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An Anatomy of American Melancholy: David Foster Wallace's Tocquevillian Portrait of the Democratic Soul

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Abstract

This article argues that David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* can be read as a "Tocquevillian" novel, showing that its depiction of late 20th century American life is a profound exploration of the democratic soul. By analyzing the confusion within ordinary understandings of the meaning of freedom and illustrating how this confusion leads to a paralyzing moral relativism and the unsatisfying pursuit of pleasure, Wallace diagnoses the pathologies of the modern American mind. Wallace suggests that in a hypercommercialized democracy, the pursuit of pleasure inevitably devolves into the "soft despotism" of addiction. But underlying Wallace's critique of American consumerism and various addictions are dynamics that Tocqueville would have recognized as contained in the logic of the mind formed by the democratic regime. Wallace argues that the democratic soul seeks solace from its restlessness in self-annihilating compulsions. He frames the struggle for sobriety within Alcoholics Anonymous as a struggle for self-knowledge and self-governance, offering a model for countering the American pathologies he diagnoses.

Keywords: David Foster Wallace; *Infinite Jest*; democratic soul; Alexis de Tocqueville; American melancholy; American Political Thought

1. Introduction: David Foster Wallace and the Democratic Soul

In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition that exists in the world; it seemed to me that a sort of cloud habitually covered their features; they appeared to me grave and almost sad even in their pleasures. Alexis de Tocqueville

In this country, we're unprecedentedly safe, comfortable, and well-fed, with more and better venues for stimulation. And yet, if you were asked, 'Is this a happy or an unhappy country?' you'd check the 'unhappy' box. We're living in an era of emotional poverty, which is something that serious drug addicts feel most keenly. David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (*IJ*) offers an incisive portrait of the American soul. It has, unfortunately, in the culture at large garnered the reputation of being a big, pretentious book, another tome in the long line of late 20th century works of literary postmodernism—a tale told by a bigheaded poindexter, signifying nothing (see, for example, [Hungerford 2016](#)). As the scholarship on Wallace has shown, this reputation is misguided ([Boswell 2009](#); [Kelly 2012](#); [Konstantinou 2012](#); [Holland 2018](#)). *IJ* is concerned with the possibility of living a serious moral and spiritual life in contemporary America. It shows how the American pursuit of happiness has warped into the pursuit of superficial pleasures, leading to a deep sense of anxiety and loneliness—"a real American type of sadness" (Wallace quoted in



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Miller 1996). Wallace offers a persuasive diagnosis of this American sadness: the rise of an ironic skepticism that erodes the concept of any standard of the good that might serve as a compass in modernity's morass of distractions. He suggests that escaping American restlessness requires recovering the capacity to reason about the good and a willingness to submit limits on one's desires that in this modern context approaches heroism.

In fact, the novel's portrait of the democratic soul evokes the account of the democratic mind offered by Alexis de Tocqueville, and, in particular, his account of the "singular melancholy" and restlessness (*inquiétude*) that befalls Americans (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 514). The primary insight motivating Wallace's depiction of America can be summarized by Tocqueville's claim that "[t]he soul has needs that must be satisfied; and whatever care one takes to distract it from itself, it soon becomes bored, restive, and agitated amid enjoyments in the senses" (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 510). As Kiki Benzon writes, Wallace's novels depict the "historical conditions and cultural attitudes" of millennial America, "a media saturated, corporatized nation" that undermines "the individual's understanding of civic responsibility" (Benzon 2015, p. 29). This article contends that *IJ* is a Tocquevillian novel that examines the democratic subject as America reached its apex as the international superpower and the source of a global culture based around consumerism. For Wallace, as for Tocqueville, American melancholy originates in the premises of the American regime. Despite the overlap of their subject and themes, the connection between Wallace and Tocqueville has been unexamined. It is a fruitful comparison that sheds light on the political implications of Wallace's novel and the democratic psychology of its major protagonists. In turn, this comparison offers insight into how Tocqueville's account of American psychology resonates in millennial America.

IJ fits within the tradition of American literature that, in the words of Catherine Zuckert, raises questions about "the natural foundations of political order," but it does so not by reflecting on the grounds of natural right but by examining the American regime's effect on the human soul (Zuckert 1990, p. 2). Indeed, Andrew Hoberek argues that as an encyclopedic study of "individual anomie and collective social description," *IJ* is an heir to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (Hoberek 2018, p. 45). Just as Zuckert argues that Melville warned against the destructive path of an overbearing rationality and "showed that democracy requires a kind of metaphysical foundation in agnostic tolerance," Wallace uses his novel to shed light on the destructive tendencies of American rationality (Zuckert 1990, p. 100). Ultimately, he endorses a similar agnostic tolerance to the one that Zuckert finds in Melville while simultaneously encouraging his readers to question what good is worthy of pursuing freely.

By analyzing Wallace in light of Tocqueville, we find a compelling example of what George Anastaplo calls "the artist as thinker." Anastaplo claimed that "Mind may be seen at work in our classics, Mind investigating *what is*" (Anastaplo 1983, p. 298; his emphasis). This criterion certainly applies to *IJ*. Wallace helps us understand what America is by showing how similar Tocquevillian dynamics between America's democratic regime and the American mind are still operative, if also transformed by new technologies and an even more thoroughgoing skepticism toward any authority that would limit personal autonomy. Accordingly, Wallace stands in the tradition of American writers who seek to strengthen democracy by deepening the reader's understanding of it.

2. The Form and Plot of Wallace's Tocquevillian Novel

Adam Kelly claims that one question "haunted" Wallace throughout his career: "what has gone wrong with America?" (Kelly 2012, p. 280). To understand this question Wallace investigates the more primary question of the meaning of America. His manner of thinking about politics and culture is not dissimilar from Tocqueville's. While one does not want to overstate Tocqueville's influence on Wallace, an influence can be traced. Only two references

to Tocqueville appear in Wallace's oeuvre; however, the significance of these references shows a kinship of thought. Taken together they speak directly to Wallace's diagnosis of the malaise of American culture.

