Blog Post 2: *Infinite Jest* and Its Critics

500 words minimum

Due Tuesday, February 10th for A-L

Due Tuesday, February 17th for M-Z

Any discussion of “interactivity” or “interactive literature” must begin from acknowledging that every work of literature is part of a conversation. Whether a text engages with its forerunners, influenced (whether anxiously or not) by the tradition preceding it, or whether it is in dialogue with its own immediate cultural context, literature cannot avoid being in a heteroglossic, dialogical relationship with other things. For a writer like David Foster Wallace, seemingly obsessed, as he is, with communication, with the problems, challenges, and possibilities of truly speaking and listening to other people, one must also emphasize the dialogue between his text and how and why people have read his work. In other words, thinking about the interactivity of any text cannot stop at its immediate physical and conceptual boundaries, nor those of its predecessors and contemporaries, but also involves considering the diverse critical, scholarly, and popular ways a given work has been read.

As I have mentioned, since the publication of *Infinite Jest* (1996), and then getting really started after Wallace’s death in 2008, an entire sub-discipline has sprung up of various critics seriously reading Wallace’s work. And *Infinite Jest*, as his *magnum opus*, has received quite a lot of attention from the emerging field of Wallace studies. Various people have read the novel in a variety of interesting, profound, complex, and often eye-opening ways. Multiple readers’ guides have appeared. Scholarly journals have devoted considerable space—oftentimes whole issues—to his work. Multiple monographs and collections of essays have been published. Online communities of readers and fans have formed, expanded, and proliferated. Films have been and are being made adapting his work or reflecting on his life. In short, I do not think it a stretch to suggest that “interacting” with *Infinite Jest* means interacting with what people have said and written about the novel. And there is quite a bit to interact with.

So for your second blog post I would like you to read one text revolving in *Infinite Jest*’s orbit and to report back to us on the blog about that essay. I have provided a bibliography of texts below that you can look at. The majority of these are by critics writing about Wallace’s work, but I have also, for context, included essays Wallace himself wrote that directly bear upon aspects of *Infinite Jest*, as well as an important interview with Wallace. Each student will be responsible for choosing one of these essays to read and write about for this assignment, and each student will be working with a different essay. I will be passing around a sign-up sheet on Thursday for students to choose an essay to read and work with. All these essays are on CourseWeb, under “Course Documents,” in the folder “Additional Documents,” and then in the folder “Essays on *Infinite Jest*.”

After you have read the essay that you have selected, I would like you to write a report and a response to it. First, I would like you, in two to three paragraphs, to introduce the essay, describe its argument, and locate its critical stakes. Then describe and show how the critic reads and interprets Wallace (or how Wallace treats his own critical object), and also how the critic supports their argument. Pick significant, specific moments of reading and interpretation to focus on. You will probably find that some of these essays are difficult and complex. Focus on those

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1 Before class on Thursday please take a few minutes to scan a couple articles that you might be interested in reading and discussing so that you will have a good idea of what you want to read and why when I hand out the sign-up sheet.
moments of difficulty and complexity and try to account for them, try to see what the critic is trying to do and trying to say.

Second, in another two to three paragraphs, I would like you to engage with the critic, to comment on their reading, to extend their thinking. One easy way of going about this would simply be to answer the following questions: Do you agree or disagree with the critic? Why or why not? What has the critic done well? What have they overlooked? You may choose, however, to build upon the critic’s work (or read them against the grain), to go further in your reading, to allow their insights to lead you toward interesting, novel ways of engaging with Wallace’s novel. Though agreeing/disagreeing with a critical text can be an effective way of engaging with it, I often find that being generous, trying to read criticism critically, to see what more the critic might have opened up, can be a more productive and useful way of reading, writing, and thinking.

Your midterm essay assignment will ask you to engage with at least a couple of Wallace’s critics, so this is a good way to get started on this requirement. This assignment is also intended to provide resources for other students, as we will have critical reports of over twenty essays after this assignment is complete. So be sure to pay attention to what other people are reading and writing about, as this will surely help you as you move toward the midterm.

And please feel free to ask any questions of me or get help. Lastly, note that if you want to look at something not on the list that should probably be okay, just run it by me beforehand.
Bibliography of Criticism on *Infinite Jest*


Holland, Mary K. “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 218-42.


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2 I have made available the following articles on CourseWeb under “Essays on *Infinite Jest*,” which is under “Additional Documents.” Note that some of these articles are not in fact on *Infinite Jest*, or are interviews with Wallace, or things Wallace wrote, etc. Also note that this bibliography is by no means exhaustive, and there are many more things one could find. I feel, however, that these articles, essays, and interviews are a good place to start and are some of the more interesting/valuable things on Wallace and *Infinite Jest*. Lastly, note that this bibliography is formatted in Chicago style and would necessarily need to be converted to MLA.


———. “The World of David Foster Wallace.” boundary 2 40, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 59-86.


Thomas, Eric A. “‘Psychotic Depression’ and Suicide in David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest.” Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction 54, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 276-91.


