

“I Am in Here”: A Comparative Reading of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*

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Abstract Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915), with Gregor Samsa’s transformation “into a gigantic insect”, forms an insightful comparative reading to the opening of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), including Hal Incandenza’s seeming, unexplained catatonia. Wallace described Kafka’s fiction as conducting a “radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical”. In comparing Kafka’s novella and *Infinite Jest*, the question ‘what has happened to Hal?’ thus means: what metaphor is literalized by Hal’s situation? In both texts, the metaphors represent selfhood and writing fiction; but, contrary to Gregor, Hal has taken up the task of self-becoming and symbolizes literary disclosure and communication – rendering *Infinite Jest* as a redemptive novel.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. Franz Kafka. *The Metamorphosis*. Alienation. Self-becoming. Communication. Acknowledgment. Role of literature.

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Peer review

Submitted	2021-09-16
Accepted	2021-12-07
Published	2022-03-16

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Citation den Dulk, A. (2021). “I Am in Here”: A Comparative Reading of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. *English Literature*, 8, 29-50.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2021/08/002

1 Introduction¹

In his essay "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from which Probably not Enough Has Been Removed" (1998), David Foster Wallace describes Franz Kafka's fiction as conducting a "radical literalization of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical" (2005, 63). Perhaps the most famous example of this is Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915): in the first sentence, main character Gregor Samsa is described as having been transformed "into a gigantic insect" (75). Kafka's novella provides an insightful comparative reading to the two opening sections of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), which portray, respectively, the novel's protagonist Hal Incandenza locked in a seeming state of catatonia, and the breakdown of addict Ken Erdedy (as part of which he increasingly identifies with an insect). Both Gregor and Hal are imprisoned in their transformed state, incapable of speech and treated as non-human, while Erdedy embodies an attitude of reflective self-deception leading to self-alienation similar to Gregor's. The question 'What has happened to Hal?' can be said to be the main driver of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative and to encapsulate its thematics. In the scholarship, Hal's situation has mostly been approached as a matter of plot - is Hal clinically depressed? Did he ingest the hallucinogen DMZ? Did he watch the film *Infinite Jest* -, to which the novel "deliberately withholds a linear conclusion" (Boswell 2003, 174)? A few scholars, however, have suggested we should not approach Hal's situation through "plot-hypothesizing" (Henry 2015, 495), but instead, as Rob Mayo puts it, as a "prompt to consider what the condition represents" (2021, 78). In the comparison with Kafka, this means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation?

Several scholars have analyzed connections between Wallace's and Kafka's work (Staes 2010; 2014; Severs 2017; Thompson 2017; Gourley 2018). Perhaps most relevant to my approach is Toon Staes's argument that Kafka's writing functions as a "model" for Wallace's "ongoing trust in fiction's redemptive quality" (2010, 459-60) - but whereas Staes focuses on Wallace's portrayal of artist figures, such as in "The Suffering Channel", I will focus on how this redemption can be seen to come about through *Infinite Jest*'s reworking of devices and themes from *The Metamorphosis*. Lucas Thompson has insightfully sketched some of the ways in which Wallace "refracts Kafka's themes and ideas within a US context". But Thompson's scope is broad, tracking influences from world literature, with Kafka representing "German" and "Eastern European" traditions, whose sociopo-

¹ I am grateful for the support of the Frederic D. Weinstein Memorial Fellowship at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas, Austin), which made possible an important part of the research underlying this paper.

litical and cultural dimensions Wallace largely ignores, as Thompson shows (2017, 22, 123, 155). As such, I think the importance of Kafka's fiction for Wallace – both in its themes and formal innovation – can in fact be best understood within the perspective of Wallace's interest in existentialism, and – as I have argued elsewhere (Den Dulk 2015; forthcoming a and b) – of Wallace's work critically renewing ideas and concerns from existentialist philosophy and literature. Furthermore, though these scholars (also see: Severs 2017) have noted some of the links between *Infinite Jest* and *The Metamorphosis* that I would like to draw out, no sustained comparative reading between these texts has been conducted so far.

In order to do so in this article, I will first address the development of *Infinite Jest*'s opening sections, based on materials from the Wallace archive. Then, I will bring out the similarities and differences between the thematic and formal rendering of Gregor, Hal and Erdedy. Subsequently, I will analyze which metaphors are made literal in *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest*, in relation to their respective socio-cultural contexts. This will show that, for both Wallace and Kafka, selfhood in general and writing literary fiction in particular are at stake in these metaphors, and that, contrary to Gregor, Hal can be seen as having taken up the existentialist task of self-becoming and as symbolizing literary disclosure and communication – thereby rendering *Infinite Jest* as ultimately a novel of redemption.

2 *Infinite Jest*: Development

To begin, it is worth noting that the opening section of *Infinite Jest*, Hal's admission interview, appeared relatively late in the development of the novel, namely in the "Typescript Draft" submitted in June 1994 – a manuscript subsequently trimmed down for the "Draft for Copyedit". In the archival materials, no previous drafts of the opening section are available. By contrast, other key sections from the start of the novel, such as the professional conversationalist scene and Erdedy's breakdown, are available in early individual handwritten or typed drafts (some of which may date back to 1986)² and are included in the partial manuscript sent to the publisher in May 1992, for the book to be contracted, and the Spring 1993 revised typescript (WP).

