

**“Turning a Man’s Life Right Around”:  
Wallace’s Rehabilitation of Frederick Exley in *IJ***

Among the throng of influences, literary and philosophical, major and minor, patent and hidden, absorbed by *Infinite Jest*, *Ulysses*, along with *Hamlet*, is among the most central. Joyce’s magnum opus serves for Wallace as a model and inspiration not just for particular set-pieces, in the way, say, that DeLillo’s *End Zone* provides the intertext for the Eschaton episode or Pynchon’s “The Courier’s Tragedy” (from *The Crying of Lot 49*) serves as the antecedent of the “Blood Sister” sequence, but for the very gestalt and make-up of Wallace’s novel as a whole. Its encyclopedism, its verbal maximalism, its kaleidoscopic play with narrative techniques – all the elements that give it its burgeoning, prodigious identity derive from its Joycean precedent. So, too, does the dynamic between the novel’s main characters harken back to its predecessor.<sup>1</sup> Both novels follow the paths of two protagonists, one a melancholic authorial surrogate and the other an extroverted Everyman, through their respective fictional worlds; and the opposition between their temperaments becomes the basis of an implicit metafictional argument about the novel’s own condition of possibility. The younger figure needs to attain the broader sensibility – more open, more humane, more resourceful -- exhibited by the older man and so realize the capacities that will allow him to body forth the fictional world that contains them, an achievement to which the existence of the novel in the reader’s hands self-referentially attests.

Of course, Wallace introduces several twists on this correlation. The invocation of the Joycean analog provides a basis of expectation which allows him to throw into relief the distinctive features of his own thematic concerns. So the climactic meeting of the two protagonist towards which Joyce’s novel builds and which Wallace’s reader hopes for is withheld; or rather, it has already been hinted at in the course of Hal’s rambling soliloquy in the

novel's opening section set at an unspecified time after the rest of novel's action -- an epilogue given in a flashback in a prolog that takes place after the events to be narrated in the novel -- when he fleetingly alludes to their meeting, along with the Canadian John Wayne, at the grave of Hal's father. That this meeting restages the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, from which the novel derives its very title, while the grave is that of James Orin Incandenza, or JOI, the promethean auteur who embodies the novel's parody/homage to Joyce, suggests the thoroughness with which *Ulysses* and *Hamlet* are entwined in Wallace's novel.

For all that in his portrayal of Gately Wallace carries out an ambitious, audacious reworking of Joyce, that portrayal, as I will demonstrate in what follows, draws upon yet another intertext: *A Fan's Notes* by Frederick Exley. The largely forgotten Exley might on the face of it seem like an unlikely author for Wallace to pair with Joyce in the creation of a character so important to his project.<sup>2</sup> Yet Wallace's use of Exley in the fashioning of his Joycean Everyman is not only an example of his procedure, a fundamental imperative of Wallace's poetics, of combining and layering his intertexts, but also of the radical conception of intertextuality in which he imitated not only Joyce's work, but the very process, the working method, by which Joyce brought that work into being.<sup>3</sup> Just as Joyce based the portrayal of Bloom on his friend, the Italian novelist, Italo Svevo, author of the seminal modernist work, *The Conscience of Zeno*, Wallace, following the same path, draws on the biographical details of a contemporary novelist for his portrayal of Gately.\* The big difference is that whereas Joyce drew upon direct knowledge of his actual friend to form his fictional character, there is no evidence that Wallace knew or had any dealings with the flesh-and-blood Exley, who died of alcoholism in 1991,

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\* Both Joyce and Svevo were working on their respective novels in Trieste during the war; *Ulysses* appeared in 1922, *The Conscience of Zeno*, with Joyce's help, in 1923.

around the time Wallace began writing *IJ*. What Wallace has to go on is Exley's text, whose values he will systematically reverse, turning what was a biographical relationship between Joyce and Svevo into a purely textual one. For Wallace the text of Joyce he rewrites is expanded to include not just the words on the pages of *Ulysses*, but also an empirical aspect of Joyce's creative process. For Wallace, what we know of "Exley" is another text, which happens to have been written by Exley himself. So Gately is based both on the character, Bloom, who was based on the real Svevo, and on a revision, a correction – quite harsh, it will emerge – of the character Exley as represented by the historical Exley in his fictionalized autobiography. As Svevo is to Bloom, Exley is to Gately.

But as I will demonstrate Wallace does not just allude to or invoke Exley's novel in the Gately sections and elsewhere in *IJ* in a general way. His approach is pointedly deconstructive, and reconstructive. He seizes upon certain elements of Exley's novel -- details, motifs, scenes, and words -- and literally rewrites them – or does so in a manner closer to "literal" than we usually mean when we speak of "rewriting" -- in accordance with the argument of his own novel. In the process, Exley's novel is absorbed into *IJ* and as it were reversed, a reversal that is even encapsulated in the two figures' names: the hospitable "Gate" connotes openness and movement into, while the bristly "Ex," fortuitously for Wallace's purposes, connotes departure and movement away from. As an examination of the reoriented presence of *A Fan's Notes* in *IJ* will make apparent, Wallace's intertextual practice is not simply more extensive than what we typically imagine intertextuality to consist of, it is also more intensive. In his refashioning of Exley's novel, he takes the truism of literary criticism that all texts are necessarily revisions of previous texts to a new extreme of microscopic correction of the antecedent work, as if he is bent on showing just what it means to take the idea of "revision" seriously and practice it rigorously.

The details that serve to pin Gately's story to Exley's provide the basis for a point-for-point remaking of Exley, a turnaround that is at once a rewriting and a reeducation. Recovery becomes a metafictional trope: not only does *IJ* depict Gately's process of recovery within the text, but it recovers Exley's text, in the sense both of reviving it and redeeming it.

Like just about every other element of the hyperbolic poetics of *IJ*, then, revision is taken to a new order of magnitude. Wallace is in effect revising the idea of revision itself, practicing it on a scale and with a deliberateness that may well be unprecedented, since, as is becoming more and more apparent, all of his fictions interweave close rewritings of multiple sources. In his recent book, *Global Wallace*, Lucas Thompson has formulated this as a general principle of Wallace's poetics, noting that "Wallace's texts are innovative in their complex amalgamation of diverse philosophical, cultural, and literary influences" (85). Moreover, Thompson sees this as a divergence from the thought of another Bloom – Harold – whose theory of the anxiety of influence was the dominant model of intertextual revision during the heyday of critical theory that coincided with Wallace's formation as a fiction-writer. Contrasting the multiplicity of Wallace's influences with the simplicity of Bloom's theory that emphasizes the writer's struggle to define himself against his chief influence, Thompson argues "Bloom's conception of influence... cannot properly account for the presence of multiple and overlapping artistic influences" (85).<sup>4</sup> The sheer plethora of influences Wallace patently incorporates into his works swamps Bloom's emphasis on a decisive struggle between a writer and a single major precursor, making it impossible to assign priority.

Yet Wallace does not merely bypass Bloom's theory and seek to replace it with a better one. As he told David Lipsky, "I believe in Harold Bloom's theory of misprision" (127) and from early on critics have felt a heightened case of the anxiety of influence in his work. Charles

Harris has observed, apropos of Wallace's response to the works of John Barth, that his fiction engages in "not only misprision... but a self-aware misprision, a knowing enactment of the anxiety of influence (1, abstract)." Marshall Boswell, also writing of Wallace's relation to Barth, has remarked that Wallace proceeds "in deliberate accordance with Bloom's famous theory of artistic influence as outlined in *The Anxiety of Influence*" (103).<sup>5</sup> What is crucial here is the quality of deliberateness the critics have detected, which is to say that Wallace creates a textual environment in which it is understood that the intricate versions of revision he offers are to be read with Bloom's theory as a reference point. By rewriting his intertexts so overtly, Wallace appears to be taking aim at the Freudian underpinnings of Bloom's theory, which requires a certain measure of unconsciousness for influence anxiety to produce the defense mechanisms that are the tropes of a reimagined poetic achievement. In this way, Wallace gives anxiety of influence a meta-level, recursive twist, swerving away from it in just the manner that Bloom's theory predicts a strong artistic imagination must respond to another strong imagination. The foregrounded, exaggerated quality of Wallace's intertextual rewritings act as both homage and parody of Bloom's theory of intertextual rewriting. In his determinedly playful revisions of Bloom's theory of revision we can understand him as conducting a meta-agon with the arch theorist of the literary agon.

