference to the medieval Italian Ugolino. Wallace's characters never reach a consensus about the source of the name and the clearest assertion any of them presents is that

“Ugolino is some biblical character or another” (*Broom* 442). There is a mention of a Count Ugolino in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, but Wallace is surely aware of the cannibalistic Ugolino in Dante’s *Inferno*. Wallace wants the reader to discover the character’s shortsightedness and share in the mockery. But if the reader is unable to correct the characters’ assumptions, the humor of the narrative is at the expense of the reader.

These references to Dante that Wallace inserts into his fiction make specific points about his view of narrative structure. They hint at allowing what I refer to as portholes into parallel narrative worlds that stretch the bounds of the narrative imposed by the pages of the book. He looks to place himself in a literary tradition with Dante because the *Commedia* is able to incorporate narrative strategies that both enclose the narrative and incorporate a fictional reality that is unlimited but still maintaining coherence as a text. Wallace sees Dante’s work as a model for structure and approach because of its encyclopedic nature, which Wallace hopes to mimic.

Many of Wallace’s major influences are authors of encyclopedic novels and he clearly regards this genre as one that fits his own style. Edward Mendelson’s article on Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “Gravity’s Encyclopedia,” uses Dante’s *Divina Commedia* as an example of a touchstone upon which he bases his definition of the encyclopedic novel. *Infinite Jest* fits Mendelson’s vision of an encyclopedic novel and can serve as a touchstone for late twentieth century fiction.

Wallace’s novel seems to ally itself through an allusion to Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and in so doing places itself in the same category with the medieval work. Wallace’s character proclaims “. . . Only that at times like this, when you’re directionless in a dark wood. . .” (1072). This statement emphasizes the hopelessness of Wallace’s characters that

they share with Dante Pilgrim and the declaration points the reader back to Dante's opening lines of *Inferno*: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,/ che la dritta via era smarrita" (*Inferno* 1-3).

The allusion not only shows how Wallace emulates Dante's narrative structure, but also asks the reader to accept that the novel relies on an infinite structure. The text includes copious endnotes that often include narrative lines that reach beyond the main narrative, achieving something that Dante's text does not attempt and hinting at the possibility of infinite narrative space while the novel also contains a circular structure that Wallace finds in Dante's placement of resolution at the beginning of the work. Wallace modifies these techniques to fit his narrative structure, which stretches the bounds of the book's pages. Dante also uses infinity, through his discussion of the empyrean, as an arrival at an infinite and divine space that exists in a single point but has infinite quality. The structure of both works introduces an infinite reading, as neither work has a clear ending or beginning in a traditional sense. Dante's journey is two-fold, yet simultaneous, as the narrative follows both pilgrim and poet. The reader can only understand the retrospective aspect of the poet fully after a first reading. Wallace's narrative structure is much more demanding of a second reading (and an infinite set of readings after that) because the resolution to his narrative appears in the first section of the work.

Wallace works with the idea of infinity in a very specifically mathematical way in his work, *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* . In this work, designed for the general public without a sophisticated understanding of higher math, Wallace pursues infinity not as a temporal or spatial idea, but rather as a mathematical abstraction. He focuses on logic problems as a way to introduce the reader to the work on a formula for infinity. This work of

nonfiction provides a way to interpret Wallace's inclusion of mathematics as a truth system that appears in *Infinite Jest* as what Wayne Booth would regard as unstable irony. The reader must discover Wallace's viewpoint on logic to decipher his intentions with mathematics in his fiction. These clues are hidden, however, by false declarations such as Pemulis's about the stability of mathematics.

Wallace also hides clues through his use of the lemniscate, ∞ , as a visual representation of infinity. It is a symbol that Robert Alter has noted in the novels of Nabokov. Alter has interpreted images such as butterflies, bicycles, and tennis rackets as representations of this symbol. Similarly, Wallace's character Orin traces actual lemniscates on the bodies of women he has seduced. In addition, Wallace's discussion of eyes inserts visual representations of the lemniscates into the text. These images emphasize the idea of infinity throughout the narrative even though it is bounded within the narrative.

Wallace's dependence on Dante comes through in the presentation of a moral structure that involves the geography of these two works and allows them to define relationships between characters through the perspective of the land itself. For Wallace, the Boston area provides the Charles River that signifies a divide in the understanding of self that the river Acheron provides for Dante's pilgrim. The most striking moment of perspective through geography in both works, however, depends on the reversal of moral standing that happens for Dante pilgrim as he finds Satan at the pit of Hell and what becomes the foot of Mount Purgatory. In Wallace's novel, the dichotomy of E.T.A. and Ennet House follows a similar reversal in geographic perspective when Hal visits the half-way house and gives up his moral high ground. Wallace's narrative landscape is fixed but the moral shift is what allows his other main character, Don Gately, to become a hero.

Wallace is an author who has a complicated relationship with both his characters and his readers because of the elaborate structure he develops in his narratives that confound expectations of how a reader should approach a text. This aspect of his work becomes even more prominent when dealing with these narratives in an audiobook format. Wallace approaches the problem of incorporating footnotes during the reading of his collection of essays, *Consider the Lobster*, by using a “‘phone filter’ – a voice-through-the-receiver effect used in radio dramas.” (Newman 1). This intentional emphasis on separation from the reader is a gesture by Wallace to mislead his reader into thinking that these footnotes, or as Wallace calls them, extratextual signs, are disconnected from the main text, not extensions of it.

This expansive text centers on Wallace’s ironic presentation of his modern vision of a medieval truth system. Wallace’s style also insists that the reader engage with the novel in a way that leads in infinite circles. These circles are dependent on the narrative structure that Wallace finds in Dante and uses to contain his encyclopedic text.

The Encyclopedic Novel

David Foster Wallace emerged as a major literary figure in America at a time when Thomas Pynchon was one of the greatest influences on writers of the generation. Pynchon, along with Coover, Barthelme, and Barth, were members the first generation of postmodernists.¹ These writers share an approach to narrative that is based on the writer's self-consciousness about the form their writing takes. Beyond this general trend in fiction, the style that Pynchon developed was based on creating a narrative that enfolded an entire fictional reality within the pages of his novels. Pynchon constructed a set of rules to create a reality within his work that related to a specific cultural moment in America and helped to arrive at a definition of how the culture saw itself through *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Pynchon created a narrative in which the reader must give himself entirely to the reality of the work to follow and comprehend it, but that narrative also reflected the reader's own culture. The narrative world that Pynchon developed in his novel serves as a blueprint for Wallace, who also works to create a fictional world that reflects the cultural identity of his time, 1990's America, and projects its political fears about nationhood in a representation of the near future. Both of these authors created works that develop a narrative that implies that

¹ The term "first generation postmodernists" is one that James Rother uses to define this list of writers. He classifies Wallace as a "third generation postmodernist" because, he argues, Wallace creates works that are concerned with "reflectively principled encoding of truths elicited from certain axiom systems and rules of procedure able to elicit further truths unrelated to those systems and procedures." He makes this argument to follow up a claim that Wallace is not interested in destroying mythologies in the same way that other ironists are. I would disagree with such a broad statement about Wallace's style because it refuses to acknowledge Wallace's playfulness with the systems that he introduces and the challenges he presents his readers.

it contains an entire world with its own reality. In Wallace's case, the circular structure of the narrative contains the fictional world while the unresolved aspects of the narrative imply infinite narrative space.

Edward Mendelson's essay, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," analyzes *Gravity's Rainbow* as an encyclopedic novel, which is a genre of works written to define a culture and serve the purpose of placing that culture in a literary historical tradition. Mendelson's essay, published in 1976, argues that Thomas Pynchon's novel serves this purpose in the American literary tradition of the time. His list includes other American novels, including Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Mendelson uses these novels as markers crucial to the development of the literary identity of a culture.

Mendelson traces this genre back through several centuries to show how it serves to define cultural moments in literary tradition. His examples also include Dante's *Divina Commedia* as a medieval expression of this narrative tradition and Joyce's *Ulysses* as the Irish manifestation of an encyclopedic novel that reflects the cultural moment. David Foster Wallace's allusions to these encyclopedic works can be seen clearly as gestures on Wallace's part to alert the reader that these works can serve as clues to find which elements are ultimately meaningful in his labyrinthine text. Wallace is creating a narrative that places him in a tradition that Mendelson has carefully defined. This tradition of the encyclopedic novel also includes one of Wallace's obvious literary influences, Thomas Pynchon, in addition to Dante and Joyce. Wallace strengthens the impression that his work allows for infinite narrative space by creating a work that can be defined as "encyclopedic." This term implies that these works are comprehensive and could contain a complete fictional reality.

Infinite Jest meets is a narrative that reflects the social and political atmosphere of Wallace's culture: 1990's America. Wallace sets himself apart from his contemporaries by concentrating his narrative efforts on making his presentation of his fictional world comprehensive. Jonathan Franzen's novel, *The Corrections*, was published in 2001 and came from the same literary atmosphere as *Infinite Jest* but Franzen's novel concentrates on a family and the coincidences and connections that occur between them. In this novel, Franzen develops a fictional reality but it does not seek to give the impression of covering more than what is relevant to the family. Wallace, however, ties his characters together through his elaborate fictional world that at once reflects Wallace's culture and maintains its own reality.

For Wallace, a part of the development of an encyclopedic novel includes creating narrative connections within his novel that are dependent on structural elements. He introduces a narrative infinity that requires rereading his text, in a way inspired by Dante, as well as moments in his novel that provide portholes to other narrative lines he does not fully pursue. Though infinity is not an aspect of Mendelson's definition of an encyclopedic novel, it is an important way in which Wallace associates himself with Dante through the structure of the narrative.

Mendelson insists that the encyclopedic novel must be written in an epic style, though these works are often set in the author's near immediate past. The style of the work must strike a balance between utilizing this style and creating a convincing narrative world that has ties to the author's present while maintaining a distance. These authors are carefully defining their narrative timelines to manipulate the work's relationship to the author's culture.

Mendelson uses Dante's work as one of his main examples, and it is clear that Wallace understands what elements work for Dante in creating a narrative that meets all of

these requirements. Dante's Poetics place his work in the epic tradition, which he emphasizes by calling upon his own literary predecessor, Virgil, as a guide clearly tied to the epic tradition.

To provide an epic hero, Dante uses his own life for points of reference. By creating a pseudo-autobiographical work, Dante is able to set his narrative only slightly in an imaginary future from which he claims to be writing to make predictions of actual events that he incorporates into his work. It is important to note that most of the encyclopedic authors Mendelson uses set their works in the immediate past, but Dante has intentionally misrepresented the timeframe so that his work would appear to be set in the future while actually writing about the past (162-63).

Dante takes a personal moment revolving around his exile as a beginning, and creates an imagined series of events that could unfold from this narrative present but are also firmly set in his narrative reality. This method of drawing on real cultural events but presenting them in a fictional narrative allows Dante to manipulate his representation of time. Dante claims to be writing his narrative nearly a decade before he actually begins. This allows him to make predictions about his political landscape that he knows will be true. The politics of Florence that led to Dante's exile serve the narrative well as the point of departure for Dante Pilgrim. Dante the author has a clear perspective of the narrative's timeframe because of this manipulation. This is the way that Dante is able to make his narrative's meaning concentrate on the topical and also include stable allegory that his reader can decipher based on the spiritual structure of the Church. Dante's judgments of political figures of his day fit into the allegorical reading of his work.

