

CONSCIOUSNESS ACCORDING TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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Consciousness According to David Foster Wallace

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Keywords

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escapism

La question fondamentale à laquelle cet article tâche de répondre concerne la nature de la relation que l'œuvre de Wallace entretient avec la notion de bonheur. L'hypothèse principale est que la réponse à cette question est à chercher auprès d'un thème essentiel qui parcourt l'œuvre entière de l'écrivain, à savoir son rapport à la conscience. Pour ce faire, cet article se réfère principalement à This Is Water, texte fondateur dans lequel Wallace fournit un condensé de son rapport à la question de la conscience et qui devient la pierre angulaire de l'analyse de ce thème dans l'œuvre entière. La méthode d'investigation retenue propose un examen individuel des divers aspects de la conscience tels qu'ils sont énoncés comme postulats théoriques dans This Is Water, puis par une illustration au travers d'exemples paradigmatiques issus de la production fictionnelle de l'auteur, plus précisément les quatre textes correspondant à sa période de maturité.

Introduction

In 2005, Wallace gave a commencement address at Kenyon College that later became famous under the title *This Is Water*, and that both summarizes and schematizes Wallace's thoughts on consciousness. The present essay, therefore, uses *This Is Water* as a cornerstone for analysis in order to indicate how the contents of *This Is Water* pervade all of Wallace's fiction, how these contents lead back to the central theme of consciousness, and how, as a result, all of Wallace's fiction can be said to explore the theme of consciousness.

The method is as follows: each facet of Wallace's discourse on consciousness is treated individually, in its own section or subsection. Each facet, also, is transposed from its theoretical formulation in *This Is Water* to at least one paradigmatic representation in Wallace's fiction.

The fictional examples cover all of Wallace's four mature¹ works, which should suffice to indicate the pervasiveness of the treated concepts throughout Wallace's fiction. I have not included Wallace's first novel (except for a brief mention) and first short-story collection for simple reasons of length. That these two works constitute further proof in defense of the present argument can be demonstrated, but in another setting. Here, delimitation was needed, I felt, for the sake of clarity.

Despair: our default setting

The automatic default setting of consciousness

In *This Is Water*, Wallace explains that our “natural, hard-wired default setting [...] is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self” (44). In other words, then, each one of us thinks of himself as “the absolute center of the universe” (36) and thus Wallace persists: “the world as you experience it is there in front of you, or behind you, to the left or right of you” (40). Thoughts, feelings, and experiences are always *your* thoughts, *your* feelings, and *your* experiences. Other people's thoughts and feelings are communicated to you, but you can't feel them, forget live them. Other people are a sort of abstraction, something you think you get to understand—and never actually do—through a theoretical system of signs called language. *You*, on the other hand, are concrete, your thoughts and feelings are “immediate, urgent, *real*” (41). Cogito ergo sum, and of everything else I shall doubt. *This*, for Wallace, is the default setting of consciousness. It is natural and automatic, unconscious and pervasive. “Consciousness,” therefore, means “the state of being awake,” or the “full activity of the minds and senses, as in waking life,” and is *not* related to the standard psychological definition of “the mental activity of which a person is aware as contrasted with unconscious mental processes.”² It is important to remember this definition because, in general, the term “consciousness” has myriad (and at times extremely) divergent meanings, and because, as we will see in part two of the essay, Wallace himself varies his use of the

1. With “mature” I mean those coming after Wallace's well-known 1993 aesthetic manifesto including the interview with Larry McCaffery and the essay “E Unibus Pluram.”

2. All definitions are from wordreference.com, which surely doesn't belong among the most authoritative sources available, but research in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* confirmed that the definitions provided by wordreference.com were the most precise for the purposes of this article.

CONSCIOUSNESS ACCORDING TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

term.³ For now, then, note that in relation to the default setting consciousness is essentially *unconscious*: it controls each one of us, and it “supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence” (36). As such, consciousness imprisons us in an individualism so dominant that it is always on the verge of solipsism.

