

ANALYSIS

Infinite Jest (1996)



David Foster Wallace

(1962-2008)

“If David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) were to be compared to a painting, it would fit well with Jackson Pollock’s ‘drip’ work of the late 40s and early 50s, something like ‘Blues Poles’ or ‘Lavender Mist: No. 1’ or ‘Full Fathom Five.’ In both mediums, Wallace and Pollock allow for immense free form within a plan or pattern that distinguishes random acts from a form of art. Pollock’s paintings suggest everywhere and everything, a consuming hunger to include, but there is a controlling, limiting, conception buried in the work; so too, Wallace’s novel, more postmodern even than Pollock, purports to go everywhere, seemingly scattered like dripping paint, and yet with a controlling pattern behind it.

The fact that there is control does not mean one can necessarily pinpoint it. For Wallace, the ‘control’ often bleeds over into postmodern, or post-postmodern, an eclecticism of forms; or else a kind of deference to Gaddis and Pynchon for their wildness of vision held together by precision of language. Little of this answers the question of control in Wallace, or Pollock, and yet we keep searching. If we take Pollock first, we see a pattern in his most famous painting, ‘Blue Poles.’ Here he segments different color areas with black ‘poles’ rising from the bottom of the canvas toward the top, without quite reaching it.

In these segmented color fields we have Pollock’s wildness, as it were, a frenzy which is bounded and controlled by streaks of yellow and red, against backgrounds of color fields that look like territories seen from an airplane bomb site. The painting as a whole opens up to light and then darkens down as the eye moves across the black. What is clearly a flat surface comes alive as the viewer sweeps across and up and down—so that flatness is belied by intense movements, like so many tiny snakes moving simultaneously along the canvas.

So, too, Wallace’s novel. Impossible to summarize—intentionally an artifact of tentacles and traces which cannot be retold—it is, nevertheless, like Pollock, narrated and re-narrated. ‘Blue Poles’ is a repeat story, with each segment a reprise of a contiguous one, sameness and difference, spoken and respoken. In *Infinite Jest*, we have the story of the tennis academy, which is attached to a private school run more as a corporate entity dedicated to turning out top tennis players than to an institution of learning. In various degrees, the players, but especially Hal Incandenza—named after the computer in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001?*—are on dope, with Hal detailing lovingly how he gets hold of and enjoys grass. Then we learn that

Hal's family is dysfunctional in a sensational way—father disappeared, younger brother handicapped, older brother fleeing.

Juxtaposed to the tennis academy is a halfway house, both AA and NA, with its cast of Pynchon-like addicts and castoffs. There is also a video, the so-called 'Infinite Jest,' which has obsessed those who see it, for they cannot stop watching it. Any effort, however, to sort out the major lines is discouraged, since the book works by way of flashbacks within flashbacks (Hal's father and grandfather, for example), innumerable interpolations and interruptions, narrative looping which makes much of the looping in Woolf and Joyce seem by comparison realistic and reasonable. Even helpful hints along the way, or in the extensive notes, are merely weak guidelines.

The aim, therefore, is not chiefly to sort things out—although a reader's guide to the novel would be helpful—but to try to understand how and why the novel is presented this way. One seeks metaphysical meaning more than narrative or novelistic logic. The torrential matter—recalling Gaddis's *JR* and parts of *The Recognitions*—is not only a kaleidoscope of American life and practice, but also an unsolvable, virtually impenetrable world of behavior. So many subcultures and subgroups exist parallel to each other that the country cannot be captured in any coherent way. Wallace's method is not to bring order to disorder, but to reveal disorder so broad that even the novelist's efforts to achieve some order cannot prevail.

This latter point needs development. Most fictions, even Pynchon's and Gaddis's, have a meta-narrative and some resolution, although not an easy finality or the one expected in mainstream fiction. Traditionally, novels close down, even though the Mega-Novel premise is that such fictions could continue, theoretically, forever, like Scheherazade's tales. Wallace clearly breaks with that sense of finality; his disorder is of such magnitude that any effort to harness, by the author or by an outside force, is futile. The novel reads like an acid high, colors, hallucinations, improvisation, feverish images, a rush of energy and words, as in jazz, an incoherence, seemingly, that is part of dream, disorder run amuck. More than Gaddis or Pynchon, his obvious sources, Wallace permits disorder to become the norm, not as some overarching idea but as an integral part of the way people live and manage their lives. One of his favorite words is annular and variations upon it which in itself suggests forms of circularity and circuitry caught in a continuum.

