

Memories of the Limbaugh Administration

1990s Politics, Conservative Media, and *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio

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Abstract This essay asks why radio host Rush Limbaugh appears in *Infinite Jest* as president and what this detail suggests about the relationship of the novel to conservative media, the later rise of Donald Trump, and radio's role in Wallace's imagination of narrative voice. Limbaugh is also threaded through Wallace's analysis of US politics and potential fascism, from the early 1990s in which Wallace composed *Infinite Jest* through to his essay "Host" (2005). I closely analyze sonic elements of *Infinite Jest* and subliminal anti-Limbaugh agendas in the radio host Madame Psychosis, nuancing analyses of Wallace focused exclusively on visual media.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. Rush Limbaugh. Conservative Politics. Radio.

Summary 1 President Limbaugh and the Political Wallace. – 2 Limbaugh, the Right, and Wallace's Vision of Political Media. – 3 "Somebody's Mind Coming Apart Right Before Your Ears": *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio. – 4 In Conclusion: The 2024 Candidates.



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“Makes misogyny seem literary the same way Rush
makes fascism seem funny”.

David Foster Wallace, “Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One
Would Sort of Have to Think (Re John Updike’s *Toward the End of Time*)”

1 President Limbaugh and the Political Wallace

An odd conjunction of right-wing American political lives and the nation’s contemporary literature occurred in February 2021. In the space of eight days, newly former president Donald Trump’s second impeachment trial began (this one for inciting insurrection at the Capitol on January 6) and long-time conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh died of lung cancer. Pundits and interested citizens took immediate note of the irony of these paired endings: Limbaugh’s massively popular daily show, syndicated nationwide on hundreds of stations from 1988 to shortly before his death, had laid the groundwork for cruel, xenophobic, demagogic Trump-style politics, a fact acknowledged at the January 2020 State of the Union when Trump awarded Limbaugh the Presidential Medal of Freedom. February 2021 also happened to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Infinite Jest*, in which David Foster Wallace had described a dystopian future US led by two presidents, in the years between 1996 and an era of Subsidized Time revealed to be the late 2000s: Rush Limbaugh (elected presumably in 1996, since the book fleetingly mentions “the pre-millennial Limbaugh Era”, p. 411, which apparently ends with his assassination, p. 929) and the invented leader of the Clean US Party, a former Vegas lounge singer, Inaugural microphone-twirler, and major germaphobe and waste-displacer named Johnny Gentle (who must come to power, in the book’s implied history, in 2000, since the change to Subsidized Time he oversees can be dated to roughly 2001).

Gentle, upon Trump’s rise from reality TV celebrity to the presidency in 2016, led some readers to credit Wallace with uncanny prophecy of Trump’s widely unexpected election. Making the case for a Gentle/Trump comparison, for instance, Sonny Bunch, in a May 2017 *Washington Post* overview of novels that help readers deal with Trump, cited not just vapid entertainment and germaphobia as their common ground but passages describing the electorate’s exhaustion and apathy with mainstream US political life, a subject in Wallace’s later writing as well. “[T]he C.U.S.P.,” as Bunch quotes from *Infinite Jest*, “suddenly swept to quadrennial victory in an angry reaction voter-spasm [over domestic waste] [...] as the Dems and the G.O.P.’s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other’s got it, the two established mainstream parties split along tired philosophical lines”, with the nation thereby, in the absence of post-Cold War foreign enemies, “turn[ing] in on itself and its own philosophical fatigue” (382).

In this essay, while I do have things to say about Trump, I sidestep the somewhat facile question of whether Wallace, 25 years ago, in fact predicted his presidency or the particular American disillusionment or derangement that led to it. Instead, I use the retrospect offered by the novel's silver anniversary to focus on Wallace's concrete (if elliptical) prediction of President Limbaugh, as well as the larger role Limbaugh's strident, cruel voice played in the way Wallace (a heavy listener to all sorts of radio, this essay also reveals) imagined political, media, and even fiction-writing possibilities. In doing so, I examine how Limbaugh as major conservative media figure lies not just in the background of *Infinite Jest* but is threaded through Wallace's analysis of US politics and potential fascism, from the early 1990s in which *Infinite Jest* was largely composed through to one of Wallace's final major essays, a 2005 account of conservative talk radio titled "Host". When *Infinite Jest* appeared in February 1996, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News was still eight months from going on the air (its twenty-fifth anniversary arrives in October 2021), internet discourse was in its infancy, and the social media that also greatly aided Trump's rise did not exist. Major conservative media, beyond print sources, largely began and ended with Rush's voice on the radio. But Wallace, my readings make clear, kept track of - and worried about the dangerous political effects of - Rush's career and Rush-inspired media across eras, from the early 1990s through the Iraq War era of the early twenty-first century in which he composed much of *The Pale King*.

