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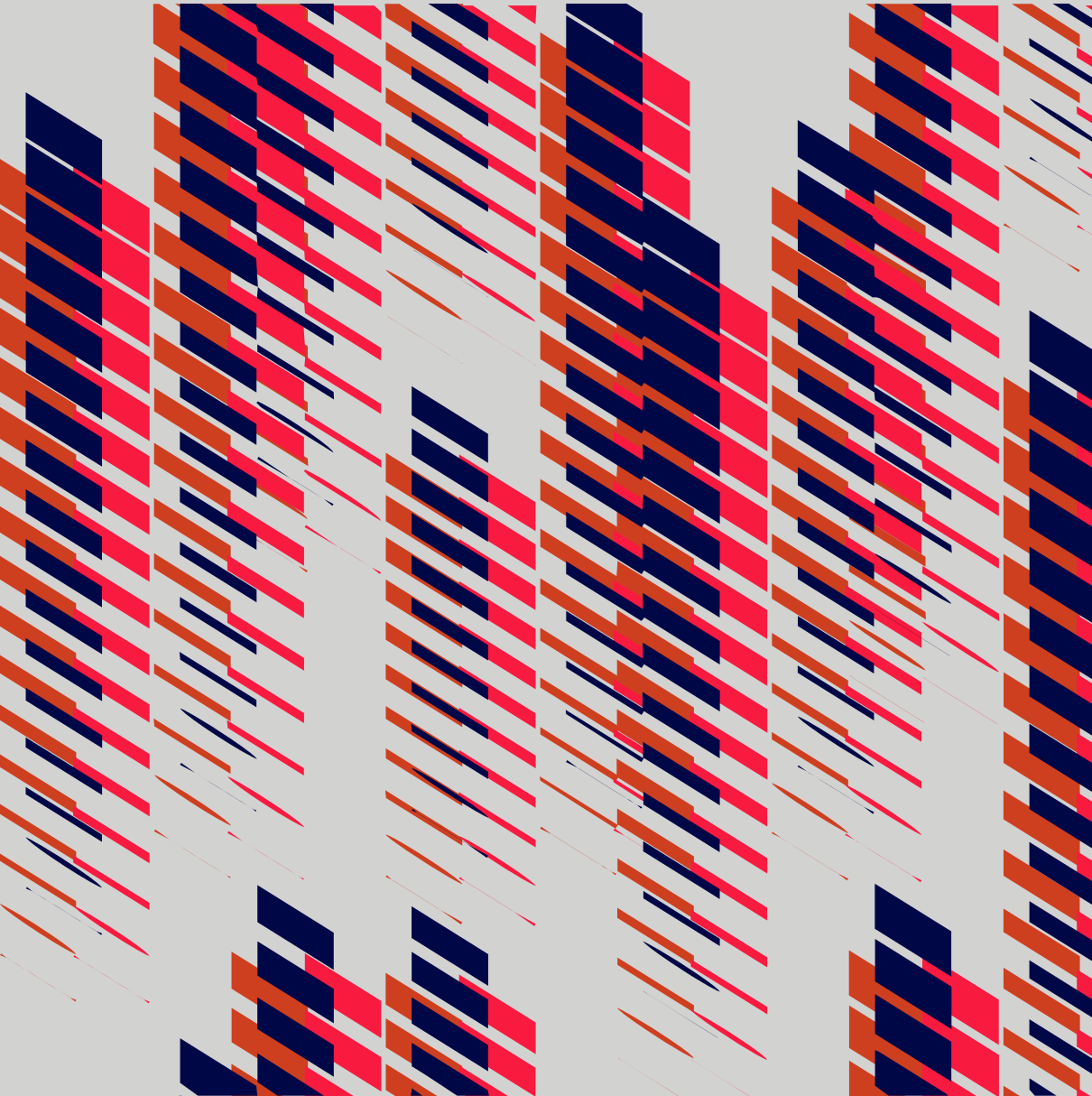

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Section 1
David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* Turns 25

edited by Allard Den Dulk and Pia Masiero

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Introduction

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Infinite Jest, David Foster Wallace's most famous book, published on February 1, 1996, turned 25 this year. This special issue celebrates the novel's silver anniversary with six fresh re-readings by prominent Wallace readers.

