

The Triumph of the Will of Athletes in *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract In 1995, in the introduction to *Tennis and the Meaning of Life: A Literary Anthology of the Game*, Jay Jennings lamented that there were still “no great” tennis novels. Had the collection been published just a year later, a revision would have been in order. David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), the encyclopaedic masterpiece set around the grounds of Enfield Tennis Academy, is a great tennis novel. Yet, when critics discuss Wallace’s work on tennis, the focus is usually on his essays and tends to fall into one of two camps: either emphasizing the bodies of Wallace’s dumb jocks, or the divine inspiration that helps them play so well. Once we recognise that Wallace’s treatment of character was itself always dualistic, we can begin to reconcile these two apparently conflicting points of view. Doing so will shed new light on Wallace’s treatment of tennis as a stress-test of the connection between body and soul, and will raise difficult questions about the fate of a country where that test is so necessary.

Keywords Dualism. Tennis. Humanism. Descartes. Fascism.

Summary 1 The Most Beautiful Sport There Is. – 2 Inspired Machines. – 3 Not Either. – 4 Triumph of the Will.



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And blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well co-meddled
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 301)

1 The Most Beautiful Sport There Is

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) is one of the great tennis novels. It marks the high point of a life-long interest in tennis for Wallace – he was himself a “near-great junior tennis player” (Wallace 1997, 3), who grew up to be an even greater tennis writer – yet one need not know anything about the man to see why a sport like tennis might have appealed to the author of a novel about madness and solitude and suffering. Tennis matches have “no fixed duration” and can, in principle, go on indefinitely (Wilson 2014, 23). And since every position on an infinite score-line is as close to 0 as it is to 1, the joke is on you: two hours in and two sets up there are still endless opportunities to lose. Tennis players get to learn pretty quickly what it means to be a mind imprisoned in an imperfect body. Perfect subjects, then, “not just for writers but for philosophers too. The perfect game for Wallace” (Sullivan 2016, xi). Though it is a truism in Wallace studies, best put by Elizabeth Freudenthal and N. Katherine Hayes, that *Infinite Jest* is a “demonstrat[ion] of the futility of seeking agency via what is conventionally known as one’s inner life” (Freudenthal 2010, 195), that “autonomous selfhood”, indeed, is a dangerous “illusion” (Hayes 1999, 693) and the human a dead idea, the sport of tennis, which sets the human soul so sharply at odds with the machine it is stuck inside, invites us to revise this prevailing view.

That tennis is the best and most important sport needs, I think, no justification. That *Infinite Jest* is Wallace’s best and most important piece of tennis writing still perhaps needs some. When it comes to tennis, Wallace is usually remembered for his essays. The publication of *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (2016) – a Library of America Special Publication that collects Wallace’s tennis nonfiction – is proof of their endurance, and shows how much has changed from 1996 when Wallace’s piece on “Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open” was not even “on the radar” of the editor of *The Best American Sports Writing* (Pilon 2015). Indeed, ever since the publication of Wallace’s Federer essay – “the greatest tennis writer of his generation [...] writing about the greatest player of his generation” (Sullivan 2016, xiii) – sports writers have been wrestling with the legacy of a piece “that did more to construct the terms in which we now view Federer than any other” (Phillips 2016). Much of the academic criticism of Wallace’s tennis writing is similarly focused. Kyle R. King, Alexander Kozin, James Schiff, and James Wilberding all primarily orbit the argument Wallace makes in his essays, or at

most consider the opening pages of *Jest*.¹ In his survey of tennis's long literary history, Jeffrey O. Segrave does include *Jest* at the end of a prestigious line that takes in Webster (whose stage-players are bounced around like the "Starres tennis-balls"), Montaigne, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Shaw, Amis, and others, though his reading of Wallace's novel as a "lampoon" of "nepotis[ti]c" academies, and of Hal being "used and abused for his tennis talent" because he could not possibly have written "a series of bewildering essays" (2013), suggests he has only read the novel's introduction.