The questions I explore here, through close-readings of "Host" and of scenes that emphasize radio, sound, and silence in *Infinite Jest*, are as follows: what did Wallace hear in Limbaugh that led him to project an election over incumbent Bill Clinton in November 1996 and subsequent assassination? (In another disturbing bit of Wallace's invented history, Jack Kemp, who was Bob Dole's actual Republican running mate in 1996, has also had a pre-Gentle presidential administration, presumably taking over from Limbaugh, p. 177, and then being assassinated as well before 2000, since Marathe says obliquely to Steeply that historical hatred of the US includes the "trans-Latin cocaine cartels and the poor late M. Kemp with his exploding home", p. 422.) According to the comment in my epigraph (supposedly from a female friend who hates Updike, a Wallace influence who also grants my essay its title), Rush made fascism "funny" on the radio; can we then read *Infinite Jest* for signs that there are effects of Limbaugh's real-life rhetoric on the "funny" fascist creation Gentle, whose ridiculous tactics wed media strategies with authoritarian tendencies in things like the *"Totalitarian's Guide to Iron-Fisted Spin"* (404)? What if anything does analysis of Limbaugh suggest about Wallace's notorious votes for Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, revealed by D.T. Max's biography (2012a, 259), or the largely sympathetic portrait of Republi-

can John McCain in “Up, Simba”? And finally, by closely re-reading sonic elements of *Infinite Jest* and certain subliminal anti-Limbaugh and anti-Gentle agendas in the radio host the novel does describe at length, Joelle van Dyne, a.k.a. Madame Psychosis, can we add much-needed nuance to analyses of Wallace that focus exclusively on visual media as dominant and lethally ironic forces in US culture? In other words, can we broaden our understanding of the novel’s media representations to include radio and even find in it positive, generative, anti-irony effects that correlate with Wallace’s own ideals about fictional voice? While the traces of Limbaugh in *Infinite Jest* are admittedly scarce and perhaps less intriguing than seeming predictions of Trump, the brief mentions expose in negative some understudied aspects of Wallace’s critiques of media and entertainment, as well as the renewed relevance of his 1996 novel to the political and media turmoil gripping America in the era of a dominant Fox News and, for the last six years and counting, a dominant Trump.

Criticism of Wallace as a political writer has, justifiably, focused on *The Pale King*, a book squarely about government, taxation, civic duty, citizenship, the 1980s solidification of neoliberalism, and the role of financial capital in US political economy (see, for example, Clare 2014; Boswell 2014; Godden, Szalay 2014). Critics often take Wallace’s 2000 *Rolling Stone* article on presidential candidate John McCain, low voter turnout, and political apathy as the turning point leading to a late-career, twenty-first-century Wallace newly concerned with politics in his fiction, culminating in the posthumous 2011 publication of *The Pale King*. *Infinite Jest*, by comparison, seems a politically far less serious book, far less focused on governmental entities, far more given to crude slapstick when it does cover cabinet meetings, and generally far more interested in, as Andrew Warren demonstrates, localized acts – “failed or felicitous”, and always incomplete – of community-making, “communities built and dismantled by shared language”, seen perhaps most clearly in processes of speaker/audience identification at AA meetings (Warren 2014, 67). Many of *Infinite Jest*’s large-scale (geo)political fictions – especially the plot-instigating facts of waste-displacement, Reconfiguration, and the Great Concavity/Convexity – seem more like extremely large-scale metaphors for the potentially toxic interpersonal relationship between self and other that dominates the novel on the level of individual character. Elements like the distortive mirror language of concavity and convexity, along with a “sham-arrangement of quote Interdependence that’s really just a crude nationalist scheme to indulge my own US individual pleasure-lust without the complications [...] of considering some neighbor’s own desires” (1996, 427), lend support to Mary K. Holland’s (2006) suggestion that the central problem of the book on all levels is the personal pathology of an infantile narcissism.

At the same time, much of the book's embeddedness in early 1990s history and topicality, especially figures in the 1992 presidential campaign, has gone unnoticed and uninterpreted, and in paying deep attention to the implications of Limbaugh being elected over Clinton in Wallace's imagination I expand on my monograph's claims that Wallace, who worked intensively on *Infinite Jest* during what Max describes as "the breakthrough of 1991-92" (2012a, 159), was not only a career-long political writer but placed sly (and consequential) allusions in *Infinite Jest* to presidential politics - for instance, George H.W. Bush's famous 1988 "read my lips" convention line about taxes (Gentle says, "I told them on Inauguration Day. I said look into my eyes: no new [revenue] enhancements", p. 441) and the neoliberal economic incursions throughout the early 1990s of NAFTA (which Wallace's US/Canadian/Mexican Interdependence and Reconfiguration examine in indirect ways) (Severs 2017, 101-4). And while Gentle, a B-movie actor who before becoming a politician represents performers' labor rights as head of the "Velvety Vocalists Guild" (1996, 381), is clearly identified with Reagan (known for his leadership of the Screen Actors Guild in the Hollywood blacklist era), there are also in Gentle's entertainment antics nods to Clinton, in sunglasses, campaigning by playing an Elvis song on his saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show in June 1992.¹

As (re-)readers have come to know, events narrated in the endnotes and minor asides of *Infinite Jest* are hardly marked as ancillary or subordinate; in the book's highly elliptical beginning and ending pages, as well, momentous and even cataclysmic events are left fleetingly and ambiguously implied - including not just the fate of the killer Entertainment's master-copy buried with James O. Incandenza and