Wallace's approach to situating his narrative in a slightly different time is contrary to Dante's, though it preserves the author's relationship to actual political circumstances. Wallace maintains the distance by setting his narrative in a future that is directly influenced by the culture of his own present while other encyclopedic novels rely on the past. He uses his present to address his reader's fears about political stability on one level of the text and incorporates allegorical signs that point to a mathematical structure to provide a natural truth. As an author, he is known for including references from popular culture in his fiction as a way of drawing into the narrative both his and his reader's reality. His use of popular media is essential to his relationship to his present. *Infinite Jest*, however, depends on the reader being able to employ an understanding of the cultural milieu of the early/mid 1990's while also demanding that the novel cannot be completely defined by his own time. His timeline within the novel is not delineated by numeric years but rather by products. Because the narrative is a fictional world in which corporations subsidize the years, the years have names such as Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Year of Glad, and Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster, among others. It is possible to hypothesize how these years follow from numeric years, with 2002 being Year of the Whopper, the first corporately named year, and Year of Glad as 2010. Wallace, however, makes every effort to make an extrapolation of this sort difficult. The separation from the Zeitgeist of 1990's popular culture does not preclude a cultural influence.

The political landscape of *Infinite Jest* is not a mirror of Wallace's own political experience but rather expands on common concerns within his own culture. Wallace's fictional representation of his culture also has close ties to Dante's politics in Florence. Dante wrote the *Divina Commedia* in exile because his political affiliations were with the

Florentine political party the whites, which had lost power to the opposing party, the blacks. Dante's identity as an author has a great effect on his narrative. Dante's view of Florentine political figures is ultimately dependent on his own political leanings.

Wallace's narrative also places characters in an unstable political atmosphere. Instead of living in the United States, Wallace's characters live in the Organization of North American Nations and are threatened by Quebecois terrorists in wheelchairs who call themselves Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents. The connections between Dante's political atmosphere and the restructuring of North America that Wallace does in his novel depend on exile and national identity. Hal's mother, Avril Incandenza, is originally from Quebec and, although Wallace keeps the issue of her nationality secondary to the main narrative, it emerges at certain points, reminding the reader that this is a narrative at least in part about exile. Some descriptions of Avril include references to her heritage such as explaining that "she has a rather spectacular thumb, plant-wise, for a Canadian" (189). This comment is meant to illustrate how her identity can be linked to her family background in ways that have no bearing on Wallace's own culture. The specific stereotypes and assumptions made about her Canadian ancestry come entirely from the political world Wallace has created. Dante does not have to make up political or cultural disputes because these are something he borrows directly from his own experiences. Dante writes from a position of exile while Wallace writes his characters into a fictional exile.

Though Wallace uses a different approach to the time setting of his work than Dante, much like Dante's narrative, *Infinite Jest's* almost immediate narrative present emphasizes the "almost" and continually sets it apart from Wallace's actual present in crucial ways. This method creates a situation in which this fictional near future seems like a promise or threat.

The setting is tied closely enough to the author's present that it follows logically, though it includes aspects that are entirely fictional and, for Dante, supernatural. Though this reworking of the present into a near future is extreme at points, it uses aspects of the political landscape that make it appear plausible from the perspective of 1990's America. The most striking aspect of O.N.A.N. is how its borders differ from those of the United States. Wallace allows these borders to be part of the backdrop of his narrative, but their relevance to the narrative is jarring for the reader. The borders are lined with "giant protective ATHSCME fans atop the hugely convex protective walls of anodized Lucite [that] hold off the drooling and piss-colored bank of teratogenic Concavity clouds and move the bank well back, north, away, jaggedly, over your protected head" (93). The polluted "Concavity" is Wallace's restructured view of Canada that threatens the well being of his main characters. This exaggerated and horrific landscape develops from the border and environmental concerns in Wallace's own time and represents an extreme development of political maneuvers in the 1990's.

Mendelson's argument for the definition of the encyclopedic novel also includes the use of technology or science, which adds to the plausibility of the fictional world. He expands on this rule, explaining that the use of science in these works is used "far more elaborately than most other literary works" and as his main example he notes that "A complete medieval astronomy may be constructed out of the *Commedia*" (164). Wallace employs mathematics, especially in James Incandenza's use of optics in his film career and the use of calculus as a major part of the game Eschaton that the E.T.A. students play, as an escape from their rigorous training schedules. The game's name also provides the reader with a clue that Wallace's narrative includes gestures toward allegorical levels of meaning.

The game is based on complicated calculations that reflect the trajectories and combinations of hits from tennis balls lobbed onto a tennis court. The court has been covered in discarded tennis equipment that represents the countries of the world. This game is one of political maneuvering, brute force, and negotiations. The students incorporate complicated mathematics that make the repercussions of their actions on the tennis court seem much more real.

They are calculating the casualties over specific areas in actual countries caused by the missiles lobbed at a tube sock near the net. Their grasp of the delicate and complicated nature of international relations as seen through calculus allows a set of universal mathematical truths to define political and historic events. The understanding of politics is dependent on the rigid set of rules that apply to calculus and as the students apply the Mean-Value Theorem for Integrals to their game they rely on the math to stabilize their play. These rules operate as an allegorical key in the same way that stable fourfold allegory provides the tools to interpret Dante's text.

Wallace also uses the game as an opportunity for his characters to engage in debate over boundaries of the real and imaginary, which is crucial to his own narrative structure. During one game of Eschaton, it begins to snow and the students are at odds about where the boundaries lie between the game and their own environment. The question at issue is whether the snow is falling on the *map* or the *territory*. This question leads the students to question whether players are inside the game or merely part of the *apparatus* of the game (333-342). These same questions are at issue in Wallace's narrative structure that gestures towards infinite possibilities within a bounded form: the pages of a book. Wallace introduces this debate during a section of his narrative that questions whether mathematics can provide a

reliable truth and introduces unstable irony that complicates his hints that there might be a stable allegorical reading of the novel.

Mendelson mentions the use of art in addition to science within these works as a way to connect the narrative world with the world of the author and to enhance the encyclopedic quality of the narrative. It is the verisimilitude of an artistic representation that appears within each encyclopedic work that allows the reader to enhance his understanding of what the work itself is trying to accomplish. He cites the bas-reliefs that appear in Canto X of *Purgatorio* in which Dante Pilgrim, in the midst of his ascent up mount Purgatory, sees three representations of humility carved in the rock. These are included in Dante Pilgrim's journey because he is hoping to achieve the virtue humility, among others. *Infinite Jest* includes James Incandenza's entire filmography with detailed descriptions of each film. This representation of a film within the novel serves the same purpose, but it is the film that bears the novel's name that fills this role most thoroughly because it seduces its audience with its artifice as Wallace seduces his reader with the structure of his text. Through their representation of artworks that mirror the works in which they appear, both authors incorporate the narrative technique of mise en abyme and provide characters reactions to the fictional artwork to guide the reader's interpretation of the frame narrative.

Wallace describes the film *Infinite Jest* in great detail within the novel and connects it to the qualities of Joelle that make her unable to interact in society and have fulfilling relationships in which she is not objectified. This work of art appears within the narrative and expands its scope by extending the fictional world into another medium. Joelle's experience is projected into the film and interpreted for the reader as a way to work through the central theme of the perception of the infinite pleasure of entertainment that eventually

devolves into spectacle. The film introduces the promise of infinite time for the viewer and reminds the reader of the infinite space Wallace implies in his narrative.

Along with working in different artistic media, encyclopedic novels include compendia of proverbial lore to achieve the effect of containing an entire world. Dante is able to use Italian proverbs, some of which are specifically Florentine to draw upon his reader's understanding of the culture. He relies on sayings that are more general and a part of the common knowledge of his day. This element is enfolded in his dedication to writing in the vernacular and breaking with narrative convention. In the *Commedia* the proverbial and the colloquial work together to present the lore that is a crucial element of the encyclopedic novel.

Wallace employs popular culture references that serve this purpose, thus creating his own fictional lore to widen the expression of his fictional world. The sections of plot that takes place in Ennet House depend heavily on the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous's method of recovery from addiction. The repetition of the AA slogans throughout the novel allows them to permeate the fictional world and even affect the scenes that include those who do not live in the halfway house.

In a scene late in the main text, James Incandenza, in the form of a wraith, visits Don Gately in the hospital. This is the only time the two characters meet, though they are connected through several coincidences. Incandenza speaks through Gately's own thoughts, which confuses Gately about who or even what Incandenza is, and he wonders, "What would it be like to try and talk and have the person think it was just their own mind talking? Gately could maybe Identify, to an extent, he decides" (833). The word "Identify" is jargon pulled

directly from the AA culture that Wallace explores thoroughly in his text, though Wallace uses it here to represent Gately's genuine feelings.

Wallace allows these phrases to guide the drug addicts frequently enough in the novel that they are present for the reader even when the plot focuses on characters who are not aware of these slogans but are struggling with addiction in the same ways. Hal engages in a complicated struggle with himself over his drug use and what rules he sets to control it. He debates with himself about whether there is "a clear line, a quantifiable difference between need and just desire" (121). Later he finds himself

struggling with a strong desire to get high again for the second time since breakfast v. a strong distaste about smoking dope with/in front of all these others, especially out in the open in front of Little Buddies, which seems to him to violate some sort of issue of taste that he struggles to articulate satisfactorily to himself (329).

The reader is able, however, to articulate what issues of taste exist here because Wallace has provided them with a detailed AA vocabulary through the experiences of another set of characters. The reader realizes that Gately could "Identify" with Hal's situation. Though Wallace does not give Hal the means to express his struggle with addiction to a Substance, the reader is well versed in recovery jargon.

Along with the overlay of vocabulary and diction, there is the mingling of experience between the tennis academy and the halfway house. Within the development of the narrative thread that centers on the tennis academy, Orin lectures his younger brother, Hal, on the Speedy Seduction Strategies he has developed and used on various women. Orin lives his life by these strategies much in the way Don Gately lives by the AA slogans. They are equally applicable to these men's lives as they have organized them. Orin wants Hal to adopt or at least appreciate the Speedy Seduction Strategies, though the younger brother is appalled by his brother's womanizing. Hal's rejection of this lore does not keep him from being

influenced by it, and making it relevant to him in the reader's mind because of his connection to Orin. Connections like this one send the reader in circles of characters' relationships to one another that enhance the impression that the narrative includes infinite space.