Other than the obvious reason of its length, one explanation for why *Jest* gets overlooked is that tennis has been thought of, traditionally, as the "sport of love" and luxury (Segrave 2013): a game played by the leisured class on the Riviera grass (Wilson 2014, 43). In the Mexican writer Álvaro Enrigue's mini-encyclopaedic novel *Sudden Death* (2017), tennis is certainly emblematic of that old, courtly world. The pass-time of such great Western figures as Caravaggio and Don Quixote's temptress, tennis, for Enrigue, is also a synecdoche of European imperialism and the devastation of the New World. History, as he puts it, is a rigged match in which "the bad guys" always seem to "have the advantage" (190). While *Jest* pays homage to tradition - it is set in Boston, where a lawn tennis ball "first bounce[d] in the United States" (Gillmeister 1997, 207), thanks in part to a suitor of Edith Wharton, no less (Wilson 2014, 18) - his is a very modernly American game: capitalistic, high tech, hard courted, televisual, the site of grim "economic interests" of the sort described in his least-loved tennis essay (2012a, 133).² This is all in striking contrast to a novel like *Double Fault* (1997) by Lionel Shriver, which, though it is set in the same "cut-throat Open era" (20), is above all a romance:

After all, tennis is like sex, isn't it? [...] Listen to the language! *Long-body, sweet spot, throat* of the racket. *Dish* and *shank, stab* and *slice, punch* and *penetrate* - it's pornographic! [...] *Approach* and *hold, break, break back, stroke, regain position, and connect* - it's romantic. (1997, 45; emphasis in the original)

Tennis is only like sex in Wallace's work insofar as sex, in Wallace's work, is also a philosophical exercise. For Wallace, tennis, like any other kind of "courtship" (Shriver 1997, 50), is a game for hideously isolated individuals.

1 From here onwards, only the abbreviated form *Jest* will be used.

2 In this sense *Jest* speaks to the years in which it was written. Tennis in the 1990s was dominated by American players, before Courier, Sampras, and Agassi were supplanted by the 'Big 4' from the Old World: Federer (Switzerland), Nadal (Spain), Djokovic (Serbia), and Murray (Scotland).

2 Inspired Machines

When it comes to those individuals, critics are divided. The question Wallace's essays raise, as Wilberding summarizes it, is the "problem of athletic genius" (2017, 109): how does he (and how, more broadly, do we) understand athletes? Are jocks little more than unthinking machines, or have they access to some special something? The problem is perfectly emblemized by Hal, who in the opening pages of *Jest* is able to play tennis beautifully yet whose ability to communicate has profoundly broken down. Wallace criticism has struggled to account for this – Stephen J. Burn calls it one of the novel's "most vexing problems" (2013, 75) – and readings tend to go one of two ways. On the one hand, critics such as Burn unpack the "mechanistic materialism" (2004, 45) that underpins much of the pedagogy at Enfield, where students are taught to think of themselves as ball-striking machines. Burn argues that Hal's breakdown can be read, in this context, as the consequence of an "impairment to his left [language-heavy] hemisphere" (48 fn. 4) or as a sign of full-blown "schizophrenia" (2013, 76), while Matthew J. Darling suggests that Hal has sacrificed "normal teenage selfhood" (2013, 223) to become a brilliant "tennis-playing automaton" (217). Wilberding, on the other hand, concludes that only "divine inspiration" (2017, 117) can explain the opening chapter and Hal's surprising lack of an inability to play. Wilberding's reading runs in a similar vein to Kozin (who interprets the wind in Wallace's first tennis essay as a friendly "divinity" – 2017, 7), King (who argues that Wallace's view of athletes in the essays is "escapist", because "transcenden[t]" – 2018, 224), and Schiff (who, in his comparison of the sports essays of Wallace and John Updike, argues Wallace's writing style is that of a grafting player who does not have the "God-given prowess" of his seemingly effortlessly talented senior – 2018, 24).

It is a peculiarity of Wallace studies that its readings are either materialistic, or, at the other extreme, literally divine. In my view, this dualistic split in the criticism is a manifestation of the dualism that is so central to Wallace's own work, and we can begin to reconcile these two conflicting points of view when we understand that Wallace's treatment of all his characters, especially his tennis players, owed as much to the essentialism of Plato and Descartes as it did to the mechanistic models of cognitive science.