Is disorder, we may ask, an adequate mode of typifying the Nineties, or does it more closely recall the Sixties, which at first sight seems to be Wallace's beat? Or should we characterize the book as an epiphenomenon, something 'beyond,' rather than as an element that generically fits in the novel, however broad, wide, and deep we consider that genre? Or is it part of millennial fiction, the repository of final things? As a phenomenon or a millennial artifact, *Infinite Jest* becomes an exercise in language, on the order of *Ulysses* or even some of Beckett, with Wallace not forging a new language of sounds and connections as did Joyce and Beckett, but using arcane words and technical language as if he were reinventing the ordinary lingo of ordinary speakers. He is quite witty, for example, in parodying the governmental use of acronyms.

As a phenomenon, epi-or [*sic*] otherwise, *Infinite Jest* makes clear we cannot read in the usual way, seeking meaning from narrative and meta-narrative, and all that accrues to that. We read, instead, for segments, for individual passages of wit, for bursts of sparkling and biting commentary, for ways of indulging a runaway verbal facility that has decided to call itself a novel. Once again, the parallel to Pollock's drip paintings is suitable, since they, too, are epiphenomenal—certainly a break even with the action painting, or abstract expressionism, of Rothko and others. Wallace drips words, waves of foamy words, as if from buckets; not grasping language but letting go and evacuating.

More than Joyce or Beckett, more appropriate might be Rabelais, his explosive exuberance, his bursts of inspired prose, his ability to get beyond the ordinary and to make exaggeration seem normal. Gargantua and Pantagruel are larger than life, and so is the voice—not the characters—in *Infinite Jest*.... Wallace impresses us as so volcanic and oceanic that words on the page, the page itself, the novel as form are all inadequate for him to express himself... Not the reinventor of words like Joyce, Pound, or Beckett, Wallace is the accumulator of the detritus of our postwar civilization. He knows well where myths and cults meet as shams. His discontent falls well outside any theorizing, whether Marx or Freud or any anti- or pro-; rather, it

accrues from a desire to capture it *all* in its foulness, foolishness, and its humanity. Segments are headed by the parodic ‘Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment,’ a sendup of advertising.

Wallace seems much more at home with the rehab centers than he does with the tennis academy, which often reads like a stretch. He digs into the rehabilitated Gately more than he can encompass Hal and his dysfunctional family. For Wallace, daftness trumps malfunction. His deployment of the several steps toward rehab at the AA and NA center are brilliantly depicted as embodied in Gately, an ungainly, huge, mess of a man; and the other messes such as Lenz and Green who show up at the center are similarly treated with a depth of humanity that is lacking when Wallace comes to tennis.

The juxtaposition of the two centers, tennis and rehab, are not symmetrical. Wallace uses every particular case as a comic riff to move on to the edges and margins of tragic lives and their stories. The idea is sweep, the ingathering of a large number of lives: the athletes at the tennis academy, the addicts at the rehab center, marginal figures of every type of degradation: psychopaths, sociopaths, reinvented creatures, poseurs, confidence men and women, figures in high position, the homeless and depraved. The possibilities include the discrete, maniacal detail the last few decades have thrown at us. History is furious: Wallace moves into nuclear waste, for example—like DeLillo, he is a big garbage man—and has picked up all the devastation that tests have incurred, going back to testing in the 1950s. This is an America caught up by a myriad of contradictions that lie just below the mean point of American bourgeois life, and especially in the comfortable Nineties.

Nothing, apparently, is what it seems, and this is the world the novelist gets at. The tennis academy, for one, is superficially a sign of American health and productivity, its players often winners in national tournaments and emblems of health. But beneath that surface, the archeologist Wallace digs, and what he discovers is distinctly another America. Hal smokes grass whenever he can find the moment; other drink themselves into oblivion; still others are more inventive and commit suicide; some barely make it onto the court, so caught up as they are in psychological problems. The academy, we come to recognize, is a twin of the rehab center; while it does not directly rehabilitate, it provides a patina of conformity (its own ‘steps’) and so-called sane living—the discipline of landing a ball in a particular spot on a court—over what is really just another snake pit.