¹ I focus on Limbaugh's media presence in this essay, but I should note that a whole other article waits to be written about the allusions in *Infinite Jest* to Ross Perot, the upstart independent candidate who changed the 1992 election (and led the polls for a time), in no small part by using paid media in a new way, and who has also often been cited as a populist precedent for Trump. Without apparently knowing how he voted, Max notes that Wallace supported Perot in 1992, writing to a friend that "[y]ou need someone really insane to fix the economy" (Max 2012a, 259). The "philosophical fatigue" with the two major parties that Bunch cites in his Gentle/Trump comparison is really, in the context of *Infinite Jest*'s 1990s composition, about Perot the reformer: Gentle's C.U.S.P. (as "cusp" suggests) defines an edge drawing the disaffected of right and left and is, in its first three unsuccessful years, "a kind of post-Perot national joke". The party brings together "ultra-right jingoist" deer hunters with automatic weapons and "far-left [...] ponytailed granola crunchers" advocating environmentalism, and is also "a surreal union of both Rush L.- and Hillary R.C.-disillusioned fringes" (1996, 382) (Wallace seems here to predict runs for the highest office by Hillary Clinton well ahead of 2008). Perot's unprecedented multi-million-dollar half-hour prime-time campaign infomercials in 1992 drew great interest, mainly because of his low-tech use of economic charts and graphs, tapped upon by his pointer, which had a fake alligator claw on the end and Perot called his "voodoo stick" (perhaps a distant comic inspiration for the telescoping weatherman's pointer that Rodney Tine, architect of O.N.A.N., wields in various meetings).

possibly exhumed, but also what international conflict has occurred between the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and the Year of Glad, such that, in the first section, Hal blandly notes that “some sort of ultra-mach fighter too high overhead to hear slices the sky from south to north” (16). Reading nuclear weapons in this post-Cold War novel outside of Eschaton’s game context, Bradley Fest suggests that an ambiguous news fragment from Mario’s Interdependence Day puppet-show film may mean that a deranged Gentle created the irradiated Great Concavity by ordering that all nuclear missiles “north of 44° latitude (Wallace 1996, 407) be inverted in their silos and shot into the ground (Fest 2012, 133-4). Thus, a scarcity of the narrative’s direct attention to Limbaugh’s presidential term and the shock of his assassination might be taken as reason to look even more closely, not less, at those events’ implications. I therefore make much in this essay’s climactic section of the invented Gentle sharing a background in broadcast sound with Limbaugh, his presidential predecessor, especially when placed in the context of the novel’s rich, direct depictions of avant-garde radio.

Infinite Jest (which Wallace began drafting in the late 1980s) continued in a vein of political writing seen in his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in which another deranged politician, Governor Raymond Zusatz, orders the creation of a state wasteland, the Great Ohio Desert. While setting novels alongside wasted deserts is an idea that (like Eschaton) Wallace took from Don DeLillo’s *End Zone*, the mode of comedy Wallace deploys for Zusatz – the surgical mask- and bubble-helmet-wearing Gentle, the penis-measuring Rodney Tine, and others in these first two novels – arises from the absurdist political satire of Donald Barthelme (in stories like “The President”, featuring a leader only 48 inches tall) and Robert Coover (in novels like *The Public Burning*, whose mythical Uncle Sam and fictional Richard Nixon Wallace alludes to in “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction”). Wallace is not simply derivative of these writers (though more derivative than his infamous “patriarch[s] for my patricide” list, which includes Coover, would suggest [McCaffery 2012, 48]), and he certainly had other modes of political writing, though they do not correlate simply with supposed phases of career maturation. Wallace wrote in depth and with pathos about a historical politician in his early-career story “Lyndon” – indeed, with a solemn respect for government work and its difficulties (there he was influenced by a different Barthelme, the author of “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning”). Lyndon Johnson sits alongside many well-known figures (David Letterman, Alex Trebek, etc.) in *Girl With Curious Hair*, and by the last years of his career, with *The Pale King*’s direct mentions of Reagan and George H.W. Bush, its echoes of ideas from “Lyndon”, as well as with the unpublished draft “Wickedness” (about Reagan suffering from dementia in a nursing home), Wallace would return to

this mode of embellished but mainly realistic historical fiction (Max 2012b). I cannot help but think, too, that the legal troubles that delayed *Girl's* publication - potential lawsuits from using real people as characters (Max 2012a, 106-9) - might have led Wallace in *Infinite Jest* to diminish (though apparently not to cut out altogether) references to invented careers and gruesome deaths for real people like Limbaugh and Kemp.

Whether regarding Reagan, Perot, or other candidates, Wallace's personal ballot-box politics will continue to draw critics' interest, no doubt. According to one of the most eyebrow-raising revelations in Max's biography, Wallace was "politically fairly conservative", voted twice for Reagan in the 1980s, and practiced in his younger years "a girlfriend-pleasing campus liberalism" (2012a, 259) before becoming much more of a leftist in later years, partly through the influence of his partner Karen Green. As he makes clear early in the McCain essay, without mentioning his earlier Republicanism, he had already voted in the 2000 Illinois Democratic Primary for Bill Bradley. And *The Pale King's* acid remarks in § 19 about Americans "elect[ing] someone who can cast himself as a Rebel, maybe even a cowboy" (2011, 149), while directed at Reagan, are easily read as a critique of George W. Bush, a son of eastern privilege who played Crawford, Texas rancher in brush-cutting photo ops (the logic could apply as well to Trump, who cast himself as what *The Pale King* calls the "Rebel Outsider President" while running as the incumbent in 2020, p. 150). James Santel has argued that at their philosophical core "Wallace's essays evince a real interest in some of conservatism's central principles, particularly its valorization of individual choice", noting with reference to *This Is Water* that its "assignment of ultimate responsibility to individual agency" offers "a strikingly anomic view" for "someone interested in how Americans could foster civic empathy" (2014). Santel's readings, focused on the nonfiction and mainly about the McCain essay, make some missteps as to how Wallace philosophically defined individualism and choice (and the criticisms he mounted of the myth of individual agency propagated by neoliberalism). Santel also misses something I want to draw out here by reading Wallace 'out of order' and turning to a late-career essay about conservative politics hardly ever discussed by critics: "Host", a piece that draws even further to the fore something that remains latent in the much-discussed "Up, Simba" as it investigates McCain's chances of sincere political communication amid spectacle-based campaigning - that is, Wallace's systematic attention, from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, to the media forms through which conservative politics reached (and, increasingly, inflamed) its audience.