To represent the enormous number of pages that encyclopedic novels cover, such narratives include giants to "metastasize the monstrosity of their own scale" (Mendelson 164). He refers to the giants who guard the gates of Hell in the *Commedia*. In the narrative, Dante Pilgrim mistakes these giants for towers and asks his guide, "Maestro, di, che terra è questa?" (*Inferno* XXXI 21). Virgil explains to the Pilgrim that these giants are sunk in the ground waist deep to guard the pit of hell because of their arrogance. Dante author calls attention to the size and scope of his own work to show his reader that he is aware of the danger of presumption and that he is aware of the element of arrogance in creating a structure that is so complex and claims to cover so much.

Wallace approaches the enormous scope of his work with a sense of pride for which he refuses to apologize. He emphasizes the physical size of his work and the amount of fictional ground it covers by allowing his characters to mirror the enormity of the work. These characters represent more than would be expected from a fictional character, allowing them to embody the encyclopedic element. Both Hal's mother and father are described as strikingly tall, implying gigantism. Though they are both imposing figures, it seems that their height gestures towards the requirements of encyclopedic novels. Both James and Avril Incandenza are ominous and imposing characters regardless of their stature, but Wallace insists on making their height a prominent feature of their characterizations.

Joelle Van Dyne's impressions of Orin and Hal's parents are incorporated into the novel in a way that expands the narrative with another circle of connection. Joelle is one of

the crucial points of connection between Ennet House and the tennis academy for the reader who is trying to find the links between each plot line. Joelle's experience at an Incandenza family Thanksgiving centers on her reactions to James and Avril's height. The description includes Joelle's misgivings about her presence, and the narrator works through her unease beginning with the fact that "Avril Incandenza was one of the tallest women Joelle had ever seen, and definitely the tallest pretty older woman with immaculate posture" (744). James Incandenza's presence at the meal comes across as an element of scenery. The narrator does not report him speaking at all, but does explain that, "The director was so tall he seemed to rise forever" (744). Both of these descriptions leave the reader with the feeling that these characters are out of place in a narrative setting because of their size. Wallace uses this out-of-placeness to remind the reader of the encyclopedic nature of the work and the claim that it is exceptional in its promise to include everything.

Wallace also uses Joelle to fill Mendelson's requirement of unrequited love. She is an object of desire for both Orin Incandenza and Don Gately. Dante Pilgrim's relationship to Beatrice is one that stands out in literary tradition as an important example of unrequited love. Dante Pilgrim journeys through the underworld and makes his way to heaven to find her, only to realize that she is part of the cosmology of heaven and can never have a relationship with him on earth as a human. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, which focuses on his artistic reinterpretation of a relationship between himself and Beatrice that depends on his conception of her within his fictional world, does a great deal to establish the dynamics of unrequited love within the narrative that he calls upon in the *Commedia*. Even in this work, Dante Pilgrim is unable to achieve the level of intimacy with Beatrice that he desires, though he has achieved levels of divine revelation that no mortal had been able to attain.

Wallace places the character Joelle in the role of Beatrice, though he provides her with a complexity and voice within the narrative that Dante does not allow for Beatrice. In all of Joelle's relationships covered in *Infinite Jest*, she cannot achieve a connection that is fulfilling and lasting because she is so beautiful that men are paralyzed by her. She is the subject of the film *Infinite Jest*, in which her beauty mesmerizes the viewers to the point of a paralysis that leads to death.

Joelle's life and her role in the film is an exaggeration of Dante's presentation of Beatrice in both *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*. Wallace anticipates his reader's expectations of these relationships and purposely changes them in a way that focuses on the narrative's grand scale. It is Joelle, not James Incandenza, Orin, or Don Gately, who ultimately suffers from her beauty. Don Gately does fulfill the role of Pilgrim who is the hero of the work, but even he is unable to achieve a relationship with Joelle that seems complete.

Although the relationships Wallace develops among his characters are flawed because of addiction, he allows his characters to connect successfully through dedication to precision in language. Mendelson emphasizes the use of etymologies that appear in encyclopedic works, though he is careful to explain that the history of language is dealt with in several different ways. He brings up Dante's meeting with Adam in *Paradiso* when he describes his experience with "l'idioma ch'usai e ch'io fei" (*Paradiso* XXVI 114). Adam then explains that "La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta/ innanzi che all'ovra inconsummabile/ fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta" (*Paradiso* XXVI 124-126). For Dante, there is the opportunity to recall the idea of ideal relationships between words and what they represent. He brings Adam into his narrative to claim that there was once a direct correlation of names to things.

While Wallace cannot make such a straightforward assertion, he is able to focus on Hal's dedication to memorizing the *O.E.D.* This is a way to include an expertise on style and usage so that there is an element of authority in the work. Even when Hal is closing himself off from others, Wallace refers back to his relationship to the history of language. Hal sees himself as a success and Wallace portrays him as a figure who believes that mastering the *O.E.D.* is equivalent to possessing all knowledge. Wallace teases out Hal's dedication to this misconception to call attention to the bounds of any book because its pages contain finite space.

Hal as narrator explains that, "There are, by the *O.E.D.* VI's count, nineteen nonarchaic synonyms for *unresponsive*, of which nine are Latinate and four Saxonian" (17). Hal continually calls upon his expansive knowledge of the dictionary to punctuate his interactions with others to serve in place of interacting with them on a personal level. He is able to recite information as if he were the source himself:

'Implore's a regular verb, transitive: to call upon, or for in supplication; to pray to, or for, earnestly; to beseech; to entreat. Weak synonym: urge. Strong synonym: beg. Etymology unmixed: from Latin *implorare*, *im* meaning in, *plorare* meaning in this context to cry aloud. *O.E.D.* Condensed Volume Six page 1387 column twelve and a little bit of thirteen' (28).

Hal believes that he could contain all information, beginning with a book that claims to contain the meanings of all words, but Wallace includes this to remind the reader of the inherent limits on his work. This creates a distance between Hal and the other characters in the narrative but it directs the reader back to the role of language itself in the encyclopedic text.

Wallace's creation of an encyclopedic novel allows him to ally his work not only with Thomas Pynchon but also with Dante. He molds his work to share qualities with these

influential texts as well as others that fit into this genre. provides a clue to a reading of the novel that incorporates the influence of Dante. Wallace's approach to developing a narrative that covers such a broad scope includes the influence of Dante. *Infinite Jest* shares qualities with Dante's *Divina Commedia* that allow Wallace's work to develop a narrative that creates its own world but still takes specific cues from Wallace's own culture. Wallace's encyclopedic novel shares a thematic use of exile to ground the fictional temporal distance that Dante finds easily in his own culture. The scientific elements of the two works allow hints at stable allegory, though Wallace undermines this possibility with an ironic approach to fixed truth. The two authors also use representations of other works of art that mirror their own artistic ambitions in mise en abyme. The art within these fictions and the characters who produce them use as the history of language as well as jargon to stabilize their ability to express themselves. These works also include giants to represent the huge scope of the work within the fiction and they focus on relationships that center on unrequited love to illustrate the unfixed nature of the characters. These elements force these encyclopedic works to cover fictional realities so complicated they cover an entire reality and Dante's partial influence on Wallace allows the modern author to draw out aspects of his own narrative that enhance the work's encyclopedic qualities.

Narrative Structure, Narrative Fate

Infinite Jest includes an allusion to Dante's *Divina Commedia* in an endnote that is connected to a passage in the second half of the main narrative. Wallace inserts Dante into his text through a secondary character who says: "when you're directionless in a dark wood. . ." (1072). Dante's work begins: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,/ che la dritta via era smarrita" (*Inferno* ln. 1-3). Though Wallace does nothing to inform the reader of his source, and the character does not contextualize the reference, the influence of Dante's opening lines of *Inferno* is clear when comparing the two passages.

Though Wallace's novel centers around Hal Incandenza and his experiences as a student at the Enfield Tennis Academy, the note revolves around the final downfall of his best friend and classmate, Michael Pemulis. This offshoot of the main narrative line pursues the details of Pemulis's expulsion from the academy for dealing drugs to his classmates. The theme of drug addiction is one that Wallace uses to tie his disparate narrative lines together and to establish a moral system for his characters. This note also provides the clue to understanding the connection between the novel and Dante's text.

This endnote signals the end of Pemulis' role in the text, it is an important moment for the reader because of the explicit reference to Dante. It is essential to the understanding of the novel as a whole for the reader to recognize this reference. This recognition then leads to rereading. This section of the text is what Wallace refers to as an extratextual sign, but it

includes clues that can be used in the second reading during which the reader finally understands the connections among all of the characters. Wallace only allows for this understanding of his work that illuminates the meaning of clues near the end of the narrative. The second reading, though more informed, also leaves the reader dependent on the resolution that appears in the first section, so that the narrative demands an infinite number of readings.

This is only one moment, however, within Wallace's novel at which the reader must return to an earlier point in the narrative to fully understand Wallace's intentions. The novel has the structure of a labyrinth that the reader must navigate using clues imbedded in the narrative by Wallace to interpret the work as he intends. By including close to a hundred pages of what he calls "notes and errata" (983), Wallace overwhelms his reader with literary references and extended explanations connected to his main text. Many of these pieces of information are simply details that contextualize the point in the main narrative, while others serve as clues to the interpretation.

One of these clues lies in endnote 324 as Pemulis stands before his little buddy and alludes to *Inferno*. The lines in Dante signify the beginning of Dante's journey as Pilgrim seeking to find redemption from God. Dante presents it as a personal journey that results in the understanding of human salvation through divine enlightenment, though the life that Dante Pilgrim has lead up to the point of finding himself lost in the wood is the plight of humanity. Dante is also lost in a narrative labyrinth as he struggles with moral and spiritual dilemmas that have led him to the *selva oscura*.

While Wallace declines to acknowledge his sources directly, he does create a Dantean labyrinth of connections among his characters for his reader. The series of connections is so

complicated that it is virtually impossible to keep them all in mind at one time. This strengthens the impression that the novel is a world unto itself. Wallace allows Pemulis to deliver this key to the narrative in order to keep the allusion connected to his entire fictional world and not link it only to the parts of the narrative that include Hal. Wallace places his echo of Dante in an endnote to call attention to his method of embedding clues in the text. Pemulis' fate is not explored overtly, but it serves to show the reader that there are possibilities left unexplored, and reminds him that many of the characters serve as portholes into realities that hint at extending the narrative beyond the extratextual signs. Endnote 332 picks up the narrative line that endnote 324 began. Note 332 provides the scene in which Pemulis's is informed of the seriousness of his actions and how they will affect both his academic and tennis careers, "Pemulis scratched very coolly next to his ear. 'And this affects Whataburger, my chances?' DeLint told Pemulis he just fucking slayed him while Watson looked from face to face and Nwangi rocked and wheezed and slapped at his knee, and Pemulis, close-mouthed and breathing with terrible ease, found their good humor almost infectious" (1076). This is one of the last places that Pemulis appears in the narrative present in either the main text or in its extratextual signs, and it offers the only real explanation of his fate. Though it is clear how and why Pemulis is expelled, Wallace intentionally leaves this section of the text unresolved and open-ended. This implies through narrative organization that there are infinite worlds unfolding from the novel proper.