In the past twenty-five years, *Infinite Jest* has come to be regarded as a landmark attempt to move beyond the quicksands of postmodernist metafiction and irony, toward ways of mobilizing reflexivity, irony and other devices to new, *post*-postmodernist – that is, communicative and affirmative – ends. As such, Wallace's novel has become a main reference point beyond literary studies as well, in debates on what comes 'after postmodernism' (e.g. 'new sincerity', 'metamodernism' in film, visual art, or popular music), and can also be related to discussions about the need for new directions in Humanities scholarship (e.g. 'post-critique', 'surface reading').

As Mary Holland points out, *Infinite Jest* is both "a defining achievement and the beginning of a new literary project for Wallace", which "expresses in grand style the complex potential of its author and its period to reimagine the future of America, and of American letters" (2018, 127-8). *Infinite Jest* amplifies and deepens many themes that Wallace worked on in his earlier texts – addiction (both to drugs and entertainment), solipsism, narcissism, tennis, language and communication, to name the most obvious, placing them within a powerful tripartite institutional frame – the Enfield Tennis Academy, Ennet House halfway facility, in a country called O.N.A.N. (the Organization of North American Nations, in which the US has annexed Canada and Mexico) – that hammers home the pervasiveness of the poisons beleaguering present-day America. Formally speaking too, *Infinite Jest* magnifies (rather literally) the devices Wallace employed ever

since his debut novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) – disruption of linearity, elliptical structures, shifting focalizations, heavy footnoting, pervasive allusiveness, multivocality (in terms of registers and idiolects) –, but within a scaffolding that suggests that coherence can be brought about by the reader, with the help of a shifting, evanescent but recognizable narrator who remains audibly present within the 1,079 pages of main text and endnotes. As such, thematically and formally, *Infinite Jest* is also the basis for the rest of Wallace's fiction oeuvre – the story collections *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004), and the posthumous novel *The Pale King* (2011) – and the further development these works represent.

Whether these features of *Infinite Jest* point to postmodernism, post-postmodernism or, as some scholars (such as Timothy Jacobs and Andrew Hoberek) seem to suggest, to a pre-modernist – that is, realistic – framing, testifies to the book's richness and complexity, and provides one of the reasons why it bears and invites new readings. Tim Vermeulen's essay, which closes this special issue, is a further contribution to this intriguing debate. A further reason for *Infinite Jest*'s continuing appeal may well be that "the book's future is [contemporary readers'] present" (Boswell 2018, 30), or, even more radically, that it "increasingly becomes less a contemporary or futuristic American novel and more a historical one" (Holland 2018, 133). According to Jeffrey Severs, in his contribution to this special issue, *Infinite Jest* discerns the origins of the media forms through which American conservative politics has gone on to agitate and mobilize its base; while Mary Shapiro, in her article, remarks that Wallace's caricature of celebrity politics may even seem "gentle and benign in retrospect", compared to what the world has witnessed in the past years.

Be it because of its prescience, its revolving around the philosophical core of Marathe and Steeply's conversation concerning free will, choice, necessity and responsibility, or the sheer beauty of its linguistic pyrotechnics, or its ambiguous relationship with phases or movements in literary history, or the perpetual issue of the fate of its two main characters, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, *Infinite Jest* is worth re-reading. With this special issue, we want to argue that *Infinite Jest* is "not an independent entity but a node in a network" (Burn 2012, 6). But whereas Stephen Burn uses this characterization to refer to the "different components of [Wallace's] novelistic toolkit" that allow him to "[throw] his genealogy into sharper relief" (13), we would like to borrow the phrase to evoke the complex relationship that reading creates, the unique communicative process that is shaped when a singular experiential background interacts with a given text – as such, the novel is a node in a network of (re)readings.

