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Ellen CHANCES

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND DOSTOEVSKY: ON PARALLEL TRACKS*

Abstract: The article discusses ways in which David Foster Wallace engages with Dostoevsky's life and works. The article points out that Wallace's commencement speech, "This Is Water," makes no direct references to Dostoevsky, yet the moral and spiritual values that he enunciates share common ground with those of the Russian writer. The article then turns its attention to Wallace's review of four of Dostoevsky scholar Joseph Frank's five volumes devoted to Dostoevsky's writings, life, and the historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts into which they fit. Wallace admires the way in which Dostoevsky's novels address important issues, including isolation and nihilism, facing Russia in the 1860s. The American writer sees a similarity between that isolation of the 1860s and the isolation prevalent in the United States in the 1990s. The article then analyzes Wallace's 1996 novel, *Infinite Jest*, and the ways in which he indirectly weaves into the text references to Dostoevsky's fiction, primarily, but not exclusively, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Also discussed are a few parallels with *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons*. The article describes Wallace's focus on the detrimental effects that isolation leads to in contemporary America. The article explains that Wallace declared that in *Infinite Jest*, he wanted to reflect the distracted, fractured way in which contemporary people think. The article states that given this goal, it makes sense that the references to Dostoevsky's works in *Infinite Jest* are also fractured. They are in bits and pieces.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, David Foster Wallace, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, *This Is Water*, Wallace review of Joseph Frank books, *Infinite Jest*, Russian-American literary connections.

Information about the author: Ellen Chances, PhD, Professor of Russian literature, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Princeton University, 249 East Pyne, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6784-3323>. E-mail: echances@princeton.edu.

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Эллен ЧАНСЕС

ДЭВИД ФОСТЕР УОЛЛЕС И ДОСТОЕВСКИЙ: ПАРАЛЛЕЛЬНЫМИ ПУТЯМИ*

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается влияние биографии и творчества Ф.М. Достоевского на Дэвида Фостера Уоллеса (1962–2008). В своей речи «Это вода», произнесенной перед выпускниками Кеньон-колледжа 21 мая 2005 г., Уоллес не делает прямых отсылок к Достоевскому, однако те нравственные и духовные ценности, о которых он говорит, восходят к русскому писателю. В статье также уделяется внимание рецензии Дэвида Фостера Уоллеса на первые четыре тома знаменитого пятикнижия американского исследователя Джозефа Фрэнка, посвященного творчеству и биографии Достоевского, а также их историческому, интеллектуальному и культурному контексту. Дэвида Фостера Уоллеса восхищает то, как Достоевский поднимает в своих романах вопросы нигилизма, изоляции и другие важнейшие проблемы, с которыми сталкивалась Россия в 1860-х гг. Американский автор усматривает сходство между изоляцией, характерной для России 1860-х, и изоляцией, доминирующей в Америке 1990-х. Далее в статье анализируется роман Д. Фостера Уоллеса «Бесконечная шутка» (1996) и то, как в текст романа влетают аллюзии к произведениям Достоевского, в первую очередь к «Братьям Карамазовым». Отмечается также ряд параллелей с «Записками из подполья», «Преступлением и наказанием», «Идиотом» и «Бесами». В статье подчеркивается, что Уоллес главным образом сосредоточивается на разрушительных последствиях, к которым ведет изоляция в сегодняшней Америке. Уоллес говорил, что в «Бесконечной шутке» он стремился отразить фрагментированное, разорванное мышление современного человека. В силу этого в «Бесконечной шутке» отсылки к Достоевскому также предстают в виде фрагментов и осколков — прием, полностью соответствующий заявленной автором главной цели романа.

Ключевые слова: Достоевский, Дэвид Фостер Уоллес, «Братья Карамазовы», «Записки из подполья», «Преступление и наказание», «Идиот», «Бесы», «Это вода», рецензия Уоллеса на книги Джозефа Фрэнка, «Бесконечная шутка», русско-американские литературные связи.

Информация об авторе: Эллен Чансес, PhD, профессор русской литературы, департамент славянских языков и литератур, Принстонский университет, 249 Ист Пайн, г. Принстон, 08544 Нью-Джерси, США. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6784-3323>. E-mail: echances@princeton.edu.

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If one judges a civilization, as I believe it should be judged, not by the high-mindedness with which it regards art, but by the seriousness with which art regards the civilization, then it is high time we begin to address anew and with vigor certain problems that continue to signify alarm.¹

Toni Morrison

Are the contemporary American writer, David Foster Wallace (1962–2008), and the nineteenth-century Russian writer, Fedor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), on parallel tracks? In some ways, they certainly are. The two writers are connected by their concern for some of the same moral and spiritual values. They both wrote about the destructive and self-destructive effects of isolation.

For Dostoevsky, as we know, Western ideas warp people. We see that, for example, in the underground man, a citizen of St. Petersburg, which is, as the narrator writes, “the most abstract and premeditated city in the world.” The underground man is unable to connect with other people. When Liza offers him spontaneous love, he cruelly rejects her. We see that in Raskolnikov, living in isolation and addicted to Western ideas, until, only near the end of *Crime and Punishment*, through Sonya’s love, does he begin to be able to break out of the prison of rational ideas and turn to religion. Raskolnikov’s addiction to an idea had isolated him from humanity and from religion. We see that in Ivan Karamazov, whose lack of responsibility for others begins to melt away only after his third visit to Smerdiakov reveals to him the fact that following his “all is permitted” philosophy can lead to murder. When Ivan had left town, Smerdiakov had mistakenly taken that as a signal that it would be all right for him to kill Fedor.

