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"Analysis Paralysis": The Suspicion of Suspicion in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace

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Blaise Pascal once offered the following advice to those perennially worried about knowing fact from fiction: "how few things can be demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind; custom provides the strongest and most firmly held proofs" (148). The concern about whether or not God existed was for Pascal an unnecessary anxiety: the question couldn't be answered by human knowledge, and so ultimately one just had to "wager" on whatever stood to be most beneficial, act as if this chosen answer was true, and the mind would eventually fall into line. For Pascal, if one stood to gain from believing in the truth of an idea then the great problems of epistemology could be reduced to a relatively simple and pragmatic calculation of benefit. Doubt, suspicion, and all the attendant epistemological worries would only count as wasted time.

It might at first seem surprising that this somewhat antiquated idea of Pascal's, conceived in seventeenth-century France, appears at the core of a novel by a writer considered to be the quintessential "modern" author, David Foster Wallace. But consider the following advice offered to a recovering drug addict in Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. To reap the benefits of the AA program, Don Gately, one of the central characters of the novel, is told by resident counsellor Gene M to imagine he is holding a box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix. The box of cake mix represents Boston AA. Gately is advised that the "box came with directions on the side any eight-year-old could read":

Gene M. said all Gately had to do was for fuck's sake give himself a break and relax and for once shut up and just follow the directions on the side of the fucking box. It didn't matter one fuckola whether Gately like believed a cake would result, or whether he understood the like fucking baking-chemistry of how a cake would result: if he just followed the motherfucking directions, and had sense enough to get help from slightly more experienced bakers to keep from fucking the directions up if he got confused somehow, but basically the point was if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result. He'd have his cake. (467)

This advice indeed seems lifted from Pascal almost verbatim (plus or minus a few turns of phrase, of course):

Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began ... (Pascal 156).

While the Pascalian influence on Wallace's work is perhaps interesting in its own right, and there are certainly more extensive and capable analyses of it to be done than mine, I invoke it here to highlight a particular emphasis in Wallace's work that I think exceeds the framework through which it is usually understood.

Wallace's fiction is commonly considered an attack on irony, being supposedly at the vanguard of a movement in recent American literature that Adam Kelly, in an illuminating analysis, has called the "New Sincerity" (131). But before anything else irony is a particular trope of understanding, a way of situating oneself in regards to an object of knowledge, and so Wallace's work needs not only to be understood in terms of what a culture considers unhip, trite, and sentimental, but how it comes to decide upon those things at all, how it chooses to understand its reality. Inspired by the Pascalian influence apparent in Wallace's portrayal of the Alcoholics Anonymous program, I intend to shift the focus away from issues of irony and sincerity and instead consider the importance of the epistemological tropes of suspicion and trust in reading *Infinite Jest*. More than anything else Wallace's depiction of the AA program tells us he is interested, like Pascal, in the existential implications of suspicion, in what might be lost in following doubt to its most "radical" conclusions.

I Suspicion

It is fruitful to view Western intellectual practice as exhibiting suspicious tendencies. From Descartes's "hyperbolic doubt," the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that Ricœur and Foucault see coming out of the legacy of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, to the endless "paranoia of the postmodern" that typifies recent academic trends (Bywater 79), the refusal to trust the veracity of surfaces has been a driving force in post-Enlightenment thought, becoming largely inextricable from how we understand the world. As a mode of critique, suspicion has a particular anxiety about the way fiction masquerades as truth. When a suspicious mind reads a given object, be it an advertisement, a novel, a film, a supermarket, or an egg carton, it most often proceeds by first separating the text into what Paul Ricœur calls an "architecture of meaning" (18), defining those elements it considers fictive and those it considers truer, more essential, in order to locate what it considers "the intentional structure of double meaning" (Ricœur 9). Beneath the fictive surface of a novel, for example, it might find hidden the "truer" forces of social repression and patriarchy. Behind the innocence of a bedtime tale it might discern the truth of the placating purpose of story, or the tyranny of naïve narrative closure, the fantasies of teleology and final consonance. And behind Pascal's wager it might find a weak submission to ideological fictions, a confirmation of the processes of social conditioning.

Over the years suspicion has doubtless proved itself a crucial resource for various politics of resistance, for challenging ossified structures of knowledge, and for exposing heinous fictions that definitely needed exposing. But some contend that these once fruitful intellectual practices have become so deeply entrenched that they are now the things to be suspiciously overcome. Rather than being a subversive tactic of liberation, the "routinisation" of suspicion can stand to mark a hermeneutic stasis. It can even, as Bruno Latour argues, mire important social and ecological issues in counterproductive doubt, the most obvious example being the tiresome "debates" about global warming:

the danger would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive distrust of good matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases! (Latour 227)