Wallace provides an explanation of how he parses information within his works in *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞*. The title of this work implies that the narrative can contain all information, which is a claim that Wallace is not making seriously. He is playing with developing a structure that seems to be all-inclusive even though the

reader knows that this is impossible. Wallace's mockery of this idea does not preclude an attempt to create a narrative in *Infinite Jest* that works to stretch its own boundaries.

Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞ includes what Wallace calls a "Small But Necessary Foreword" that claims to be a guide to reading the text. In it, Wallace explains how the reader may approach his narrative structure. If followed, however, his suggestions would keep the reader of *Infinite Jest* from finding the clues to the allegorical system in the narrative. Wallace explains:

In the following document, the boldface 'IYI' designates bits of material that can be perused, glanced at, or skipped altogether if the reader wants. Meaning skipped without serious loss. Over half the document's footnotes are probably **IYI**, as well as several different ¶s and even a couple subsections of the main text (2).

If the reader approaches this advice as genuine and continues to apply it to similar extratextual signs in Wallace's writing, such as endnotes and their footnotes in *Infinite Jest*, he misses the points that reveal Wallace's ironic presentation of allegory. By testing his reader in this way, Wallace can include several layers of meaning and levels of clarity with the references he makes to other works. He makes no such attempt to address the issue of the reader's relationship to the narrative structure of *Infinite Jest*, but it emerges during the process of reading.

The journey that begins in endnote 324 is one that the reader must take to understand the text itself. The placement provides a clue to the reader of how Wallace intends his action to be interpreted throughout the novel. Whereas Dante invites his reader to join him on his journey to find redemption and learn with him, Wallace sends the reader on the journey to gain an understanding of the novel. The extratextual sign allows the reader to make the connections and interact directly with the text. The reader must step outside of the main narrative to understand it and return having threaded the pieces together.

The endnote is unrelated to the sections that precede and follow it and stands apart on the page. It comes after Hal has visited Ennet House, which lies at the bottom of the hill from the tennis academy. Hal is seeking redemption himself, trying to find a way to overcome his drug abuse and in doing so he brings together the two institutions together that represent the extremes of social status. Wallace's narrative thus creates a union of opposites, a structure that folds back on itself and maintains a circular structure. Pemulis' eventual expulsion does not occur until another endnote, several pages later, also set apart from the main text. The relationship between the endnote and Hal's attempts to redeem himself lead the reader to expect a journey for Hal that will end in salvation. The empty space on the page, however, signals the fact that the salvation is not Hal's. Wallace juxtaposes the narrative connections among characters in the main text and those whose relevance is mostly dependent on extratextual signs and structural separation on the page to expand his text.

This relationship is complicated even more by Wallace's use of two types of endnotes within the novel. One type is flippant and contains information that is not necessary for understanding the allegorical meaning. The other is a note that works as a way to deepen the reader's understanding and is, therefore, crucial to the plot. The second type is exemplified in endnote 324, which provides a map of how to read the novel as a whole. Wallace tests the reader by using both types of endnotes and challenging him to continue to read beyond the main text. He knows that his reader may assume that all endnotes are extraneous and unnecessary for an understanding of the novel. He at once encourages and complicates this assumption by including trivial information, often of a pharmaceutical or technical nature, but also by including in endnotes information or sections text that are connected by plot elements to the main text but are separated by the organization of the narrative. He is

training his reader not to make these assumptions, and the reader who is willing to commit to the novel as a complete experience including endnotes is rewarded, while the reader who chooses to skip the clues is left in the dark of Dante's *selva oscura*.

Wallace includes the offshoot of the main narrative (note 324) to provide the reader with the understanding of his text's relationship to Dante's. His use of the endnote in this instance, however, asks the reader to become involved in the narrative to the fullest extent. He only provides this clue, which is integral to the understanding of the text as a whole, in an extratextual sign, the endnote. Pemulis is an inherent part of the main narrative, though not a main character. He is involved in secondary narratives and is the point of connection among characters within the main narrative. His role is one that operates mostly on a structural, narrative level and ties the fictional world together tightly. It is fitting that the signal of the end of his role in the narrative includes a key to the text itself and lies buried in a section that is disconnected from the main narrative.

This use of the endnote to extend the text creates an extra dimension to the narrative itself and confounds the reader's assumptions about the conventional role of an endnote. Wallace works with the structure both to break down the narrative and to complicate it. He is working to develop the impression that his fictional world is an entire reality unto itself that holds all of the aspects of the reality of the reader within the text. Yet his narrative defies the reader's understanding of how a work of fiction should conduct itself in order to draw that reader into the reality he has created.

The narrative spills over into the extratextual signs that Wallace provides and the narrative then adopts that space for its own purposes. The endnotes often send the reader to footnotes of their own such as James Incandenza's filmography, which includes a footnote

that contains a fictional bibliographic reference. This allows Wallace to envision the structure of his work in a different way that expands the narrative beyond its assumed borders. He is pushing his narrative into new spaces to develop a fictional world that plays with the idea of extending beyond the pages themselves. This works to create an explosion of the text and it seems to have no boundaries at certain points and gestures toward containing a way into a limitless fictional world.

Wallace's promises of infinite worlds existing beyond the pages of the book relate to the aspects of Dante's narrative that Wallace incorporates into his own work. This is the development of a text with which the reader must actively engage in order to decipher it. The reader is unable to regard the experience of reading as a linear one if he gives himself to the nature of reading the novel with all of its endnotes. As the reader oscillates from the main text to the endnotes he breaks down the conception that a book must be read from beginning to end. In this way the reader must do with Wallace's text what Michel Chaouli insists readers of hypertext fiction are always able to do: reorder and in some way rewrite the text.² Dante is able, as well, to manipulate this experience for his reader and use his Pilgrim as an entry to the reinterpretation of narrative. Finding Dante's meaning depends on the act of reading and rereading as does Wallace's, but this occurs in Dante's text this occurs through the multiplicity of Dante's fictional selves.

The relationship between Dante's Pilgrim and Poet and how it affects Wallace's plan for his reader can be explained by using Mieke Bal's definitions of embedded texts. Bal sees the primary relationship in a text like Dante's as that between the narrator and the actor.

² Chaouli takes this argument and ties it to what Robert Coover claims this means about hypertext when Coover says that the form "favor[s] a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and free[s] the reader from domination of the author" (4). While it is true that Wallace's narrative structure allows the reader to manipulate the information and interpret it, these acts are only seemingly independent of Wallace. He is an author who carefully constructs a system so that it will appear disordered.

Divina Commedia casts Dante's two fictional selves in these two roles. Dante Poet serves as the narrator, in Bal's terms, while Dante Pilgrim fulfills the role of the actor. Bal states that, "when there is text interference," or more than one narrative with some dependent on others, "narrator's text and actor's text are so closely related that a distinction into narrative levels can no longer be made. The relationship between the narrative levels has exceeded the boundary of maximum intensity" (142). Dante Poet introduces a narrative level in which Pilgrim is an actor, making Pilgrim dependent on Poet, but in turn Poet comments on Pilgrim, requiring Pilgrim's actions for understanding. This interconnection, which Bal calls "interference," maintains a separation in time, but it allows Dante's text to reflect back on itself. Dante Poet provides the commentary to Dante Pilgrim's experience and these two figures together create a circular and encyclopedic structure with their combined understanding and experience.

Though Wallace does not construct his narrative with interference in the same way that Dante does, he uses place and space to manipulate interpretation within his text. Bal defines these terms in specific ways that can be used to analyze Wallace's construction of meaning within his narrative and its relationship to Dante's embedded text. Bal uses the term *place* as "related to the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions," though she is careful to qualify this statement by arguing that "in fiction, these places do not actually exist, as they do in reality. But our imaginative faculty dictates that they be included in the fabula" (93). Fictional places, as defined in this way, "seen in relation to their perception are called space" (93). This idea relates the perception of place and the resulting creation of space in Wallace's text. In *Infinite Jest*, this can be seen in the relationship Wallace cultivates between the reader and the text. Bal's narrative theory, which is directly

applicable to Dante's work, focuses on the relationship between the actor and narrator. For Wallace, the main text includes narrative place, but corresponding narrative space is sometimes developed in the extratextual sign. In these instances, the reader is asked to interpret the extratextual signs as if they were still connected to place on the page. In doing this, Wallace explores how the reader's relationship to the development of fictional place and space relies on the organization of the narrative on the page.

Wallace extends the perception that allows for the creation of narrative space to the reader's physical interaction with the text by redirecting interpretation to extratextual signs. This interaction fills the role of interference that exists in Dante's work and achieves the same effect as Dante Poet. The dual nature of the Dante's fictional presence in the work demands a rereading, though Dante (Poet) himself provides the second layer of meaning. Dante Poet even addresses the reader directly at points to provide commentary on Dante Pilgrim's experiences. One such instance occurs when the Pilgrim arrives at the city Dis and Dante Poet writes, "Pensa, lettore, se io mi sconfortai/ nel suon de le parole maladette,/ che non credetti ritornarci mai" (*Inferno* VIII ln. 94-96). Wallace instead develops a relationship between his reader and the text directly that requires his reader to do the deep reading.

Wallace intends for his reader to understand that his narrative draws on allegory, as does Dante's. Dante's allegory is stable, however, and corresponds to the expectations of his reader who knows how and why to decipher the fourfold meaning in the text. Wallace's reader does not have this training nor do they necessarily know to look for allegorical signs in the text. Wallace uses the narrative structure to complicate this approach. He places the allusion in an endnote that, as an extratextual sign, is separated from the main text. Separating these aspects of the narrative from the main text within the pages of the book

implies that these elements are to be regarded separately. This invitation to defer the information included in these endnotes is not sincere and depends on Wallace's use of irony. However, this section is still important to the understanding and interpretation of this novel with respect to a larger literary tradition as well as the meaning of certain characters' relationships to each other.

Dante's uses allegory in a literary tradition in which readers are trained to find the keys to understand the overarching meaning. Dante's reader knows what symbols serve as keys to deciphering stable allegory and the reader can trust that Dante will provide the layers of meaning that stable allegory demands. Wallace, however, must train his reader to find the keys, but when he learns how to find these, Wallace does not support the allegory. His ironic text is a labyrinth created to lose the reader in the fictional world, yet it is able to provide the clues necessary to navigate the way to expected meaning even when that meaning is not actually present. The structural devices, such as extratextual signs, draw the careful reader further into the narrative and its own reality, which contains hints that are not included in the main text, while the reader who does not follow through with Wallace's clues is separated from the narrative. By doing this, Wallace is able to present infinite possibilities inside a finite space, which is the physical limitation of the pages of the text. Dante also introduces the infinite with the idea of the empyrean when he arrives with Beatrice at the Primum Mobile and "Noi siamo usciti fore/ del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce:/ luce intellettual, piena d'amore;/ amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;/ letizia che trascende ogne doloroze" (*Paradiso* XXX 38-42). This view of the Empyrean allows for the infinite within one point, which is a presentation of the idea in a well defined manifestation (Rucker 17).