2 Limbaugh, the Right, and Wallace's Vision of Political Media

If *Infinite Jest's* writing about Limbaugh's impact on US life is scant, "Host", a profile of Los Angeles radio host John Ziegler originally published in *The Atlantic* in April 2005, is voluminous on this subject. Several Wallace essays connect thematically to certain narratives and have been instrumental (primers, even) in critical dissections of the fiction that followed: "E Unibus Pluram" with themes of irony in *Infinite Jest*, "Authority and American Usage" and "Up, Simba" with issues of authority and civics in *The Pale King*, and "Deciderization" with ideas about information theory and consciousness that run throughout *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*. "Host", however, becomes most interesting as a companion to Wallace's fiction if allowed to cast backward light on *Infinite Jest*. As it details Ziegler and his sound engineers, who run the show 10:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. five nights a week, a long-time reader of Wallace across genres inevitably makes associations with the detailed scenes in *Infinite Jest* of the WYYY studio at MIT and Madame Psychosis's midnight show *Sixty Minutes More or Less*, a fictional world of sound to which I will return.

In "Host", about eight years into the network's lifespan, Wallace does write about new conservative media leader Fox News, identifying Ziegler's station early in the essay as the "Radio Home of Fox News" (2005, 275). Conservative media (especially talk radio) has undergone massive growth since Wallace's creation of President Limbaugh: Wallace notes Sean Hannity (who began on Fox News TV in 1996 and started his radio show in 2001), Laura Ingraham (whose nationally syndicated radio show brought her to fame starting in 2001), and several other lesser-known figures, all while describing the rise not only of Fox News on TV (where Ingraham and others would later end up with shows) but also the great corporate radio beasts Infinity and Clear Channel. "Host" is a rueful view of media consolidation in radio with certain connections to the analysis of magazine and book-publishing homogenization Wallace mounted a year earlier in "The Suffering Channel".

Wallace bluntly says near the start that Ziegler "is not a journalist - he is an entertainer" (2005, 282). And before turning to any real focus on Ziegler as personality, Wallace emphasizes that political talk radio is not "motivated by ideology". It "is a business" (290), "more lucrative [...] than most people know" (291). Indeed, "Host" might be seen as a key transfer point in Wallace's career-long concern with various (but primarily visual) media: the essay applies *Infinite Jest's* concerns about the effects of entertainment and its constant "stimulation" (280) of American subjects to Ziegler's attempts to make ostensible journalism and information entertaining, leading to questions of authority, politics, and communal responsibility that

preoccupy Wallace in a different register in *The Pale King*. As “Host” puts it, Ziegler and his ilk would like the “authority and influence of a journalist without the stodgy constraints of fairness, objectivity, and responsibility” (282-3), something like the general American obliviousness to and disdain for the exacting, tedious work of good government that the IRS embodies. The parasitism and virality hinted at by the stark title (unlike some others in *Consider the Lobster*, unchanged between magazine and essay collection, suggesting perhaps it was Wallace’s choice and not a magazine editor’s) connote a media system that has been deleterious to the American discourse that (whether in terms of grammatical prescription, political speech-making, or food industries) Wallace strives to make more transparent, ethical, and deserving authoritative throughout *Lobster*.

Limbaugh, in “Host”, is the predecessor and accelerant in this transformation within the culture over the years since *Infinite Jest*, where things like Ziegler’s xenophobic caricatures of the diverse Islamic world are simply much more prominent and accepted in the US media-sphere - and not only because of 9/11. By comparison to the small-time imitators like Ziegler, Rush has “14.5 million regular listeners” for his daytime show, which runs three hours every weekday in national syndication (2005, 287). Ziegler is also Limbaugh’s pale imitator in a mode of subtle irony and distancing-from-truth that Wallace often looks for in media: Ziegler has a “slight air of self-mockery”,

[a] half-pretend pretension, which is ingenious in all sorts of ways [and] was pioneered in talk radio by Rush Limbaugh, although with Limbaugh the semi-self-mockery is more tonal than syntactic. (279)

Perhaps Limbaugh is the David Letterman (the ironizing force portrayed in “My Appearance”) of the radio airwaves. On the level of content, Wallace credits Limbaugh with instilling in radio a mode of alleged news-broadcasting that “really means editorializing” (285): Limbaugh has set “the rhetorical template [...] on which most syndicated and large-market political talk radio is modeled” (286).