The work of David Foster Wallace can be considered another example of such a discourse, one that definitely admits suspicion's hermeneutic force, but is a little uneasy with its predominance. While Wallace's work is most commonly understood in

relation to irony, irony itself, as I have suggested, can in turn be understood as related to a subtending culture of suspicion and cynicism. In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace notes a complex interaction between knowledge, suspicion, art, and televisual culture, in which a particular rendering of irony—a mistrust in clichéd sentiment and all those words we now so confidently put between "shudder" quotes—is commoditised and exploited in order to constantly provide the psychological payoffs of knowingness, those feelings of superiority, safety, and power that come from suspiciously seeing through to the "truth" of things. In Wallace's reading, ostensibly postmodern advertisements draw attention to their fictive layers to make viewers feel attuned to the supposed truth of their intent. But this access to the "truth" is itself just another fiction aimed to mislead them into commercial pliancy:

[TV can] ease that painful tension between Joe's need to transcend the crowd and his status as Audience member. For to the extent that TV can flatter Joe about "seeing through" the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it's taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling. (Wallace 180)

The ironic viewer who would stand above these deliberately naive appeals would then also, and perhaps before anything else, be a suspicious reader, someone predisposed to seeing through the "surface" of a text. Irony, in these examples, would even be alike to the effect gained from "successful" suspicion, something like its reward, rather than an epistemological mode in itself. While in his essay Wallace ultimately intends that his critique of such tendencies will highlight the way much contemporary fiction struggles to subvert this culture, and thus we cannot help but look to his own work to see how it supposedly "attacks" irony, it is also just as crucial to consider its embedded critique of suspicious hermeneutics.

II Trust

In *Infinite Jest's* portrayal of Boston's Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous programs, Wallace attempts to propose a kind of neo-Pascalian "wager." And like Pascal's, Wallace's is based on the willed performance of that most critically maligned of concepts, trust: that is, a willingness to become, like Pascal, blasé with truth as long as it stands to be beneficial.

Within the novel the fictitious Ennet Drug and Alcohol House, along with the adjacent Enfield Tennis Academy, is staged as a school of personal (re)development, dramatising approaches to self-help in the damaged landscape of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment's Boston. And it is here where Don Gately, the novel's unlikely hero, has ended up on his quest to escape the "spider" of addiction.

As it openly admits, Alcoholics Anonymous is an easy target for a suspicious mode of thought bent on locating fictions because it "literally makes no sense" (368). But like Pascal, Wallace's AA submits the problem of truth and error to a more primary consideration of benefit, and celebrates the power of language and custom to create realities, rather than being suspicious of this process of linguistic mediation. So it is a system, like signification itself, that functions on "the carrot-and-donkey aspect of trudging to Meetings only to be told to trudge to still more Meetings" (1001); like any transcendental signifier, the revelations it hints at can never truly arrive. It is also based on assertions that "do not make anything resembling rational sense" (1002).

For example, Joelle van Dyne battles with the AA precept "I'm Here But For the Grace of God." She finds the phrase is

literally senseless, and regardless of whether she hears it or not it's meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radarange. (366)

But perhaps the strongest reason Joelle feels uncomfortable with the present example is that she senses in its obvious untruth the potential truth of all meaning's fictitiousness, how all sense might just be made up of nonsense of one form or another. Within the AA program these words are a means to an end, rather than something to be resisted or deconstructed.

To exist within Infinite Jest's AA program is thus to be uncomfortably close to the linguistic production of reality, to work at meaning's coalface, exposed to the flames of its fictitiousness, but all the while being forced to deny this very vista. So while AA is a process firmly against the mechanisms of denial (one of its favourite slogans is "Denial is not a river in Egypt" [272]), it is also based on a paradoxical imperative to deny the status of meaning as a production, as well as the denial of the significance of this paradox:

For me, the slogan [Analysis-Paralysis] means there's no set way to argue intellectual-type stuff about the Program [...] You can't think about it like an intellectual thing [...] You can analyse it til you're breaking tables with your forehead and find a cause to walk away, back Out There, where the Disease is. Or you can stay and hang in and do the best you can. (1002)

Although it is common knowledge that its precepts are full of logical contradiction and impasse, that it is a blatantly fictitious enterprise, the difficulty which Wallace's portrayal poses, both for his characters and for his readers schooled in suspicious hermeneutics, is that as a process of healing the AA program somehow seems to work with great efficacy. Enter the redemption of Don Gately.

Despite his initial reluctance to embrace the program's undertakings, much to his surprise Gately finds it having a definite effect: he "all of a sudden realised that quite a few days had gone by since he'd even thought about Demerol or Talwin or even weed" (467). The bracketing of the desire to know and interpret, and the willed trust in the efficacy of a process that one cannot know by necessity, initially frustrates him, and even makes him suspicious: "He couldn't believe it. He wasn't Grateful so much as kind of suspicious about it, the Removal [of his addiction]" (468). And all this can definitely be intellectually uncomfortable for a reader well-versed in suspicious hermeneutics, let alone the somewhat unintellectual Gately:

It did, yes, tentatively seem maybe actually to be working, but Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting on haemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody's ever been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality. (349)