The first reference, appearing in "E Unibus Plurum: Television and U.S. Fiction," published before *IJ*, shows Wallace using Tocqueville to highlight that America's addiction to entertainment is nothing new. Wallace notes that "by 1830, de Tocqueville had already diagnosed American culture as peculiarly devoted to easy sensation and mass-marketed entertainment, 'spectacles vehement and untutored and rude' that aimed 'to stir the passions more than to gratify taste'" (Wallace 1997, pp. 36–37). American television, the topic of this particular essay, preys on a discontent bound up with whatever it means to be "American." The second mention of Tocqueville appears in Wallace's posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*. It occurs in a scene where four IRS agents discuss the meaning of America while stuck in an elevator. One of the agents summarizes an argument familiar to Tocqueville's readers that doubles as the thesis of *IJ*: "he [Tocqueville] says somewhere that one thing about democracies and their individualism is that they by their very nature corrode the citizen's sense of true community, of having real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same as his. This is a kind of ghastly irony, if you think about it, since a form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists, navel-gazers" (Wallace 2011, p. 143).

IJ puts this ghastly irony on display, showing how the commitments of the American regime—understood as the *form of government* that aims to produce equality—provide the cultural conditions that leads to self-absorbed melancholy. Wallace shares Tocqueville's concern with how the regime shapes psychology. Contra many of the American novelists discussed by Zuckert, Wallace does not dwell on the "state of nature" or the foundations of natural right. Neither does Tocqueville, who famously does not reference the *Declaration of Independence* in the entirety of *Democracy in America*—in part, it seems, to discourage the American tendency to think in abstractions. In other words, Wallace, like Tocqueville, begins with the fact of the regime and the social conditions it produces, which resembles classical political thought's approach to political phenomena more than a modern approach oriented by abstract notions of rights.

It should be noted that Wallace wrote *IJ* in the midst of a revival of interest in Tocqueville and the rise in laments regarding the decline of a robust American civic society. One might say that Wallace was responding to a Tocquevillian moment, when the excesses of American individualism and materialism were not only evident but a common topic of conversation in academia and the general educated public. The success of the writings by such figures as Robert Bellah, William Galston, Robert Putnam, or even Allan Bloom and Francis Fukuyama attest to the general concern with the predominance of unhealthy forms of individualism that undermine commitments to common political ends, turn citizens into consumers, and transform moral judgment into a hedonistic calculus (Bellah et al. 1985; Putnam 1995; Galston 1996; Bloom 1987; Fukuyama 1992). As Joel Winkelman argues, Wallace "absorbed" many of the themes of the "neo-Tocquevillians." Above all, Wallace shares the sense that the habits of mind and heart encouraged by televisual culture exacerbates the individualistic tendencies within America's democratic character that weaken "the social bonds that would enable society to work together" (Winkelman 2022, p. 99). For Wallace, this Tocquevillian moment illuminates the threats to a common authority that grounds "the ability of society to have shared values" (Winkelman 2022, p. 109).

What separates Wallace from Tocqueville and the neo-Tocquevillians, of course, is that he writes fiction. Tocqueville states that one can conceive of nothing "so antipoetic" as "the life of a man in the United States;" and yet, the flux of democratic life "puts the shape of the human race in broad daylight for the first time" (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 461). Wallace makes

poetic the mundane melancholy of the American and shows how it relates to the sweeping trends in the ways of thinking that characterize the democratic age. *IJ* is as much about the sentiments of democracy as the ideas behind these sentiments. As a kind of poetry, it can also be fairly described as “the search for and depiction of the ideal;” *IJ* engages the imagination in helping the reader conceive of new ethical possibilities within American democracy (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 458). Wallace’s aim is not to offer a theory of democracy but a description that helps his readers see how the regime devoted to certain ideas about human equality and freedom shape their souls, their longings, and undermines the very pursuit of happiness promised in America’s founding document. The poetic presentation serves the Tocquevillian aim of instructing democracy (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 7).

Accordingly, the formal complexity of Wallace’s novel is for the sake of the readers, to help them work through the ironic skepticism that is the default posture of so many young Americans. As Lee Konstantinou argues, Wallace uses the tools of postmodern “metafiction” to communicate a “postironic belief” and “construct ethical countertypes to the incredulous ironist” (Konstantinou 2012, p. 85). Likewise, Kelly contends that Wallace is a “deeply philosophical thinker” who helps his readers think through philosophical ideas and problems by embodying them in the drama of his characters and their dialogs (Kelly 2012, p. 280). These accounts accord with Wallace’s articulation of the most serious aims of literature. In “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” a book review that doubles as Wallace’s statement of artistic purpose, he notes that so many contemporary American novelists “look so thematically shallow and lightweight, so morally impoverished, in comparison to Gogol or Dostoevsky” (Wallace 2005b, p. 271). Americans require of their art “an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions” and the average American is characterized by “congenital skepticism” (Wallace 2005b, pp. 271–72). *IJ* moves us from this ironic skepticism to a genuine consideration of such “desperate questions.” It does so, in part, by mirroring ironic entertainment to get a critical distance on American irony.