This, Wallace concludes, is “the automatic, unconscious way that I experience [...] life when I’m operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world” (83).

Consciousness’s automaticity in Wallace’s fiction

This is perhaps best fictionalized in the short-story collection *Oblivion* (2004). As Boswell has convincingly argued, the whole collection “deepen[s] what Stephen Burn has called ‘Wallace’s career-long fascination with consciousness,’” and examines how we are “controlled, sometimes to the point of madness, by the layered, nested, entropic workings of [our] interiors” (“Monologue” 151). For example, the short story “Good Old Neon”—widely recognized as the most distinguished piece in the collection—contains a perspicuous and straightforward illustration of this theme. Its narrator, by aligning with Immanuel Kant, unequivocally illustrates his belief that the nature of consciousness is automatic, pervasive, and yielded to deeper, unconscious, and uncontrollable forces:

the German logician Kant was right in this respect, human beings are all pretty much identical in terms of our hardwiring. Although we are seldom conscious of it, we are all basically just instruments or expressions of our evolutionary drives, which are themselves the expressions of forces that are infinitely larger and more important than we are.

(*Oblivion* 173)

Consciousness condemns us to existential solipsism

Consciousness’s default setting controls us, and it tells us that we are “the absolute center of the universe.” It, therefore, condemns us to existential solipsism, i.e. “the quality of being self-centered or selfish” (*OED*).

This Is Water is, in fact, a last-call attempt to rescue us precisely from this solipsism. And so is Wallace’s fiction because, for Wallace, “self-centered” and “selfish” do not aptly describe the gravity of the condition.

3. Relatedly, Wallace has explicitly claimed, in an interview on the KCRW radio show “Bookworm” in 1997, that “we need more words for self-consciousness the way Eskimos have for snow” (n.p.).

Existential solipsism is a far more eloquent definition because it indicates that the default setting condemns us to a sort of unconscious acceptance of philosophical solipsism, i.e. the “theory that the self is all that can be known to exist” (*OED*). In the words of *This Is Water*, then, the default setting makes you “totally hosed” (55) and “it is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms nearly always shoot themselves in...the *head*” (58) (i.e. *consciousness*). In addition, the default setting renders you “alone at the center of all creation [...] uniquely, completely, imperially alone.” Existential solipsism, therefore, can also be (and has been⁴) referred to as “existential loneliness.”

Existential solipsism in Wallace's fiction

There are myriad examples, but of these, the novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) is the most enlightening: it contains hundreds of characters, and almost all of them are representative of existential solipsism. For instance, Hal Incandenza (the protagonist) and his tennis-academy mates talk about existential solipsism in terms directly related to *This Is Water*. Hal declares: “welcome to the meaning of *individual*. We’re each deeply alone here. It’s what we all have in common, this aloneness.” His mate Arslanian adds: “alienation, [...] existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism.” Hal, again, replies: “in a nutshell, what we’re talking about here is loneliness” (112-113).

This loneliness defines, for example, Ken Erdedy, a character representative of the dozens (if not hundreds) of addicts that populate *Infinite Jest*, and of how addiction is a consequence of existential solipsism. We encounter him while he’s waiting alone, at home, for his dealer to show up, and he cannot help but get “lost in a paralytic thought-helix” (335) of paranoid anxieties about himself, his loneliness, and all the possible ways he might not get the fix he needs to forget about himself. Existential solipsism, here, transmutes in such extreme desolation, self-obsession, self-judgment, and apathy, that Erdedy becomes the paradigm of what—in analyzing addiction in *Infinite Jest*—den Dulk defines as “hyperreflexivity [that] leads to a total alienation from the self” (58). We meet Erdedy again around two hundred pages later, at one of two main settings in the novel, a Halfway House for recovering addicts and alcoholics. Here, he is taught one of AA’s (and *Infinite Jest*’s) deepest truths: “that 99% of compulsive thinkers’ thinking is about themselves [and] that 99% of the

4. I am referring to an interview Wallace gave to the German television station ZDF in 2003, available on Youtube, but the term occurs repeatedly in his interviews, nonfiction, and fiction, and is also widely used in the criticism on David Foster Wallace.

head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself" (204).