Wallace's debt to cognitive science is clearly evident at Enfield Tennis Academy, which treats its students in the same way you "might restore vintage autos or build ships inside bottles" (Wallace 1996, 63). They are bodies first. Indeed, the idea behind all the "frustrating mindless repetitive practice" (115) is precisely that it is "mindless": that practice is made permanent when it gets into the muscles and is not thought about. As Wallace puts it, the "sheer repetitive

weight” of drills makes them “sink down into the gut [...] down under your like consciousness into the more nether regions [...] the hardware, the C.P.S.” (117). The verticality in Wallace’s description (“sink down”; “down under”; “nether regions”) speaks to his understanding of the modern model of mind in which consciousness is just the tip of the iceberg of human cognition. “The self”, as Antonio Damasio puts it, “is not a central knower and inspector of everything that happens in our minds” (2006, 227). Real skill is not in making conscious choices but in letting the hardware (i.e. the body and the just-as-bodied brain) do its thing.

There are two sides to this story, however, and this model on its own does not account for the Old World, humanistic philosophy that actually animates Wallace’s (otherwise mechanical) characters. James Sr. may insist that his junior is “a machine a body an object, Jim” (Wallace 1996, 159), but James Jr.’s “fierc[e]” “woo[ing]” of a coach like Schtitt (79) is a reaction *against* his father’s philosophy. Though Burn argues that the “prevalent mode of self-conception” at Enfield is still “mechanistic”, despite Schtitt’s best efforts (2004, 45), that materialist worldview is just the bedrock for what is the academy’s most important lesson. As Hal puts it, the physical stuff is “just pro forma” (113): once the body works by rote, that is when “the character shit starts” (118). A materialistic reading of Wallace’s tennis players stops before it does.

Descartes gives us a better framework. Though much contemporary cognitive science begins with what Antonio Damasio calls “Descartes’ Error”, the caricature is unhelpful. In “The Passions of the Soul”, Descartes writes that

every movement we make without any contribution from our will – as often happens when we breathe, walk, eat and, indeed, when we perform any action which is common to us and the beasts – depends solely on the arrangement of our limbs and on the route which the spirits, produced by the heat of the heart, follow naturally in the brain, nerves and muscles. This occurs in the same way that the movement of a watch is produced merely by the strength of its spring and the configuration of its wheels. (1988, 225)

Even the scientist Descartes had to concede that the brain and swathes of the mind were in fact mechanical, and he was forced – in a kind of God-of-the-Gaps argument (“anything in us which we cannot conceive in any way as capable of belonging to a body must be attributed to our soul”, p. 219) – to reduce the soul to an increasingly small role in the brain’s “innermost part” (230). Thus, where Plato could separate “Reason” from the body entirely (2003, 153), for Descartes it was only the shrinking will, only conscious thought, only the “thinking thing” (2000, 25) that he could legitimately separate from a mech-

anistic universe whose remit had grown worryingly broad.³ The philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously disparaged Descartes's theory that human beings are more than machine body objects as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" (2000, 17), and Wallace's critics follow suit when they celebrate his "critique of subjectivity" (Freudenthal 2010, 195) and his "subver[sion] of the Cartesian tradition" (206). Yet it is Descartes's error that animates Wallace's work. It may be wrong in the details, it may be a ghost story, but then Wallace was a *fiction* writer: a writer whose characters are, as he put it in the early draft of *The Pale King*, like "ghosts haunting [their] own fucking bod[ies]" (quoted in Redgate 2019, 69).