We are well aware of the controversies that have surrounded Wallace lately – such as his real-life mistreatment of women – in the wake of the MeToo movement. We are also well aware that these revela-

tions have caused debate among scholars, some of whom have voiced their uneasiness reading, teaching and researching Wallace. In a time in which many of us are trying to open up the canonical selection of our syllabi, to diversify our reading lists, getting away from the preoccupation with white male genius, there can be good reasons to focus on other authors than Wallace. But we also believe that Wallace's works hold significant meaningful potential for contemporary readers, and that the worlds they disclose are worth exploring, from different perspectives. As far as we are concerned, we would like to avoid the controversy to bar our engagement with the literary text. In much the same way that disentangling the reading of Wallace's works from the so-called "essay-interview nexus" (Kelly 2010) – that is, the essay "E Unibus Pluram" and interview with Larry McCaffery largely determining the outlines of Wallace interpretation – has meant that wider disciplinary, thematic and transnational views have opened up Wallace's literary project to much more nuance and intricacies, we think it is preferable to move past any deterministic way of making sense of Wallace's story worlds, narratives, and characters.

The six pieces gathered here are as many examples of the different ways in which each reader co-determines the meaning that *Infinite Jest* may have for audiences twenty-five years since its publication. A book happens differently in every single reader because it is a communicative endeavor that mobilizes the network of experiential repertoires belonging to distinctive individualities. Reading intersects our deictic field, what/where/when we are, and responds to the different readerly expectations/assumptions/questions that we each bring into play. We may see in these differently shaped co-determinations a confirmation of Wolfgang Iser's insight that texts are actualized by readers, or an instantiation of what Ed Finn calls "the social lives of books" (2012, 151).

Thus, the most obvious feature of the essays that follow is heterogeneity – attesting to both the richness of Wallace's novel and the individual networks activated by reading. However, it is possible to detect in these different conversations with *Infinite Jest* a common denominator that we find important and insightful to remark on. That is, we recognize in the contributions to this issue an overall return to close reading. Some scholars have discerned specific periods in Wallace studies, such as the early reception of *Infinite Jest* as 'just another' postmodernist novel, followed by criticism centering on the above-mentioned "essay-interview nexus", and then a widening of hermeneutic contexts. While we do not want to speak of a new period (simply because it suggests a consecutiveness that does not do justice to different simultaneous developments), we do venture to say that this return to close reading may amount to a new accentuation; and we cannot but express our personal satisfaction in witnessing this renewed attention to the textual specificities of *Infinite Jest*.

The essays in this issue thus close-read Wallace's novel starting from different subjective stances, offering distinct ways of engaging with a text that is uncannily attuned to the disquieting textures of our present world and that confirms itself as a goldmine both at the linguistic and narratological level (see Shapiro and Ardovino/Masiero) and at the intertextual (see Den Dulk), philosophical and sociocultural levels (see Redgate, Severs, and Vermeulen). Most of all, in celebrating *Infinite Jest*'s 25th anniversary, this special issue demonstrates that the rich scholarly conversation Wallace's book has spawned is far from being exhausted.

Looked at macroscopically, this special issue draws a trajectory that goes from the particular to the general. Mary Shapiro's essay – "Hidden Gems: Unexpectedly Poetic Lines Easily Overlooked (?) in *Infinite Jest*'s Voluminous Flow" – analyzes several moments of the novel's "breathtaking poeticism" – "hidden gems", as she calls them. In offering highly detailed close readings of these lines, Shapiro does not just want to remind us of Wallace's oft-praised "extraordinary facility with language" and of the "playfulness" of his prose, but shows that these lines can be seen to connect, through their careful composition, to the larger themes of the novel. For example, Shapiro looks closely at the meter, phonology, indefinite identifiers, and agentive construction of the line – focalized through Hal Incandenza – "A Brockton man in a Land's End parka took a fall too burlesque to have been unstaged" (Wallace 1996, 949), as indicative of Hal's awakening awareness of choice and responsibility. Shapiro also brings out the easily overlooked "linguistic patterning" of a not-so-hidden gem, the novel's final line – "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (981) – and contrasts it with a similar line halfway the novel, as bookending Don Gately's development, in order to suggest a hopeful reading of *Infinite Jest*'s conclusion. Overall, Shapiro's impressive analyses remind us of how syntactic and semantic patterning contribute to what makes Wallace's novel a great literary work: that the beauty and pleasure generated by language help us understand the world anew.