The allegorical meanings that exist within these texts are based on different sets of assumptions that are related to how these two authors view infinity. While Dante's allegory is based on Christian doctrine, Wallace's implication of an allegorical truth emerges in relation to mathematics. Pemulis is one key to the allegory within *Infinite Jest*, and it is important to understand that this character's academic career at the tennis academy is based almost entirely on math. Pemulis' tennis abilities are not as strong as his classmates', but his ability in mathematics perfectly complements his best friend, Hal, who is exceptional in all academic subjects except for math.

Wallace presents, mathematics, particularly logic, as a divine structure in the world that can provide a formula for the infinite that is capable of replacing Dante's Christian infinite. He privileges Pemulis in a way as the messenger of the allegorical clue because of that character's relationship to mathematics. In the opposite way, he faults Hal for not being able to grasp the method of mathematics and for failing to see the beauty in the subject. The boys' friendship represents a union of opposites that reminds the reader of the circular structure of the text.

Wallace specifically looks to logic as the narrative means to imply that mathematics is dictating the structure of his work. His own background in logic allows him the ability to manipulate his reader's impressions of mathematics and use them as symbols. Wallace is very clear about this method in his novel *The Broom of the System*, in which the characters themselves are attempting to solve the mystery of an old woman's disappearance with clues she has left in the form of logic problems. In that work, Wallace places the responsibility of interpretation of clues on himself through his characters. *Infinite Jest*, however, requires the reader to do the interpretive work from the clues provided. Not all of these clues relate to a

stable allegory or even the promise of one, however, and some are meant to be distracting. The reader must decipher all of the clues and determine which are relevant to Wallace's allegory. Some clues Wallace provides are relatively straightforward or at least readily apparent, though he creates a narrative that is so dense it is still a difficult task for the reader to recognize and comprehend even some of the more basic clues.

Wallace's intellectual interest in mathematics leads him back to the technical aspects of the ideas of infinity. For him, infinity is not only a symbol or merely a way to expand his narrative place far beyond the bounds of the pages of the book. His background in logic makes the mathematical implications of the use of infinity in his work relevant and crucial to the understanding of his allegorical system. Before conjuring up Dante's metaphorical wood, Pemulis explains the importance of mathematics in endnote 324 to a somewhat stunned younger student. This clue to the labyrinth of the work and the indication that Pemulis is providing the key to unlock Wallace's allegory is full of literary references that lead to the insistence that mathematics is the basis for truth. Pemulis rants to Possalthwaite:

Todd, trust math. As in Matics, Math E. First-order predicate logic. Never fail you. Quantities and their relation. Rates of change. The vital statistics of God or equivalent. When all else fails. When the boulder's slid all the way back to the bottom. When the headless are blaming. When you do not know your way about. You can fall back and regroup around math. Whose truth is deductive truth. Independent of sense or emotionality. The syllogism. The identity. Modus Tollens. Transitivity. Heaven's theme song. The nightlight on life's dark wall, late at night. Heaven's recipe book. The hydrogen spiral. The methane, ammonia, H₂O. Nucleic acids. A and G, T and C. The creeping inevitability. Caius is mortal. Math is not mortal. What it is is: listen: it's true (1071).

Pemulis demands that this system is trustworthy by using scientific and logical examples to ground his argument. He refers to the logical system of syllogism in his statement, and elaborates on this later with the phrase "Caius is mortal." These examples remind the reader of the order of logic that is so appealing to Pemulis by calling to mind the basic example of

sylllogism: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal. Wallace does not deliver this message in such simple terms, however, because he wishes to challenge his reader to untangle these references.

Wallace relies heavily on his background in logic to construct his labyrinthine narrative. The allegorical clues relate back to a mathematical construct that directs the reader to the representations of infinity as they play out in the text. An issue that emerges early in *Everything and More* is the discussion of the relationship between mathematicians' work on a formula for infinity and their eventual insanity. This raises the question of how Wallace's own relationship to art and mathematics relates to how much he trusts his own allegorical system.³ Wallace's relationship serves as a warning against becoming obsessed with imposing rules and boundaries. Wallace brings up the issue of insanity at several points in the text to debate the relevance of this viewpoint on Georg Cantor's life in the work *Everything and More: A Compact History of ∞* . Cantor was a German mathematician who was instrumental in developing set theory. His work on a mathematical equation for infinity makes him relevant to any modern discussion of the representation of infinity. Wallace focuses on the treatment of Cantor's place as a major figure in the development of mathematics and logic. Wallace quotes G. K. Chesterton, who writes:

Poets do not go mad; but chess players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not attacking logic: I only say this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination (6).

Wallace does not directly address here the fact that he classifies himself at different points in the work as both a creative artist and as someone with a strong base of knowledge in logic.

³ Wallace's difficult relationship with allegorical truth mirrors Dante's discussion of Adam and the origin of language in the *Commedia* when Dante author changes his ideas about man's relationship to language, particularly in *De vulgari elpquentia* (Damon 60).

Wallace attempts to minimize the role of his knowledge of logic. But Marshall Boswell explains Wallace's relationship to the field, writing that, while at Amherst College, Wallace "pursued a major in philosophy with a specialization in math and logic. He has affirmed that he was particularly gifted at technical philosophy and was for a short while convinced that he had found his calling" (3-4). Boswell also explains that Wallace lost interest in the field after a year of graduate course work at Harvard in logic, semantics, and math (6).

Wallace does not bring up these details of his life and his relationship to logic, which eventually failed him, but it is important to recognize that he allows Pemulis to insist that mathematics maintains fixed truths. Wallace knows better as an author than to trust in these types of systems but he is not above allowing his characters to rely on them. Pemulis's hope that calculus will save him from the disappointment he has encountered in so many aspects of his life is a clear example of this. Brian Phillips extends this argument to Wallace's shorter fiction, noting that it includes "desperate, flailing objectivity attempted by each of the stories' narrators, who seize on technical, special, scientific language in a vain attempt to find some fixed vantage point, some definite mooring, in the unfixed indefinite world" (4).

The reader cannot entirely infer Wallace's background from his own writing, but discovering Wallace's history in mathematics is a useful for interpreting Wallace's unstable irony. This background is hinted at, however, in an extratextual sign in *Everything and More*. Wallace uses his first footnote in that work to address the reader with what he claims is biographical information, but is ultimately misleading. He writes, "IYI Here's a good example of an IYI factoid. Your author here is someone with a medium-strong amateur interest in math and formal systems. He is also someone who disliked and did poorly in

every math course he ever took, save one, which wasn't even in college" (2). This description may serve to make the reader feel more comfortable with the information in the work and have a sense that Wallace is similarly lost in technical, mathematical explanations or even less comfortable with them than the reader. This is part of Wallace's game as a writer in which he challenges the reader to disregard his clues and intentionally leads them astray.⁴ Wallace's steps out of his role as artificer to challenge his reader to remain critical and not to become lost in his artifice. James Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest* features Joelle van Dyne, who he deems the "prettiest girl of all time." In the film, the images of her are capable of mesmerizing the viewer until he dies. The viewer's relation to reality is lost through the film's seduction, while from an outside perspective there is a finite amount of time that has passed before the viewer dies.

The film's mesmerizing quality also leads to insanity, thus shedding light on Wallace's presentation of the mathematician Georg Cantor. Wallace seems skeptical of those who have written about Cantor before because of their emphasis on his mental illness. Wallace informs the reader that "historians and pop scholars tend to spend a lot of time on Cantor's psychiatric problems and on whether and how they were connected to his work on the mathematics of ∞ " (*Everything* 6). Clearly Wallace sees this approach to Cantor's life as extremely one-sided and unfair, but he integrates infinity into his own novel in a way that is connected to mental illness. Within the novel, people who view *Infinite Jest* the film succumb to a brief insanity that leads directly to their deaths. They are caught up in a pleasure that for them seems infinite, but is engrossing to the point that they die watching. This manipulation of the finite recalls endnote 324 because the note introduces possibilities

⁴ Wallace is aware that contemporary fiction often devolves into a game that ultimately excludes the reader in favor of the artifice and that this occurs because of the self-conscious nature of contemporary fiction (Jacobs 215). He is able, however, to engage in his own game that actively includes the reader.

outside of the scope of the novel's pages. The reader, however, knows that the narrative is bounded by the pages of the book.

Wallace's history of infinity focuses mostly on the mathematician Georg Cantor's work on a mathematical representation of infinity that is able to impose boundaries. Wallace refers to Cantor in *Infinite Jest* in a passage connected to an extratextual sign, endnote 35, in which he cites Cantor as a figure who "deeply informed Dr. J. Incandenza's sense of the transstatistical aesthetics of serious tennis" (994). What appears in the main text is a description of how the administrators and coach apply the ideas of Cantor's Diagonal Proof to the students' performance. The explanation serves a greater purpose within the novel as it sets out a way of understanding Wallace's own approach to his writing through his narrator's words:

locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play is not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern. [Schitt] seemed intuitively to sense that it was not a matter of reduction at all, but – perversely – of expansion, the aleatory flutter of uncontrolled, metastatic growth – each well-shot ball admitting of n possible responses, 2^n possible responses to those responses, and on into what Incandenza would articulate to anyone who shared both his background as a Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response, Cantorian and beautiful because *infoliating*, *contained*, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it finally, a game, these boundaries of self (82).

This description of Incandenza's approach to tennis that incorporates the mathematical aspects of infinity serves not only to give the reader a sense of how this character has shaped the narrative space, but also to show how Wallace views the narrative structure. This discussion of imposed boundaries is directly relevant to how the author approaches writing the book. The same issues of an infinite, but bounded system that arise in relation to Dante's

empyrean are also present in Wallace's hints at portholes that point outside of the text, even though the text has to contain the whole narrative within the boundaries of the pages. He is intrigued by this system that allows both infinite structure and defined limits.

Wallace is aware of his gesture toward infinity through his circular, structural framework that relies on a union of opposites to replicate the infinite but bounded system. The paradoxes upon which he relies return to a problem of logic known as the *Vicious Circle*, which is part of the mathematical representation of infinity. An explanation of this paradox that Wallace often uses in both his scientific writing and his fiction involves a barber who shaves all and only those who do not shave themselves. The question is: does this barber shave himself? The problem is that if he does, the statement is false, and if he does not, it is also false (*Everything* 278). Wallace's narrative hints at similar problems since the narrative is bounded but seems to contain portholes to infinite possibilities. Both cannot be true, but Wallace does not privilege one over the other.

Dante's use of paradox in reference to infinity relies on a spiritual structure whereas Wallace's is based on math. Dante uses the empyrean to present a visual representation of infinity in his text that raises the same questions of boundaries coexisting with infinite space.⁵ The empyrean is a single point, filled with infinite divine light and contains all of heaven.⁶ His presentation of infinity in a finite space is also bounded by the pages of the book.

⁵ Giordano Bruno addresses this paradox in his work, *De la causa, principio et uno*. His first statement in Dialogo quinto: "È dunque l'universo uno, infinito, immobile," begins his presentation of an alternative perspective on the nature of the universe that counters the Aristotelian viewpoint that was prevalent and accepted in his day.