IJ offers such distance by presenting a parodic and Swiftian view of the excesses of American materialism by way of a futuristic setting, taking the logic of the American cultural industry to its conclusion. It takes place in a near-future North American superstate where Mexico and Canada have joined the United States in “interdependence” to form the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.). The formation of this superstate is driven by corporate interests that also lead the years to no longer be numbered but named after corporate sponsors (Year of the Whopper, Year of Glad, Year of the Adult Depend Undergarment). The change in the naming of the years, besides being a joke about the excesses of late capitalism, points to the fact that this near-future America is post-Christian. A Quebecois Separatist association of wheelchair-bound assassins (*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* or A.F.R.), who become wheelchair-bound by playing a rite of passage game involving trains, are in search of “The Entertainment,” otherwise known as “Infinite Jest,” a lethal film so entertaining it renders its viewers catatonic as they watch it on an endless loop. They threaten to unleash it on O.N.A.N. to rebel against the hegemony of American superficiality. By sharing the same title as the novel, taken from Hamlet’s “Poor Yorick” monolog, the reader is invited to compare the Entertainment with Wallace’s entertainment—where the former represents the bad infinity of American *inquiétude*, the latter offers a diagnosis and points toward a cure.

IJ centers around two communities in Enfield, Massachusetts, located in the Greater Boston Metro Area, and two protagonists that most embody the ethos of these communities. The first is the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), where the academically gifted and promising junior tennis player Hal Incandenza struggles with addiction, depression, and the suicide of his father, James O. Incandenza, founder of E.T.A. and an arthouse auteur who made *The Entertainment*. Hal, loosely based on Hamlet, is haunted by the

legacy of his father (and his father, as a “wraith,” speaks with Gately) and has a complex relationship with his mother, a serial adulterer who has a relationship with Charles Tavis, an uncle-figure and new head of E.T.A. Hal resembles Hamlet most of all in his melancholy and thought-induced paralysis. The other community, just down the hill from E.T.A., is Ennet House, a halfway house where Don Gately, a former criminal and Demerol addict who, now an avid member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), works as a live-in staffer while dealing with the grueling realities of sobriety.

The book weaves together its various plots in an order that is hard to discern, jumping with little regard to chronology, slowly revealing background information, and delving with painstaking detail into the psychology of even the most minor characters. It forces the reader to flip to the back of the book, sometimes in mid-sentence, to consult footnotes that might contain anything from crucial plot points to the chemical constitution of some drug, mirroring the modern mind’s relationship to the discrete chunks of information it must process. Through this tangle of information, Wallace hopes to help his readers foster the discipline necessary to face life’s “desperate questions” without irony.

3. America’s Confusion of Permissions

The complexity of *IJ* serves its examination of the premises of the American regime, particularly its conception of the meaning of freedom. As N. Katherine Hayles writes, the novel exposes the “presumption of autonomy” that is “the founding principle of the liberal humanist self” (Hayles 1999, p. 693). She argues that the only way out of the “deadly illusion of autonomy” is to “restructure the autonomous liberal subject” (Hayles 1999, pp. 692, 694). Wallace begins this restructuring by showing that the elevation of freedom as the most important moral standard within the context of a “government engineered to produce equality” is self-undermining. It obscures the teleological nature of human action that orients our freedom and connects us with other citizens.

The theme of the nature of American freedom is most conspicuous in the conversation interspersed throughout *IJ* between Helen (also known as Hugh) Steeply, a government agent poorly disguised as a female journalist, and Remy Marathe, a member of the A.F.R. and a quadruple agent reluctantly working with O.N.A.N. to provide information about A.F.R.’s search for the Entertainment. The conversation, which mirrors Tocqueville’s diagnosis of the ghastly ironies of American individualism, revolves around Steeply’s desire to know why the A.F.R. seeks to unleash the Entertainment on the American public through mass dissemination. Marathe claims it is not for concrete political ends but to show the hedonistic and infantile nature of American society. He argues that American freedom is a “without-end pursuit of a happiness,” a joyless quest for joy in a “confusion of permissions” (Wallace 1996, p. 320). Americans have forgotten “the old things which made happiness possible” (Wallace 1996, p. 320). For Marathe, the old things are those things worthy of devotion, love, and sacrifice. He claims that one *is* what one loves (Wallace 1996, p. 108). Happiness consists of pursuing some end or cause beyond oneself—*freedom for not freedom from*—that constitutes the self. Marathe continues: “Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter” (Wallace 1996, pp. 319–20). The American is “a citizen of nothing” whose “temple is self and sentiment” (Wallace 1996, p. 108).

Steeply’s rejoinder is that a misguided use of freedom by some is a risk inherent to the lofty goal of a self-governing republic. “There are no choices without personal freedom,” Steeply says, “[t]hese things you find so weak and contemptible in us—these are just the hazards of being free” (p. 320). It should be noted that Steeply says this while on a mission to protect citizens from the consequences of their freedom. For Steeply, the United States is “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of individual choice”

(Wallace 1996, p. 424). In this framework, individualism is the highest value; indeed, it is the value that binds America together. America's passion for equality, which Tocqueville argues is stronger than its passion for freedom, transforms the aristocratic conception of freedom, understood as the duty to govern oneself in accordance with a higher standard, into the mere freedom of choice that demands a radical openness.

This elevation of freedom to *the* sacred value creates a crisis of purpose and, ultimately, of moral authority. As Andrew Warren writes, "the question of authority" is "the most consistent flashpoint in Wallace's political thinking" (Warren 2018, pp. 176–77; see also Winkelman 2022, especially pp. 109–12). When freedom is defined solely as the absence of constraint, its very indeterminacy leaves the public without an authoritative standard by which to judge how that freedom should be used. Democratic tolerance becomes a vice when it is turned into the fundamental virtue. A pervasive sense of moral relativism is the consequence of the elevation of a notion of choice that abandons any conception of the grounds that makes a choice rational or, more drastically, asserts that no such grounds can even exist.