This late addition of the opening scene is significant because it suggests the section was conceived to bring together different strands

² David Hering dates an autobiographical draft of the conversationalist scene to 1986 (2016, 39). Herein, Hal is called "David"; it is titled "What are you exactly – unadorned autobio – automobiography", and set in 1974 (April 1), with David 13 years old (Wallace himself would have been 12 on that date) (WP 15.7).

of the novel, and make it work as a whole. In June 1993, editor Michael Pietsch told Wallace that the manuscript needed significant cuts, and that he saw Hal as the "emotional core of the novel" and hoped "to see lots more of Hal in extremis" (LB 3.2). Later that year, Wallace sent the manuscript to Steven Moore, for advice on revisions and cuts. One of Moore's recommendations was to change the novel's opening (then still the professional conversationalist scene): "1-5: Hal at therapist: this is wild and funny, but rather too much so;" "it will give the reader the wrong idea of what kind of novel this is going to be" (SM 2.1). With the admission interview, Wallace can be seen to combine Pietsch's and Moore's suggestions, changing the opening section to something that combines the humor and sadness so characteristic of the novel, while maintaining the focus on Hal and providing us with an episode much farther into Hal's future than anything in the novel's previous drafts.

It may have been the Erdedy section that sparked the new opening section. In the first two typescripts the Erdedy section directly followed the professional conversationalist opening. In the version he sent to Moore, Wallace had placed, as an insert between the opening and Erdedy, a section on Orin – which Moore then recommended to "cut or condense", thereby inviting Wallace to keep Hal and Erdedy partnered (SM 2.1). As to the Erdedy section itself: the handwritten draft and subsequent typescripts already contain the insect imagery, so indicative of the links with *The Metamorphosis*. The handwritten draft already features the insect's three 'protrusions', which can be said to mirror Gregor's three exits that give *The Metamorphosis* its three-part structure. Subsequently, "Three Protrusions" even becomes the title of the Erdedy section in the 1992 manuscript, which suggests the importance of the recurring insect imagery to Wallace's development of the section (WP 15.7, 16.1). As Thompson notes, Wallace's debut novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) mentions a rewriting of *The Metamorphosis* as part of a character's list of manuscripts, which includes at least one real Wallace story ("The Enema Bandit and the Cosmic Buzzer"): "it is not impossible that 'A Metamorphosis for the Eighties' refers to a genuine piece of fiction", Thompson speculates (134). I would contend that *Infinite Jest* is that fiction.

That is, as a portrayal of a 'useless' man paralyzed by self-deceptive reflexivity, Wallace may have already modeled Erdedy on Gregor, and later saw the possibility of partnering this with a portrayal of possible further 'metamorphosis' through Hal's admission interview as the new opening section. With the novel's structure largely finalized, Wallace wrote to Pietsch that "Hal's psychological situation" should be understood through "backlighting against the Ennet characters", including Erdedy (LB 3.3). This comment reinforces the impression that the two opening sections can be treated as a meaningful complementary unit.

3 Metamorphoses

Below, I will compare Gregor, Hal and Erdedy, in order to bring out the differences and similarities between these characters and their situations.³

First of all, the structure of *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest* invites comparison. With the miraculous transformation of their main characters, both texts offer their narrative climax in, respectively, their first sentence and section – perhaps doubly so in the case of *Infinite Jest*, because its opening section describes what are chronologically the last events of the narrative. As such, both texts employ another ‘Kafka-esque’ technique identified in Wallace’s essay, namely ‘exformation’: the exclusion of crucial information forcing the reader to make associations and connections – which in Kafka’s case, according to Wallace, tend to be of the “nightmarish” kind, “primordial little-kid stuff from which myths derive” (2005, 61-2). We could even take Hal’s ‘flashback’, midway the opening section, to having eaten a piece of “horrific” mold as a child, as a (Kafka-esque) ‘literalization’ of this exformative effect: the flashback could be interpreted as Hal (and, with him, the reader) attempting to fill in the gaps of his story, while he himself does not recall this event, but was told by his notoriously unreliable brother Orin – suggesting a possible (though highly unlikely) explanation for Hal’s ‘catatonic’ state thirteen years later (10-11). As discussed above, the insect’s three ‘protrusions’ in the Erdedy section, which punctuate the escalation toward Erdedy’s breakdown, suggest a similarity with the three-part structure of *The Metamorphosis*, each part concluding with an attempt by Gregor to leave (protrude from) his room.

As to thematics, in the first sentence of *The Metamorphosis* Gregor is described as having been transformed “into a gigantic insect”. This transformation has already taken place before the start of the story, and the how and why of it remain unexplained (75). The first two sections of *Infinite Jest* also feature two largely unexplained transformations or crises. First, Hal seems to be in some sort of catatonic state – he is seen by others as unresponsive and repulsive –, the nature and causes of which remain ambiguous throughout the rest of the novel. In the subsequent section, Erdedy’s obsessive waiting for a marijuana delivery gradually escalates and seems to end in some sort of addiction breakdown, which he is recovering from in a half-way house later on in the novel.

³ The characters’ names and two protagonists’ links to their authors also invite interpretation. For conciseness, this is left out here and will instead be included in my forthcoming *Wallace’s Existentialist Intertexts*.

3.1 Gregor and Hal

In *The Metamorphosis*, it quickly turns out Gregor has lost the capacity for human speech. When he first tries to speak, there was a "persistent horrible twittering squeak behind [his voice] like an undertone", that "rose up reverberating round them to destroy their sense". Gregor tries to control this by speaking calmly. But after he gets agitated, in response to questions from his family and the chief clerk, his attempt to speak is shown to be futile: "Did you understand a word of it?", say the others: "That was no human voice" (78, 85). At the start of *Infinite Jest*, Hal also seems unable to speak: "I'd tell you all you want and more, if the sounds I made could be what you hear." Like Gregor, Hal tries to speak calmly. And similar to Gregor's rant, Hal's attempt to explain himself is unsuccessful; instead, he is met with disgust: "'What in God's name are those...,' one Dean cries shrilly, '...those sounds?'" "Indescribable", "Like an animal" (9, 12).