Indeed, Limbaugh created the very Teflon conditions for conservative discourse that ruled throughout the 1990s and 2000s. While revealing yet more about his long-time fandom by calling Limbaugh “a host of extraordinary, once-in-a-generation talent and charisma - bright, loquacious, witty, complexly authoritative” (315), Wallace zeroes in on the key feature of his rhetorical template, one that must be in any genealogy of Fox News’ market-dominance and Trump’s later reliance on a trope of ‘fake news’: Limbaugh was “the first great promulgator of the Mainstream Media’s Liberal Bias idea”. The “MMLB concept”

turned out to be a brilliantly effective rhetorical move, since [it] functioned simultaneously as a standard around which Rush's audience could rally, as an articulation of the need for right-wing (i.e., unbiased) media, and as a mechanism by which any criticism or refutation of conservative ideas could be dismissed (either as biased or as the product of indoctrination by biased media). Boiled way down, the MMLB thesis is able both to exploit and to perpetuate many conservatives' dissatisfaction with extant media sources - and it's this dissatisfaction that cements political talk radio's large and loyal audience. (315-16)

Five years after "Up, Simba", without a McCain to examine, Wallace seems far less hopeful about the possibilities of conservative politics, but this is because he is not exploring one sincere voice's attempt to fight through an ironizing, apathy-inducing media environment - Wallace is instead describing the well-marketed environment itself, the major voice that has set the tone that all others, on right and left, must relate or react to. In essence, in "Host", Wallace the journalist reverts to a premise glimpsed in *Infinite Jest*: Limbaugh, preceding Gentle, is at the origin point of the nation's political degradation.

"Host" is Wallace's most extensive analysis of Limbaugh; but elsewhere in post-*Infinite Jest* commentary Wallace was more ominous about his impact on American political culture. His days-long 1996 interview with David Lipsky, which became *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010), cements the image of Wallace as radio fan and analyst, from his thoughts on the pop songs playing on the car radio (and their "sellable" status, p. 212), to the "pretty" voices of his radio interviewers (whose tones distract him from the questions and remind him of his father reading him Melville as a child, p. 49), the strange ruts of Wallace's radio habits (he claims to listen to a single genre/station for a year at a time, p. 212), and his realizations about the beauty of country stations (he learns to find "profundity" in these "incredibly existentialist songs", p. 198, a hint for interpreting the country radio in "Incarnations of Burned Children"). And Wallace proves again that his dial has often been tuned to Limbaugh, saying at one point while discussing themes of *Infinite Jest*:

The thing that really scares me about this country - and again, [...] I'm a private citizen, I am not a pundit [...] I think we're *really* setting ourselves up for repression and fascism. I think our hunger, our hunger to have somebody else tell us what to do - or for some sort of *certainty*, or something to steer by - is getting so bad, um, that I think it's, there's even a, Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, I mean, makes a similar argument economically. But I think, you know, in Pat Buchanan, in Rush Limbaugh, there are *rumbles* on the Western horizon, you know. And that it's going to be, that the next few

decades are going to be really scary. Particularly if things get economically shaky, and people for instance – people who’ve never been hungry before, might be hungry or cold. (158)

In these casual remarks, it is difficult to see Wallace making a clear and coherent claim about an authoritarian future – though some might take this itself as a good prediction of Trump’s presidency! But what precisely are Limbaugh’s and Buchanan’s “rumbles on the Western horizon”? The desire “to have somebody else tell us what to do” and offer “certainty” tracks with *Infinite Jest*’s emphasis on the US’s collective failure of so many tests of free will, as well as with remarks in “Host” that conservative talk radio outruns any liberal shows by purporting to offer “received truths” (286), “energizing” and uniting its audience with “a coherent set of simple ideas” (288). But are the conditions of hardship and hunger Wallace mentions really there in *Infinite Jest*? As I have argued (Severs 2017, 62-87), Wallace did frequently invoke the trials of his grandparents’ generation – the Depression of the 1930s – as something that was missing for the Boomer generation who came of age in the 1960s and forged the world of affluence and supposed greater freedoms his generation inherited. But as many have noted, the apocalypse and collapse are always in Wallace’s endings left in the offing, implied but rarely engaged.

Is Gentle the leader that, in the fiction, Limbaugh and Buchanan’s “rumbles” led to (the vituperative, culture-war-fomenting Buchanan mounted a significant campaign to unseat George H.W. Bush for the Republican nomination in 1992 and ran again in 1996)? It seems hard to say, given how ridiculous and “funny” Gentle is, how hard it is to assimilate his literal cleaning obsession to the genocidal fantasies of purification that define fascist and authoritarian movements. Still, while Wallace’s novel is no *Gravity’s Rainbow* in prophesying an American turn toward the authoritarian (though see Brian McHale 2013 on all of Wallace’s major debts to *Gravity’s Rainbow* and its views on social control), many elements in *Infinite Jest* do align Gentle with fascism and totalitarianism. We might see his name itself as an echo of Giovanni (read: John) Gentile, Italian philosopher of fascism who led fascist councils and ghost-wrote Mussolini’s manifestoes. Reconfiguration of O.N.A.N., Gentle’s keynote geopolitical move (as backed by Tine), gets associated with Nazi manoeuvres in the 1930s and 1940s: there is talk of “Mexico’s Vichified puppet-state” and “a three-country continental Anschluss” (1020) (the latter term, describing Hitler’s annexation of Austria in 1938, comes up several times in the novel). The text also describes Gentle’s “experialism” as (from Quebec’s perspective) “Finlandization”, a term originating in the smaller Finland bowing to the desires of the totalitarian Soviet Union during the Cold War (1996, 421).