There is a consistent pattern of Cartesian imagery across Wallace's work – and particularly in *Jest* – that emphasizes the presence of both machine *and* occupier. Ira Halpern writes that tennis, like drugs and entertainment and everything else in *Jest*, is on a "continuum" between the two "pole[s]" of addiction and therapy (2015). Armed with Descartes we can begin to clarify their effects. A Cartesian model explains, for example, why "sedation" is synonymous with "depart[ure]" (Wallace 1996, 16), or why narcotics make you feel "less high than disembodied" (981), since in a Cartesian world-view putting the conscious mind to sleep is equivalent to vacating the body: drugs help you "literally los[e] [your] mind, like the massive dose pick[s] [your] mind up and carrie[s] it off somewhere" (214; emphasis in the original). It also explains why the Entertainment renders its viewers "docile and continent but blank, as if on some deep reptile-brain level pithed" (548). When the attaché is hooked by the Entertainment in the beginning of the novel, for example, others go into the room with "all good spiritual intentions" (87) only to find themselves trapped too, and bodied, and beginning to smell: "possessed of roughly the mental/spiritual energies of a moth, now" (549). Note Wallace's word choice here: "spiritual" intentions, "mental/spiritual energies", and, tellingly, "possession." According to Descartes, human beings without a soul are not human anymore, only the "configuration of wheels" that are "common to us and the beasts" (1988, 225). Wallace's characters go into the room as if "possessed" by a human spirit, and when that spirit is exorcized they become Carte-

³ Hence Descartes's peculiarly specific theory – "ridicule[d]" by his contemporaries (Makari 2016, 96) – that the soul must be located in a small gland in the brain: the "pineal gland" that Wallace used as the McGuffin in his first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987, 149). Descartes's model speaks more readily to the mechanical mindset that has never really left us, yet there are commonalities between Wallace and Plato, too. Wallace's description of Lucien literally "shed[ding] his body's suit" (1996, 488) at the moment of his death, for example, clearly owes a debt to Plato's description of the soul "wear[ing] out" the body like a "tailor[s] [...] cloak" (2003, 159).

sian machines only, reptilian and insectile and inhuman.⁴ You have to have something to lose for a drug to leave you “utterly empty, a shell, void inside” (Wallace 1996, 218), or for the Entertainment to turn you into an “empty shell. The iron will, the analytic savvy [...]. All gone” (508). When the ghost is misplaced, the absence is felt so strongly because it was in there to begin with.

While it is important to emphasize that Wallace was not simplistically essentialist, the existence of actual, literal ghosts in his novel (James; Lucien) should suggest he was not entirely materialist either. Yet critics, especially when it comes to Wallace’s tennis players, are split down a quite dramatic line: one group reads Wallace as a materialist who deconstructs the “liberal humanist self” (Hayles 1999, 693), while the other sees a literally divine force at play. What Wallace was, I think, was a humanist in the classical sense. To quote the title of Wallace’s Federer essay, his characters are “Both Flesh and Not”, both body and soul, both machine and ghost *at the same time*. Shriver wrote that “the tennis game is the window of the soul” (1997, 12), and though Wallace was hardly romantic this is literally true of his own work. The verticality in Wallace’s descriptions of the low guts and high mind, of “subterranean compulsive[ness]” (Wallace 1996, 270) vs. the “command headquarters in the head” (272), is borne out of a Western metaphysical tradition wherein God is at the top of the Chain of Being and animals are at the bottom. Human beings, being both bodied and souled, are squarely in its centre: each of us, as Wallace puts it in his essay on the tennis player Tracy Austin, is that “exquisite hybrid of animal and angel” (2005, 143). We are *both*, not one or the other. Tennis helps us see it.

3 Not Either

On the 11th November in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, Helen Steeply sits with Aubrey deLint (and, later, Thierry Poutrincourt) to watch Hal and Stice play an exhibition match. The chapter’s slower-than-real-time description of each point played is highly technical, as if the laws of physics have taken over: as if the boys’ bodies are just going through the motions, and points are won be-

⁴ A blackout, explains Pat Montesian, feels “like your mind wasn’t in *possession* of your body” (Wallace 1996, 464; emphasis added). The word occurs throughout *Jest*, and is often associated when it is with the Cartesian ‘will’. Joelle’s father “exert[s] every gram of trembling will he’d possessed trying not to drill” a hole in his daughter’s wall (794), while Stice believes a ghost is trying to “possess” objects in his room and similarly “exert [its] will on them” (943). When Gately’s stash of Demerol is discovered he is charged with “Possession with Intent” (462), though in this instance perhaps the crime’s title should be extended to ‘Possession with Intent to End Possession’.

fore they've run their course (on one shot we are told, for example, that there is no way, "statistically", of "Hal fucking up: Hal Incandenza does not fuck up passes off floater half-volleys" – Wallace 1996, 653). The play-by-play is so detailed, in fact, that it is quite boring to read. But this is the point, because it encourages us to think deeper than the details. Part of the cleverness of the scene's construction is that Hal is distant, in both senses of the word. Alone on the court far away from the stands (where the chapter's focalization locks the reader), he is also maintaining a learned stare, a way of "acting as if unwatched" (674), "register[ing] nothing on the face" (680). It is only the "mishit" (661) of his second serve and his going down 5-6 against a lower ranked player that tells us something – beyond the mechanics – has gone wrong. High-level tennis is about the character shit that complicates the rigid laws of physics.