Existential solipsism leads to despair

This Is Water "is about making it to thirty, or maybe even fifty, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head" (130). This sense of despair finds an explicative correlative in a very basic interpretation of Schopenhauer's main ideas in *The World as Will and Representation*. The parallel has already been made,⁵ and I shortly reframe it here only to define one key aspect of the default setting. For Schopenhauer, everything that exists is a manifestation of a force called Will. This force is pervasive, spontaneous, irrational, impulsive, and selfish. It is also overpowering, and human beings are unconsciously and irredeemably driven by it. Of course, the nature of the Will causes despair, and since human beings *are* Will, they are also condemned to despair. This is the nature of Being; it is the way things are—a conviction that Schopenhauer and Wallace share, as the Will equals the default setting of consciousness (the analogy works for our purposes, but keep in mind that a deeper exploration of Schopenhauer's and Wallace's thoughts would also show substantial differences). Or, I should say, Wallace's default setting holds all these characteristics of the Will and, like the Will, sentences every individual to irreversible conflict with everything Other. Both the Will and consciousness, then, result in a tragic and incurable despair that pervades all existence, as "The Suffering Channel," another story from *Oblivion*, testifies: "CONSCIOUSNESS IS NATURE'S NIGHTMARE" (282). This despair, in Wallace's fiction, culminates in three main concrete human conducts: escapism, performance, and self-deception.

Escapism in Wallace's fiction

Infinite Jest fictionalizes this despair in an endless cast of addicts and, more significantly, in a whole desperate nation addicted to entertainment. For, as Dowling and Bell rightly point out, "the personal hell that drives characters [...] to seek refuge in alcohol or [drugs] is simply an extreme version of the spiritual emptiness that haunts everyone in the society" (56) *Infinite Jest* represents. In other words, almost everyone in the book is trying to escape from the same inescapable fear: being "uniquely, completely, imperially alone."

5. See Bennett, "Inside David Foster Wallace's Head," and Vermeule, "The Terrible Master: David Foster Wallace and the Suffering of Consciousness."

This holds true for all of Wallace's fiction. Wallace criticism has already amply demonstrated this, and we shall look at Wallace's very last work, *The Pale King* (2011), to hint at how this theme held sway till the very end. In it, the fictional author "David Wallace" tells us that he wrote the book to explore "why we recoil from the dull," and why we have "this terror of silence with nothing diverting to do" (87). He then provides a tentative answer: "maybe [...] because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, [...] and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling" (Ibid).

"David Wallace," then, diagnoses escapism as a pervasive human conduct: we constantly try to distract ourselves from the tragic truth of our existence, the "deeper type of pain" our default setting condemns us to.

Performance

Another consequence of despair is the individual's attempt to make the self and the universe coincide, either by subsuming the universe into the self or by "fill[ing] the universe with *Self*" (Wallace, *Broom* 91). Norman Bombardini in *The Broom of the System* (1987), Wallace's first novel, undertakes the latter attempt by eating infinite amounts of food to become a giant and thereby fill "a non-full universe [of] vastly empty lonely spaces" (90). This is yet another example of escapism, in fact, but our interest lies elsewhere.

The condition whereby Self and universe coincide is, ultimately, philosophical solipsism, where, as you will recall, "the self is all that can be known to exist." In philosophical solipsism, there is nothing outside the self and, therefore, "former divisions between self and other morph into conflicts within the self, and a recursive paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins" (Kelly, "New Sincerity" 136). In this dimension, the individual perceives all worldly events as inextricably connected with the self and, therefore, as *attributable* to the self. He, in short, feels that every fact of the world says something about him, his faults, and his merits (as Sartre has said in *Being and Nothingness*, he feels that he must carry the whole weight of the world on his shoulders). This unbearable sense of individual responsibility sets him on the perennial brink of collapse and, in response, he adopts a performative self (hyper-reflexive and hyper-judgmental) in a desperate attempt to carry the unbearable burden.