⁶ For a complete discussion of the corporeal nature of divine light in *Paradiso*, refer to Gilson's *Medieval Optics and Theories of Light in the Works of Dante*.

Wallace adopts the structure of stable allegory and reworks it into an ironic element of his novel. He trains his reader to decipher his work and Wallace also seems to promise his reader a fixed truth like Dante's stable allegory, but *Infinite Jest* does not hold together with such a reading. Wallace's unstable irony eliminates the possibility for consistent meaning even in the mathematics that his characters trust in the text.

Lemniscates: The Symbol of Narrative Infinity

Both Wallace and Dante draw their readers into their texts by creating a circular structure in which each reading demands a subsequent rereading because these authors embed resolution to their narratives in the beginning of the texts before the reader can contextualize them. This approach to narrative structure demands that the reader return to the beginning to find the resolution and begin another, more informed reading. The circularity allows for the work to be encyclopedic because it contains its own referents. By splitting his narrative persona into two distinct characters who serve clearly different purposes in the work, Dante is able to allow the Poet to comment on the actions and reactions of the Pilgrim. Wallace achieves the same effect by including a piece of his narrative puzzle in the first chapter when Hal narrates that he is “standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and [he] dig up [his] father’s head” (17). There is no way for the reader to contextualize this information as it appears in the first section. It is not until nearly 1,000 pages and almost 400 endnotes later that the reader realizes that Hal Incandenza and Donald Gately’s connection to the film *Infinite Jest* has not been thoroughly resolved. The narrative does make an entire circuit, however, in the first chapter. Finding this clue and recognizing it during a rereading provides a sense of completion to the novel that is denied if the reader is not willing to follow Wallace’s direction back to the beginning of the work. Both authors emphasize the need for a

rereading of their texts but do not insist upon it. They leave this realization and interpretation to the reader.

Likewise, Wallace introduces a symbol of infinity, the lemniscate, into his novel. This symbol, ∞ , is relevant to Wallace's work because it is a track that is bounded but infinite. This symbol can also represent a union of opposites that at first seems paradoxical but can be understood visually with the lemniscate. It can be traced without ever coming to an end point because tracing it covers the same space over and over. This symbol is a visual representation of the perceived narrative expanse within *Infinite Jest* that is ultimately bounded by the pages of the book. Wallace incorporates this symbol into his narrative consistently without directing the reader's attention to it or interpreting it overtly. The symbol does for Wallace's text what Dante's arrival at the empyrean achieves. Both the lemniscate and the empyrean are gestures toward infinity that also complement the circular structure of the narratives. The empyrean allows for a similarly paradoxical structure that unites infinite space with a single point that contains it (Rucker 17).

Wallace, however, places the lemniscate in various places in the text, often hidden or disguised as some other object. Pemulis's reference to "The hydrogen spiral" and "Nucleic acids" (1071) in his speech to Possalthwaite is an example of his ability to insert the lemniscate symbol and connect it to his allegorical system. This is the same method of inserting clues that Robert Alter's book, *Partial Magic*, illustrates with respect to Vladimir Nabokov's use of objects representing lemniscates in his novels. Alter has interpreted the use of butterflies and the image of the impression left by a bicycle in the sand that appears in *Pale Fire* as objects that conjure up the lemniscate as a motif of narrative infinity. Alter emphasizes Nabokov's use of this symbol in conjunction with that of mirror images, which

likewise represent infinite regress within the narrative. Wallace is able, however, to use narrative circularity to achieve the overlapping effect that Nabokov creates with mirrors. Though Alter's interpretation of this recurring image in Nabokov focuses on different intentions than those of Wallace, it is worthwhile to discuss Nabokov's use of tennis rackets in *Lolita* as serving a purpose similar to Wallace's in his novel. These images in *Lolita* also hint at the possibility of infinite options that are not expressed overtly in the narrative itself, but are nonetheless part of what the reader must consider as the scope of the fictional reality.

Wallace continually wants to expand his narrative labyrinth and include details that allow for options that are not explicit in the text. This is an attempt to create a narrative structure that replicates the visual representation of infinity, while making it encyclopedic by attempting to contain everything in its pages. Wallace actively explores the limits of these bounds within his work. Endnote 324 is one point at which Wallace intentionally leaves a part of the narrative that is extratextual without a resolution. The reader follows Wallace's lead to find this section of the plot which Wallace places in an unexpected position, but Wallace then denies the reader the resolution of the section. Endnote 324 then appears to be an incomplete section that possesses an infinite number of possible outcomes that the reader must consider seriously because Wallace has made it clear to his reader that he is developing this plotline carefully and abandoning it is a conscious decision. While this is not an infinite regress in as clearly recognizable a form as it appears in *Pale Fire*, it allows Wallace to shape a narrative that is simultaneously finite and infinite, one that extends the bounds of the pages of the book. The circularity of Wallace's work, however, maintains those bounds because it is a closed system.

Wallace does not always hide his use of the lemniscate, as Nabokov, does but instead gives the reader clues that he should actively look for this symbol when it is more obscure. The most overt use of this symbol arises with the description of Orin tracing actual lemniscates on the bodies of the women he has seduced. Orin is scornful of, but also pities, the women who do not recognize the symbol. Included in the description of these “subjects,” which is Orin’s term for the women whom he has seduced, is a sentence that serves as a clue for the reader to be aware of levels of meaning connected to this symbol. The description of one woman states that she is “Not real bright – she thought the figure he’d trace without thinking on her bare flank after sex was the numeral 8, to give you an idea” (47). This is Wallace’s signal to the reader that he has the knowledge to decipher the meaning that the woman does not comprehend and the reader should be watchful of this symbol in other significant places.

Wallace’s treatment of Orin’s seductions of these women, however, serves a larger purpose than just to introduce the image of the lemniscate. The Speedy Seduction Strategies are the rules by which Orin lives his life. Because he is ultimately unable to create a fulfilling relationship with Joelle, he has replaced the potential of that relationship with the sure failure of a possible infinite number of relationships. The connection that Orin makes between infinity and basic or dissolute pleasure is one that Wallace emphasizes throughout the work through the manifestation, not symbol, of infinity within the narrative, the film *Infinite Jest*. The film mesmerizes the viewer with Joelle’s beauty, but provides no revelation or understanding beyond oblivion as the viewer loses perspective on his reality while he is watching. The steps leading to the viewer’s death for him are, however, an infinite experience of pleasure. The union of death and pleasure is another way in which

Wallace is able to incorporate the union of opposites that emphasizes the circularity of his work.

The film is regarded as a weapon because of its insidious nature. There is no attempt here to disguise the nature of the film or to leave any ambiguity about the result of watching it. The reality of the film's horrific effects makes Orin's seductions seem innocuous. This allows Wallace to use Orin's Seduction Strategies to provide the reader with the clue that as an author he is seducing his readers with his text. His careful explanation of how one might go about seducing another person is so overt that his intentions become secondary and somewhat hidden. Embedding the ending of the novel in the first chapter can be understood as a seduction strategy, for in this way, Wallace draws the reader back into his narrative labyrinth though it seems to be the reader's own choice.

Wallace's manipulation of his reader's expectations of narrative closure operates on the same principles as Orin's seduction strategy, in which the subject truly thinks she is falling in love with Orin despite what he actually wants. Seduction Strategy Number 7 (1007-08) serves as the explanation of what Wallace is doing to his reader. This strategy depends on Orin wearing a wedding band and telling a woman that he has not even thought about another woman since he met his (fictional) wife and that he feels awful for even looking twice at the Subject so that the Subject is put in a position of consoling Orin. Eventually she becomes convinced that her reactions to his attempt to seduce her are not based on anything he is doing because he is, all the while, desperately upset that he is attracted to her. This is the opposite of being entirely open and overt about the seduction (another one of Orin's strategies), and is analogous to what Wallace is doing to his reader. The book is so overwhelming and difficult to read that the reader convinces himself, with

Wallace's help, that he is reading it entirely based on his own dedication to achieving a sense of completion. Wallace then denies the reader this sense by refusing to repeat the detail that brings the whole novel together in the last chapter.

The explicit reference to the lemniscate within Orin's pursuit of pleasure has a clear meaning that connects back to the structure of the narrative, but the image is also hidden in ways, much like it is in Nabokov's novels, throughout the narrative. Wallace uses images of eyes, which also represent the lemniscate, to extend the idea of infinity within the work through artifice. In fact, his use of eyes, and their connection to pleasure, provide a key for the reader to interpret the labyrinth that Wallace develops. Eyes are a prominent image in James Incandenza's filmography, which appears in the section of endnotes (985-93). Again, one of the major clues to aid the interpretation of literary influences and devices within *Infinite Jest* is contained within one of Wallace's extratextual signs. As an author he challenges and in some way encourages his reader to ignore the sections that are extratextual but are crucial to interpretation. His labyrinthine narrative is a game he plays with his reader. This is a game that, like Eschton, raises the questions of what is the map, what is territory, and where those boundaries lie.

Part of this game depends on his dedication to creating not only a feasible narrative that the reader can follow, but also a complicated history for many of the characters that often come in the form of talks given at AA meetings. These digressions within the main narrative give the reader background information necessary to extrapolate assumptions about these characters that Wallace indicates could lie beyond the perceived boundaries of the narrative. The infinite structure makes this appear to be a reasonable possibility, but Wallace knows that none of his narrative can actually exist outside of his text. Wallace hints at this

option playfully with James Incandenza's filmography, which is a professional background for this character who never appears in the present action of the narrative alive. The filmography, however, reveals the novel's obsession with eyes and vision as related to pleasure. This connection of thematic elements in the work eventually brings the reader back to the presence of a perceived infinity that exists in the experience of watching the film *Infinite Jest*. The other films, though, bring up this idea in somewhat grotesque ways, tying these images closely to Dante's images of the fates of souls in *Inferno*.

Incandenza's filmography includes hidden representations of the lemniscate in the form of eyes. The description of Incandenza's film *The Medusa v. the Odalisque*, in which "two visually lethal mythological females duel with reflective surfaces onstage while a live crowd of spectators turns to stone," emphasizes the destructive nature of artifice while also theoretically being infinitely entertaining for the spectators who are paralyzed like the viewers of the film *Infinite Jest* (1998). The artifice and destruction in both films is tied directly to the eyes, though there is more emphasis on this relationship in *The Medusa v. the Odalisque*.

The images of eyes and artifice are even more directly connected in the description of Incandenza's film that appears just before *The Medusa v. the Odalisque*. The film *Cage III – Free Show* is described as a story in which

the figure of Death presides over the front entrance of a carnival sideshow whose spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that the spectators' eyes become larger and larger until the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs, while on the other side of the sideshow tent the figure of Life uses a megaphone to invite fairgoers to an exhibition in which, if the fairgoers consent to undergo unspeakable degradations, they can witness ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs (1998).

As in Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest*, the artifice draws the viewer into a state of paralysis that has the promise of infinite pleasure, but ultimately leads to suffering and death. The viewer's experience begins with the artist's creation but ends with the viewer's destruction.