This seems particularly true of *IJ* where, as Thompson notes, Wallace refers to Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence with obvious hostility.<sup>6</sup> Yet once Bloom's theory has been so overtly and teasingly invoked, overturning or refuting it cannot be a straightforward matter, since the theory predicts that the sufferer from influence, productively deceiving himself, will deny it. I think that, understanding this, the hyperaware Wallace meant for his outright antagonism to be read as a case of "protesting too much," to use an example of a phrase that has become a cliché,

as Wallace argues in *IJ* on behalf of clichés, precisely because it is so apt. In other words, the specific allusions to Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence that Wallace puts in *IJ*, some of them aggressively mocking, may also be read as symptomatic of the very anxiety they unobtrusively seek to disassemble. They display precisely the kind of denial that Bloom himself typically overrides, discounting a poet's identification of a major influence as a subterfuge hiding the unbearable awareness of the real menace to the poet's claim to originality. Bloom himself, surprisingly or not, in remarks quoted by Thompson, responded in kind: "[Wallace] can't think. He can't write. There is no discernible talent.... Stephen King is Cervantes compared with David Foster Wallace. (43)." Perhaps Bloom really means this. Perhaps he read *IJ*. Perhaps if, as his generalities seem to suggest, he didn't read it, Wallace's apparent hostility to his theory was brought to his attention. But his sweeping judgments ("can't think," "can't write," is as inferior to Stephen King as King is to Cervantes) are so patently and, I would say, uncharacteristically, careless that they raise the possibility that Bloom is playing the same game as Wallace is playing with him, brushing off the challenge from a rival imagination who had dared to throw down the gauntlet to him, in damning terms that his own theory has taught us to suspect as gestures of ego-protection. Wallace's complicated relationship to Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, I would thus argue, may be understood as exhibiting the same pattern as his decidedly vexed relationship with critical theory in general. Throughout his oeuvre an aggravated ambivalence is the affective corollary of the deconstructive bind or, as Wallace names it in his interview with Larry McCaffery, "the postmodern trap," which might be described as the state of being stuck inside of language, or metaphysics, to invoke the Derridean characterization, and having nothing but the very thing that entraps you, language or metaphysics, with which to make the attempt, doomed, of course, to wriggle free (144).

A demonstration of how Wallace invokes and uses Exley's novel in order to define the argument of his own, a close reading of Wallace's close reading/rewriting to which I now turn, will thus serve as a demonstration of the rigor with which Wallace conceived of revision and put that conception into practice. More generally still, Wallace's wrangle with Bloom serves an example of how he does not merely instantiate or dramatize the tenets of theory but sports with them, twists them, leads them into *mise-en-abîmes* and aporias. What else can he do? Since play was a central concept in the post-structuralist imaginary, playing with theory, even to the point of distortion and break-down, is the most apt, and most assertive, response to theory's dicta. Mischievously, Wallace plays with the theory in its own terms, confirming and exploding it at once. The homage is in the parody, which I think in part accounts for the fraught, amplified style of a novel that in its very title bids us to think of its "jest" quantitatively, as being without limit. The exceptional precision with which Wallace gives Exley a spiritual makeover in the figure of Gately is the form that magnification takes on the micro-textual level. At the same time, that revision of Exley is, on a macro- or meta-level, a revision of Bloom's theory of revision.

## II

I begin by noting that *IJ* is seeded with a number of references to *A Fan's Notes* in order to establish that Exley's work had some special pertinence for Wallace. Johnnie Gentle is the sobriquet Exley sarcastically bestows on the hero of a soap opera who he wishes would rise "suddenly up out of the perpetual lethargy of his saint-like patience and [smack the heroine] right on her nose" (200). In *IJ*, Wallace gives the name Johnnie Gentle for the former crooner turned president of The Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N. In *A Fan's Notes*, "The

U.S.S. Deborah” is the cruel name Exley gives to the large wife of the mysterious Mr. Blue. In *IJ* a variant of that name, “The U.S.S. Millicent Kent,” is applied by the kids at the E.T.A Tennis Academy to a stout female classmate. Exley tells us that his brother-in-law, Bumpy, shoots cats for sport during Sunday joy rides; the seedy villain in *IJ*, Randy Lenz, slays cats (and dogs) as a way of relieving psychic pressure, while the name Lenz gives to his penis, “the frightful hog,” is taken from *Pages from a Cold Island*, the sequel to *A Fan’s Notes*. In Exley’s novel, when the patients first come to the mental hospital they stay in a reception building at the top of a hill and then, their initial evaluations complete, they go “*down the hill* to be cured” (75, emphasis in the original). In *IJ* there is a similar opposition between the Enfield Tennis Academy on top of the hill, where privileged kids train to be tennis pros, and the Ennett Drug and Alcohol Recovery House at the bottom, where bedraggled souls hang out to dry. In both cases the allegorical implication is that the city on the hill is the microcosm of an America whose competitive rigors render its citizens fit only for the rehabilitation facility down below.

More specifically pertaining to Gately are incidents which Wallace takes from Exley’s life story. In the central chapter entitled, “Journey on a Davenport,” Exley admits that after his many failures out in the world he returned to his mother’s couch, bearing “in my heart murder, utter, brutal, and conscienceless murder” (210). During his long confinement to a hospital bed, the supine Gately takes a similar journey, examining his life and, now in his painfully growing clarity, remembering that he had killed a man in the course of his career as a drug addict. Evidently Wallace did not just read Exley’s works, but had learned something of his life from other sources, for he includes an important detail that Exley omits from his novel but that is reported by his biographer, Jonathan Yardley: just before graduating from high school, Exley was in a car accident and suffered an injury to his right shoulder, which is but which is



significant because it kept him both out of the army and off the gridiron (Yardley 52-3).<sup>7</sup>

Wallace's constructs a parallel by having Gately, in what is arguably *IJ*'s biggest turning point, receive a gunshot wound in the right shoulder. Both men spend long stretches in a hospital, Exley for his alcoholism, Gately for the wound in his shoulder, and both are embarrassed by having to expose their buttocks to a female nurse, Gately when he requires the assistance of an attractive nurse to move his bowels, Exley when in the course of treatment for his alcoholism receives an insulin shot: "each day I rolled over in bed, turned the cheeks of my ass to the ceiling, and received my injection" (82). Finally, Exley dubs his brief stint working with the quirky Mr. Blue, a canvasser for aluminum siding, "a shady vocation." In the context of the other clues Wallace has strewn throughout his novel, Gately's vocation when we first meet him, burglary, may be read as a literalization of this characterization.

These examples should make it clear that *IJ* is interwoven with details and motifs from *A Fan's Notes*. But why, exactly, in a novel that brashly flaunts its concern to take on and synthesize the legacy of *Hamlet*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Ulysses*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*, among other monuments of the canon, does Wallace knit so many details from a relatively minor work into his ambitious project? Why, in particular, does he draw parallels between his protagonist, Gately, and a forgotten novelist? The answer begins to emerge when we consider Wallace's employment of another element that is more than just a stray detail. Throughout *A Fan's Notes* Exley uses the adjective "jolly" in sarcastic deprecation so often that it becomes a signature verbal tick. Here are some examples from among the many with which Exley litters his pages:

... it never occurred to [my mother] that to an adult or jaded mentality such items [as appeared regularly on the back page of the *Watertown Daily Times*] might be viewed with tolerant or jolly sympathy. (31)

With my father play-acting the amused and tolerant tutor in a world of buffoons and in a jolly, whimsical style preceding her into the front seat of the Model A Ford roadster.... (180-1)

After Harold's script had been used and found jolly by the company's executives... (215)

In high school we had a math teacher, a great wide, jolly soul under whose thunderous stride the creaky halls had trembled ominously... (278)

Another reason for my jolliness was a fantasy I had been indulging inspired by the U.S.S. Deborah's library, the volumes of which filled a small, white-enameled bookcase directly facing me... (282)

This was a piece of jolly news which Big Red met by disappearing... (352)  
Mixing the dietary with the simplistic mysticism of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, she told me that it was his belief that if a man saw himself in one way, trim or triumphant or jolly, long enough and hard enough, he became that vision of himself. (369)

Exley employs "jolly" as a loose, ironic intensifier; the word signals he is having fun at the expense of whoever or whatever he applies it to.