With Allard den Dulk's contribution – "'I Am in Here': A Comparative Reading of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*" – the zooming in is enriched in an intertextual direction. Den Dulk starts with Wallace's praise of Kafka's fiction for its "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical" and compares Kafka's famous novella to the two opening sections of *Infinite Jest*. Gregor Samsa and Hal Incandenza are both imprisoned in a "verminous" state, incapable of speech and violently subdued, while Ken Erdedy exhibits a reflective self-deception similar to Gregor's. Den Dulk analyzes the structure, descriptions and themes of these three 'transformation' narratives, in order to ask:

what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation in the opening scene? Most Wallace scholars have assumed the situation to be an exacerbation of the emptiness experienced by the younger Hal in other parts of the novel. But understanding it, like the metamorphosis conjured up by Kafka, as a literalized metaphor rooted in the specific cultural context invoked by the novel, allows Den Dulk to analyze the imagery at hand more precisely and – dare we say – more optimistically. Whereas Erdedy (as one of the novel's many addict-characters) represents a contemporary iteration of Kafka's original metaphor of insect-hood as alienation, Hal's metamorphosis can be seen to dramatize the values and risks of the development of selfhood *and* of writing literary fiction in a contemporary context: throughout *Infinite Jest*, and in other parts of Wallace's oeuvre, the desire to develop a self and to communicate with the other (selfhood and acknowledgment by/of the other being inextricably tied together) come with the risk of being deemed 'horrific' and the fear of isolation. As such, Den Dulk contends, it is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether Hal, and Wallace, are 'in there', communicating something meaningful, and thus whether *Infinite Jest* is indeed a novel of redemption.

In "*Infinite Jest*'s Voice(s) – Notes for an (Audible) Map", Adriano Ardovino and Pia Masiero too reflect on the reader's engagement with the text and look at meaningfulness as it might take place listening to the novel's voice. To do so, Ardovino and Masiero introduce the notion of 'vocal field' in order to understand the multilayered and dynamic workings of voice in Wallace's novel and try to get past the classical narratological concept of voice. Their proposal strives to bring out how *Infinite Jest* – which they take to be exemplary of but also more radical in this regard than "other masterpieces of contemporary literature" – is able to generate a "clear and recognizable voice" that at the same time is a "vocal paradox": it is present in and binds together all the novel's voices, but "without coalescing in a static whole"; the novel's voice is an "essence without essence", a presence that cannot be pinpointed or ascribed a consistent identity, what resonates in each reader while accepting to inhabit the novel's story world. Ardovino and Masiero do so by paying specific attention to Madame Psychosis/Joelle van Dyne, because she most clearly manifests the oscillatory qualities of the novel's narrative voice: the authors show how passages regularly switch between third and first-person, between omniscient and particularized, generating a "vocal confusion" that at the same time remains "fairly easy to navigate at the level of the single scene", as the reader is invited to abandon certainty regarding the "voice in charge of the telling", in favor of imagining "a shared existential positioning". Both Madame Psychosis's radio show and Joelle's veil can be seen as models or representations of the novel's voice: the show privileges an "evocative and evanescent rather than grounded rhetorical manner" and Joelle's veil "openly conceals" an individual character. Ardovino and Masiero

demonstrate that it is this permeability of voice, which readers need to "ventriloquize" in their acts of reading, that generates the particular "intimacy and understanding" that readers experience in *Infinite Jest*.

Jeffrey Severs's "Memories of the Limbaugh Administration: 1990s Politics, Conservative Media, and *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio" also close-reads elements of voice, sound and silence in *Infinite Jest*, as well as in Wallace's essay "Host" (2005), about conservative US talk radio. Severs does so in order to nuance Wallace's supposed view of entertainment media, to show Wallace's awareness – already from the early 1990s onward – of "the media forms through which conservative politics reached (and, increasingly, inflamed) its audience", and to propose certain portrayals of radio in *Infinite Jest* as a representation of "Wallace's own ideals" for the "positive, generative, anti-irony effects" of fictional voice. Severs uses "Host" – an analysis of Rush Limbaugh-style conservative talk radio – to retrospectively understand *Infinite Jest*'s (fleeting) imagining of President Limbaugh (who precedes Johnny Gentle) as suggesting Limbaugh's influence to be an "origin point of the nation's political degradation". But Severs also shows that Wallace – "a heavy listener to all sorts of radio" – sees a commonality in the "special intimacy" of the voice of a long novel and of a long radio show, and – akin to the analysis of Ardovino and Masiero – that there's a "symbiosis" between *Infinite Jest* and Madame Psychosis's radio show portrayed therein, as "good" productions of voice, versus destructive media forms, such as the lethal film *Infinite Jest* and Limbaugh's rhetorical style. As such, Severs contends, Wallace's "thinking about art, sincerity, and sentiment" can be seen as "radio-inspired", and understanding radio as offering a potential "set of counter-possibilities", including silence, versus the "loquacious certainty and simplistic truths" of contemporary conservative politics.