Wallace makes sure to use this fictional filmography to provide a direct clue to the reader about the hidden image of the lemniscate within this relationship of artifice, pleasure, and fatal paralysis. Incandenza's film, titled *Möbius Strips*, is a narrative in which "a theoretical physicist, who can only achieve mathematical insight during coitus, conceives of Death as a lethally beautiful woman" (990). Here Wallace is explicit with his imagery by including the Möbius strip, which when turned on its side is the same as the lemniscate. This image also brings up the paradox of a bounded system that does not have a beginning or end. John Barth uses this symbol to the same effect in his short story, "Frame Tale," which consists of a strip of the page that the reader is instructed to cut out and make into a Möbius strip. Written on one side of this strip of the page is "Once upon a time," and on the other side, "there was a story that began" (1-2). These words repeat without ever coming to a stopping point when the reader constructs the Möbius strip.

Beyond Wallace's clear placement of this clue, the film's description makes Wallace's intention of pursuing the relationship between pleasure and death within his work clear. The appearance of this union of opposites in the fictional film mirrors its presence in the work itself through *mise en abyme*.

Wallace also includes descriptions of Incandenza's fictional films that are representative of the structure of his own work. One film entitled *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space With Mind-Boggling Efficiency* (991) does nothing to illustrate characteristics of Incandenza but works as a clue

about Wallace to the reader. It is in this example that the reader can understand that Wallace is aware of what he is doing with the structure of his narrative and that the novel itself also uses every available bit of space. He constructs his narrative carefully to reflect back on itself like Dante's showing that he is conscious of the implications of the narrative decisions he is making.

Wallace uses the lemniscate to mirror the structure of his work. The symbol allows for infinite space that is bounded, which is the idea that both Wallace and Dante employ in their texts. For Wallace, however, this symbol allows him to challenge the reader to find this element hidden in symbols. The lemniscate achieves the same effect as the empyrean, but the symbol serves different purposes in Wallace's novel than in Dante's.

Morality and Inverted Perspective

The physical manifestation of the moral journey in the *Commedia* is counterintuitive, and the reader, therefore, must accept this structure as a narrative place that operates under different rules from his own or Dante's reality.⁷ The deepest point in the Inferno is also the foot of Mount Purgatory. This does not coincide with the ideal system of the afterlife in which the stratification of judgment determines placement of souls beginning in the pit of hell. Dante's organization, though useful for the Pilgrim's journey of self-discovery, operates under a different organizational system that is most importantly paradoxical. In Dante's cosmology, Satan is frozen in the ground at the very pit of hell and creates a striking image as the last figure the Pilgrim sees before his ascent toward Paradiso.⁸ Dante describes the sight saying, "Lo 'mperador del doloroso regno/ da mezzo 'l petto uscia fuor de la ghiaccia" (*Inferno* XXXIV ln. 28-29). Satan is frozen upside down from the perspective of the foot of purgatory. The inversion that Dante includes in his work is a narrative defeat of Satan by the author and a way to show that the sins of Inferno cannot contaminate the reality of either Purgatory or Paradiso. When Dante Pilgrim expresses his confusion about their orientation, Virgil explains that:

⁷ A source that pursues issues related to this argument is Evelyn Birge Vitz's *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology*. The section discussing Guillame's *Roman de la Rose* focuses on narrative place in medieval texts that concern travel, including Pilgrimages.

⁸ Mario Fittoni's article, "Il Canto XXXIV" makes an interesting argument that Dante is not actually fear Satan, but rather he is frightened of the pagan elements of the Canto. He deals most closely with Dis itself serving as the aspect that worries Dante Pilgrim most.

Tu imagini ancora
d'esser di là dal centro, ov'io mi presi
al pel del vermo reo che 'l mondo fõra.
Di là fosti cotanto quant' io scesi;
quand' io mi volsi, tu passasti 'l punto
al qual si traggon d'ogne parte i pesi. . . .
Da questa parte cadde giù dal cielo;
e la terra, che pria di qua si sporse,
per paura di lui fè del mar velo,
e venne a l'emisperio nostro; e forse
per fuggir lui lasciò qui loco vòto
quella ch' appar di qua, e sù ricorse.

(*Inferno* XXXIV ln. 106-111, 121-126)

Dante Pilgrim is able to arrive at this understanding through the structure of his topography.

It is the narrative place that makes his points for him.

Wallace uses this same idea of reversing the perspective of his narrative place, yet relies more heavily than Dante on the moral development rather than the physical orientation of the narrative place. Wallace's work requires a set of definitions for the moral system upon which he is relying so that the reader can understand the basis for judgment. The tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous and the morals that it lays out are what Wallace uses to judge his characters. Though he does not interfere in the text as Dante does in the role of narrator to deliver these judgments, Wallace is in a position to make clear how the AA ideals would apply in each narrative situation. He is forced then to do some of the interpretive work for his reader and be sure to illustrate how his allegory operates. This is certainly not a concern for Dante, who is able to call upon the teachings of the established church as rules that apply to his narrative place. Dante is allowed more freedom to manipulate the topography of that place while remaining confident that the reader can follow the strict rules that hold true throughout his work.

E.T.A. is on the top of a hill looking down at Ennet House, which sits at the bottom. This physical relationship mirrors Dante's structure of Inferno and Mount Purgatory in which the descent into Hell represents severity of sin and the ascent of Mount Purgatory symbolizes redemption. Wallace also opposes his two main characters, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, who inhabit two distinctly different aspects of the narrative but whose eventual meeting provides the resolution of the novel and completes the web of connection. Wallace juxtaposes two events that illustrate the judgment of these characters based on the set of rules imposed by AA. Hal seeks out an NA meeting hoping to begin to overcome his addiction but he mistakenly attends a meeting for men seeking to find their Inner Infant. Hal does not come to the realization, however, that this meeting is not a group of fellow addicts. He assumes that he is at an NA meeting and wonders, "What the etiquette is in NA about getting up and leaving right in the middle of somebody's Infantile revelation of need" (803). Hal eventually recognizes one of the men as one of his brother Orin's childhood friends and tries desperately to find a way to escape before being recognized. He is too buried in his privilege that has led him to addiction to use common sense, and recognize the meeting for what it is – an extension of the community on top of the hill. Hal cannot escape his world, like those trapped in the ice in Dante's pit of hell, to begin a process of moral development.

Hal's experience depends on the community that sits on top of the hill, while Don Gately's experiences are closely tied to Ennet House, at the bottom of the hill. The act of heroism that serves as the main climax within these disparate narrative threads features Gately defending the halfway house from attack. As Gately fends off the attackers, he is shot and wounded. Wallace focuses on Gately's ability to recognize the situation for what it is and maintains a deep sense of what is real and true during the actual fight scene. Wallace's

narrator states that “it’s impossible, outside of choreographed entertainment, to fight two guys at the same time” (613). This assertion separates Gately from the theme of artifice and death that plagues other characters in the work. Gately’s involvement with infinity depends on his appearance in the first section of the novel, and is reflective of the view of infinity that is the mathematical, circular structure of the narrative. He is not taken in by the paralysis of the false promise of infinite pleasure.

He is Wallace’s hero because he has learned to make these distinctions about reality with the jargon and structure of AA. James Incandenza, in the form of a wraith, seeks out Gately as he lies in a hospital bed recovering from his injuries from the fight. The director explains how he attempted to reach his son and draw him out. Incandenza, through Gately’s own thoughts explains, “His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (839). Incandenza recognizes Gately as a hero who was able to avoid being taken in by the false promise of artifice and found a truth.

Wallace allows Gately’s dedication to the truth that he finds in AA define how that character views himself. After being shot defending his fellow recovering addicts, Gately imagines a headline that reads “**SHOT IN SOBRIETY**” (613) as he continues to try to fend off his attackers. Wallace exaggerates Gately’s obsession with and dedication to Alcoholics Anonymous to the point that it becomes a ridiculous aspect of the characterization. He is ridiculing Gately’s overzealous dedication to rules and boundaries, but this dedication is what defines Gately and allows him to become the hero of the narrative and redeem himself as a moral figure. Wallace ties Gately to the foot of the hill while maintaining Hal’s connections to the top of that hill to invert the expectations of his moral system.

Though both Wallace and Dante are in control of the fates of their characters, they play at passing that responsibility along to the system they overlay on the narrative. For Wallace, the rules of mathematics, the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the negative reinforcement of Speedy Seduction Strategies that his characters react against impose judgment as divine order does in the *Commedia*. Though Wallace's topography is not as complicated as Dante's, it relies on specific details that parallel the recovery process laid out by AA.

Though Dante works to tie his narrative to the political reality of his day, the gestures he makes to separate the narrative from reality are important. The experience he has in the underworld is dependent on Dante Pilgrim being lost and unsure of himself so that he can change for the better and manage to use what he has learned from the souls he encounters in his own life. Though Dante Poet is able to reflect and decipher the early experiences of the Pilgrim for the reader, this insight only comes from the brief experience he has in the underworld. The Poet is no more acquainted with the topographical maneuvering in his own reality than the Pilgrim, which tempts the reader to pursue multiple rereadings to become the expert on the narrative space that neither Dante Pilgrim nor Dante Poet can be.

Wallace's presentation of Boston does not allow for an abrupt change in perspective due to the movement of the land, but it does allow for moral perspective to shift. Wallace limits himself by using a real city for his narrative place even within his fictional, restructured political and geographic system. Dante uses Florence insofar as it is useful for establishing his political scene but not in any way that limits his ability to manipulate the geography around the Pilgrim. Wallace invents the politics of his Boston for his narrative space, but he is still limited by the geography of the city itself for the narrative place. Part of

the appeal of the work is the use of Boston and the personal connection that might have for the reader, but keeping the narrative place tied to the reality of Boston does ultimately result in a more limiting aspect compared to Dante's use of Florence. Dante calls upon Florence as a referent but does not rely on the structure of the city within the narrative. Wallace, however, invites the limits that engaging with a real place within his fictional reality imposes. The limits are part of the narrative bounds that counter Wallace's gestures toward infinite narrative possibilities. He introduces the portholes but reminds his reader with elements of his own reality that the narrative is contained within its pages and limited by narrative place. The boundaries that reality imposes on the narrative in Wallace's work are the same as the limitations Hamlet addresses when he claims that he "could be bounded in a nutshell and count [himself] a king of infinite space, were it not that [he has] bad dreams" (*Hamlet* II.ii 255-257). In one way imagination promises freedom, but it must ultimately adhere to reality's rules.

The book is bounded by the physical pages but also by the narrative place. The balance that Wallace strikes results in the dependence on his ability to clearly establish the moral implications that emerge from his use of AA to work in place of Dante's manipulation of the ground upon which the Pilgrim walks.