Hal and Stice's match is a way for Wallace to set two different kinds of bodies, and thus two different models of mind, against each other. There is a stark difference between Hal's "fluid" mechanics (658) and Stice's, which are said to look a little like "bad animation" (653), a "segmented windup" (656), like "he'd learned to serve by studying still photos of the motion's different stages" (656). Interestingly, Wallace uses much the same language to describe Tracy Austin's book, calling it "inanimate" because it "gives us no sense of a conscious person" inside it (2005, 151). The metaphor evokes Genesis. Unlike Federer who is "inspired" (2012a, 33) – as God *inspired* life into the man he made from dust – Stice is a stop-motion maquette, a clay "man of parts" (1996, 658), not animated by a soul but golem only. This is fitting for a player whose head is said to contain "a wheel inside another wheel, gears and cogs being widgeted into place" (635), and it perhaps explains why the wraith chooses him, of all people, to haunt, there being such a vacancy.

Wayne, the academy's best player, is a similar sort of machine, though his game is even more "complete" (662): not comprised of turning gears but solid-state, like "tungsten-steel" (681). The difference, says DeLint, between Hal and players like Wayne is "the head" (682). Wayne "doesn't feel fear, pity, remorse" (682) – a description Wallace lifts, significantly, from James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) – because he is a machine through-and-through. And though Freudenthal reads such players as success stories because they "embrace materiality" (2010, 205), locating their selves in their bodies instead of in some "inner essence" (206), Wallace's description of Wayne is less kind. He is said to be "less alive than undead" (1996, 263), a sort of a walking example of the "Philosophical Zombie", which *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines as an entity "exactly like us in all physical respects but without conscious experiences" (2019). The problem for the living, like Hal, is that despite his insistence that he is not "in there, inside his own hull, as a human

being”, that he is in fact “far more robotic than John Wayne” (Wallace 1996, 694), his machine is occupied. “Hal looks just as perfectly dead out there”, DeLint says, “but he’s more vulnerable in terms of, like, emotionally. [...] Some days you can almost see Hal like flit in and out of a match, like *some part of him leaves and hovers and then comes back*” (682; emphasis added).⁵

As Timothy D. Wilson puts it, the sporting “Zone” is a zen-like state where an athlete “is ‘unconscious,’ [...] performing at an optimal level without any awareness of exactly *what* [they are] doing” (2002, 52; emphasis in the original). Wallace’s players chase this phenomenological experience: the place where “[y]our body’s doing it for you and the court and Game’s doing it for your body. *You’re barely involved. It’s magic*” (Wallace 1996, 166; emphasis added). Yet his description of players turning into undead, machine-beings with a “chilly reptilian film of concentration” (678), is somewhat at odds with the religious ecstasies induced by a veteran of the Zone like Federer. The language Wallace uses in *Jest* suggests that tennis is just another means to an ugly end for characters who live in a world where it is not unusual to “year[n] for unconsciousness” (697). It is true that, when Hal and Stice play, the sky looks significantly “clear” and “washed” (653), free of the kind of “internal weather[s]” mentioned earlier in the novel (53). Yet even a healthy kind of brain-washing can be abused. “Talent’s unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself”, Hal tells us (173), and it does not augur well. It does not augur well for Hal that his creator described the same “fugue-state” he spent his own tennis career “chasing” (1997, 19), in an essay cut short by an apocalyptic tornado.