Furthermore, both Gregor and Hal feel forced to speak up in response to accusations by officials, are then met with disgust, and violently subdued. In Gregor's case, the chief clerk arrives to accuse Gregor of neglecting his tasks: "For some time past your work has been most unsatisfactory"; "I beg you quite seriously to give me an immediate and precise explanation" (83-4). In his admission interview, the committee question Hal about his test scores, which "this past year" have "fallen off a bit": "there's some frank and candid concern about the recipient of these unfortunate test scores, though perhaps explainable test scores" (6-7).

When Gregor and Hal reveal themselves, the horror of these officials is highly similar. As Gregor pushes through the doorway, "he heard the chief clerk utter a loud 'Oh!' - it sounded like a gust of wind", "clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure". Gregor moves toward the chief clerk, who "stared at him with parted lips over one twitching shoulder", "yelling 'Ugh!'" (87-9). Likewise, while explaining himself, Hal opens his eyes, gets up and makes a soothing gesture, only to deepen his audience's disgust: "Directed my way is horror", "I see jowls sagging, eyebrows high on trembling foreheads, cheeks bright-white"; "From the yellow Dean's expression, there's a brutal wind blowing from my direction"; "Sweet mother of Christ", someone exclaims (12).

The description of what these officials are disgusted *with* also warrants further scrutiny. As noted, both Gregor and Hal are said to sound like an animal. Gregor is described as "vermin", which is later specified to be an insect or beetle.⁴ Hal's appearance is (even) more

⁴ Cf. the upcoming section on the literalization of metaphor.

ambiguous, but resounds with that of Gregor. The admission officials describe Hal exclusively in 'animal' ('non-human') terms. Descriptions like "only marginally *mammalian*" and, even more so, "*subanimalistic*", call to mind "vermin", i.e. a lower, 'unclean' animal. Furthermore, emphases on formlessness and on jittery, slithering movements call to mind insects and reptiles (14; cf. Thompson 2017, 153).

Following the disgust at their appearance, both Gregor and Hal face violent restraint. Gregor's father "gave him a strong push [...] and he flew far into the room, bleeding freely. The door was slammed behind him with the stick" (90-2). In Hal's case: "Both my arms are pinned from behind by the Director of Comp., who wrestles me roughly down, on me with all his weight. I taste floor". Like Gregor, Hal is subdued and isolated in a marginal space - in his case, a restroom (12-13).

3.2 Gregor and Erdedy

Erdedy also seems incapable of communication. He can only think about the marijuana he is waiting for but is terrified of the exchange it might involve. And his planned binge will only foster that isolation: "He couldn't even be around anyone else if he'd smoked marijuana that same day, it made him so self-conscious". Like Gregor, Erdedy is trying to project a sense of calm and does not want to call the "woman who said she'd come", because he "had been very casual about the whole thing" and "he didn't want her to know how much now he felt like he needed it". Meanwhile, he "considered getting up to check the color of the bong he'd be using but decided that obsessive checking and convulsive movements could compromise the atmosphere of casual calm he needed to maintain while he waited" (21-3).

This is an example of the reflective self-deception - after all, Erdedy's considerations suggest the opposite of 'casual' waiting - that characterizes both Erdedy and Gregor. A first example in *The Metamorphosis* is when Gregor, upon having found himself transformed into an insect, thinks: "What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense" (75). Throughout, Gregor's self-reflection serves to avoid the truths of his situation - it is the motor of the self-alienation embodied by his transformation into an insect. The clearest example in Erdedy's case is his 'justification' for his marijuana binge, namely that he will "cure himself by excess", even though he has already used this 'plan' "70 or 80 times before"; "[h]e always lasted a week, or two weeks, or maybe two days, and then he'd think and decide to have some in his home one more last time" (18) - the latter phrase, "one more last time", aptly capturing the self-deceived character of this scenario.

This does not mean that Gregor and Erdedy are unaware of the dissatisfactory character of what drives their self-alienation, respec-

tively submission to a demeaning job and marijuana addiction. This becomes clear, even as Gregor tries to deny his transformation and catch the train: "Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Traveling about day in, day out". And, when the chief clerk arrives: "What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion!" (76, 81). Similarly, Erdedy observes he is obsessively waiting for "something that had stopped being fun anyway". Shortly after, he elaborates: "[t]he dope scared him"; "[i]t wasn't that he was afraid of the dope, it was that smoking it made him afraid of everything else" (21, 22).

Because they try to hide their dissatisfaction from themselves, Gregor and Erdedy also have to hide from others. Gregor locks his bedroom door in his own family home, describing it as the "prudent habit he had acquired in travelling of locking all doors during the night, even at home" (78). He hides his work issues from his family, and has a secretive, controlling desire toward his sister. In *Infinite Jest*, addiction is shown to breed (a 'verminous') secrecy: "a drug addict was at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides". Erdedy "had long ago forbidden himself to smoke dope around anyone else"; "he considered himself creepy when it came to dope, and he was afraid that others would see that he was creepy about it as well" (932, 21, 18). In his Kafka essay, Wallace uses the word "creepy" as an example of how *The Metamorphosis* literalizes metaphor (63): it could suggest the 'creeping' of an insect, which barely registers as movement but rather as hidden shifts of position – and, through his self-designation as 'creepy', Erdedy is thus again associated with Gregor's 'insectile' properties.