The topography of Boston and Enfield, where the main action of the work actually takes place, shares geographic details with Dante's description of the underworld. The two crucial aspects that can be found in *Infinite Jest* and serve similar purposes to those in Dante's work are the foot of the mountain and the river. Crossing the Charles River marks a division of the narrative place and space in *Infinite Jest* that recalls Dante's view of the River Acheron. Dante Pilgrim loses consciousness as he travels across the river, allowing him to

possess a new perspective on the other side. He is so overcome that he falls into a deep sleep while he crosses:

La terra lagrimosa diende vento,
che balenò una luce vermiglia
la qual mi vines ciascun sentimento,
e caddi come l'uom cui sonno piglia.
Ruppemi l'alto sonno ne la testa
un greve truono, sì ch'io mi riscossi
come persona ch'è per forza desta;
e l'occhio riposato intorno mossi,
dritto levato, e fiso riguardai
per conoscer lo loco dov' io fossi.

(*Inferno* III ln. 133-136, IV ln. 1-6)

Likewise, Wallace's characters develop different identities on either side of the Charles River that reflect their perspective on their lives.

Orin is the first character chronologically to establish two distinct identities differentiated by geographic location upon leaving for college. Though he does not go far, the move has implications that relate to his identity, including his decision to play football and abandon his tennis career, that ties him to his family and his identity at E.T.A. The move signals specific changes in Orin's situation that still depend, however, on his life in Enfield. His identity is always defined in relation to his mother's viewpoint. She casts a shadow over his decision to go to B.U. and she "privately thought it was important for Orin to be away from home, psychologically speaking, but still able to come home whenever he wished" (284-85). The influence of Orin's mother is oppressive even after he establishes himself on the other side of the river, but she cannot keep him from developing an adult identity that leads to his involvement with Joelle van Dyne and eventually to Speedy Seduction Strategies.

The most innocent character in Wallace's work, Orin's brother Mario, has a relationship with the other side of the river that also develops through Joelle, in the role of

Madame Psychosis. It is as if the signal from her radio show were directed at him intentionally:

Obstructed on all sides by the tall buildings of East Cambridge and Commercial Drive and serious Downtown, though, only a couple thin pie-slices of signal escape M.I.T. proper, e.g. through the P.E. Dept. gap of barely used lacrosse and soccer fields between the Philology and Low-Temp Physics complexes on Mem. Dr. and then across the florid-purple nighttime breadth of the historic Charles River, then through the heavy flow of traffic on Storrow Dr. on the Chuck's other side, so that by the time the signal laps at upper Brighton and Enfield you need almost surveillance-grade antennation to filter it in out of the EM-miasma of cellular and interconsole phone transmissions and TP's EM-auras that crowd the FM fringes from every side. Unless, that is, your tuner is lucky enough to be located at the apex of a tall and more or less denuded hill, in Enfield, in which case you find yourself right in YYY's centrifugal line of fire (184-85).

Wallace refers to the hill and the river to locate the moral standing of the characters in a structure that recalls Dante's presentation of *Inferno*. The connection between the neighboring institutions, E.T.A. and Ennet House, is part of the reverse perspective that develops based on the morals of Wallace's characters and mirrors Dante's use of shifting topography. Hal seeks help at Ennet House, becoming a lost soul and admitting to his addiction. His arrival marks the point in the narrative when his morality comes into question based on his association with a life of privilege that emanates from the top of the hill in the narrative. He is judged based on the tenets of AA not only because of his addiction, but also because they are what serve as the moral system of the work. The description of Hal's visit to Ennet House illustrates how class distinctions that are apparent in Wallace's narrative place and are relevant to the reader's reality do not serve as the basis for moral judgment in the narrative space.

Hal's brief visit is described as inspired by the impressions of a resident of the half-way house who emerges as morally superior to Hal during her description of his presence in Ennet House. Johnette, whose voice is utilized in the narration of the section, establishes

from the start that “there was no way [Hal] was police or court personnel,” (Wallace 786) and she does not regard him as an authority. Her reaction to him is one that is based on her assumptions of his judgment of her, which she assumes to be dependent on class. She is neither impressed nor threatened by him:

Johnette gave her face the blandly hostile expression she wore around upscale boys with no tats and all their teeth that outside of NA wouldn't have interest in her or might view her lack of front teeth and nose-pin as evidence of they were like better than her and like that, somehow (786-87).

Her feelings of class distinction are tempered, however, by the essential connection she has to the teenager based on drug use. The description of Hal continues, explaining that “His talk had a burbly, oversalivated quality Johnette know all too wicked well, the quality of somebody who'd just lately put down the pipe and/or the bong” (787). Johnette assumes the moral high ground, and Wallace privileges her as a more competent person through the ideals of AA. The final impression of Hal in this narrative space that is so foreign to him defines him as the type of person who “knew how to long-divide and say *whom* but didn't even know how to look up shit in the Yellow Pages” (787). Here Wallace allows his character's voice to guide the narration, to pass judgment on Hal, and to determine that class privilege is far less important than street savvy. Hal's visit to Ennet House appears well before Don Gately's heroic defense of the residents, but it is connected to that scene by narrative place, reminding the reader that a sense of narrative completion depends on bringing these two characters together. Thus denying this completion in logical order is one Wallace's methods of challenging his reader.

Though class serves as a clear distinction between Hal and Gately, they do have a relationship related to drug use. Wallace does not seek to establish a distinct and firm moral hierarchy. He complicates any moral judgment the reader might develop with varying

viewpoints on seduction. Hal is clearly opposed to Orin's Speedy Seduction Strategies, but Gately struggles with his feelings and desire for Joelle. He is able to solve his dilemma, however, with an AA rule that precludes any romantic relationship between Gately and Joelle based on which Step each has achieved. When Gately thinks about his desire for Joelle, the strict morality he follows because of AA takes over his thoughts:

This last fantasy makes him ashamed, it's so cowardly. And even contemplating a romantic thing with a clueless newcomer is shameful. In Boston AA, newcomer-seducing is called 13th-Stepping and is regarded as the province of true bottom-feeders. It's predation. Newcomers come in so whacked out, clueless and scared, their nervous systems still on the outside of their bodies and throbbing from detox, and so desperate to escape their own interior, to lay responsibility for themselves at the feet of something as seductive and consuming as their former friend the Substance. To avoid the mirror AA hauls out in front of them. To avoid acknowledging their old dear friend the Substance's betrayal, and grieving it. Plus let's not even mention the mirror-and-vulnerability issues of a newcomer that has to wear a U.H.I.D veil. One of Boston AA's stronger suggestions is that newcomers avoid all romantic relationships for at least a year. So somebody with some sober time predated and trying to seduce a newcomer is almost tantamount to rape, is the Boston consensus. Not that it isn't done. But the ones that do it never have the kind of sobriety anybody else respects or wants themselves. A 13th-Stepper is still running from the mirror himself (863).

The most important distinction between Hal and Gately, though, is the difference in their dedication to the recovery from addiction. Hal slowly loses control of his rules about his drug use as he is "struggling with a strong desire to get high again for the second time since breakfast v. a strong distaste about smoking dope with/in front of all these others" (Wallace 329). His relationship with drug use eventually becomes so extreme that he is unable to control his own muscles. Gately, on the other hand, refuses narcotic pain killers even after he suffers several severe injuries during his attempt to defend Ennet House. Gately's dedication to resisting the drugs offered to him is what Wallace privileges at the end of his narrative because it is the commitment to truth and the rejection of artifice.

Wallace contrasts his two main characters through his use of narrative place that reflects Dante's construction of an afterlife. The moral judgments that Wallace includes in his narrative are based on the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous instead of a stable allegorical system. The two main characters of *Infinite Jest* represent the process of recovery from addiction that Wallace uses as the informing force in his characters' lives, but his use is ironic in some aspects because he develops this theme while he works to seduce his reader with an addiction to his own novel.

Conclusion

Dante's influence on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is most clear in the allusion Wallace places in an extratextual sign, endnote 324. This is the point in the narrative at which Wallace obviously incorporates an aspect of the *Commedia* in his work and it is at this moment that Wallace's ironic use of Dante's stable allegory comes into focus. Wallace uses his character Pemulis to express trust in mathematics as a fixed truth that Wallace later denies. Wallace's reinterpretation of Dante's stable allegory allows *Infinite Jest* to challenge the reader with unstable irony. Wallace's use of Dante's *Divina Commedia* does, however, emphasize the fact that of these narratives are encyclopedic works that strive to represent a cultural and a historical moment within a fictional framework that includes symbols of infinity to expand the bounds of these texts.

Wallace's use of the lemniscate as a recurring symbol serves as a visual representation of the structure of the narrative, which is infinite but bounded. Dante's use of the empyrean also introduces infinity while simultaneously limiting the space. Both authors use symbols of infinity to create fictional worlds that in some way represent the reader's reality, though Wallace is much more skeptical of shared truth than Dante, who develops his allegory knowing that his reader has the tools to decipher it.

Beyond complicating the interpretive work, Wallace requires that the reader engage with his narrative in a way that breaks with the reader's expectations. The material in the

endnotes demands the reader's careful interpretation and dedication to connecting points from various, disparate narrative lines. The structure of the work defies the reader's assumptions of how to read a text. The self-referential endnotes and the physical separation of sections of the plot provide the reader with more than one option of how to follow the plot. There is a ludic quality to Wallace's narrative structure that brings into question whether it is the reader or Wallace himself who is controlling the narrative.

Wallace's play with the structure also expands it through gestures towards infinite narrative possibilities that unfold from the disparate narrative lines. He implies that there is the opportunity for his narrative space to continue beyond the boundaries imposed on the pages of his book, though, Wallace recognizes that the fictional world cannot unfold from itself without the work of the author. His solution is to create a work that hints at expansion, but is a closed system that entirely accounts for itself through its circular structure.

The circular structure that bounds the text depends on embedding the narrative's ending in the beginning section. This is an approach that Wallace borrows from Dante. Using this technique allows Wallace to draw his reader into a relationship with his text that cannot be fulfilling in any one reading that follows the narrative from the first page to the last one. The theme of addiction in the work applies not only to the characters but also underscores what Wallace is doing to the reader, who is searching for a sense of narrative completion in each reading and continually returning to the beginning of the work.

Dante's work, however, provides an initial sense of linearity as it creates a two-fold structure that develops a relationship with the reader on a first reading that seems to allow for augmented understanding with the help of Dante Poet. Eventually, however, the narrative structure reveals that the reader must follow through with a second reading to fully interpret

the intentions of both Dante Pilgrim and Dante Poet because of the interference between these two levels of narrative.

Dante encourages his reader to interpret his allegorical text and the rereading enhances the allegorical reading. Wallace's intention is opposite, however, as he addicts his reader to his narrative only to provide ironic representations of allegorical meaning in the style of Dante. The gamesmanship that is an inherent part of Wallace's narrative structure also extends to the issue of meaning.

Because of his own ludic style, Wallace continually rewards his characters who are untrustworthy of artifice. Pemulis's trust in mathematics eventually fails him, but Wallace does privilege him because it is mathematics and not artifice that has taken him in. Likewise, Don Gately is able to separate the real from the artificial, which leads him to become the hero of the work. Wallace's distrust of artifice also extends to his own work through his ironic representation of Dante's stable allegory. Wallace sets up the framework of the medieval model within his extensive fictional world only to lead his reader to distrust this model.

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