Gentle is no Gentile-like intellectual of the state apparatus, and as Bunch (2017) points out in his review of Trump-era reading, Gen-

tle “isn’t evil; he’s just a buffoon manipulating social undercurrents while being manipulated himself by far more devious individuals”. I suggest that, to flesh out what forecasts about the entanglement of evil, politics, media, and entertainment *Infinite Jest* itself is making, we need to read the novel’s two presidents, Limbaugh and Gentle, together – and as figures of a shared medium of sound. When these two are triangulated with the work of Madame Psychosis, a counter-reading of radio and sound in *Infinite Jest* becomes possible.

3 “Somebody’s Mind Coming Apart Right Before Your Ears”: *Infinite Jest* as a Novel of Radio

I argue in this climactic part of the essay that Limbaugh, despite his absence, haunts *Infinite Jest* when it is considered as a novel in which radio, broadcasting, voice, and silence are vehicles of real power, often political power. Wallace clearly prized his writing’s achievement of vocal or oral effects. As he put his goals in a 1998 interview,

I like stuff that sounds intimate to me, and that sounds like almost there’s somebody talkin’ in my ear. And I think at least some of the stuff that I do tries to sound out-loud, aural. (Scocca 2012, 41)

Wallace also noted that the complex *Infinite Jest* was structured like a sonic artifact: “It’s really designed more like a piece of music than like a book, so a lot of it consists of leitmotifs and things that curve back” (Donahue 2012, 71). Some of the descriptions of talk radio in “Host” follow in this vein by seeming self-reflective about the goals of a fiction writer too: radio, somewhat like reading, “is the most solitary of broadcast media”, and talk radio can achieve (like the fiction Wallace likes) a “special intimacy” with listeners (2005, 294). Talking solo for long stretches in inviting ways is very difficult, and as one of Wallace’s station interviewees says of his shots at hosting, “It’s *you*” listeners hear. If they tune out, “they don’t like *you*” (296). Sustaining a long novel’s voice and sustaining a long radio show have some things in common in Wallace’s mind.

Long before “Host,” Wallace had described radio in relation to TV in a curious way in 1990 in “E Unibus Pluram”. There, radio figures as a pre-irony mode, and with the potential, it would seem (outside of Limbaugh’s hands at least), to counteract TV’s pervasive ironizing effects. In all the writing on Wallace, TV, and irony, as well as the connections between that manifesto essay and the novel that followed it, no critics have noted the power Wallace grants to radio’s lack of images. TV “is a bisensuous medium”, Wallace claims, and “needs irony because television was practically *made* for irony”. TV’s “displacement of radio wasn’t picture displacing sound; it was picture

added. Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works via the conflicting juxtaposition of pictures and sounds. What's seen undercuts what's said" (1997, 35). Watching has special powers that radio does not, even though Wallace admits (perhaps undercutting the tidiness of this media and entertainment history?) that radio's comedic narrative shows too were often self-referential (a more sophisticated and complex account of new media recycling and re-presenting older ones is available in the term, influential in media studies of the last two decades, of "remediation" - Bolter, Grusin 1999). For Wallace, "once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never could have, the referential stakes go way up". Humans as TV watchers "become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of 'watching' is expansive. Exponential" (1997, 34).

In *Infinite Jest* Wallace puts these distinct phases in mass media history into a powerfully regressive sequence for Joelle. She goes from visibility to invisibility, from acting in James's films (including, according to Molly Notkin, the Entertainment itself) to - when readers first come to know her in Y.D.A.U., through much obscuring of her identity - being a mysterious radio host, Madame Psychosis. There is something penitential-seeming in Joelle's veil, and while Wallace leaves ambiguous whether she is deformed by (and ashamed of?) her tremendous beauty or by acid thrown in her face, in a world of exponentially proliferating images with damaging effects, the veil seems self-imposed punishment for her visual role in the Entertainment (though she is unaware of its deadliness). Is her radio career, focused on the unbeautiful, likewise a kind of penance, an attempt at the moral perfection she seems to crave in identifying with Bernini's St. Teresa (though as in the story of *Blood Sister*, the path to moral purity for Joelle is one of Augustine-esque excess)? Such self-directed penitence lies in tension with the message she apparently utters in the Entertainment, the only audio as she bends naked over a crib: "I'm sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry" (1996, 939). That "sorry" reads as a message of apology from parent to child - an external message that infantilizes its audience and cannot be the basis for true adult maturation, even if it is wholly appropriate to all the execrably bad parenting *Infinite Jest's* characters suffer through.