In fact, their constant self-reflection fosters paralysis – as they try to suppress every conclusion about themselves. Gregor longs for his situation to be decided for him: "[i]f [the others] were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could stay quiet. But if they took it calmly, then he had no reason either to be upset" (84). The purpose of Erdedy's binge is to "shut the whole system down", while it is his addiction that feeds this system, i.e. his obsessive thinking. Tragically, after the section's climactic paralysis – in which Erdedy, as both phone and front door ring, "moved first toward the telephone console, then over toward his intercom module, then convulsively back toward the sounding phone, and then tried somehow to move toward both at once" –, it is only in his subsequent breakdown that Erdedy ends up "without a thought in his head" (20, 27).

Moreover, these moments of paralysis and self-alienation are explicitly connected with Erdedy's anxious, increasing identification with an insect in his room. The first mention (and first 'protrusion'), in the sixth line of the section, follows a statement of Erdedy's paralyzed waiting: "[t]here was an insect on one of the steel shelves that held his audio equipment"; "he was afraid that if he came closer and

saw it closer he would kill it, and he was afraid to kill it". Erdedy's fear of killing the insect prefigures his gradual identification with it. Two pages later, descriptions of how Erdedy "was committed to several courses of action" – i.e. having no choice in the matter – because of the binge, alternate with the first intimations (and suppressions) of similarity with the insect: "[i]t didn't seem to do anything"; "[h]e felt similar to the insect", "but was not sure just how". After this second appearance of the insect, Erdedy observes: "[i]t protruded, but it did not move". Then, upon stating his purpose to "shut the whole system down", Erdedy further intuits but declines to understand his similarity with the insect: "[i]t occurred to him that he would disappear into a hole in a girder inside him"; "[h]e was unsure what the thing inside him was and was unprepared to commit himself to the course of action that would be required to explore the question". However, the similarity slips in, when the above-quoted "atmosphere of casual calm [while he waited]" is directly followed by Erdedy's understanding of himself as "protruding but not moving" (17-21).

The third and final protrusion follows another description of Erdedy's passive alienation, namely his tendency to let the impression of himself in others "gather its own life and force". This prompts the observation: "[t]he insect sat inside its dark shiny case with an immobility that seemed like the gathering of a force, it sat like the hull of a vehicle from which the engine had been for the moment removed" – in which the echoed phrase 'to gather force' further links Erdedy's inaction to the insect's 'immobility'. Then, as Erdedy's obsession escalates: "he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away", "but he could not even begin to try to see how the image of desiccated impulses floating dryly related to either him or the insect" (23-7). Here, the connection between Erdedy and the insect reaches its peak, but his deceptive self-reflection continues to stave off such conclusions, because accepting these would entail commitment to a truth about himself. He ends up, like Gregor, "without a thought in his head", "as if something's flung, splayed" (27) – a state, as Severs notes, "appropriate to an insect-man" (19), "splatted or squashed like a small bug", as Thompson puts it (154).

3.3 Hal versus Gregor and Erdedy

The Erdedy section helps to bring out differences between, on the one hand, Hal in the opening section and, on the other hand, Gregor and Erdedy, as well as the younger Hal we encounter later in the novel. First of all, Hal, contrary to Gregor and Erdedy, does not deceive himself about his situation. Whereas Gregor pretends he might sleep it off – and later in the story still thinks his situation will pass if he just "lie[s] low" (94) – and Erdedy refuses to even consider his prob-

lem, Hal knows very well and acknowledges it. He knows his words will not be what the Deans hear, nor his movement what they see: "I would yield to the urge to bolt for the door ahead of them if I could know that bolting for the door is what the men in this room would see" (8). This example recalls Gregor, who does bolt for the door, three times, and remains in denial of how this will be experienced by others. Hal is aware of the possible discrepancy of what he intends and how he is perceived.

Such awareness is possible, because there is a discrepancy: while Gregor and Erdedy have no self to contrast with their 'insect'-hood, this seems different with Hal as we encounter him in the opening section. As Casey Michael Henry points out, the "awakened feeling" that is "manifest in Hal at the novel's opening" is "of central importance" but "little discussed" (2015, 495). Most Wallace scholars have assumed that Hal's situation in the opening scene is some sort of exacerbation of the emptiness experienced by the younger Hal (e.g. Boswell 2003, 139-40; Burn 2013, 75-6), who is described as having "no idea he even knows something's wrong" and without any "bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion" (1040, 694) – and thus resembles Gregor and Erdedy. But this stands in contrast with Hal in the opening section, which constitutes, as Mayo formulates it, a "defiant assertion" of Hal's "bona-fide-intensity-of-interior-life" (77).

Hal's 'awakened feeling' manifests in his desire for communication, for his selfhood to be acknowledged, as well as his display of empathy. Despite their shared loss of speech, a crucial distinction between Hal and Gregor (and Erdedy) is that Hal wants to explain himself. Gregor's attempt at speech merely serves to placate his family and the chief clerk, to be left alone again. Despite his dissatisfaction with his job, he wants to be determined by and compliant with it: "I'll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I'm not obstinate, and I'm willing to work" (87). Gregor's rant is an extension of his desire to remain hidden. Again, this desire is shared by the younger Hal, who – like Erdedy – "likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high". However, in the opening section, when Hal senses that a "familiar panic at feeling misperceived is rising", this is not because he wants to remain hidden; it is because "I cannot make myself understood. 'I am not just a jock,' I say slowly". Hal wants to be understood for who he really is: "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings". Contrary to Gregor, Hal does not seem to feel dissatisfied with his (athletic) pursuits, and does not see himself as fully determined by or compliant with certain social and professional expectations: "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions", he says: "I'm not just a creātus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function" (49, 8, 10-12, 852). Furthermore, as Henry notes,

an "affective affinity" or "empathy" has entered in "Hal's relation to those around him" (2015, 495).