In *IJ* the word "jolly" is associated with Gately three times in the section that introduces him. The section's first paragraph shows Gately in the process of robbing a house to get money for drugs, and concludes with the observation that this thief "was, at his professional zenith, smart, sneaky, quiet, possessed of good taste and reliable transportation – with a kind of ferocious jolliness in his attitude toward his livelihood." Immediately following this, at the beginning of the next paragraph, is something of a recapitulation, "as an active drug addict, Gately was distinguished by his ferocious and jolly élan" (55). Like everything else in Wallace's oeuvre, this conspicuous repetition serves a purpose that is at least dual. It establishes a narrative voice with an imperfect command of the language, in imitation of the manner of somebody who,

struck by the aptness of a word he has just used, repeats it. Further, the speaker is a jaunty persona drawn from the subculture to which Gately belongs at this point in his life. The attributes the narrator admiringly lists, “sneaky, quiet, possessed of good taste and reliable transportation,” are all qualities that make for a good thief. The tone, eager, amused, colloquial, safely synoptic, and, above all, companionable, comes as a relief for the reader after the whirlwind of the sections that precede it in the novel, all of which starkly immerse the reader in this or that character’s hectic experience.

The tone of the narrative voice induces us to sympathize with Gately from the moment we meet him, even though he is engaged in criminal activity. The word “jolly” lets us know that a certain levity will attend the sections that feature this character, and that his escapades are to be taken as good fun. Yet at the same time something is awry. The narrator insists too much: first Gately exhibits “a kind of ferocious jolliness in his attitude,” and then if this weren’t awkward enough, in the reformulation the attitude is named as “*élan*,” a word never that has never been sufficiently domesticated in English not to strike a note of pretentiousness. Now it is that *élan* which, in the narrator’s reformulation, is “ferocious” and “jolly.” The suggestion is that Gately, too, is forcing it, trying a bit too hard to maintain his “jolly” attitude. Later in the novel the recurrent motif of the smiley face becomes a rather sinister emblem of apparent fun behind which lurks a grimace of pain.<sup>8</sup> Still further on the word pops up yet again, when we read that Gately “whistled a jolly tune” while tying up a man whose house he has broken into, stock behavior of one who wants to pretend (but to whom, if not himself?) that he isn’t bothered by what he is doing. Again, the irony in this third instance of the word “jolly” is compound. While it is the sign of the good cheer Gately affects as he goes about his business as a burglar, it is also becomes the focal point of a dramatic irony at Gately’s expense, since by tying up and gagging a

man with a bad cold, he is inadvertently committing the crime that will land him in deep trouble, and not incidentally, though the reader can't know it yet, setting in motion one of the novel's major plot trajectories. Whistling a "jolly tune" all the while, Gately is whistling in the dark of his own obliviousness, as dire as it is droll. His jolly mask is askew.

Yet as mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the structure of *IJ* also slots Gately into the role played by Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. Before moving to a discussion of the thematic pertinences of *A Fan's Notes* to *IJ*, it is necessary for a fuller appreciation of the complexity of Wallace's intertextual procedure to briefly consider how his portrayal of Gately amalgamates its two different sources right from the start. Thus, even as the repetitions of "jolly" in the opening Gately section serve to tie him to Exley, the slack, chatty manner of the narrative voice also links him with his general prototype, Leopold Bloom, by recalling the cliché-bloated Eumaeus chapter of *Ulysses*, the one in which, as Hugh Kenner's observed, Bloom "is written about as he would choose," resulting in "a contrived stylistic disaster" (35). Here, too, the similarities between Wallace's text and that of his predecessor are quite specific, too much so to be coincidental. The first sentence about Gately introduces him as "a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict (favoring Demerol and Talwin) and a more or less professional burglar...." and then said to be "a gifted burglar, when he burgled..." The redundancy of these lines matches the redundancy of the description of Leopold Bloom's actions in the opening paragraph of Eumaeus: "Mr. Bloom, who was anything but a professional whistler, endeavored to hail [a cab] by emitting a kind of whistle, holding his arms arched over his head, twice..." In both cases, the hero is assigned to a hypothetical profession (burglary, whistling) and then the name of that "profession" is, in ostentatious violation of the norms of literary economy, repeated. Wallace even makes a show of the repetition, by doing it twice ("a

gifted burglar, when he burgled”), while Joyce has his narrator, with a kind of bumptious exactitude, call attention to the inelegant doubling by identifying it with the adverb, “twice.” Awkwardly stranded at the end of the sentence, the misplaced word conveys the ingenuousness of one who, aware of having uttered a redundancy, makes matters worse by trying to cover it up.

That Wallace’s presentation of Gately alludes to the “Eumaeus” section of *Ulysses*, a vast, amusing tissue of clichés, is perfectly apt given *IJ*’s programmatic challenge to our usual impatience with cliché. For Joyce cliché is simply what most of us have been conditioned to regard it as: tired language that may be an object of amusement. But for Wallace a cliché is a truth that has been obtunded by familiarity and something to be made fun of only at the cost of avoidance of the truth it harbors. It is Gately himself to whom Wallace gives the insight that “the vapider the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers (446).”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the Gately sections of *IJ* cliché is unleashed as a source of vitality, a device used by the jovial narrator to sociably include the reader in a communal vision. Compounding his clichés, Wallace’s narrator even achieves a charming expressivity. So the first Gately section concludes with a burst of clichés: “Don Gately... was, through no will to energy-consuming violence on his part, in the sort of a hell of a deep-shit mess that can turn a man’s life right around” (60). The conflation of the several trite figures of speech (“hell of a,” “deep-shit mess,” and “turn a man’s life right around”) offers a concentrated, expressive summation of Gately’s plight, conveyed in a tone of amused sympathy that neatly reverses the spirit of the ironic mockery that characterizes Joyce’s sport with his hero Leopold Bloom in the Eumaeus chapter. Behind the facile phrase, “turn a man’s life right around,” Wallace will show, lies the whole narrative arc of Gately’s arduous effort to reform himself. At the same time what better trope for troping could there be than “turning something around” or a “turnaround,” a name that brings the

etymological meaning of “trope,” a turning in Greek, to the fore: telling the story of Gately’s turnaround, Wallace is turning around Exley by turning around Exley’s novel.

### III

For the rest of this essay I concentrate on Wallace’s thematic reformation of Exley. *IJ*’s textual echoes of *Ulysses*, which I suspect are abundant, would be another, bigger project. The basis of that reformation, is provided by the coincidence of themes between the two works. Indeed, the constellation of topics treated in Exley’s novel -- addiction, sports, education, loneliness, fathers and sons, masculinity, and the difference between being a “player” and being a “fan”— is so nearly identical to the group of major themes in *IJ* that one might be tempted to think that Exley’s largely forgotten confessional novel anticipated the concerns of Wallace’s tour-de-force to an uncanny extent. But this would be an optical illusion resulting from Wallace’s deliberate absorption of Exley’s self-portrayal into his portrayal of Gately. The similarities even extend to the preoccupation with which *IJ* is most closely identified: the pernicious power of entertainment, the destructive lure of what Wallace calls “spectation.” Wallace’s argument, that “entertainment” reduces the viewer to a state of passivity and infantile dependency, is already laid out Exley’s account of his months-long stay on his mother’s couch in a state of regressive torpor and besottedness. Of his days spent watching quiz shows, soap operas, and “jolly comedies that induced no laughter save on that Orwellian laugh track,” he writes:

I watched – but there is no need to enumerate. Not once during those months did there emanate from the screen a genuine idea or emotion, and I came to understand the medium as subversive. In its deceit, its outright lies, its spinelessness, its weak-mindedness, its pointless violence, in the

disgusting personalities it holds up to our youth to emulate, in its endless and groveling deference to our fantasies, television undermines strength of character, saps vigor, and irreparably perverts notions of reality. But it is a tender, loving medium; and when it has done its savage job completely and reduced one to a prattling salivating infant, like a buxom mother it stands always poised to take one back to the shelter of its brown-nippled bosom. Save for football, I no longer watch the tube, and yet my set is always on. In the way one puts a ticking clock in a six-week-old puppy's pillowed box to assure him that Mom is always there, I come in from having one too many beers, flick on the switch, and settle comfortably on the davenport. The drone reassures me that life is there, life is simple, life is unending. (197-8)

Not only is TV for Exley a “mom” with a nourishing bosom, it is on his mother’s couch that he spends his days entranced by it. But what is figurative in *A Fan’s Notes* becomes literal in *IJ*. “IJ,” the fatally seductive “entertainment cartridge” in Wallace’s novel, consists of a mother-figure bending down and offering repeated apologies, with the viewer placed in a position of the infant in a crib blurrily looking up. Joelle van Dyne, who plays the mother in the “IJ” video, explains to Gately in one of his delirious dreams, “the woman who either knowingly or involuntarily kills you is always someone you love, and she’s always your next life’s mother” (850).<sup>10</sup> The figurative death in life that is spectatorship for Exley becomes in Wallace’s novel the actual death induced by watching a lethally seductive film of a consoling mother.