The inability to choose well is precisely what Marathe argues Americans have forgotten: "Someone sometime let you forget how to choose, and what. Someone let your peoples forget it was the only thing of importance, choosing" (Wallace 1996, p. 319). For Marathe, there can be no freedom without learning how to choose. The pleasures of mass entertainment or drug use are not chosen but are distractions from the responsibility to make a choice. Marathe has the existentialist's commitment to the decision as such—the standard of choice is one's willful commitment. However, choosing for choosing's sake does not solve the problem of lacking a temple. While scholars are rightfully hesitant to see Marathe as a mouthpiece for Wallace, they often give him too much credit for living in accordance with his radical decisionism (see Evans 2013, pp. 179–80, who argues against the notion that Marathe speaks for Wallace while taking Marathe too much at his word). It cannot be said that Marathe himself chooses well, as he has not investigated the criterion by which one should make a choice—that is, the nature of the good. He is like the American in that the good for him is the radical freedom of choosing what to love. He elevates freedom over all other goods. Wallace shows the bind in which Marathe is in by making him a hopeless romantic. His love for a sickly woman "without a skull" causes him to betray the political cause he once willfully chose. Despite his radical initiation into the political movement of the A.F.R., Marathe cannot help but pursue another good he thinks is higher—namely, erotic and romantic love.

When one reads Marathe's critique in light of the confusion of his character, one sees a common problem that binds the modern subject that seeks some ordering principle. There is a desire for the old things, often expressed as a romantic longing for limits or an overarching ideal that can order our desire. And yet, these old things were not chosen but given. The freedom to choose is the starting point of the democratic subject but anything chosen can be unchosen. Our desire for limits is undermined by the apparently limitless possibilities available to us and by the fact that we can, at any moment, choose to no longer abide by self-imposed rules. The fact that American freedom is expressed as the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain finds its political corollary in the novel's accounts of O.N.A.N.'s imperial expansion. A democratic regime devoted to pleasure (what might be called *political onanism*) leads to empire, as feeding the appetite of a people's limitless desire necessitates the encroachment on the material resources of other nations. But this is freedom without responsibility. In fact, much of the political drama—which revolves around the "Great Concavity," a vast region of the northeastern USA and southeastern Canada that O.N.A.N. has "reconfigured" into a toxic waste dump—deals with the problem of waste as a symbol of the consequences democratic desire refuses to face.

The flipside of pleasure becoming the common guide for freedom is a Nietzschean revulsion in the kind of human being this produces. This is seen in the A.F.R.'s negation of the American last man as well as in the "Kanto-Hegelian" language of the head tennis instructor at E.T.A., Gerhardt Schtitt. Schtitt compares the discipline of high-level athletics to the demands of citizenship. For him, citizenship is the subordination of one's will to a higher principle or one's self-interest to the common interest. Schtitt, a German immigrant, has been raised "from infancy to certain permanent values," which have "proto-fascist potential," but which also anchor "the soul and course of life" (Wallace 1996, p. 82). Accordingly, his life is shaped by "Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit" (Wallace 1996, p. 82). His rhetoric appears comical since his appeals to citizenship are anachronistic (he is something like an aristocrat in a democratic age) and made to young boys and girls who have no duties to anything larger than themselves and who clamor to be successful entertainers in the athletic industry. Schtitt bemoans his pedagogical circumstance, blaming the contemporary democratic State "that's forgotten privation and hardship and the discipline which hardship teaches" and that is instead "a sloppy intersection of desires and fears," where "the only public consensus" is that one should pursue "the happy pleasure of the person alone" (Wallace 1996, p. 83). And yet, his Old World values have little purchase in the democratic epoch.

In short, the effectual truth of American freedom is the affirmation of hedonism as the most accepted way of life. The indeterminacy of freedom as the authoritative good leads to the denial of other goods for which freedom should be used. Efforts to provide the conditions for one's choosing becomes the end of politics. Since we must use our freedom for something, we use it for what is most immediate, the pursuit of pleasure. What results from Wallace's analysis is a new wrinkle in Tocqueville's account of soft despotism—namely, the despotism of addiction. The addicted and perpetually entertained American of *IJ* is ruled by a conflation of corporate interests and state powers that might not tyrannize but which "hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces" the people into "a herd of timid and industrious animals" (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 663). Wallace shares with Tocqueville (and the neo-Tocquevillians) the concern that the most powerful tendencies at work in the democratic character—the passion for equality and the elevation of pleasure as the highest, because most universal, good—will undermine American democracy through the promotion of a lax relativism supported by a therapeutic state.

The democratic virtues need to be cultivated, and doing so is the perennial and arduous task of citizens. However faulty Steeply's notion of freedom might be, he is correct in insisting that toleration must be central to American democracy. Marathe's view of positive freedom might work for a small republic with a strong sense of ethnic identity, but to insist on such a politics in a large democracy bound together by an idea would be to advocate for a despotism of a different kind. American democracy requires tolerance as a way of addressing the real political problem of adjudicating between rival conceptions of the good. When healthy, such tolerance is a result of an epistemological humility that does not doubt the existence of a human good or its possibility of being realized (at least partially) within ordinary human life, but which keeps open the possibility that one could be misguided about its content or the means one uses to realize it. In "Authority and American Usage," Wallace calls such a position the "Democratic Spirit," which "combines rigor and humility" or a "passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others" (Wallace 2005b, p. 72). The Democratic Spirit is difficult to maintain, as it is "indisputably easier to be Dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged" (Wallace 2005b, p. 72). Wallace's novels and essays are written in the Democratic Spirit he describes and meant to foster it among his readers. Accordingly, Wallace points to a third way of reasoning about democratic freedom, one schooled in the

phenomenology of the addict. However, we turn first to his account of the intellectual habits behind American melancholy.