Hal's manifestation of selfhood, feeling and empathy is embodied by his repeated assertion "I am in here", and related statements "I am not what you see and hear" and "I'm not" (3, 13) - which signify a claim to an interiority not determined by the context in which Hal finds himself. Importantly, even though Hal's self-assertions are not understood by the admission committee, we as readers do understand him and witness his interiority. We do have access to his thoughts and feelings, and can discern that the claims about his selfhood are largely right: he comes across as eloquent and intelligent.

This is facilitated by Hal's first-person narration in the opening section. For most of the novel, Hal's sections are narrated in third-person. This changes on page 851, after Hal quits marijuana, opens up to Mario about his fear that quitting may uncover the underlying "hole" in him, and Hal attends (what he thinks is an) AA meeting (785, 851). Jamie Redgate is right in pointing out that as Hal's "withdrawal gets steadily worse", we see his "interior self wake up as the narcotising flood recedes: he turns out to be in there after all" - which, I claim, is symbolically underscored by the switch to first-person narration. But Redgate's conclusion that Hal "emphatically does have [an interior self], he just doesn't know how to treat it with anything more than ironic contempt" clearly does not apply anymore in the opening section (2019, 147).

There, Hal's repeated appeals to his interiority do not suggest contempt, but rather that the success of such appeals is always dependent on acknowledgment by others. This is denied to him by the committee, and also, Hal expects, by the doctor he will encounter in the ambulance or E.R., "wanting gurneyside Q&A, etiology and diagnosis by Socratic method, ordered and point-by-point" - i.e. aiming for objective diagnosis rather than subjective disclosure. But Hal clearly does have experience with such disclosure and acknowledgment, as he expects that in the hospital "someone blue-collar and unlicensed, though, inevitably" - perhaps referring to Hal's intermediate experiences with AA's informal, peer-centered practices - will ask Hal "So yo then man what's *your* story?". This hypothetical but 'inevitable' interlocutor points to the reader, to whom Hal has been narrating, and who now wants to know: what's the rest of this story, what has happened to Hal? The inclusion of the M.D.'s "etiology and diagnosis" approach, which will lead to Hal being "unresponsive", "sedated", can be seen as a suggestion to the reader which readerly attitudes may be less or more productive: diagnosis or acknowledgment (16-17).⁵

⁵ The interpretation that Hal is on the mend in the opening section can be further supported by reading it in light of R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, and in contrast to Ste-

4 Metaphor Made Literal: *The Metamorphosis*

Kafka's "literalization-of-metaphor tactic", as Wallace calls it, is well-established in scholarship, particularly with regard to *The Metamorphosis*. Günther Anders writes that Kafka "takes metaphors at their word" (40).⁶ In depicting Gregor "like a cockroach", because of "his spineless and abject behavior and parasitic wishes", Kafka "drops the word 'like' and has the metaphor become reality", Walter Sokel explains. Thereby Kafka "reverses the original act of metamorphosis carried out by thought when it forms metaphor", and "this counter-metamorphosis becomes the starting point of his tale", Sokel writes (1966, 5). In doing so, Kafka does not just offer a literalized extended metaphor, of "dreckiger Käfer" (dirty bug) and "Mistkäfer" (dung beetle) denoting a slovenly and unclean individual: rather, the "textual and poetic complexity" complicates the single metaphor (Sokel 1956, 203-4). Stanley Corngold takes up this idea of reversal and complication of metaphor, asking whether the "literalization of the metaphor is actually accomplished". The different descriptions of Gregor are inconsistent with any bug we might try to visualize; and Gregor's reaction, and that of his family – despite their horror – suggests a more indefinite mix of human and animal being, not 'simply a bug.' Corngold posits that this indeterminacy characterizes Kafka's complication of the metaphor: Gregor's metamorphosis exists as an "opaque sign" (56).

This ambiguity is already introduced in the story's first sentence, which describes Gregor as transformed into an "ungeheueren Ungeziefer" (2004, 96). The usual English translation 'gigantic insect' does not convey the meaning of the original German phrase. 'Ungeziefer' means 'vermin', rather than bug or insect – the word originally meaning "the unclean animal not suited for sacrifice" (Corngold 1988, 57). In turn, 'ungeheuer' evokes the monstrous, a category that is vague by definition, Mark M. Anderson points out, adding that the 'un-' prefixes in both words "double the term's lack of specificity into a kind of negative infinity" (1996, 155).

As Melissa de Bruyker shows, Gregor's "hybridity" – his opaque mix of animal and human characteristics – "signals a contested boundary between social norms and the individual". Gregor experiences a "social crisis", in which his body becomes a "metaphoric border between the self and society" (191-2). How should we understand this social crisis? In Gregor's transformation into an uncanny

phen Burn's use of Laing as confirming Hal's "schizophrenia" (Burn 2013, 75-6). However, the discussion thereof goes beyond the scope of this article and will instead be included in my forthcoming *Wallace's Existentialist Intertexts*.

6 Translation adopted from Corngold 1988, 49.

vermin we can discern both his resistance *and* conformity to societal norms and expectations, as well as Kafka's own hopes *and* anxieties about being a writer.