Wallace often strives too hard to penetrate that patina, so that the riffs, both short and long, get further and further away from anything compelling. As in the following: ‘Lenz [at the AA center] tells Green how one he was at a Halloween party where a hydrocephalic woman wore a necklace made of dead gulls.’ Or just before that, the riff about the cleaning woman who is almost electrocuted when she touches a hot knob intended for someone else. There are dozens of such examples. Wallace never saw an eruption he didn’t like; he never saw an objectionable act he didn’t want to reproduce. Puke and vomit are never sufficient; excrement, saliva, blood, semen, vaginal discharge, menstrual blood are intermixed into the lives of the characters, especially, of course, those in and around the rehab centers. The reach toward comedy frequently overreaches.

When Wallace strains too hard for comedic effect, the humor becomes sophomoric. A segment on beds, for example, about halfway through *Infinite Jest* misses both as comedy and as an element linked to Wallace’s larger plans. It fits only as disorder, but of a kind that does not validate the seven or eight thousand words expended on it. The making of beds, the taking apart of beds, with mattresses turning to sponges and jelly, accompanied by failed maneuvers to discard parts fails not only as comedy but heads nowhere, a digression for the sake of digression. Such segments, while not fulfilling any comic or dramatic function, recur like fraternity house humor, riffs out of control. Yet they persist as part of Wallace’s emphasis on vagary, disorder, the mayhem of everyday life, a kind of existential absurdity and randomness.

It is clear that even as we dismiss some hijinks Wallace’s paradigm was one of inclusion. Exclusion would mean selection, and while of course he is selecting, he must give the appearance of all-ness, in a postmodern version of Thomas Wolfe’s obsession with consuming everything by way of words. Wallace, in fact, recalls Wolfe, as a hungry artist (not a hunger artist) whose appetite is so unfulfilled he must keep going. Since he cannot forgo the opportunity to tell a story, *Infinite Jest* can be viewed less as ‘novel’—however defined—than as a sequence of short stories or riffs, or unleashed verbal segments. These stories

attempt, like Wolfe, to encompass America, particularly its underside and its more horrific failures. While people in higher places are ridiculed—Wallace’s social sympathies are evident—those with disabilities and personal weaknesses (alcohol, drugs, crimes) are treated with sympathy and even empathy.

America is kaleidoscopic, impenetrable, indescribable, divisible into miniscule elements, segmented and hierarchical. *Infinite Jest* reflects everything America tries to disguise in its presentation of itself as the world’s supreme victor. The world’s greatest, here, is imploding into segments which do not mesh, do not function, do not cohere, and which, each in its way, is a form of disease (from tennis to heroin). Discontented is this civilization, and, in many instances, beyond repair.”

Frederick R. Karl
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“Shhh! Keep quiet and I will let you in on a secret. Nobody dares say this in the literary world, but novelists have scaled back their ambitions in recent years. All big projects have been put on hold. Special clauses are being inserted in publishing contracts. I have it on good authority that you can’t write a novel longer than 650 pages without getting a 27B-6 form signed by three senior editors. And no one wants to be the first to sign. In the old days, authors aspired to write the *Great American Novel*—or the *Great Commonwealth Novel* or the *Great Fill-in-the-Blank Novel* as the case may be. Not any more. Nowadays, fiction has been downscaled, just like your job, your car and your 401-K. Today a writer’s highest aspiration is a movie deal or (the holiest of holies, pause while I genuflect) a place in Oprah’s Book Club. Even the phrase Great American Novel is now off limits—only uttered with a sharply ironic tone.

For your own good, you should practice saying it in front of a mirror. Put a Snidely Whiplash sneer on your face and spit it out between clenched teeth: *Great American Novel*...hah! Trust me, if you get the tone just right it will help you earn a tenured position in the English Department. In short, big, sprawling books are dead. But somebody forgot to tell David Foster Wallace. The poor schmuck! While everyone else was downscaling, he was working on *Infinite Jest*. Wallace clearly was operating under the old Pynchon-house rules. He thought he could pull out all the stops and write *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius*. (Whoops, that title was taken a few years later by Wallace admirer David Eggers, but you get the idea.) Nice try, DFW (the author, not the airport), but who was gonna publish a novel that approached a half-million words, with footnotes that, on their own, are as daunting as the “Penelope” section in Joyce’s *Ulysses*? Yes, there are 388 footnotes in *Infinite Jest*—all of them in a tiny font, and some of them as lengthy as *New Yorker* short stories.