4. The Boy Without Qualities

Like Hamlet, Hal Incandenza's excessive self-consciousness leads to paralysis. Hal does not know how to choose and because he does not know how to choose, he has no sense of who he is. *IJ* begins with Hal's nervous breakdown—expressed as an inability to communicate—and the rest of his plot shows his descent through melancholy, marijuana addiction, and loneliness. He is a promising tennis player destined for “the show,” academically gifted—showing preternatural linguistic abilities manifested through his obsession over proper usage and his memorization of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—and, strangely, an expert in Byzantine erotica. There is no cohesiveness to these interests; what holds them together is the desire to be pleasing to others. Hal, as gifted as he is, embodies the “impoverished souls” Allan Bloom lamented. Like Bloom's elite university students, Hal possesses a default “democratic relativism” that is not a hard-earned stance, but a moral prejudice that makes him incapable of recognizing any authority other than his shifting desires or public opinion (Bloom 1987, p. 67). In Hal, the democratic elevation of freedom has morphed into a negative skepticism that undermines the possibility that any good might be worthy of devotion.

Hal's social milieu at E.T.A. embodies the envy and competitiveness that Tocqueville argues is inherent to democratic societies and one of the main sources of *inquiétude* (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 514). Due to the equality of conditions and the lack of solid hierarchies, democratic societies are fluid. Anyone can have success, but when one fails one can no longer blame the social hierarchy. Even the smallest differences appear offensive, and one's position in the relative hierarchy is always precarious. The greater the equality, the more the smallest differences offend, and thus “the desire for equality” inherent to democratic peoples becomes more “insatiable” (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 514; see Stauffer 2018, pp. 450–52). E.T.A. students obsess over their rankings and dread the possibility of having reached “a plateau” in their skills. This anxiety is heightened in that they are most valued for one particular skill, athletic achievement, which forces them to identify with what is valuable on the market. The hyper-competitiveness of democratic society leads to feelings of helplessness and isolation. It is a competitiveness exacerbated by the market economy in which there is a price put on one's worth.

While the anxiety of democratic envy contributes to Hal's melancholy, his melancholy originates in his inability to make authoritative judgments about the good that could help him withstand the flux of democratic materialism. Hal suspects that he must make some choice regarding how to live but realizes that he has never actually chosen anything, despite his accomplishments. Hal's father makes “Infinite Jest” in part to reach through what he perceives to be his son's anhedonia—he wants to make Hal fall in love with something so passionately that he would be induced “to open his mouth and come *out*—even if it was only to ask for more” (Wallace 1996, p. 839). James O. Incandenza seeks to counter the negativity of Hal's mind by presenting an image of the good or the beautiful that is impossible for his negating skepticism to debunk. What ultimately guides Hal is the hope to please other people. He is Hobbesian in that he is oriented not by the desire for a *summum bonum*, but by the fear of a great evil—in his case, loneliness. In this way, Hal reflects on the individual level the democratic tendency to place authority in public opinion. As Bloom succinctly states, “openness results in American conformism” (Bloom 1987, p. 34).

Hal feels lonely and powerless. To disguise this feeling, he wears an ironic mask. In this, he follows many contemporary Americans who treat “anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool” (Wallace 1996, p. 694). Younger Americans, especially susceptible to

public opinion, look to mass media for tips on how to be. Faced with the adolescent fear of loneliness, they learn how not to be alone by learning what it means to be well-liked. The narrator writes: “The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté” (Wallace 1996, p. 694). The thesis of one of James O. Incandenza’s films is that “naïveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America.” One reason naïveté can offend the democratic sensibility is that some forms of it assume the possibility of standards of action other than self-interest or pleasure that some fail to live up to. It is an affront to the democratic belief that common decency requires the lax toleration of moral relativism.

It is precisely such relativism that underlies Hal’s ironic posture. The narrator observes: “He finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself” (Wallace 1996, p. 694). There is no value worth choosing nor joy to be felt because there are no reasons to choose any good or experience over another. Hal is alienated from experience in a “womb of solipsism” (Wallace 1996, p. 839). His ironic thought proceeds as if it were an infinite series of negations, a constant debunking and self-doubting. Hal is “empty but not dumb.” He suspects that “what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment” is a “fear of being really human, since to be really human is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve” (Wallace 1996, p. 695). Even if he had some inkling of what he longs for, Hal cannot pursue it due to his skepticism.

Hal’s skepticism has roots in the American tendency to think in terms of abstractions and general ideas. As Tocqueville claims, Americans are unwitting Cartesians: “Each withdraws narrowly into himself and claims to judge the world from there” (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 404). As Baskin argues, Wallace identifies “Descartes’ approach with what has become the habitual way of thinking about the self—and not just among philosophers” (Baskin 2019, p. 11). Hal’s ill-fated solipsism marks a distinction between his inwardness and the outer world that is to be constantly doubted. He seeks to “submit the objects of all beliefs” to “individual examination” (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 405). Thus, the book’s opening lines contrast Hal’s inwardness (“I am in here”) with his reductionist perception of the human beings seated around him (“I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies”) (Wallace 1996, p. 3). He breaks natural wholes down into their parts but cannot reconstruct a whole in which this information has meaning. He cannot see his interlocutors as human beings, but only as collections of parts. The logical endpoint of Hal’s ironic distance is the denial of the inwardness of others.

Yet Hal longs to be heard and seen as a self but there is no self for him to communicate since there is nothing he can affirm nor anything to receive him. Public opinion, already fickle, is a meaningless standard when you deny intersubjectivity. He tries to justify his identity by the fact that he consumes (“I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex. I *read*”) but not by what he thinks, feels, or hopes for (Wallace 1996, p. 12; cf. Baskin 2019, pp. 54–56). This is because his thought is pure negation, dissolving the phenomena with which it is presented; Baskin calls Hal’s thought “a regressive spiral of doubt” (Baskin 2019, p. 11). Hal makes the positivistic assumption that values are beyond reason—that one settles on one’s moral beliefs as a matter of will. For someone as intelligent as Hal, personal choice is an insufficient ground for moral commitment. Since Hal cannot trust the given goodness of any experience or the truth contained in everyday sentiments, there is nothing *from which* he could reason about “values.”