As we have seen, though the metamorphosis makes literal and confronts Gregor with the truth of his life (for which he despises himself, like he begrudges his job) - namely, that he lacks 'humanity', that he has evaded the task of becoming a self -, Gregor keeps deceiving himself about his situation, his lack of self, his relation to his family - in short, about what Wallace describes as the central Kafka insight, namely "that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (2005, 64-5). Furthermore, Kafka elsewhere "established a link between the bug and the activity of writing itself". In these other writings, positive and negative aspects of the image are brought out. In "Wedding Preparations in the Country" (1907), protagonist Edouard Raban dreams of becoming a beetle, in a "mystic exaltation" of the act of writing. Conversely, in "The Judgment" (1913), the father disparages Georg's artist friend as "yellow enough to be thrown away" (Corngold 1988, 68-9). This anticipates both Gregor's sickly state and Kafka writing, in "Letter to His Father" (1919), that his father compared Kafka's actor friend Löwy "terribly, in a way I've now forgotten, to some kind of vermin", and possibly regarded Kafka himself as a "vermin" for wanting to be a writer (2009, 106, 139). As such, Gregor's metamorphosis is also a reflection of Kafka's conflicted feelings about the writer's ability to speak the truth, at risk of isolation, of being outcast.

Another 'literalized' element in *The Metamorphosis*, related to this metaphor for becoming a self and becoming an artist, and relevant to *Infinite Jest*, appears when a starving Gregor intuits a connection between art and sustenance but also - again - verminousness. Toward the end of the novella, when the family's three lodgers are having dinner, Gregor seems to have an epiphany: "I'm hungry enough [...] but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!" (117). At this point, Gregor is no longer eating and thus literally starving, but the lodgers' food makes him realize he above all craves something else. The original German is even more purposefully ambiguous here, with Gregor being 'hungry', 'but not for these things' ("Ich habe ja Appetit", "aber nicht auf diese Dinge") - further opening up 'hunger' to other things than food; also, 'dying of starvation' in the original text is "ich komme um", which means 'I am dying/perishing', but 'umkommen' can also mean to 'become corrupted/depraved' - which signals Gregor's awareness of his alienation but also his ambiguity with regard to his possible redemption (2004, 47). For, subsequently, after dinner, his sister's violin playing draws Gregor into the living room, indifferent to the responses of others. Gregor observes: "[w]as he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way

were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (119). Here, a starving Gregor intuitively art to be the 'unknown nourishment' he craves. At the same time, Gregor sees this attraction as a form of animality, and thus a confirmation, perhaps definitively, of his 'verminous' state, which is why he ultimately recoils from this nourishment. This association with animality may seem odd (we tend to see music, and art more generally, as particularly human expressions) but makes sense in light of Kafka's conflicted views about being an artist: the passion to art holds both the promise of truth and the fear of isolation.

5 Metaphor Made Literal: *Infinite Jest*

These aspects of the literalization of metaphor in *The Metamorphosis* are particularly insightful to *Infinite Jest*. Wallace once stated: "maybe any 'realistic' fiction's job is opposite what it used to be - no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again" (McCaffery 2012, 38). In relation to this quote, Staes remarks that "Kafka does just that", "defamiliarize the delusive immediacy of modern society" (2010, 461). Thompson adds that a key way in which Wallace's fiction shows this influence of Kafka, is in its adoption of the literalization of metaphor - making a culture's expressions and assumptions visible (2017, 142). In my comparative reading, this means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation?

Below, I will show that *Infinite Jest*'s imagery of 'verminousness' implies its own version of being regarded as 'sub-human' in relation to the contemporary social context invoked in the novel. Like in Kafka, this constitutes both a social/existential crisis (what does it mean to be a self in contemporary society?) and an aesthetic crisis (how to be a writer in that society?). Hal's transformation can be seen to embody the rejection of certain societal norms (but also the fears and risks that accompany this rejection), as well as Wallace's hopes and anxieties about moving beyond equivalent norms and expectations with regard to fiction. As such, there is a purposeful indeterminacy about the 'metamorphosis' in *Infinite Jest*: like in Kafka's novella, it is an 'opaque sign'.

What does it mean, in the world of *Infinite Jest*, to be seen as 'sub-animalistic', as 'damaged' or 'cognitively underdeveloped'? Such imagery occurs throughout the novel, as well as at other points in Wallace's writing, in relation to a contemporary 'fear' or 'distaste' for selfhood, emotion and commitment, and for the exploration of such values in literary fiction. This is expressed most directly in relation to the younger Hal, who believes that to have an "internal self", to be "really human", is to be "hideous", to be "something that pules and writhes", "some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging

itself anacritically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool" (695). In this description we can already recognize several attributions from the opening section: a deformity with reptilian traits that moves in an unsettling (dragging, writhing) way.

This belief – that to have a self, with emotions and attachments, is to be "naïve", "goo-prone and generally pathetic" – has been conditioned by Hal's social context: "Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent"; and "naïveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America". Instead, "weary cynicism" is celebrated as "sav[ing] us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté". The dominant idea of *Infinite Jest's* contemporary cultural formation is the "queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive" (694-5) – a phrase that appears, almost identically, in Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" (63) and story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (304), as the "delusion" that "cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive". This recurrence suggests the importance of this 'myth' or 'delusion' to Wallace's cultural critique.

The metaphoric imagery associated with this myth – that selfhood equals naïveté equals hideousness, deformity – pervades *Infinite Jest* and its story world, not just in relation to Hal. Similar imagery is associated with AA, which is said to be "unromantic, unhip, clichéd", its gatherings full of "lobotomized smiles and goopy sentiment". AA stands as the novel's counterpart to the self-deception, paralysis and self-alienation of its many addict characters, such as Erdedy: AA is about choosing to stay clean, uncertain whether the programme will work, but doing it anyway and thereby committing to one's choice and affirming one's sobriety. Therefore, the dominant 'myth' leads the program to be seen as "goofy", "so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons". In an extension of 'verminous' imagery, AA veterans are called "Crocodiles", with "green", "hideous turd-like cigars" in "their misshapen fingers" (350-4).