This book seemed a non-starter even before it used up the first toner cartridge on the Wallace family printer. But our clueless author miraculously found a publisher, and must have gotten the three requisite signatures, because *Infinite Jest* arrived, with a heavy thud on the loading dock, at your local bookstore on February 1, 1996, just in time serve as the perfect Groundhog Day present. When they put it on the scale at the checkout counter, everyone gasped: four pounds of prose, and no fat. Even more surprising, this daunting book found its audience, garnering praise from delighted readers and enthusiastic reviewers. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sven Birkerts declared: ‘Wallace is, clearly, bent on taking the next step in fiction.’ *Newsday* proclaimed: ‘If you believe the hype, David Foster Wallace is about to be crowned the next heavyweight of American fiction. And the accolade is probably deserved.’

Of course, the leaders of the downscale camp demurred, especially a certain Michiko Kakutani, affiliated with a prominent Northeast daily newspaper, who dislikes sprawling fictions the way inner city parents disapprove of their kids wearing pants two sizes too big. She wanted *Infinite Jest* to be tighter around the waist, smaller and more form-fitting; she compared the novel to an unfinished Michelangelo sculpture weighed down by big chunks of marble that need to be cut away. But even Kakutani was forced to admit that Wallace was ‘a writer of virtuosic skills who can seemingly do anything.’

In truth, Wallace put the equivalent of four novels into *Infinite Jest*. Even stranger, these four novels have seemingly little to do with one another—although the author eventually forces them together with brazen contempt for literary decorum. First, Wallace has written the Great Sports Novel, a detailed and brilliant account of life in a very competitive tennis academy. Wallace has grafted on to this coming-of-age

tale an equally detailed and gut-wrenchingly honest novel about recovering addicts in a halfway house. Then we have a sci-fi tale based on the concept of a mysterious video that is just to entertaining...so much so, that people who start watching it can never stop. Finally, on top of all these stories Wallace constructs a political satire about a crooner turned President who re-shapes North American borders in alignment with his own personal obsessions.

Yet the way Wallace presents these stories is never conventional, and sometimes so wildly fanciful that you need to put down the heavy tome—thud!—and chuckle or just draw a deep breath. A big chunk of the political sub-plot sketched above is conveyed in the form of the description of a filmed puppet show. (Imagine the peculiar flavor of John Adams' *Nixon in China* to the power of ten.) Other important story lines are developed in the footnotes, or presented in street jargon full of malapropisms, or in streamlined question-and-answer interludes in which all of the questions have been conveniently omitted.

In short, none of this 1,079 page novel is padding. None of it is 'straight narrative' or conventional story-telling. The constant creativity that Wallace shows, page by page, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, is dazzling in the highest degree. By any definition, and not just word count, *Infinite Jest* is a big novel. Big in its aspirations, big in its scope, big in what it delivers.

Yet this flamboyant novel is also one of the most down-to-earth books you will ever read. At its very core, this book is a critique of flashiness and attitude, and argues for a healthy distrust of irony and intellectualizing. Here is my verdict: *Infinite Jest* has a heart of gold. The viewpoints it presents with the greatest vividness are so simple that, at times, they come across as truisms and clichés. But, again and again, our author forces the dead cliché back to life—which may be one of the most difficult tasks any author can face.

Wallace's ability to marry this austere and unadorned core of his vision to the grand superstructures of his interlinking tales is one of the most compelling aspects to a novel that is rich in things to admire. So put aside your sneer for a few days. Send your ironic attitudes off to the cleaners, and forget to pick them up. You can always go back to making fun of the Great American Novel next month or next year. In the meantime, take a chance on a book that aims to scale the heights. Who knows, you may decide you want to give up on downscaling completely."

Ted Gioia
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Michael Hollister (2015)