Ultimately the AA program presents the novel's hero and its readers with an impasse, a block to what one knows and can critique, refuting the basic assumption that links narrative progression and change with the acquisition of knowledge. While others in AA seek to understand and debunk it, they also significantly fail to achieve the kind of recovery experienced by Gately. As Elizabeth Freudenthal suggests, "despite the problems one may have with AA as a vehicle for healthy living, Gately's mode of fighting addiction is the only one in the novel that actually works" (191). And while Freudenthal suggests that Gately's success comes through a ritual "anti-interiority," a "mode of identity founded in the material world of both objects and biological bodies and divested from an essentialist notion of inner emotional, psychological, and spiritual life" (192), to me it seems that were Gately unable to resist the pleasures of the suspicious mind then little of his "abiding" in the exterior world would be possible. Ultimately, what Gately achieves comes through a kind of epistemological "trust."

III Reading Trustfully

By occupying such a central place in the narrative, this neo-Pascalian wager around which the novel's AA program is built is obviously intended to bear not only on its characters, but on how the novel is read. So how might we also "learn" from such Pascalian gambits? How might we read the novel without suspicion? What might we gain by becoming Don Gately? What, on the other hand, might we lose? While this essay is far too short to conduct this kind of investigation in full, a few points might still be raised in lieu of a proper conclusion.

By openly submitting to his ignorance of what his actions mean, Gately is able to approach success, conclusion, and fulfillment. What the novel's ending has in store for him is another question altogether, but Freudenthal views Gately's closing scenes as the apotheosis of his "anti-intellectual endeavor" (206). Gately's narrative thus also presents a challenge to readers thoroughly led by suspicious hermeneutics, and encourages us, if we are to accept this notion that is key to *Infinite Jest* (but we can, of course, refuse not to), to place ourselves in the position of the AA attendee, as a subject of the text's discourse, not in possession of knowledge through which to critique it and scale that "architecture of meaning."

Many aspects of the novel of course impel us to read suspiciously, to gather clues like detectives, to interrogate the veracity of claims. Consider, for example, the compounded conflicting accounts of whether Joelle van Dyne has been horribly disfigured by acid, or is sublimely beautiful (compare, for instance, the explanation given on 538 with that on 795). Yet ultimately, recalling the AA ethos, the narrative makes it difficult for us to successfully execute these suspicious reading practices. Similar to a text like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, that for Brian McHale ultimately resists any attempt to answer the many questions it poses (90-91), *Infinite Jest* frequently invokes a logic of what we might call epistemological equivocation. Either the veil-wearing Joelle van Dyne is hideously and improbably deformed or is superlatively beautiful; either AA is a vapid institution of brainwashing or is the key to recovery from substance abuse; either the novel's matriarch, Avril Incandenza, is a sinister "black widow" or a superlatively caring mother. The list goes on.

To some extent, the plethora of conflicting accounts simply engages an "innocent" readerly curiosity. But regardless of the precise nature of this hermeneutic desire stimulated by the text, one cannot help but feel, as Marshall Boswell suggests, that "Wallace's point seems to be that these issues are not the issue" (175). If we read the novel attempting to harmonise these elements, interrogating the reliability of the given textual evidence, we will be sorely disappointed, if not doomed to the "analysis paralysis" that is much feared in the novel's AA program. While one of the pleasures Wallace's novel offers readers is the encouragement to participate actively in the text,

it is also something it is wary of. And this is where the rub of the book lies. Just like in AA, we can potentially keep analysing its ambiguities forever; it is indeed designed to be pleasurable in just this way. But it is also intended, at least so Wallace tells us, to resist the addictive nature of pure entertainment:

The original title was *A Failed Entertainment*. The idea is that the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work [...]. And the tension of the book is to try to make it at once extremely entertaining—and also sort of warped, and to sort of shake the reader awake about some of the things that are sinister in entertainment. (Wallace in Lipsky 79)

If we consider what it might mean to view the book as a "Failed Entertainment," and consider what it is we love to do when reading suspiciously, we can then see that it is perhaps intended to steer us away from trying to decode it, especially when it is constantly suggested to us that it is this effort of analysis that tends to move one out of the immediacy of a given moment. The fact that "nobody's ever been able to figure AA out" (349), yet it still indubitably works, seems to suggest how we are to approach the novel.

But what are we offered instead of these pleasures of suspicious reading? Perhaps, like the AA attendee, the novel wants us to learn to listen to what is already in front of us: for the AA member it is all those stories offered up at the "podium"; for us it is all the pain and joy written in the text. In place of a conclusive ending that gives us all that we want to know, that shows us everything that "happens," in its final scene the novel instead tells the story of a man finding his "bottom," his lowest ebb, waking up "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand" (981). This man, of course, is Don Gately. If we see this final moment only as a frustration of narrative desire, as a turning away from full understanding, from a revelation of the "truth" the narrative has been withholding, then we perhaps fail the task Wallace's text, like AA, constantly asks of us: to listen, to accept, to trust.

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