Mostly, however, Wallace absorbs Exley’s text in order to subject it to a drastic, antithetical correction. This is the case with Exley’s hankering after the fame enjoyed by his father, a local sports hero. “Other men might inherit from their fathers a head for figures, a gold pocket watch... or an eternally astonished expression; from mine I acquired this need to have my name whispered in reverential tones” – so Exley on the origins of his lifelong hunger for fame, for the adulation of what he refers to as “The Crowd” (35, 206). By the time he started high school, Fred tells us he felt the burden of being his father’s son to have become intolerable: “At

thirteen I was already having my abilities unfavorably compared with those of my father. Not having the stomach for such witless collations, I had for a long time wanted to quit not only [basketball] but sports entirely” (205). Yet his obsession with football derived from his thwarted identification with his father carries over into his vicarious participation in the exploits of other football heroes. The first of these is Steve Owen, the coach of Exley’s beloved New York Giants. Exley attaches great significance to a meeting between his father and Owen in which the latter insulted his father by laughing off his attempt to arrange a game between his professional team and the local semi-pro squad for which Earl Exley excelled. The son writes, “...my father’s shadow was so imposing that I had scarcely ever, until that moment, had any identity of my own. At the same time I had yearned to emulate and become my father, I had also longed for his destruction. Steve Owen not only gave me identity; he proved to me my father was vulnerable” (56-7). So Exley makes explicit the connection between his own self-realization and his desire for his father’s “destruction,” and the significance of the meeting with Owen is that Owen’s put-down of his father clinches what the son had started to suspect: that in the larger world his father, far from being the deity he appeared to be in Watertown, NY, was small fry. The other football hero who figures prominently in Exley’s cosmos is Frank Gifford, the Giant’s star player and poster boy, with whom Exley maintained a lifelong, ambivalent, identification that began when both were students at USC in the early 50s. In the rhetorical climax of *A Fan’s Notes*, Exley watches a TV screen in which the “broken, blue-and-silver figure” of his hero and nemesis Frank Gifford is borne from the field on a stretcher. That night Exley provokes a fight with two gay men in Greenwich Village and gets badly beaten up (447). The fight, he tells us, is a “lament for a conspiracy... [the] conspiracy against anonymity begun so many seasons before and ended that day” (356). Exley the author thus assigns cathartic value to the fight, for when



Gifford falls, Exley loses even his chance for vicarious fame. He writes solemnly: “I understood, and could not bear to understand, that it was my destiny – unlike that of my father, whose fate it was to hear the roar of the crowd – to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan” (357).

In *IJ*, the theme of competitive identification with the father in the realm of sports is partly displaced onto the four generations of Incandenzas, beginning with the great grandfather who, while watching his son play tennis concedes that he is good but predicts, “He’ll *Never Be Great*,” a judgment that echoes like a curse down each successive generation of the family (166, emphasis in the original). But Gately, too, is haunted by thwarted athletic promise. This is poignantly dramatized in a crucial scene that Wallace draws almost point for point from the climax of Exley’s novel. In Wallace’s rewriting of this turning point, Gately reaches an abject recognition similar to Exley’s: that he is always only going to be a spectator rather than the participant he wanted to be (and, according to the novel, could have been), an insight which accelerates his downward trajectory. Lying in his hospital bed during the novel’s final stretch he remembers how one afternoon he was “laminating some false MA drivers licenses rush-ordered by rich Philips Andover Academy kids” and “watching good old Boston U. play Clemson in the Ken-L-Ration-Magnavox-Kemper-Insurance Forsythia Bowl,” with bright winter sunlight streaming in through the window and making “the players look bleached and ghostly.”

The narrative continues:

The B.U. punter was a hometown Boston kid the announcers kept inserting was a walk-on and an inspirational story that had never played a major sport until college and now was already one of the finest punt-specialists in N.C.A.A history, and had the potential to be a lock for a pretty much limitless pro ball career if he bore down and kept his eye on the carrot. The B.U punter was two years younger than Don Gately. Gately’s big digits could barely fit around the irons EZ-grip handle, and stooping over the

ironing board made the small of his back ache, and he hadn't eaten anything except deep-fried stuff out of shiny plastic packaging for like a week, and the stink of the plastic laminates under the iron stunk wicked bad, and his big square face sagged lower and lower as he stared at the punter's ghostly digital image until he found himself starting to cry like a babe. It came out of emotional nowhere all of a sudden, and he found himself blubbering at the loss of organized ball, his one gift and other love, his own stupidity and lack of discipline, that blasted cocksucking *Ethan From*,<sup>11</sup> his Mom's Sir Osis and vegetabilization and his failure after four years ever yet to visit, feeling suddenly lower than bottom-feeder-shit.... It was two days later he got pinched for assaulting one bouncer with the unconscious body of another bouncer, in Danvers MA, and three months after that that he went to Billerica Minimum (915-6).

All of the thematic elements that swirl throughout Exley's book and coalesce in its climax are present here, deftly reconfigured to fit with the requirements of Wallace's own story: while watching football Gately has the sad realization that he could be playing pro ball, too, if he had not succumbed to his "other love," narcotics, which habit he is even at the moment enslaved to, engaged as he is in one of the illicit activities that supports it. Indeed, applying the laminate to the fake IDs, Gately becomes, in one of Wallace's literalizations of abstract meanings with which *IJ* is rife, an actual "ironist." To recall the terms of the discussion at the end of the "Television" essay, in portraying this scene of Gately's anguish, Wallace goes beyond merely risking "the parody of the gifted ironist." He preemptively defangs irony by turning the dread ironist into a figure who merely irons for fraudulent purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the image on the screen brings home to the disadvantaged Gately the consequences of his having betrayed his athletic gift: his failure to be the professional ballplayer he could have been, his exclusion from the glorious life of being watched, lauded, and acclaimed instead of watching the TV while serving rich boys in their pursuit of their own jolly highs. All this makes him "cry like a babe," thus returning him to the state of infancy that overtakes the TV

viewer in Exley's indictment, and providing a figurative equivalent of the actual infantilization that occurs in *IJ* when one watches the "IJ" video. The misery and frustration that accompany this realization then lead to a violent eruption in which Gately, like Exley, gets in an ugly fight with two men, and which in turn lands Gately in an institution, in this case a prison, in much the way Exley's own addiction to his "other love" was at the root of his own failure to be something other than a mere "fan" and led him to his own institutionalization in a mental hospital.