Performance in Wallace's fiction

The protagonist of “Good Old Neon,”⁶ for example, wants to commit suicide because he knows he lives a fraudulent life but just can't stop; the burden lying beneath the performance is too terrifying. Maintaining the performative self (a successful career, so-called friends etc.) enables the retention of the façade self-identity that protects him against the inherent human despair that comes from solipsism's imperial aloneness and weight of the world. On the other hand, though, the performative self enhances the very sense of burden by feeding on solipsism's infinite attribution to the self and, finally, reveals its nature as a defense mechanism that crushes its carrier under the burden of performance. Accordingly, the protagonist kills himself, and even his suicide becomes a performance: “the idea was to have the accident [...] occur someplace isolated enough that no one else would see it, so that there would be as little an aspect of performance to the thing as I could manage” (*Oblivion* 177). This, the protagonist knows, is a mere performance of disinterest about performing, that is, he wants people to think he committed suicide without thinking of what people would think. He concludes appropriately: “this is the sort of shit we waste our lives thinking about” (*Ibid.*).

Self-deception

Here the link with Schopenhauer strengthens itself. For the German philosopher, we try to escape the ineludible pervasiveness of the Will by lying to ourselves: we pretend the Will does not govern us while we know in our hearts that it does. The same is true for Wallace's default setting, as Timpe rightly notes: “the more central the belief is to our self-understanding, [...] the more likely we are to engage in self-deception about the belief in question” (66) and indeed “we err, Wallace thinks, when we [...] refuse to [...] consider that what we take for granted may, in fact, be mistaken” (55). In addition, *This Is Water* refers to the default setting as “the utter wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of” (35) and Wallace admits that “a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded” (33). In this sense, Wallace aligns with psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who writes, in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011): “you believe you know what goes on in your mind [but] most impressions and thoughts arise in your conscious experience without your knowing how they got there” (4).

6. Another explicit example is “The Depressed Person” in the short-story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), not included for reasons of length.

Self-deception in Wallace's fiction

“Good Old Neon” would again be paradigmatic, as its protagonist suffers from Imposter Syndrome, but to hint at how self-deception is pervasive throughout Wallace’s fiction, I will briefly analyze the second of the two short stories entitled “The Devil Is a Busy Man” from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) (a short story that it would be interesting to read in the light of Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*). Here, the protagonist gives someone a gift and maintains anonymity to prevent the act of giving from selfishness. He is afraid he gives to hear “thank you,” which makes giving egoistic, not altruistic and, in other words, he is afraid even gift-giving doesn’t escape solipsism. As the story advances, though, it gradually transpires that his actions are motivated by his desperate need to feel like a good person. He is, in fact, performing altruism to pursue his egoistic need of feeling altruistic. In the end, the despair inherent in such solipsism drives him to deceive not just others but *himself*: “[he] showed an unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive [him]self and other people” (192).

Happiness: “learning how to think”

Awareness

The default setting of consciousness, in *This Is Water*, amounts to “a close-mindedness that’s like an imprisonment so complete that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up” (32). As a result, Wallace’s fiction represents self-centered and desperate individuals brought to acts of escapism, performance, and self-deception by forces “that are infinitely larger and more important than” they are.

But is there a way out of this bind?

The main difference between Schopenhauer and Wallace is that *This Is Water* provides a way out: each one of us can learn to exercise “some ‘critical awareness’ about [him]self and [his] certainties” (33) thereby “somehow altering or getting free of [his] natural, hardwired default setting” (44). This process, Wallace explains, has “everything to do with simple awareness” (131).