While at times invoking all sorts of esoterica, poetry, film talk, and so on, the audio of Madame Psychosis's show - especially her reading of dozens of deformities from a U.H.I.D. leaflet (185 ff.), with touches of the Bible's Beatitudes - is obviously filled with the suffering of birth and the challenges of growing up in a body that cannot be apologized away. All this is broadcast from a brain-like building that suggests the shows are dark interior monologues receiving verbal expression. Her broadcasts "seem both free-associative and intri-

cately structured, not unlike nightmares" (185) – and not unlike *Infinite Jest* itself. Her show is likened to (or consists of) literature during her stint of "Madame's Downer-Lit Hour", which includes readings of Stephen Crane, James Baldwin, and a "truly ghastly Bret Ellis period" (191) (with that well-known Wallace opinion of Ellis underscoring that the first two turn up on his interview lists of favorites and teaching syllabi – Miller 2012, 63; Jacob 2012, 155). A highly eclectic radio show is thus one of the novel means of metafictional reflection Wallace so often sought. DeLillo was probably again his guide: among the many wonderful talkers in his fiction, the rambling, improvisatory radio DJ's of the man who became Wallace's mentor-by-way-of-letters include the quite Joycean Warren Beasley in *Americana* and "Weird Beard" in *Libra*. In Wallace texts preceding the crowning radio creation of Madame Psychosis, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" stands out as preparation: the novella's whole long reflection on what it takes for Mark Nechr to "produce[]" (1989, 233) fiction leads up to an ending short story of archery-murder that is "basically a rearranged rip-off of the radio's 'People's Precinct' episode" he heard on the long car ride (355-6). Wallace is suggesting more than postmodernist pastiche of recycled genre narratives here; he places in the 1980s the very unlikely material of an afternoon radio drama to install in this critique of TV commercials and J.D.'s deadly filming plans a literature-inspiring return to pre-visual media. A similar symbiosis exists between *Infinite Jest* and Madame Psychosis's shows, and here too there are contrasts between these 'good' productions of voice and other deadly visual material, in this case the Entertainment.

Vocality, silence, and possession are subjects in *Infinite Jest* with which Madame Psychosis's transformation into a disembodied radio voice might be correlated, and there I would point and defer to the incredibly thorough account of voice, authorial presence, and the supernatural wraith's abilities to enter others' minds offered in David Hering's chapter on vocality (2016, 24-37). Here (to wend my way from Madame Psychosis back to Rush Limbaugh and political themes) I will stick to recorded and broadcast voices and note what happens to the novel's radio associations when Joelle goes into rehab but her show stays on the air. She is missed most mightily by her unlikely top fan, Mario, who, an exceptional character in so many respects, points to radio's contribution to Wallace's central ideas about art, as well as to the important vocal and non-visual qualities that *Infinite Jest* the novel possesses and "Infinite Jest" the film does not. In the scene of Mario's insomniac nighttime walks down to Ennet House, Wallace stages a rare moment when his two separate communities are momentarily connected, and with far more therapeutic effects than when Mario's brother later goes there seeking addiction-recovery options. When Mario hears his favourite radio show (one from "Mad-

ame's inaugural year") through an open upstairs window, which "has a billowing lengthwise flag for a curtain", Joelle is, as it were, doubly veiled, doubly unvisual: Mario, from family dinners and his involvement in his father's films, would recognize Joelle if he saw her face, but of course she is veiled. But still he would not know an unveiled Joelle to be his beloved Madame Psychosis and not just 'a fellow listener', since he seems never to have recognized the former actor's voice before. This distance between Joelle as visual actor for Mario's father and Joelle as aural host for Boston becomes all the more potent if we start to wonder whether Mario, his father's cameraman at times, was present for the filming of the Entertainment (or even perhaps protected from its effects by not having to look through the anamorphic lens on his head-mounted camera?). The "tapes" (1996, 591) of Madame Psychosis that Mario hopes to ask for stand as salutary auditory alternatives to the film cartridges we know are transferred from E.T.A. to Ennet when sent home with residents who are on the cleaning staff (perhaps, as Marathe suspects, including the Entertainment?).

On a thematic level, Wallace introduces an aesthetic concept of tremendous importance to him here: Mario reflects upon hearing the early show that he had

fallen in love with the first Madame Psychosis programs because he felt like he was listening to someone sad read from yellow letters she'd taken out of a shoebox on a rainy P.M., stuff about heart-break and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way. (592)

After that last sentence, which along with the phrase "U.S. woe" seems to drift momentarily from Mario's limited consciousness and vocabulary and into omniscient narration, the rest of the paragraph attends to Mario's uneasy laughter at an E.T.A. joke about belief in God. The entire paragraph marks not only a continuation of the associations of the radio show's effects and the novel's goals but also a gateway rhetorical moment in the argument *Infinite Jest* builds about 'real' and 'valid art' in general. A little over a hundred pages later, in the paragraph that is perhaps the most frequently excerpted in *Infinite Jest* criticism and reviewing, the text echoes the language of Mario's reaction to the radio tapes, though approaching the problem of US art from the other end, as it were, and through Hal's cool consciousness: "It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial USA treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool", this paragraph begins, going on to critique approaches to "U.S. arts" that will not admit of "goeey sentiment and unsophisticated naivete" (694) and thus miss out on (that Wallace obsession) what it means "to

be really human" (695). These are all, in my reading, radio-inspired thoughts about US art. For it is Mario the radio fan who serves as a first access point to this all-important line of Wallace's thinking about art, sincerity, and sentiment.