But Wallace's reworking of Exley's material contains a still deeper critique, reminding the reader, through an intricate orchestration of subtexts, that Exley's hunger for fame was sentimental and spurious in the first place. That it is a ghostly image that Gately sees on the screen, and not the "blue and silver body" that Exley describes, reminds us that there is something inherently illusory about this sort of identification with the images on the TV screen in the first place. And as it happens, the identity of the BU punter is well known to the reader of Wallace's novel as none other than Orin Incandenza and, contrary to the announcers' claptrap, his is anything but "an inspirational story." Rather, he is an unreconstructed cad, engaged throughout the novel in an "unlimited" series of cynical seductions of women in a compulsive, doomed attempt to reunite with his own mother. So the fame that eluded Exley and that Gately failed to pursue is a chimera in the first place, a point reinforced by the seemingly incidental mention of "carrot" in the above passage. Wallace's novel is fiercely skeptical of dangled "carrots" and the kind of Pavlovian motivational mechanics they imply. Because a carrot is the vegetable the young Gately would fish out of his mother's vodka for nourishment after she passed out, or was beaten unconscious by her boyfriend the M.P., his "carrots" were linked to an addictive substance from the beginning. In Orin's case the "carrot" that enticed him into football was Joelle van Dyne, whom he dubs "the PGoat," an acronym for "Prettiest Girl of All Time," a

mortally pretty cheerleader whom men are afraid to approach. Joelle's stage name is Madame Psychosis, which is also the street name of the incredibly potent hallucinogenic substance that several of the novel's characters in Wallace's novel are trying to score, and, as has already been mentioned, she stars as the mother in the balefully seductive "IJ" video, so that in effect she is the illusory object par excellence of all the male characters' desire in both literal and symbolic senses, the ultimate high that one pursues at the peril of self-destruction. Wallace's novel constructs an elaborate allegory, seamlessly interwoven into his story, to rebuke Exley's uncritical and debilitating worship of fame: that Gately identifies with Orin who chased after the reward that is also known as Madame Psychosis who in her role in the "IJ" video is the nourishing mother "who always slays you," exposes the ruinous vanity at the heart of Exley's motivational system.

Nor does Exley's truculent individualism, his outsized contempt for conventional society, however much it might have been the source of his fictional memoir's appeal, escape Wallace's revisionary working-over. The contemptuous attitude Exley exhibits towards rehabilitation and the AA meetings he attends during his first stay in the mental institution is drastically "turned around" in *IJ*. Here is Exley's description of his participation in the "Avalon Valley Chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous, to which all patients whose trouble was compounded by booze, or whose trouble had become booze... were required to go":

I always took a table with two skeptics; we called it "Cynics Circle." Snow White was, of course, one of the men. He wasn't an alcoholic; his problem was that he was tired, and he came to these meeting for laughs. The other man was Bronislaw.... He came to the meetings for free coffee and doughnuts.... The three of us had a pact, governed by signals – pinching one another, agreeing to step fiercely on each other's toes when we felt riotous laughter welling up within us. It was not that any of us doubted the efficacy of group therapy for alcoholics (it is probably the only treatment),

but, oh, dear heart, alcoholics in the loony bin! Their “falls” had been from dizzying, nearly invisible heights (110-11).

It is likely that most readers of *A Fan's Notes* simply cruise along with the high good “jolly” fun of Exley’s satiric tone here, although in any case the humor is more asserted than achieved. Read through *IJ*, however, the passage seems merely sad as it veers towards openness, conceding that group therapy for alcoholics probably works, only to take refuge in a show of ironic mirth. Together with his two buddies, Exley remains enclosed in an easy fellowship of cynicism and mockery, a hostility which effectively shields him from any helpful insight into his condition, or, as the recovering addicts phrase it, escape from the cage of his disease (355, 888).<sup>13</sup> It is true that in the character of Paddy the Duke, who remains aloof from the other patients and tells Exley “you think your duty is to fox everybody, instead of what it should be: to find out what you’re doing here,” Exley acknowledges the limitations of his cynical swagger (113). But in actual fact he was to remain an alcoholic for the rest of his booze-abbreviated life.

Near the outset of his description of his first stay in the mental hospital, Exley takes the line that what society, including the doctors in the hospital, deems normal and healthy only serves to promote a conformism to the broadly shared and narrowly defined ideals of the American Way of Life. He plays along with the doctors’ expectations the sooner to win his release, a policy which he triumphantly formulates as “Exley’s Law of Institutional Survival: [leave] the mind as malleable as mush and [let] them impose any inanities upon it they wished. It had worked for me once. I was sure it would again” (76). One would think this is a rather common ploy hit upon by people in such straits, and although it certainly may have been justified in the context of the 1950s psychiatric establishment, it leaves him holed up in his private amusement and ironic debunking.

Gately, too, is “normally a gifted cynic, with a keen bullshit-antenna,” and yet he has also reached such a nadir of desperation – Wallace reports that the Boston-area AA chapters speak of “The Gift of Desperation” – that, in a 180° reversal of the attitude brandished by Exley, he tries to be open to the possibility that the AA regimen might actually help him (349). Thus, whereas Exley regards the institutional nostrums as “mush” and “inaneities,” which he only pretends to accept while inwardly resisting, and the testimonials of the other AA members as occasions for a kind of forced hilarity, the first and foremost lesson Gately learns is the limitations of such cynicism. He perceives, in the meetings of the Boston White Flag group:

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

Exley is a prime exhibit of someone enmeshed in the snare of his own cynical irony and affected sincerity. Wallace's presentation of Gately's disarming perception here reads like a systematic deconstruction of Exley's hardened resistance.

### III

In his only published reference to Exley, Wallace includes him, along with Mailer, Roth, Updike, and Bukowski, in the retrograde ranks of “phalocrats” (“Certainly,” 53). Indeed, throughout *A Fan's Notes* Exley sports a misogyny that is both general and blatant. Its worst expression comes in the many passages in which Exley imagines, with all the cynical relish of a pornographer, sex as a sort of punishment, a come-uppance to the woman's pretensions to

dignity.<sup>14</sup> This side of Exley's unregenerate macho persona is preserved in *IJ* in the common idiom, "to X someone," used by the male characters to mean "to have sex with." By now it should be clear that it is no accident that this "X" recalls the abbreviated form of Exley's name, "Ex," with which his friends hail him in *A Fan's Notes*. As masculine slang for sex it is appropriately insensitive: "to X" is to cross out, eliminate, kill, as well as to mark an object. It thus embodies the fierce mixture of contempt, violence, and triumph found in the unreconstructed male attitude towards sex. An "X" is also the mark Gately's stepfather would make in his notebook to keep a tally of his consumption of his Heinekens before beating the little boy's mother, further reinforcing the linkage of sex, addiction, and violence towards women in the masculinist mindset so unabashedly exhibited by Exley. To some extent, Wallace reverses this orientation of Exley's character by endowing Gately with qualities that are conventionally feminine. In his role as counselor in residence at Ennet House, Gately becomes something of a mother hen to the other residents, tirelessly nurturing and protecting them. At the same time, however, some of the unthinking attitude towards sex from his pre-recovery days lingers on in Gately, and right up until one of the novel's dramatic climaxes he imagines engaging in "the old X" with Joelle van Dyne (863). Indeed, the turning point that constitutes that climax will consist in his confronting and rejecting the one-sided assertion the fulfilment of such a desire would represent. In the novel's rich symbolic ecology, Gately's becoming sexually involved with Joelle would be tantamount to re-succumbing to addiction itself.

To understand the complexity of Wallace's revision of Exley's portrayal of gender relations, it is necessary to look briefly at the other side of Exley's misogyny: helpless idealization. Flitting through the pages of *A Fan's Notes* like Babbitt's fairy girl is Exley's dream woman, the comely, educated, compliant "Vassar Blonde," whom the son of locally

celebrated Earl Exley expects the universe to drop in his lap. In the central chapter, “Onhava Regained and Lost Again,” this and other unattainable fantasies coalesce in the person of nineteen-year-old Bunny Sue Allorgee, whom he introduces to the reader with a rhapsodic literary paean, comparing her to “Hudson’s Rima, Spenser’s Una, Humbert Humbert’s Dolly” and “Wordsworth’s Lucy, Tristan’s Iseult, Poe’s Annabel Lee,” yet stressing that this overburdened resumé of archetypes is “very American” (149). Throughout the chapter in which Exley relates his courtship of Bunny Sue, she does not become much more than a mirror for his conventionally masculine expectations, less of a real character than a figment whose allegorical nature is raised to such a power that her very name is an undisguised modification of the word “allegory,” with a juvenile insinuation of “orgy” thrown in. In a way, Exley is self-critically acknowledging that the whole story is a hopeless fantasy, a swindle perpetrated by the American advertising industry on his susceptible psyche. His dream woman’s first initials, “B.S.,” and the chapter’s title’s combined allusion to Milton’s paradise and Nabokov’s imaginary Onhava, a place beyond the borders of the imaginary kingdom of Zembla in *Pale Fire*, reinforce this interpretation. It is, indeed, Nabokov’s presence that hovers over the whole chapter, but more as the author of *Lolita* than of *Pale Fire*. Any uneasiness Exley may have felt by directly associating Bunny Sue with Lolita and thereby placing himself in the role, safely dominant yet repugnant, of the sophisticated predator, Humbert Humbert, is perhaps legible in his sense that the girl’s availability is an “impossible, nearly obscene gift” (149). The suggestion is that this is the form of desire that the youth-obsessed American culture actively promotes. Hence the comparison, elsewhere in the passage in which Exley introduces her, between his Bunny Sue and a charged image of collective desire, a prepubescent model in the Chesterfield coat ad, as well as the implicit references (at one point he dubs “Bunny” “the girl next door”) to Playboy magazine,



another Chicago product, which began publication in 1953, around the time when Exley was allegedly enjoying his fling with his fantasy woman in that same city.