Hal finds himself unable to pursue an ideal, despite feeling his emptiness as foreboding doom. He reflects to himself that “[w]e are all dying to give our lives away to something,

maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly” (Wallace 1996, p. 900). Hal expresses jealousy for those who can give themselves over to something, although his claim that the object is incidental is precisely the problem with his thought. The object is *only ever* incidental to the observer of devotion but not to the devoted subject. Yet it is significant that Hal recognizes a longing for something greater than himself. Viewed in this light, his melancholy follows from his suppression of what Tocqueville calls “the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal” (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 510). This taste has no healthy outlet in the hyper-material world of America. Hal flees from his longing for the infinite by seeking to fulfill it first in external validation and then drug use. The fear of being seen as dumb, naïve, or dependent on others causes Hal to despise what he most needs: a community to draw him out of his solipsism; an ideal to orient his impressive talents; and, ultimately, a notion of the good that could inspire devotion.

It is telling that one of Hal’s academic papers describes the development in popular media from the modern hero of action to the bureaucratic heroism of the “post-modern hero of *reaction*,” and postulates the coming of a new hero, that of “*non*-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus” (Wallace 1996, pp. 141–42). Hal’s catatonic ideal represents the culmination of his own descent into the regressive doubt of American Cartesianism. His stasis is a symptom of the spiritual exhaustion that occurs when the intellect is no longer directed toward an ideal and when the higher faculties of the soul find no nourishment amidst the stimuli of modern life.

Hal’s negating relativism must be distinguished from the salutary toleration essential to the healthy functioning of a pluralistic democracy. This latter form of toleration does not deny the existence of a common good; rather, it affirms a shared moral horizon while remaining agnostic about its precise metaphysical or theological articulation, leaving its pursuit to the individual in concert with others. Through the common pursuit of such a good, the individual is drawn out of isolation and opened to the sentiments experienced acutely in a healthy community. As Hayles notes, the possibility of genuine “citizenship” in American democracy depends on the sense that one is “connected with everything else” (Hayles 1999, p. 694). While this democratic toleration maintains a skeptical humility toward dogmatic certainties, it recognizes the teleological nature of human action—that action aims for some good about which one must make judgments. Wallace’s depiction of this positive form of skeptical toleration is best captured by his account of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is an example of a contemporary American institution that can support the openness democracy requires without it devolving into the solipsism of radical negation.

5. The Ordered Liberty of Alcoholics Anonymous

The example of Don Gately’s sobriety points the way out of the melancholy that befalls Hal. As Jon Baskin argues, Wallace moves the reader from Hal’s solipsistic paralysis to Gately’s disciplined self-governance (Baskin 2019, p. 42). If Hal is a tragic figure of the bad infinity of American self-consciousness, then Gately is a modern hero of resistance. Through Gately, the reader is introduced to the polity of AA and its clichés that embody a way of thinking. The psychology of the addict is where the confusions of the modern democratic mind are most conspicuous. The efforts of Gately and others to remain sober gives some clue into the “machinery” we will have to build “within our *guts*” so as not to be overcome by the soul killing effects of modern entertainment (Wallace 2010). The building of this machinery cannot be done alone but requires participation in a community and civic associations. Wallace’s AA offers a model of the discipline and commitment required for a serious spiritual life in modern America.

In Wallace's presentation, AA centers around two conventions: the frequent attendance of meetings where participants recount their struggles with substance or tell tales of hitting rock bottom, and clichés or slogans meant to help members make sense of their experience not just with drugs but with reality as such. AA attempts to draw the user out of the solipsism of self-pity. One of the main features of depression is that it feels "lonely on a level that cannot be conveyed," even to other depressed people because "a person in such a state is incapable of empathy" (Wallace 1996, p. 696). AA relies on fostering fellow-feeling between addicts. The *Big Book* itself is mostly a collection of stories of addiction and recovery, beginning with that of Bill W., the founder of the program. *IJ* reflects the *Big Book* in that it seeks to bring the reader outside of herself by having her identify with, and learn from, these American tales of unhappiness and endurance. Such stories allow one to get a distance on one's experience that is not ironic but shows that what seem to be the most personal vulnerabilities are common.

The AA slogans assure one of a common reality. They stitch together a community by making sense of experiences that seem unspeakable and paradoxical—above all, the experience of desiring a good that one cannot commit oneself to (sobriety) due to the overwhelming desire for another, apparent good that one knows is harmful (the substance). Addicts in AA follow such slogans as "Easy Does It," "One Day at a Time," and "Fake It Till You Make It." "You are encouraged to keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it," and you're encouraged to go to meetings until you "*want* to go to all these goddamn meetings." As the narrator writes, there are "cultish, brainwash elements to the AA Program" (Wallace 1996, p. 369). The suspicion toward AA reflects the skeptical tendency of American minds that "willingly deny what they cannot comprehend" (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 404). Skepticism is the starting point of the journey through AA, but sooner or later the process of "every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés" works, and "possible glimmers of something like hope" appear out of this "unromantic, unhip, clichés thing" (Wallace 1996, pp. 349–50).