Though Wallace charts a close association between drugs and sport, the obliteration players find in the Zone is very different to that which they find through narcotics. Tennis is not about erasing consciousness, exactly, but a way of being “*in there* [...] a self that touches all edges” (Wallace 1996, 168), so “perfectly calibrated” (242) with the body that the soul becomes its image, such that the dualistic split between the two is dissolved. This is the same end, by very different means, of the way Entertainments free Joelle because they make her feel “full” (235), or the way Ennet residents sit “so close” to a screen that it “fills [their] whole vision” (202). Instead of a ghost in touch with every edge of its machine, addicts are filled to the ceiling of the skull by something other, leaving no space for the ghost

⁵ Gregory Phipps argues that the Canadian Wayne’s “apparent lack of subjectivity is based largely on his inability to occupy the idealistic American narratives of athletics which would ostensibly humanize him” (2010, 77). Phipps is referring to a traditional narrative of “the ideal American athlete” who “displays tenacity in the face of hardship” (77), but the ideal athlete in *Jest* (American or otherwise) is hardly traditional: it appears to be someone who can willingly terminate their subjectivity.

to haunt. While I agree to an extent with Halpern that the programs of Ennet and Enfield both require the surrendering of the mind, I do not read them as a critique of the “Cartesian dualism” that Wallace apparently “succinctly collapse[s]” (2015). Similarly, Freudenthal argues that the “happiest characters” in the novel embrace a “material world without any Cartesian transcendence” (2010, 208), but the solution for winning tennis matches and for being a person, in Wallace’s work, is to be *more* interior, not less: it is to “Occur” (Wallace 1996, 461); it is to be *in there*. In Wallace’s Cartesian universe, drugs misplace the soul altogether. Tennis has the potential to “reconcil[e]” it with “the fact of having a body” (2012a, 8).

The problem is that Hal, being so well-read and so terrified of nativity, agrees with the materialistic theories about him. “I feel [like] a hole” (785), he says, and he takes drugs precisely for that reason: to be anti-interior, to get rid of himself, and though it helps his tennis for a while it is hardly a solution. Hal’s is a peculiar kind of drug-enhanced performance. On drugs, with his consciousness dulled, Hal’s “arm” feels like “an extension of his mind and the stick an extension of the arm” (689). “Bob-Hopeless”, however, Hal is haunted, and his ghost’s unwelcome presence destroys what he has “in the way of a kinaesthetic sense” (689).⁶ It is telling that Hal’s first-person narration begins in the novel when withdrawal kicks in, and he wakes from a nightmare of a “zoo” (851). That the chapter begins with a resounding “I” signals that Hal is not an unconscious zoo-animal anymore but a thinking thing, dissociated from the body he is housed in, disconnected but trapped, the victim of a terrible Cartesian bothness. It is because of that dualistic split, so at odds with the artificial Zone Hal had created with marijuana, that he nearly loses to Stice. “It’s a will issue” (682), DeLint explains (in Cartesian terms), and Hal “just never quite occurred” (686) on court because he is too much a product of his culture to accept that the academy’s Old World philosophy is aimed at him. Schtitt insists on it: “You are not arms. Arms in the real tennis is like wheels of vehicles. Not engine. Legs: not either” (461). Hayles argues that “Schtitt’s tennis philosophy [is] meant to cure the dysfunctionalities of autonomous selfhood” (1999, 694), but the point of the lesson is that Hal has a self he needs to hold on to. Hal is more than a machine: he is a human being. He has to treat tennis as a way to be present, not absent. He has to revise his theory.

This begs the question, then, as to whether Hal’s ending is a happy beginning for him? In the novel’s opening pages his first-person

⁶ Schacht predicts Hal’s fall early on, believing that Hal’s substance-use and his consequent “explosion up the rankings has got to be a temporary thing, that there’s like a psychic credit-card bill for Hal in the mail, somewhere, coming [...] [something’s] surely got to give, eventually” (270).

narration is in full flow. “I’m not a machine”, he tells us at last (Wallace 1996, 12), but someone highly interior and articulate, while on the court his tennis is even more extraordinary than before (5). Has he found the best of both worlds? Matthew J. Darling argues along these lines, suggesting that Hal’s failure as a person needs to be understood as a consequence of his success as a player (2013, 215): that all sports people, indeed, must sacrifice normality for greatness. Hal has certainly sacrificed that. In the University office he is the opposite of in the Zone. His ghost and his machine are entirely split. Perhaps what matters, though, is that he is both. In the end at last he knows it more than most.