Wallace picks up on Exley's hyperbolic portrayal of the female other, but true to the spirit of excess that reigns in *IJ*, makes it still more hyperbolic. The equivalent of Exley's Bunny Sue in *IJ* is Joelle Van Dyne, the young woman who is at the confluence of all the novel's plotlines and symbolism. Save for the fact that Joelle's first lover is also a football player, Orin Incandenza himself, the similarities between Joelle and Bunny Sue are not biographical -- how could they be, when the latter is so little particularized? What the two female characters share, the dynamic of Exley's text that Wallace seizes upon and transforms, is rather the role they play as protean objects of the masculine imagination, screens upon which the male characters project a whole array of fantasies. Whereas Bunny Sue is made out by Exley to be dauntingly beautiful, Wallace, in keeping with the gigantism of his aesthetic, exaggerates Joelle's beauty still further, making her so forbiddingly gorgeous that she frightens off all potential suitors, inducing in them a kind of paralysis he dubs the Acteon complex, after the hapless mythological lad who accidentally sees the chaste hunter goddess Diana naked and is punished by being pursued and torn apart by her retinue of hounds; and whereas Exley adduces a plethora of literary comparisons to heighten the impression of Bunny's splendor, in the ampler space of Wallace's novel the way in which Joelle serves as the object of a whole bevy of the male characters' projections of fear and desire is not merely invoked but dramatized within a naturalistic psychological milieu.

For where Wallace departs from Exley is that at the same time as he inflates Joelle's symbolic resonance beyond measure, he takes pains to flesh out her character and history. Even as she embodies just about every role the male imagination can think of to foist upon woman,

Joelle also has a reality of her own, which, if it remains somewhat mysterious to the end, is a product of Wallace's taking pains to endow her with a plausible identity, one that is conflicted and opaque, instead of the mere outline of a woman that results from Exley's avoidance of the reality of the other in the case of Bunny Sue. Joelle is femme-fatale à la Pynchon's V, lady-death, Pgoat, Lolita, Iseult, Medusa, etc. Most significantly of all, her stage name is Madame Psychosis, which sounds like metempsychosis, the term woven through *Ulysses* to designate the transmigration of souls and serving as a master trope for the intertextual recycling of literary characters. Given Joelle's vast literary pedigree, which includes Exley's Bunny Sue and her pedigree, Madame Psychosis is thus strikingly apt. Yet at the same time Wallace allows the reader to see that beneath her various allegorical and symbolic roles she is a vulnerable, confused young woman who may have been horribly scarred – it is left ambiguous -- by her jealous mother, has recently tried to kill herself in an attempt to flee from her cocaine addiction, and is now shakily trying to get back on her feet. This dichotomy between overcharged symbolism and empirical personhood can make the reader feel that he himself has treated her unfairly, has not really seen her, which is not the only instance in the novel in which the Wallace implicates the reader's responses as part of his canny interrogation of the persuasive force of fiction. So Wallace's portrayal of Joelle corrects Exley's own ambiguous treatment of Bunny Sue, about whom it remains unclear whether she was merely empty or whether –and this is more likely, and I think Wallace would have agreed that one of the things literature should teach us is that no one is merely empty – her emptiness was the effect of Exley's inability to see in her more than the reflection of his own needs.

By the time, late in Wallace's novel, that Joelle visits Gately in the hospital, the reader is ready for the romantic pay-off. Her visit triggers in Gately a series of erotic fantasies, first about

marrying Joelle, and then, when that “projective mental union... keeps foundering” on the thought of her veil and what it might hide, “he still can’t help envisioning the old X, with Joelle well-veiled and crying out *And Lo!* in that empty compelling way at the moment of orchasm [sic]” (863). This one rapid line, plausible on the level of realistic reportage of a character’s thoughts and yet packed with thematic significance, contains almost the whole of Wallace’s indictment of Exley. As a name for sex within the argot of *IJ*, “X-ing,” as we have seen, epitomizes Exley’s macho arrogance. Moreover, that attitude is now spiced with a measure of lurid pedophilia, as is implied by Gately’s imagining Joelle crying out “*And Lo!*” at the moment of climax, a cry that, on the plane of Wallace’s intricate web of semantic associations, connects Gately’s fantasy to Nabokov’s *Lolita* herself, the prototype of Exley’s amorous target, Bunny Sue. Thus, the object of Gately’s fantasy, or the “subject,” to use the sinister name Orin gives the women he “Xes” in his career as a serial philanderer, is indeed both “empty” and “compelling,” compelling because an empty recipient of the sort of erotic design that Gately is entertaining vis-à-vis Joelle at this very instant. The vanity at the heart of Gately’s desire, already hinted at by the Joycean pun in Gately’s malapropism, “orchasm,” is further hinted at in the next line when he goes on to think, “the closest [he]’d ever come to Xing a celebrity was the ragingly addicted nursing-student with the head-banging loft,” a sentiment that betrays how much of a lure Joelle’s local fame as the radio personality plays into Gately’s interest in her; and thereby expands Wallace’s critique of Exley here to yet another of the components that the latter includes in his encomium to Bunny Sue, her resemblance to the prepubescent model in the coat ad. In turn this fantasy gives way to his vision of “Joelle, hopelessly smitten with the heroic Don

G.,”<sup>†</sup> helping him sneak out of the hospital, “or else selflessly offering to give him her veil and a big dress and let him hold the catheter under the muumuu and sashay right out while she huddles under the covers in impersonation of Gately, romantically endangering her recovery and radio career and legal freedom, all out of a *Liebestod*-type consuming love for Gately” (863). The irony of this last scenario is that, however ridiculous the thought that Joelle sacrifice herself for Gately at this point, in its distorted way it gives expression to the sentimental inner core of his misogyny, switching from his imagining the woman as erotic quarry to imagining himself as the object of her maternal sacrifice and pity.

Yet as the fantasies become progressively more fantastic it becomes apparent that the whole series of them is a carefully orchestrated set-up. Wallace has steered the reader towards wanting this alliance between his two most sympathetic characters only to deliver a stern rebuke. Suddenly Gately pulls up short and his fantasies involving Joelle crumble right before our eyes:

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 13<sup>th</sup>-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 sober time predated and trying to seduce a newcomer is almost tantamount to rape, is the Boston consensus.

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<sup>†</sup> Or “Dong,” to suggest that at this moment he is, as the expression has it, “thinking with his dick.” More generally, the pun reminds the reader of the phallic side of the traditional conception of virile heroism into which Gately would be lapsing were he to thoughtlessly pursue Joelle at this point in their respective recoveries.

After 600 pages or so of build-up the reader gets this anticlimactic renunciation, and it well may be may be the most important, as well as the most hopeful and heroic, moment in the whole vast novel. Gately's getting together with Joelle at this point, however sentimentally satisfying such a union might be for the reader, would constitute another instance of somebody's taking advantage of her, saddling her with his own projection of fantastic need. His renunciation of this temptation is Wallace's most complete reversal of Exley's text – it is an example of what Dr. Jay way back in Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, calls “having the wherewithal to allow [the] Other to be a self,” an act of respect which, paradoxically and hypothetically, establishes Gately as worthy of her (347).