And it is in this dimension that, in Wallace’s vocabulary, “consciousness” draws near to what we previously indicated as its standard psychological definition. When intended in direct resistance to the default setting, “consciousness” becomes “awareness of one’s own existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings etc.,” or “awareness of something for what it is” (wordreference.com). In this sense, then,

CONSCIOUSNESS ACCORDING TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

“consciousness” becomes synonym of “awareness,” which latter term is a favorite of Wallace’s and is charged with the severe task of defeating consciousness’s default setting. However, if one must succeed in this task, two prerequisites are necessary: the arduous constant exercising of attention and of choice.

Paying attention

This Is Water asserts the necessity of strenuous attention: “it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your head” (50). This constant monologue is, of course, the default setting of consciousness, and can be defeated only by “simply paying attention to what’s going on in front of me. [...] Paying attention to what’s going on *inside* me” (48-49). *This*, it turns out, is Wallace’s definition of awareness.

Paying attention in Wallace’s fiction

This can be best understood by looking at *The Pale King*, the novel Wallace was writing when he gave the Kenyon College address, and which at times reads like an explicit fictional reproduction of it.⁷ In the novel, as Andersen has argued, characters like David Cusk and Claude Sylvanshine are “self-absorbed” into a “crippling introspection [that] overrules any attempt to pay attention to what goes on outside,” them. As a result, they find “it difficult to escape the confines of [their] own skull” (13).

Furthermore, around one hundred pages of the novel are dedicated to Chris Fogle’s monologue, where he describes his life-saving shift from

7. Some readers may be misled by the idea that *The Pale King* is about boredom and the IRS, and that these topics have nothing to do with *This Is Water*. But this is not so. In *The Pale King*, the IRS functions mainly as a setting that enables the exploration of boredom; and in turn, the value of the exploration of boredom resides precisely in its being the framework within which it becomes a matter of life and death to learn to exercise the ability to pay attention in order to defeat the default setting of one’s consciousness (when a character named Lane Dean Jr. is unable to exercise this kind of attention in the face of boredom, he immediately starts to contemplate suicide). And to learn to exercise the ability to pay attention in order to defeat the default setting of consciousness and avoid suicide is precisely the main topic of *This Is Water*. Speech and novel, therefore, are related to their very core. In addition, their relations go so far as to include even such details as funny anecdotes. In *This Is Water*, a checkout clerk tells you to “‘have a nice day’ in a voice that is the absolute voice of death.” In *The Pale King*, a checkout clerk “utters the words ‘Have a nice day’ while her expressions indicates that it’s really a matter of total indifference to her whether you drop dead in the parking lot outside ten seconds from now” (289). Also, both speech and novel use the image of “carts with crazy wheels” for humorous ends.

This Is Water's “automatically hardwired” default setting—which Fogle terms “unawareness” that “we do [...] automatically,” (185) as if on “robotic autopilot” (187)—to awareness: “waking up to how unaware I normally was, [...] it felt like I actually *owned* myself” (188). It “had to do with paying attention,” with “my awareness [...] that I could pay real attention” (184). “I was a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn’t have to just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over” (Ibid.).

The redeeming power of attention, however, is most decidedly personified in Shane Drinion, a character whose power of concentration is so high that he starts levitating, and who is explained by Wallace himself in the notes and asides:

Drinion is happy. Ability to pay attention. [...] Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find, and, in waves, a boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it’s like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.

(548)

Finally, the novel explores the tedious routine of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) employees to (as is widely recognized) inspect the theme of boredom and its transcendence through attention. The IRS, in this sense, functions as an allegory. Fogle himself, for example, chooses the accounting profession because “even rote exams requires a very sharp, organized and methodical type of mental state, with the ability to concentrate for long periods of time, and, even more important, the ability to choose what one concentrates on versus ignoring” (182).