One key to AA is the recovery of experience obtained when an addict hits "rock bottom." Throughout the AA passages, Wallace stresses how desperation is the determining factor of someone successfully working the program, since only in desperation is one willing to give up her most skeptical, ironic attachments. Recovery begins when one begins to turn a skeptical glance toward skepticism. Hence the slogan: "Your Best Thinking Got You Here." Wallace does not shy away from showing the horrifying deeds born of addiction because stories of rock bottom serve an epistemological purpose. They force the addict to leave the solitude of the head by confronting the undeniable truth that actions *and thoughts* have concrete and sometimes devastating consequences. By grounding its members in this reality, AA fosters a new mode of desperate thinking that recognizes one is always responsible for the consequences of one's action, regardless of social, familial, or economic circumstances. The program discourages personal narratives that locate the blame anywhere other than the self, insisting that one could have always chosen differently. Indeed, an awareness of responsibility by which a person sees his rationality and action reflected in the world is essential to having a sense of self.

AA assists its members in investigating the good. Addicts are portrayed as individuals who involuntarily pursue an apparent good—loving their drug of choice even as it destroys them. Through the slogans, the Twelve Steps, and the testimony of meetings, the addict learns how they have been mistaken about the nature of fulfillment. In this sense, sobriety is a form of self-knowledge; hence, the Fourth and Tenth steps' suggestions that one takes a moral and personal "inventory." Despite Gately's inferior intellect, he comes to a level of self-awareness that Hal lacks. AA offers a self-knowledge that liberates its members from

the tyranny of certain desires and teaches them that what the heart truly longs for cannot be found at the bottom of a bottle.

This shift in perspective points to a fundamental insight into the meaning of freedom: its substance lies not in the ability to make unconstrained choices, but in the duty to take responsibility for one's circumstances. This duty marks the distinction between a freedom rooted in a belief in the unlimited autonomy of the modern subject and an understanding of freedom grounded in self-governance. This responsible freedom implies the duty to maintain the freedom of one's thought—to think clearly about the good, the self, and the nature of desire. It requires the realization that the most vital form of liberty is the emancipation from the pleasures that so easily rule us. The ordered liberty of AA mirrors the distinction Tocqueville draws between the instinctive love of independence and the mature and reflective taste for freedom that requires the habit of self-restraint.

AA functions almost like a healthy American republic in miniature, whose citizens have realized that total autonomy is a recipe for total enslavement, and who persist in the messy struggle to rule themselves. In this, it is distinct from the collection of atomistic individuals at E.T.A., who might be devoted to an ascetic ideal, but it is an ideal that encourages self-transcendence through self-aggrandizement (see [Evans 2013](#), pp. 177–78, for an account of the “dehumanizing” effects of athletics at E.T.A.). The Higher Power at E.T.A. remains the self. AA models a healthy democratic tolerance, oriented around notions of the Higher Power that provide some outlet for the taste for the infinite in a secular context. The conduct of members of AA is regulated by norms or guidelines that allow the members to act in concert and share in fellowship without requiring agreement on the highest principles. (The slogans, it should be noted, shape the public opinion and the mores of the AA community toward positive ends). Even as the members are still guided by self-interest—namely, their desire to remain sober—their interest is best realized by participating in and strengthening the community, often at the expense of immediate goods or pleasures (contrast this with Steeply's inverse claim that pursuing one's own good benefits the community; [Wallace 1996](#), p. 424). Hence, the 12th step's emphasis on service and sharing the principles of AA with other addicts. Here, AA operates as an example of “self-interest rightly understood” ([de Tocqueville 2000](#), p. 502).

The virtue of this form of democratic community is exemplified when Gately, unable to communicate due to gunshot wounds suffered while defending a particularly offensive member of Ennet House, struggles to remain sober by denying the pain-relief of pharmaceutical intervention. He has been equipped by AA to resist the softening temptations of the modern world, having learned that the meaning of freedom is to take responsibility for oneself even in the smallest moments.

He could do the dextral pain the same way: Abiding. No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was undealable-with was the thought of all the instants lined up and stretching ahead, glittering. . .It's too much to think about. To Abide there. But none of it's as of now real. . .He could just hunker down in the space between each heartbeat and make each heartbeat a wall and live in there. Not let his head look over. What's unendurable is what his own head could make of it all. ([Wallace 1996](#), pp. 860–61)

If Baskin is right that Wallace wants to move readers from the outlook of Hal to that of Gately, one might add that Wallace seeks to inform our understanding of freedom by showing the high level of self-control its exercise demands. Gately's abiding is a form of self-governance supported by physical habits and the norms of a community, to be sure, but one which is characterized by a thoughtful awareness of an authoritative good. Gately's striving to preserve the goodness of his sobriety is an example of the spiritual discipline required of Americans in the midst of technologies of attention that prey on the *inquiétude*

of the democratic soul (see [Konstantinou 2012](#), pp. 85–86 for an account of Gately as the postironic ethical countertype to the cool ironist). Insofar as Gately's abiding is due to thoughtful non-action, he is Wallace's spin on Hal's post-post-modern catatonic hero who finds stillness within democracy's materialistic flux.

6. Powers Greater than Ourselves

The question of God looms over the entirety of *IJ* as the most desperate question Wallace raises—and the one most susceptible to dismissal by American skepticism. Even Gately shows his skepticism when, following AA's suggestion to pray each morning, he does so sheepishly, pretending to get something from under his bed as he kneels. Wallace argues, however, that in light of the human soul's taste for the infinite, it is a question we dismiss at our peril. In language that echoes Marathe's claim that man needs temples, Wallace claims in his 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address that "there is actually no such thing as atheism." He continues: "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive" ([Wallace 2005a](#)). All the characters in *IJ* worship, and almost all of them are ruined by what they worship. As Hal notes, there is an etymological connection between worship and "addiction" (from *addicere*, meaning "give over") ([Wallace 1996](#), p. 900). In the words of AA's second step, addiction already involves giving oneself over to a "Higher Power;" it is a perverse monasticism that subjugates all interests to one overriding desire.