Yet not only would Gately's pairing with Joelle be bad for her, it would also be bad for him. The tableau in the hospital, with Gately unable to speak in the bed with its “crib-like railing” and Joelle hovering over him, her veil aflutter as she speaks, restages the scenario of the fatally alluring mother-lover-death figure of the “IJ” film, so that Gately's union with Joelle would indeed make for an ironic version of a *Liebestod*. Thus, inasmuch as the reader desires the novel *IJ* to end happily with the coming together of these two sympathetic characters, who have been developed to seem like an inevitable match, he is implicated in Wallace's interrogation of the source of such romantic, and Romantic, yearning. The reader's hope for this couple is liable to be so strong that Joelle's showing up at Gately's bedside wearing Ken Erdedy's sweatpants, suggesting that she is possibly already erotically involved with that character, whom Wallace has been careful to render just dislikable enough to seem unworthy of Joelle, becomes an inconvenient piece of information that the reader, like Gately, is apt to register only to ignore. This rebuke delivered to the reader's fond expectation was foreshadowed

early on in the novel when Gately, first taking an interest in the newly admitted girl with the veil, attempts to speak to her at an AA meeting, only to be put off by a largely irrelevant cavil she raises about the grammar of the expression, “there but for the grace of God...” It is then that

[Gately’s] own heart grips him like an infant rattling the bars of his playpen, and he feels a greasy wave of an old and almost unfamiliar panic, and for a second it seems inevitable that at some point in his life he’s going to get high again and be back in the cage all over again, because for a second the blank white veil leveled at him seems a screen on which might well be projected a casual and impressive black and yellow smiley-face, grinning, and he feels all the muscles in his own face loosen and descend kneeward (366-7).

To try to strike up a romance with her now that he is in the hospital would be to succumb to the temptation he is heroically resisting by refusing to take even one drop of the “medically-sanctioned” painkillers being repeatedly offered him to relieve him of the searing pain in his shoulder, the place where, as was mentioned above, Exley himself was injured. Harboring erotic intentions towards Joelle, Gately desires both her and what she represents; or one could say that at this point surrendering to the one pleasure, sex, drugs, or entertainment, would be to succumb to the others, since they are now all aligned and embodied by Joelle, the letters of whose name when rearranged spell “jollee,” which is, surely not accidentally, a phonetic anagram for “jolly,” the signature word of Exley’s text and, in Wallace’s, the verbal sign of the attitudinal screen, the pleasant, smiling mask, that hides the inner pain of one alienated from his true emotions.<sup>15</sup> For Gately to pursue Joelle, and all the false pleasures associated with her, would be to return to his old jolly self, addict, criminal, and ironist, ensnared, like Exley, in self-deluding fantasies.

To combat the seductive power of Exley’s reckless swagger it is not enough for Wallace to dismantle it and show how at bottom it masks a love of death that is at the same time an urge to reunite with the mother. The heroism of Gately’s resistance to the lure of addiction and the

romance of death must be compelling in its own right. Wallace gives Gately enough biographical details from Exley's account of his life to establish a parallel between his fictional character and Exley's own story, while also exploiting the happy accident that the negative connotations of the first syllable of Exley's name are sufficiently established in the language to be easily and tellingly turned around in the name Gately. But what is remarkable, and to my knowledge unprecedented, about Wallace's intervention is its specificity. He enters into Exley's text and meticulously recasts it in order to rehabilitate him as Gately. Where Exley is macho, Gately is sensitive; where Exley is hostile to the idea of recovery, Gately actively seeks it; where Exley is cynical, Gately is ingenuous, without for all that failing to have an appealing savvy; where Exley romanticizes his self-destructive behavior, Gately strives valiantly to overcome his habit and better himself. At the same time, Wallace casts this rectification of Exley's soul as a rewriting of the idea of rewriting, one that critically recasts the Bloomian model along lines of compassion rather than competition. Rewriting becomes rehabilitation, a charitable act of tough love, such as the "crocodiles" in his novel, those "with geologic amounts of sober time in AA," show towards neophytes like Gately (353); or to invoke another formulation from Shakespeare that so truthfully names a phenomenon that it has become something of a cliché, Wallace, in dealing with Exley, must be cruel to be kind. Of course, the Bloomian response would be that Exley is not an influence on Wallace, only a source. The real influences with whom Wallace is wrestling would be Joyce and Pynchon (but notice again, the undecidability that Wallace builds into the text), whose titanic works provide the constitutive modes for Wallace's own gargantuan novel. But even here Wallace's inclusion within his capacious novel of a whole project of textual rescue and rehabilitation complicates the Bloomian paradigm considerably by showing

how artistic creation may derive from profound imperatives of survival of a different sort from those that motivate the bid for poetic immortality.

In an interview, Wallace mentioned that at one point in his life he worked as a counterperson at a health club in Watertown, MA, just outside of Boston (Lipsky, 234). Given that this epoch (the late 80s, early 90s, just before he began writing *IJ*) of Wallace's life was a dark one, in which after publishing his first two books, *The Broom of the System* and *Girl With Curious Hair*, he dropped out of the graduate program in philosophy at Harvard and endured a period, by his own account, of aimlessness and desolation, drinking heavily and even ending up on suicide watch at a mental hospital, he may have been struck by the coincidence that another Watertown was the principal setting for Frederick Exley's chronicle of his own alcoholism and institutionalization. One might conjecture that this little coincidence provided a satisfying link, however tenuous, between his own life and that of the actual writer on whose life he would base, however drastic the revisions, the life of one of the protagonists of the "really American thing" he was going to write, and thus extend the analogy between his masterpiece and *Ulysses*. The difference is that whereas Joyce had befriended Italo Svevo during his years in Trieste, and could use him as a loose model of his modern Jewish Everyman in *Ulysses*, even keeping a picture of Svevo taped above his writing desk (Ellmann, 430), the Exley who plays an indispensable role in the design of *IJ* is less the actual man than the text he authored. This Wallace revises sternly, in effect reversing its valences, its animus, as if he was providing Exley's text with the corrective therapy that deconstructs his defensive machismo in order to reconstruct him as the man he was somewhere, in the midst of all his bluster, yearning to become, one genuinely open, as Gately is, to the possibility of growth and redemption. The implied critique is utter and devastating. The Exley known to us from the pages of *A Fan's Notes* and his other books would probably have



only warded it off with scorn. At the same time, a lifelong seeker of validation, he might have been pleased by the extra fillip of immortality afforded him by Wallace's joining him to the text of his own magnum opus.

Still, there is something poignant about refashioning a dead alcoholic's text to make it display the attitudes its author would have needed to rise above affliction that did him in. Which is why it must finally be remembered that this whole discussion is premised on a prior operation of troping whereby the deceased writers, Joyce, Svevo, Exley, and Wallace himself, no less than fictional characters, Bloom and Gately, are textual effects – figures, or figments, of speech. Yet while Wallace encourages such an unillusioned understanding of his work, it is a testimony to the power of that work that such a recognition is not at odds with its humane persuasion.

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<sup>1</sup> Both of the critics who wrote early books on Wallace, Stephen Burn and Marshall Boswell, register the importance of *Ulysses* for *IJ*, but in only partial and oblique ways. Burn hints at the similarity between the dynamic opposition between the pair of protagonists in each novel, but is mainly interested in how the “mythic frameworks” Joyce superimposes on Stephen and Bloom's wanderings through Dublin are paralleled by the like frameworks that lend mythic resonances to Gately in *IJ* (56). Burn also traces *IJ*'s encyclopedism back to *Ulysses*, and points out the resemblance of James Orin Incandenza, “a tall alcoholic author named Jim” to Joyce, and that Joelle van Dyne's stage name, Madame Psychosis, is a pun on “metempsychosis,” one of the key concepts – indeed, it itself may be understood as a trope for literary influence -- that circulates through the text of *Ulysses* (20, 57). In *UND*, Boswell considers the influence of Joyce on Wallace indirectly through a consideration of the major influence on Wallace of John Barth, whose fiction inverts the way Joyce uses myth in *Ulysses*. The full account of *IJ*'s incorporation of *Ulysses* has yet to be written.