But the imagery is perhaps clearest (and most literal) in Hal's brother Mario, who "doesn't seem to resemble much of anyone", because he suffers from severe physical handicaps, but also because he is the most empathetic and humane character in the novel. Mario is described as having a "reptilian/dinosaurian look", with "khaki-colored skin" and "talonesque" spidery fingers. Mario also has a "broad", "involuntarily constant smile" (101, 313-14, 154) – compare this to AA's "lobotomized smiles". This in turn recalls Hal's "grimace", the first aspect of Hal's appearance that is remarked upon in the opening section: "'[i]s Hal all right, Chuck?' Athletic Affairs asks. 'Hal just seemed to... well, grimace. Is he in pain? Are you in pain, son?'" Similar comments about Hal's facial expressions appear toward the end of the novel, after Hal has quit marijuana. One person observes,

"[s]hoot, are you crying? What's the matter?", while shortly after someone else asks: "What may we ask is so amusing, then?"; "Your face is a hilarity-face" (5, 865, 875). A 'grimace' is an ambiguous facial expression: while mostly associated with negative emotions (pain, disgust), it can also be a sort of smile, expressing joy.⁷ What seems crucial is that these expressions, however they are perceived, suggest emotion, and thus Hal's above-discussed 'awakened feeling' and 'interior life'. In the opening section, when concerns are raised about his appearance, Hal's initial response is "emptying out all expression", "to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile" (5, 3), because display of emotion (whether pain or joy) triggers concern about his appearance.

At the same time, it is clear these feelings are not just happy, positive ones: Hal's awakened interiority is not presented as a magical solution to the malaise sketched in the novel. His transformation literalizes the fear of isolation and misperception that characterize (i.e. that make 'horrific') the above-quoted Kafka insight, that the "horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle" (Wallace 2005, 64). This indeterminacy - which makes that the reader has to actively consider what it means in which cases and for what reasons - is further reinforced by the fact that similar imagery is also associated with the violent 'wheelchair terrorists' of the A.F.R., with the lethal film *Infinite Jest*, and with addiction more generally. The A.F.R. and especially the character Marathe, are at points depicted (like AA) as another counterpart to U.S. cynicism, given that they choose and act, based on their terrorist beliefs. The novel describes an advertising display of a "man in a wheelchair", "his smile's arc of the extreme curvature that exists between mirth and fury" (224). This depiction may refer to the A.F.R.'s (fanaticist) beliefs, but also to the effect of having watched the lethally addictive film *Infinite Jest* (which the display may be seen to advertise - it has an opening for a film cartridge), a victim of which is described elsewhere in the novel as catatonic while his "face produces the little smiles and grimaces of a person who's being thoroughly entertained" (483). Insect and vermin imagery is related to addiction more generally: addiction itself is described as "The Spider" and long-term addicts are described as "bug-eyed" (e.g. 274); addicts experience "subjective bugs and rodents, then one more binge and more formicative bugs" (346). And, obviously, toward his breakdown Erdedy increasingly identifies with an insect. But the lat-

⁷ When clinically depressed Kate Gompert is in withdrawal from marijuana, like Hal is toward the end of the novel, she is described as looking "either pained or trying somehow to suppress hilarity" (76). Also see: "a whole new Hal, a Hal who does not get high, or hide", will hand in his urine test with a "wide smile", "and not a secretive thought in his head" (635).

ter case, with its juxtaposition to Hal in the preceding section – Hal a clear manifestation of interiority, Erdedy the lack thereof –, also instructs us on how to differentiate among these occurrences. The addicts' insect imagery appears as an echo of Kafka's original literalized metaphor, symbolizing and confronting these addicts with their self-alienation, their neglect of the task of becoming a self. This echo allows us to better discern, to contrast the new literalized metaphor that Wallace places next to it, in the form of Hal's metamorphosis, particular to the contemporary cultural context.

Here we should also compare the literalized metaphors of 'nourishment' in *The Metamorphosis* and *Infinite Jest*. While Gregor ultimately recoils from the "unknown nourishment he craved", Hal at one point explains his situation in the opening scene by saying: "[c]all it something I ate". This baffling comment is followed by the flashback to five-year old Hal having eaten some "horrific" mold (10). From the perspective of there being something *wrong* with Hal, it is tempting to read this episode as a reference to him having ingested something harmful (e.g. the – fungus-based – hallucinogen DMZ). But note that Hal says "call it something I ate", which calls into question whether he's referring to something particular he ingested. Instead, if we read it as a literalized metaphor, a first option is to return to the flashback, which tells of Hal eating something "horrific", and read this as symbolic of Hal craving something that – as I have shown above – his societal context deems horrific, namely the development of a human self.

But perhaps more interestingly, "call it something I ate" can be seen to refer to what Henry calls Hal's "pseudo-epiphanic" insight, toward the end of the novel, regarding the "conceivably endless repetitions his current lifestyle will be composed of – a comprehension potentially brought about by sobriety" (494). That is, shortly after quitting drugs and his switch to first-person narration, Hal experiences a "panic" that "wasn't like being high, but it was still very: *lucid*": "[t]he world seemed suddenly almost edible, there for the ingesting". Here, Hal's epiphanic comprehension, his 'taking in' of the world, is rendered via the literalized metaphor of the world being 'edible'. One could regard this as a withdrawing marijuana addict experiencing the 'munchies'. But the term 'lucid' evokes Camus's characterization of a consciousness that faces absurdity, that realizes meaning is not inherent to this world (which is abundant, indifferent) but has to be consciously made, instead of eluding this absurdity by fleeing into pre-given, unquestioned pursuits of something. In Hal's case, he starts to realize the absurdity, the "crushing cumulative aspect", of "Academy routine". And the "worst part" of these lucid "cognitions" involves eating, the "incredible volume of food I was going to have to consume over the rest of my life": "I experienced, vividly, the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but