An alternate path from death-by-Entertainment, a turn toward a different kind of art, is thus glimpsed in a radio-centred *Infinite Jest*; but is that alternate path truly political in any way, as I am suggesting by associating Limbaugh and Madame Psychosis? The flag veiling Joelle, the presidential ring of "her inaugural year", and the turn to the language of "U.S. woe" all subtly signal that there are national political implications to this experimental Boston radio show. But to fully associate Madame Psychosis and President Limbaugh, I again need Gentle as a key mediating factor. Indeed, we could say that Wallace has structured the novel such that Gentle and Madame Psychosis can ultimately be seen as rivals in silence. Gentle's pre-politics background with the Velvety Vocalists Guild mimics Reagan's, including his strike with the SAG in a successful 1960 effort to secure residuals. Among all the types of leadership Wallace could have made the precedent to Gentle's political rise, he chooses the unlikely event of a sonic strike, the "seven months of infamously dreadful 'Live Silence'" that "brings GE/RCA to heel" on payments for sales and radio play of singers' recordings (381-2). An endnote describes the Live Silence as

all sound withheld, a Job Action, rendered even more chilling by the skill with which the Frankies and Tonies lip-synch to utter silence - and the way the beautiful casino audiences, hit someplace they lived, somehow, clearly, responded with near-psychotic feelings of deprivation and abandonment, became a mob, almost tore lounges down, upended little round tables, threw free ice-intensive drinks, audiences in their well-heeled majority behaving like dysfunctional or inadequately nurtured children. (1029, endnote 149)

The scene of infantile reaction seems a precursor of the content and reception of the Entertainment, and there are hints too of the lab rats crazed over their p-terminals no longer being stimulated (471-2). This reaction to the silence of lounge-singers (seemingly not indispensable artists) exposes something about US culture that Wallace would explore more deeply in *The Pale King*, a final novel that marks (as I have argued - 2019, 184-5) a culmination in the examination of silence as an antidote to a society overloaded with information from all sorts of devices, including radios. In *The Pale King's* "Author's Foreword", Wallace writes of "psychic pain" that most spaces try to cover over with "Muzak", TVs everywhere, cell phones, and iPads: "This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do" (2011, 87).

I have also argued that Wallace is deeply interested in depicting not just silence or the act of listening but "the art of falling silent"

after speaking, including in his own short stories' ending lines (Severs 2019). In *Infinite Jest*, Madame Psychosis's form of falling silent, when contrasted with Gentle's, seems the aesthetically and politically superior kind, even if done out of a kind of desperation. When she goes into rehab, she still insists on having her show occupy her time-slot, and her recasting of Gentle's Live Silence agitates the usually unflappable Mario:

For the past several nights Mario has lain there in a sarcophogally tapered sleeping bag of GoreTex and fiberfill and listened to them run the weird static ambient musics Madame Psychosis uses for background, but without any spoken voice as foreground; and the static, momentumless music as subject instead of environment is somehow terribly disturbing: Hal listened to a few minutes of the stuff and told his brother it sounded like somebody's mind coming apart right before your ears. (1996, 450)

Mario in his mummy bag seems to be confronting death, to go along with the mental dissolution Hal says he hears; but to sense such motifs in one of *Infinite Jest*'s countless depictions of media reception is to have entered an exaggerated symbolic system of image and sound that proposes the stakes are as high as actual paralysis, dehydration, and starvation. The dangers of American media are not really death-by-viewing, though, and this big, masterful novel implies many types of casualties, including (as Wallace would say in increasingly profound ways over the remaining twelve years of his life after *Infinite Jest*) viably mindful forms of political discourse and public opinion for a complex nation. Radios across the land that immersed Americans in Limbaugh's dangerous world of loquacious certainty and simplistic truths were things that Wallace would go on to more directly critique into the next decade. So Limbaugh as past president makes sense as the backdrop against which *Infinite Jest*'s war of sound, silence, art, music, and power is waged.

4 In Conclusion: The 2024 Candidates

It was widely speculated throughout 2019 and 2020 that a post-presidency Trump would follow Limbaugh's lead and launch his own media company to rival Fox News - "Trump TV" or similar, with the subscription and ad money he needed and craved replacing the votes he had never expected to win in 2016. When Limbaugh's cancer forced him into retirement in October 2020, some speculated Trump might even fill his radio niche. When I began writing this essay last spring, Fox News host Tucker Carlson was being talked about as a frontrunner for the Republican nomination in 2024 - that is, if the perennial-

ly popular Trump did not make a comeback and run, which by now in fall 2021 seems a lock to happen. Some challengers are spoken of (Ron DeSantis, Kristi Noem, Mike Pence), but they will surely face a difficult path against inexplicable frontrunner Trump. And Trump's presidency, even in the President Biden era, still produces speculation that the Democrats' best bets are to get celebrity candidates of their own, governing experience be damned, whether Oprah Winfrey, Matthew McConaughey, or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Wallace, even if he did not exactly predict Trump, did foresee much of this trend, on both sides of the aisle.

Whatever the electoral outcomes, it seems clear the legacy of Rush Limbaugh will continue to be felt everywhere in Republican politics. Wallace took a shot in the early-to-mid-1990s at predicting a future in which the transfers between the media world and political prominence would become more frequent and powerful. But the overlooked figure in Wallace's prediction of a dire future – the one in whom he heard fascist rumblings on the horizon – was Limbaugh, who fascinated Wallace because he could be brought into a dense symbolic system of sound, image, talk, and media. Wallace correctly saw that Rush had a cruel showman's rhetorical style that could have a real impact on what politicians did. But Wallace also admired in the medium of radio a set of counter-possibilities, an emphasis on voice that, absent of images, could instill the same kind of intimate relationship with its listener that he wanted to have with his reader's imagination. Better, though, to cultivate minds coming apart in the presence of his daunting pages for 25 years and more, rather than speak stridently for decades to a legion of Dittoheads.

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