Learning how to choose

Fogle introduces another fundamental element: the ability to choose. Its necessity is, again, explicitly formulated in *This Is Water*: “learning how to think’ [...] means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience” (54). This is continuously fictionalized in *The Pale King*. Fogle declares that sometimes, in concentration, “the element of choice of attention [...] could get lost,” and “the awareness could sort of explode into a hall of mirrors. [...] This was attention without choice, meaning the loss of the ability to focus in and concentrate on just one thing” (190). In such instances, the implication is, the individual remains trapped in solipsism. Cusk, for example, is so terrified by the prospect of “having attacks of shattering public sweats” (93) that he can neither withstand the presence of other human beings nor pay attention to anything *other*

CONSCIOUSNESS ACCORDING TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

than his terror. In fact, attention without choice condemns Cusk to a life of solipsism, and not coincidentally is he introduced into the novel as follows: “it was in public high school that this boy learned the terrible power of attention and what to pay attention to” (Ibid.) The same holds true for Sylvanshine, who suffers from “*Random-Fact Intuition*” which renders his attention unable to filter out “ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting” (120) data, and thereby overwhelms him. It may hold true for Fogle as well who, despite his claims at awareness, is nicknamed “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle because his infinite monologues result from his inability to filter the irrelevant facts.

All of these characters, then, lack the ability to choose, essential if one must—going back to *This Is Water*—“get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t” (95). Because, as Wallace continues, “everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship” (100-101). A final theme we explore through Rémy Marathe, a character from *Infinite Jest*.

Marathe is a Quebecois terrorist represented in recurring dialogue with Hugh Steeply, a secret agent for the U.S.A. Their conversation—which, as Kelly has shown in his “Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,” rehashes Isaiah Berlin’s famous 1958 lecture “Two Concepts of Liberty”—revolves around the novel’s driving plot: the terrorists want to disseminate a movie so entertaining people who watch it don’t want to do anything else and therefore die from starvation and thirst. The U.S.A., of course, wants to prevent its dissemination. Marathe argues that if the movie is a threat, then the U.S.A. is already dead: “this appetite of your people *unable to choose* appetites, this is the death” (319). Steeply replies that the U.S.A. is “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice” (424). Marathe, in turn, retorts that if the U.S.A. took its ethics of individual choice seriously then it should not fear the movie. The movie would just be there for Americans to freely choose to watch and, if anything, arresting its circulation would impede individual freedom. Against this argument Steeply cannot rebut,⁸ and Marathe persists: the U.S.A. fears the movie because the individual choice it reveres is not real choice but “the appetite to choose death by pleasure” (319) or what Fogle (in *The Pale King*) calls “just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me” (188) or—finally, in the words of *This Is Water*—one of “these forms of worship [that] are *unconscious*, [that] are default settings” (112-113).

8. For a more in-depth discussion of this see Dowling and Bell, to which the last sentences owe a lot.

Marathe, then, is in this sense Wallace's spokesman: he knows that "the only choice we get is *what* to worship," he knows that we get that choice only if we have "really learned how to think [and] how to pay attention" (*This Is Water* 92), and he knows, finally, that on that choice depends the meaning of our life:

what of the freedom-to? Not just free-from. Not all compulsion comes from without. You pretend you do not see this. What of freedom-to. How for the person to freely choose? How to choose any but a child's greedy choices [...]? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?

(*Infinite Jest* 320)

Conclusion

For Wallace, in its default setting, consciousness is the source of solipsism and great despair. This despair can be overcome only by achieving, as *This Is Water* proclaims, real "freedom of choice regarding what to think about" (15). This freedom, in turn, can be gained only through exhausting daily struggle, and by exerting immense degrees of attention. "It is unimaginably hard to do this" (135), but it is doable nonetheless. Our happiness depends on this battle, as only through this effort can one become (conscious in the sense of) aware, and free.

Thus *This Is Water* concludes as follows: "the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (120). "That is real freedom" (121). "The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the 'rat race'" (123); or, as Marathe one again reiterates in *Infinite Jest*, "the without-end pursuit of a happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible" (320).

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