the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years"; "[a]nd another, dimmer room, filled with the rising mass of the excrement I'd produce". The repetitive character of relating oneself to the world is literalized via repetitive eating. And Hal realizes that most people's pursuits serve as a distraction from this repetition, this inherent meaninglessness: "A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what? These rooms blandly filled with excrement and meat? To what purpose?" (896-900). The comment "call it something I ate" in the opening section can be read as a reference to this epiphany, as an embrace of the repetitive nature of existence, which should not be evaded through unquestioned pursuits, but actively chosen as part of the development of selfhood. Thereby, *Infinite Jest* can again be seen to take up a literalized metaphor from *The Metamorphosis* and transform its outcome: whereas Gregor is unable to accept the 'unknown nourishment' that would remedy his starvation, Hal has 'digested' repetition and the need for choice in the development of a self - as part of his metamorphosis.⁸

This brings me to the relation to literature. We have already seen that Kafka connects the image of the bug to the artist: it conveys Kafka's anxieties about being a writer and reigning prejudices against such a pursuit, that the artist is 'useless', 'slovenly', 'sick' etc. Wallace also employs the 'horrific' imagery associated with Hal's transformation in relation to writing - perhaps most explicitly in the essay "The Nature of the Fun": there he adapts a metaphor from Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, describing a "book-in progress as a kind of hideously damaged infant", "crawling", "dragging", "hideously defective, hydrocephalic and noseless and flipper-armed and incontinent and retarded"; but that attending to your "horrifically defective" fiction becomes a "weird way to countenance yourself and to tell the truth instead of being a way to escape ourself" (193, 198-9). This imagery is highly similar to younger Hal's fear of 'being really human'.

The social context underlying Hal's initial fear also affects literary fiction. Like Hal trying to be 'really human', Wallace describes the task of "really good fiction" as "illuminat[ing] the possibilities for being alive and human" (McCaffery 2012, 26). But if for contemporary culture the "crime is naïveté", "betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability" means that a writer will be seen as "[b]ackward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic", Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram" (63, 81). Elsewhere, the similarity between Hal's fear and Wallace's own fear as a writer are even clearer: "[r]eally good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself", and "ask the reader really to feel something"; "[w]hat's poisonous about

⁸ For an elaboration of the role of repetition in the development of selfhood in *Infinite Jest*, see Den Dulk 2015, 213-28.

the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to try to carry out" (Miller 2012, 50).

Another aspect of Wallace's Kafka-inspired view of fiction is that the reader experiences a similar anxiety *as well as* release from it. Wallace once stated that fiction should first "aggravate" the "sense of entrapment and loneliness and death" in the reader, in order to then "countenance it" (McCaffery 2012, 32). As Staes points out, this is exactly what Wallace admires in Kafka, "to provoke a release of pressure" – of "anxieties and fears" – "that already exists 'inside the reader'" (2010, 473-4). I would contend that this is what happens as we work through *Infinite Jest*: Hal's situation at the start of the narrative may antagonize a sense of isolation in the reader, to which the novel then provides different possible forms of release, including the possibility of circling back to the opening and re-evaluating Hal's isolation as standing in need of acknowledgment of selfhood.

Given these links, *Infinite Jest* can be seen to dramatize Wallace's view of literature, the desire to – like Hal – disclose yourself and communicate; but also the uncertainty how this will come across, and fear that the venture may not succeed, that it may be perceived as sentimental drivel. As such, with Hal's 'I am in here' the author, too, declares his presence, reminding the reader of the communicative nature of the literary text. As noted above, the first iteration of the Hal character (in the conversationalist scene) was strongly autobiographical, and it is thus fitting that it is Hal who declares the author's presence.

Understanding the question that drives the narrative of *Infinite Jest* – what has happened to Hal? – means asking: what metaphor is literalized by Hal's situation? We have seen that, like in *The Metamorphosis*, it represents both a social/existential crisis and an aesthetic crisis. That Hal's 'awakened feeling' and 'interior self' – in short, his development of selfhood – lead him to being perceived as horrific, primitive, 'subanimalistic', is a literalization of the imagery associated by the novel with a contemporary 'fear' or 'distaste' for selfhood, emotion and commitment. Hal's metamorphosis is the new literalized metaphor, particular to a contemporary cultural context, that Wallace builds on Kafka's original metaphor of insecthood as alienation, echoed in *Infinite Jest*'s representations of addiction to drugs and entertainment (e.g. Erdedy). The same values at stake in Hal's selfhood – feeling, disclosure, communication – are also at stake in literary fiction, in Wallace's view. As such, the literalized metaphor of Hal's metamorphosis dramatizes what both author and reader experience as the pressure (isolation, finding oneself 'horrific') and release (acknowledgement by the other) offered by fiction.

These aspects of the transformative process at the heart of *Infinite Jest* – what has happened to Hal? – are indeterminate, an 'opaque sign'. But, like with Kafka, this does not mean that the sign can mean

'anything', rather that the reader has to actively contribute to bring out its meanings. As Corngold notes, it's a popular tendency to regard Kafka's stories as "indecipherable", but this "ignores his view that literature intends to speak the truth" (80). And, as De Bruyker points out, in facing the 'opaque' hybridity of Kafka's fiction, it is the reader "who turns words into images" and by whom the truth of the transformation is "created", "identified" (192). This desire for truth and the role of the reader equally apply to the metamorphosis at the heart of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. So what is your story?

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