The longing to dedicate one's life to something high is natural to the human heart. If the taste for the infinite is not directed toward such a good, it will inevitably attach itself to the finite and the material with a religious intensity ([de Tocqueville 2000](#), p. 510). It should be noted that Tocqueville draws his analysis of *inquiétude* from his reading of Pascal. At the root of restlessness is our longing for God, and yet, restlessness is heightened by democratic conditions, which offer more diversions from our higher longings ([Stauffer 2018](#), p. 442). The case of Marathe shows how difficult it is to choose what to worship and to be aware of this choice under any conditions. The freedom to choose what to worship requires an amount of discipline and reflection uncommon to democratic peoples. Hence, the goal of education that Wallace defends in the Commencement Address, describes in the AA sections, and performs in *IJ* is to think with more clarity about one's motivations so as to keep from going through life as a slave to one's passions and the sophisticated rationalizations of one's head. AA might be agnostic, and yet it still requires its member choose, if not a god, then some authoritative ideal—what Tocqueville might call "a salutary yoke on the intellect" ([de Tocqueville 2000](#), p. 418). Requiring that addicts make such a choice makes them aware that there is a good beyond immediate pleasure that one longs for, and in determining the nature of one's Higher Power they are encouraged to inquire, at least to some degree, into the nature of that good.

Wallace argues that this commitment to a higher principle supports the clarity of thought and self-discipline necessary for a responsible freedom. However, he is reluctant to argue what temple is worth choosing or even to offer an argument on any grounds other than pragmatism why one might choose to devote oneself to a way of life that demands sacrifice. One chooses what works to keep the self from annihilation, regardless of the truth claims made by one's Higher Power. Some have read Wallace's ambivalence in light of William James' pragmatism or Ludwig Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to language and philosophy ([Evans 2013](#); [Baskin 2019](#)). Some commentators argue that Wallace remains trapped within the framework he otherwise seeks to transcend, whether that be his inability to overcome his "own ironic ambivalence" or his "nihilism" ([Holland](#)

2006, p. 220; Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, especially pp. 23–25, 45–46, 204). Warren writes that “sacrifice” is central to “Wallace’s mature political and ethical thinking.” The trouble is that Wallace, who is in a “vexed dialogue with religion,” cannot articulate for his reader the grounds on which sacrifice should be made if he wants to affirm the agnostic tolerance essential to the functioning of democracy (Warren 2018, p. 181). His personal articulation of the good would be at odds with his democratic education, especially if a key component of democratic freedom is to learn to think for oneself about the nature of the good.

Whether Wallace’s reticence hurts his message is an open question. However, it might be the case that what looks like ironic ambivalence or a nihilistic relativism is, in fact, prudence. A prudent instructor of millennial America will understand that it will not let go of ironic cynicism so easily. To demand that readers adhere to a particular set of moral or theological values would provoke a condescending bemusement, much like Schmitt’s lectures, and the negating ironic skepticism Wallace seeks to correct. In this way, he once again resembles Tocqueville, who himself argues for the positive social effects of religion without endorsing any particular doctrine as true or even as most salutary for American democracy. Religion supports America’s faith in shared democratic ideals by orienting the individual’s need to worship toward a higher spiritual standard, fostering the self-restraint necessary to sustain the Democratic Spirit. To bring readers to the recognition of a need for a Higher Power, or some ground on which to make judgments about the good life, in the amoral morass of contemporary American life is an admirable accomplishment. Wallace’s call to worship something that will force one to set limits on one’s autonomy is a forceful correction of democratic morality and speaks to an earnest awareness of the good that should be enough to call into question the claims that he remains trapped by the ironic relativism he diagnoses.

Indeed, Wallace is free from such ironic relativism insofar as he admits it to be a problem—which is, after all, the beginning of recovery. He goes further by offering a beautifully tragic portrait of American sadness that makes readers aware that the “human heart is vaster than one supposes,” containing both “a taste for the goods of the earth and a love of those of Heaven” (de Tocqueville 2000, p. 520). The democratic mind cannot remain free, let alone sane, if it insists on being the sole architect of truth while dismissing the infinite longings of the human heart. Wallace suggests that countering American melancholy begins with learning to abide in the present, which as gooey and sentimental as it sounds, means to attend to the world and our hearts with care. This kind of attention entails questioning what it is we worship and what is worth worshiping, asking about the good we should pursue and how we should pursue it. Even the corrosive negativity of the modern mind’s radical abstraction worships at some altar, and the way out of the despotic solitude of the American self is to question what it is the American self loves and whether it is really the most lovable thing.

7. Conclusions

If Tocqueville was struck by the strange melancholy of men placed in the happiest condition on earth, then it is little wonder that someone of as thoughtful as Wallace expresses astonishment at the sadness Americans experienced at the end of the 20th century. But as *IJ* shows, the source of this melancholy is not new but is a pathology inherent to the democratic mind. Modern technologies of entertainment make it harder for this democratic mind to be happy, posing great obstacles to self-governance, especially in the most personal sense of governing one’s individual passions and actions. The American mind, as Tocqueville shows, has difficulty knowing its longings and needs. Wallace’s portrait of the American soul serves the Tocquevillian education in self-knowledge that might help Americans learn to be more content amidst the flux of modernity.

Infinite Jest contributes to the reader's moral education while avoiding the kind of moralism that fails to educate. Its difficulty serves as an exercise in the sustained attention that modern entertainment destroys. Wallace meets his readers where they are by describing the environment in which they live; he moves his readers beyond description by raising precisely the desperate questions he thinks serious literature should help its readers think about more clearly. Above all, he raises the question about the meaning of freedom and the good toward which it should aim. He helps his readers confront the challenges involved in self-government, contrasting the rigorous responsibility required for genuine liberty with the systematic failure of American society to treat that freedom with the seriousness it requires. For the lonely American lost in this confusion of permissions, *Infinite Jest* offers guidance and instruction while providing solace in the fact that our singular melancholy is not so singular.

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