4 Triumph of the Will

Twenty-five years since its publication, *Infinite Jest’s* prescient depictions of “panagoraphobi[cs]” using videophones (151) and a populist, “sterile-toupee-wearing” imbecile getting elected President (381) have been unnerving. The lessons of Wallace’s tennis academy may be more prescient yet. Discussing Enfield’s Head Coach Gerhardt Schtitt, Wallace made the following comments in an interview with Michael Silverblatt on *Bookworm*:

The stuff at the academy is kind of weird because, yeah, it’s very high tech, and it’s very ‘become technically better so that you can achieve x, y, and z,’ but also the guy who essentially runs the academy now is a fascist, and whether it comes out or not, he’s really the only one there who to me is saying anything that’s even remotely non-horrifying, except it is horrifying because he’s a fascist. And part of the stuff that was rattling around in my head when I was doing this is that it seems to me that one of the scary things about the nihilism of contemporary culture is that we’re really setting ourselves up for fascism, because as we empty more and more values, motivating principles, spiritual principles almost, out of the culture, we’re creating a hunger that eventually is gonna drive us to the state that we may accept fascism, just because the nice thing about fascists is that they’ll tell you what to think, they’ll tell you what to do, they’ll tell you what’s important, and we as a culture aren’t doing that for ourselves yet. (2008, 20’12”-21’37”)

Though the Coach’s comic moniker and broken English suggest he may be talking Schtitt, we might recall also that Wallace admitted only being “able to have people say stuff that I think is serious if I’m

simultaneously making fun of the character" (2012b, 9-10).⁷ It is what Hal calls Schtitt's "character shit" (1996, 118), his "Old World" values that "anchor nicely the soul", that are the academy's most important (albeit slightly "proto-fascist") lesson (82).

They are values that, to an educated American like Hal - so used to the cynical celebration of "internal emptiness as hip and cool" (694) - seem utterly "alien" (82). But this says more about Hal than it does about the values themselves. Wallace jokes elsewhere that watching the Eastern-European tennis player Ivan Lendl play is like watching Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (2012a, 29 fn. 14), but the joke is as much at his own expense as it is at Lendl's: as if conviction and resolve are as unthinkable as Nazism is to a good American like him. The same joke plays out in *Jest*. The Quebecois terrorists certainly have strong values and a willingness to sacrifice life and limb to uphold them, but their function in the novel is as antithesis. They are not so much a direct threat as a photographic-negative of a United States which will destroy itself on its own if it cannot escape the "totalitarian grip" of irony and cynicism on its "psyche" (Wallace 1997, 73). As in tennis, "the true opponent" is always "the player himself" (1996, 84). Fascism will find its voice in the New World for the same reason that AA, though it may be "totalitarian [...] dare I say un-American?" (1003 fn. 90), is so necessary: because both can claim the sort of "moral clarity" (2005, 294) that Wallace felt his own generation so profoundly lacked.

It is not hard to see how appealing it must be for someone (a boy, say, of academy age) to be told not only how to anchor soul to body but to be reminded that they have a soul in the first place. The academy does what all fascist systems do and tries to fill the modern void by returning to the wellspring of old mythologies, and though the goal might be to have its adherents serve the Show or the State or their own selfish wants in the end, it has to start - as Robert O. Paxton puts it in *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2005) - with a celebration of "the efficacy of will" (219). The paradox is that Hal's generation is so inured to that lesson, such atheists when it comes to their own capacity for soul and will and action, that they have to be strong-armed into believing it by the kind of political ideology that ultimately threatens their individuality. Hunger is dangerous. People take nourishment where they can get it. We should not, to risk agreeing with Marathe, decide that "temples are for fanatics only and [take] away the temples" (Wallace 1996, 319). We should not leave the stories that matter to the wrong side to tell. It is a dangerous game but the quickest way to lose is not to play.

⁷ Schtitt's German-ish name presumably owes a debt to coach "Rolf Hauptfuhrer", the mini-Fuhrer from Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (2004, 12).

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