<sup>2</sup> Although the connections between *IJ* and *A Fan's Notes* do not seem to have been noticed by critics, there is a curious mention of Exley made by David Eggers in his foreword to the 10th Anniversary Paperback Edition of *IJ* (xiii). Eggers contrasts the madness with which *IJ* was created with the madness fueled by substance abuse with which Exley and Burroughs created the works for which they are respectively best known. One wonders whether Eggers intuited the deeper connection between *IJ* and *A Fan's Notes* even as he cited Exley in order to differentiate Wallace from him, especially since the resemblance between *Naked Lunch*, the work he alludes to along with *A Fan's Notes*, and *IJ* has been generally understood (although also not explored in any detail).

<sup>3</sup> A ready example of this layering or superimposition of intertexts from *IJ* would be Wallace's combined rewriting (among other intertexts) of both DeLillo's *End Zone* and Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* in the Eschaton episode. Other prominent examples from Wallace's oeuvre are the synthesis of *Lolita* and *The Crying of Lot 49* in *BOS*, and the claim on the copyright page of *GCH* that “Parts of ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’ are written in the margins of John Barth's ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ and Cynthia Ozick's ‘Usurpation (Other People's Stories).’”

<sup>4</sup> Delineating Wallace's implied critique of Bloom's theory, Thompson further states, “The peculiar ways in which Wallace texts deploy lines of influence thus resembles the way that information itself, through both traditional and virtual channels, proliferates via networks of recirculation and retransmission. His texts, understood as vast webs of influence, thus reconfigure the notion of influence for the digital era, updating what one might call the analogue simplicity of Bloom's model with a properly postmodern, digital programming model of interconnectivity” (87). I think that with this deft and suggestive

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formulation of Wallace's intertextual poetics Thompson has identified an important thread of Wallace's fiction, which is rife with metaphors for conceptualizing its own processes, its relations with other texts not excluded. Another way of putting it would be to say that in his fiction Wallace sought to work out the consequences of the post-structuralist verity that all writing is rewriting. Still, I would argue that the re-conceptualizations of intertextuality one finds in Wallace's fiction work on a different level from the one on which competitive motivations, according to Bloom, drive artistic innovation.

<sup>5</sup> Seminal in this regard is A.O. Scott's review-essay on Wallace, "The Panic of Influence." See also Boddy, who, following Boswell, considers the stories of *GCH* from the standpoint of their "virtuous engagement with other books" (26). For additional critics who have touched on Bloom in relation to Wallace see Thompson p. 40 and footnote 41. For a treatment of *TPK* as a response to *IJ* as the threatening textual influence to be swerved from and transcended in a way that is at once a confirmation of Bloom's theory and a misreading of it, see Staiger.

<sup>6</sup> The passage in question occurs late in the novel: Hal is watching one of James Incandenza's films that includes a scene of somebody reading "stupefyingly turgid-sounding shit" that turns out to be a passage, as the footnote tells us, "[that sounds] suspiciously like Professor H. Bloom's turgid studies of artistic *influenza*":

'For while *clinamen* and *tessera* strive to revive or revise the dead ancestor, and while *kenosis* and *daemonization* act to repress consciousness and memory of the dead ancestor, it is, finally artistic *askesis* which represents the contest proper, the battle-to-the-death with the loved dead' (911; footnote 366).

Thompson takes the hostility in Wallace's text (as distinct from the footnote) at face value as a rejection of Bloom's theory, but, as I state above, I believe the matter is trickier than that. As Thompson himself observes, the complexities of this node (of text and footnote) are many. In particular, he notes that Wallace cites the summary of Bloom's taxonomy of "revisionary ratios" that does not include *apophrades*, or the return of the dead, the very one that would seem most germane to a scene in which the Hamlet-like son is watching one of his dead father's films. Thompson argues, "since the return of the dead father is one of the novel's most obvious allusions to Hamlet, the reference to Bloom's theory at this precise point in the text signals Wallace's heightened self-consciousness at employing a Shakespearean allusion in a late-twentieth century novel. The passage thus contains both a reference to Shakespeare and a metacommentary on the intertextual device: The Bloomian insertion indicates that the author is aware of a prominent theory concerning the ways in which authors incorporate Shakespeare's influence." (42). I would add that not only does the passage thereby simultaneously work as an allusion to Shakespeare and to Bloom's theory of the role of such allusions in literature, it does so by enacting the sort of psychic struggle for imaginative priority that is at the heart of Bloom's theory in other ways than by performative omission (the absence of the trope for the return of the dead). Barely altering a passage from *The Anxiety of Influence* in a way that would not escape the charge of plagiarism in a college essay (yet for all that inevitably altering it in the smallest ways that introduce telling differences, such as in the misprision of "influence" as "influenza" at the end of this sentence), Wallace rewrites one of Bloom's summary statements of the different figures for rewriting, thereby counterposing to the theory of rewriting a literal rewriting, a reduction that drains it (in an extreme example of Bloom's *kenosis*) of its content and thereby, perversely, confirms it. Additionally, there are several other elements in the scene that cause its significance to proliferate almost without measure: while Hal's father is a figure for Hamlet's father's ghost, he is also a Joyce figure, so that the haunting occurs both on the level of the text and on the level of the intertextual level of Wallace's relationship to Joyce as well as Shakespeare; the whole scene begins when the film "blooms on the screen," giving the reader yet another signal that it is meant to be understood in the context of Bloom's theory (910); and, most intriguingly of all, Hal finds an "incredible pathos" in the recitation of the cribbed rewriting of one of Bloom's key passages, about the struggle with the dead ancestor (911). From all this it should be clear that despite the superficial antagonism of some of his allusions, Wallace is not simply dismissing Bloom's theory's pertinence to his work.

<sup>7</sup> Yardley comments: "There would be no college football scholarship, no further chance to measure himself against the exacting standards his father had set. In time he would find another arena in which to test himself, but the finality of his rupture from the game he loved must have seemed arbitrary and cruel" (53). Yardley's biography, *Misfit: The Strange Life of Frederick Exley* was published in 1997; so Wallace must have learned this crucial detail from some other source.

<sup>8</sup> This synthesis is graphically effected on the dustjacket of Wallace's essay collection, *SFT*, published a year after *IJ*, in which the smiley face has become a comic grimace of displeasure.

<sup>9</sup> Gately thus becomes a prime example of the program Wallace attributes to the possible next generation of real rebels heralded at the conclusion of the manifesto-like "E Unibus Pluram": "The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How Banal (193).'"

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Beckett's *Malone Dies*, "I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already, of the great cunt of existence" (114).

<sup>11</sup> Sic – it was Gately's preference for "substances" over Edith Wharton's novel, required in his sophomore English class, which led to his failing grades, ineligibility for football, and dropping out of school.

<sup>12</sup> This literal instance of an "ironist" would seem to allude to Richard Rorty's concept of the "liberal ironist," which Claire Hayes-Brady has argued is important to understanding Wallace's philosophical thematics in *BOS*. I would add that, as with many elements of *BOS* that reappear in *IJ*, the "ironist" in this scene is treated with considerably more acerbity than the more sportive and benign presentation of irony in the earlier novel. Hayes-Brady notes that already in *Broom* the "ironist," one who realizes that no vocabulary is ever a final description of reality, in touch with a power outside itself, can become "unable to take themselves or anything else seriously..." (87). This sounds a good deal like Wallace's description of the postmodern ironist in "E Unibus Pluram," and given the greater wariness towards irony to which he was later to give expression in that piece, it is not surprising that he went on to offer this strange burlesque of the "ironist" as one who irons. If, as Marshall Boswell observes in *UND*, "[Wallace] opens the cage of irony by *ironizing* it," this passage would seem to be the ultimate instantiation of that intent (207).

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, it is worth citing the following lines, approvingly cited by Wallace in "E Unibus Pluram," "'Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage'" (183).

<sup>14</sup> One example should suffice. Describing his erotic conquests in Chicago, Exley writes: "I took them on the floor on the floor and on the couch and in the bathtub, took them with their summer dresses around their ears, took them greedily, perfunctorily, pointlessly, took them while they wept and said *no, no, no*. Occasionally in a baseness of spirit, I acceded to their demands and withdrew the sweets of my sex, which only seemed to make them weep more heartily" (141-2).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mario Incandenza's remark: "It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (*IJ*, 592).

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