Jamie Redgate shifts toward a more philosophical direction with his "The Triumph of the Will of Athletes in *Infinite Jest*". His first move is to go against a seeming "truism in Wallace studies", namely that *Infinite Jest* demonstrates the illusion of "autonomous selfhood" and of "agency" via "inner life"; instead Redgate argues that the novel's portrayal of the sport of tennis – often seen by scholars to confirm the futility of selfhood – invites us to revise this view. Redgate contends that scholars have approached the "problem of athletic genius" in Wallace as being either materialistic or mystical: those who excel at tennis are either "dumb jocks" or touched by "divine inspiration"; but – and we should extend this to all Wallace's characters, Redgate says – they are *both*, "both body and soul, both machine and ghost *at the same time*", and Wallace's treatment of "tennis helps us see it". Though Wallace at points associates addiction and tennis, they are ultimately different ways of dealing with the problem of the self. Redgate points out that the important part of Schtitt's philosophy at ETA does not focus on physicality alone, but on being a self in a body.

Whereas drugs are a way of escaping consciousness, tennis is ultimately about being "present", being "*in* there", "such that the dualistic split between the two" – between body and soul – "is dissolved". In an analysis akin to that of Den Dulk, Redgate shows that Hal Incandenza's initial problem, as well as that of many of the other young tennis players, is that he has been inundated by materialistic theories of the individual as only a body – and that the change in Hal perhaps lies in a realization that he needs to "revise his theory", and that his ending might in fact be a "happy beginning". In any case, Redgate takes *Infinite Jest* as Wallace's warning that the atheist disbelief of Hal's generation's may lead them to seek refuge in a "political ideology that ultimately threatens their individuality".

Timotheus Vermeulen's "Wallace After Postmodernism (Again): Metamodernism, Tone, Tennis" concludes this issue on the silver anniversary of *Infinite Jest* by placing the study of Wallace as a post-postmodern author (which tends to limit its discussions to an American and British context, and focus only on literature) in relation to a "more transnational view", and "alongside other media and cultural forms"; and, like Redgate, Vermeulen therein also pays specific attention to the figure of the tennis player. Vermeulen considers different post-postmodern strategies that may be discerned in Wallace's work as well as in "visual art, popular media and even politics", focusing specifically on what has been termed "post-irony"; and rather than mapping the commonalities, Vermeulen focuses on bringing out the nuanced differences. For example, he compares the post-ironic, "credulous metafiction" – the explication of artificial strategies to achieve human connection – in Wallace and in visual artists Ragnar Kjartansson's *God* and Guido van der Werve's *Nummer 8*, in order to conclude that whereas Wallace "looks in vain for convincing solutions to the problem of depoliticized or corporatized irony", Kjartansson and Van der Werve are "purposefully unpersuasive": their works "keep the faith", even though it may seem ridiculous to do so. What the works share is what Vermeulen calls the "metamodern structure of feeling": "a re-energised and dispersed modernist impulse held in check (for better or worse) by postmodern doubt". This leads Vermeulen to consider what he deems one of the "pivots" of this structure of feeling in Wallace's oeuvre, namely the recurring concern with the tennis player: the (mostly white) tennis player as the "baseline" from which other identities deviate, the "center of attention", but also the "black hole" into which individual and "cultural sensibilities disappear". Even though Vermeulen does not say it in so many words, with reference to Redgate we might propose that the tennis player as representing a "materialist understanding of the self" also embodies the incentive for a "performance of transcendence" toward the other, for the "intersubjective care, empathy" that Wallace's work strives to establish.

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