For Wallace, the hollowness, isolation, and spiritual emptiness of American society in the 1990s stemmed from cynicism, from watching too much television, which, according to Wallace, leads to addiction to drugs, to alcohol, and to competitiveness. For him, that isolation resulted from people’s not facing the important moral issues, from their not dealing with the important questions. For him, that behavior led people to distract themselves by watching too much television, by turning to drugs and alcohol. For him this was addictive behavior in order to fill the spiritual emptiness

¹ Toni Morrison, “Art as Advocacy,” Morrison’s Personal Archive, as cited in [Morrison 2019: 66].

of their lives. In addition, Wallace believed that American postmodernist writers, with their emphasis on distancing the reader, with their emphasis on cynicism, irony, skepticism, and intellect did not help to alleviate the situation.

Both Dostoevsky and Wallace espoused, in their beliefs and writings, the importance of empathy and love. Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail, on the pages of *Vremia* (*Time*) (1861–1863), and *Epokha* (*Epoch*) (1864–1865), the political and literary journals, the thick journals («толстые журналы») that they wrote and edited, advocated an ideology that they called “pochvennichestvo” (“concept of the soil”). They wanted to steer a course midway between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. They agreed with the Westernizers for their insistence that Peter the Great’s innovations were positive contributions to Russian life, but they disagreed with the Westernizers for their rejection of the importance of Russia’s spiritual values. They agreed with the Slavophiles who insisted on the positive contribution of Russian spiritual values, but they disagreed with the Slavophiles’ rejection of Peter the Great’s innovations and reforms that derived from the West.

Until 1862–1863, the “pochvenniki” (“men of the soil”) thought that the rational laws — laws having to do, for example, with the judiciary and with local government — would solve Russia’s problems. The “pochvenniki” praised some of those reforms and new laws enacted by the tsar, Alexander II, who had come to power in 1855. After Dostoevsky went to Western Europe and saw that laws did not make people better human beings, he and the “pochvenniki” shifted their emphasis to the importance of the spiritual realm. They declared that only the spontaneous love of one human being for another would solve Russia’s problems. Reflections of “pochvennichestvo” can be found in, for example, Liza’s spontaneous loving feelings for the underground man, and in Sonya’s loving feelings toward Raskolnikov. Reflections of “pochvennichestvo” can also be found in other Dostoevsky novels, including *The Brothers Karamazov*, in, for example, Father Zosima’s teachings, as he talks about the importance of “active love.”

For Wallace, empathy was a paramount value. We see this, for instance, in the commencement speech he gave at Kenyon College in 2005. In the speech, entitled “This Is Water,” Wallace discussed the need to think about the other person and not to think only about one’s own self-centeredness. He says, for example, that when a speeding car cuts in front of you, your reaction should not be one of anger. Instead, he said, you should

think about the fact that maybe that driver was rushing his sick or injured child to the emergency room of a hospital. He urges “...compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things” [Wallace 2009: 93].² In his speech, Wallace talks about what real freedom is: “...being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day” [Wallace 2009: 120]. He emphasizes the need to choose how to live one’s life.

He talks about the fact that everyone worships, but that each person chooses what to worship. He tells the graduating students that it is important to worship within a spiritual framework rather than to worship solely what the material world offers. He says, “...an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship — be it J.C. (Jesus Christ. — E. C.) or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles — is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive” [Wallace 2009: 102]. Wallace continues, “If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough” [Wallace 2009: 103].

So many of the key ideas in Wallace’s commencement speech resonate with significant themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Father Zosima talks about the freedom that every individual has in order to be able to choose between good and evil. The importance of the responsibility of one human being to another comes up over and over again in that Dostoevsky novel. One glaring example is Fedor Karamazov’s total lack of responsibility for his sons. Smerdiakov takes no responsibility for his having killed Fedor. He blames Ivan for the murder, even though it was he, Smerdiakov, who committed the murder. In contrast, Dmitry does take responsibility for his actions. He says that he could have murdered Fedor. By taking responsibility, by freely choosing good rather than evil, he redeems himself. Father Zosima, Alesha, Captain Snegirev, and Iliusha take responsibility for others. They practice “active love” over and over again.

In the same novel, the Grand Inquisitor, in Ivan’s “poema” (long narrative poem), declares that people do not want freedom, that they do not want choice, that they want to worship someone who will take away their freedom, and will, instead, meet their material needs by giving them bread.

² The commencement speech was published as a book a year after Wallace’s death. One can see Wallace deliver the speech online: David Foster Wallace, “This is Water — Full Version — David Foster Wallace Commencement Speech,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>.

In terms of the concept of Wallace's statement about "the subsurface unity of all things," we can think about one of the overarching themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the idea that everything is connected to everything. Highlighting that idea, one of Father Zosima's teachings is that "all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touching in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth" [Dostoevsky 2011: 275] («...всё как океан, всё течет и соприкасается — в одном месте тронешь — в другом конце мира отдается» [Достоевский 1972–1990, 14: 290]).

In *Crime and Punishment*, there is a scene in which Raskolnikov has a dream. In the dream, a drunken peasant, Mikolka, shouts, "My property" ("Моё добро"), as he keeps beating his horse. Raskolnikov, as a child, goes up to the horse and kisses it. Here, then, is that same choice about which Wallace had spoken, the choice between the corrosive influence of a reliance on a material value, on one hand, and on the other, an adherence to the all-important ingredient of compassion. (Of course, in the case of Dostoevsky's novel, we know that after he wakes up from the dream, Raskolnikov decides that he will not murder the pawnbroker, Alena Ivanovna, yet he later does kill her.)

In "This Is Water," Wallace promotes ideas that are familiar to readers of Dostoevsky, but he does not make any direct reference to that writer. Elsewhere, also in a venue that is not fiction, the American writer directly addresses reasons for his admiration of the Russian author. As Wallace was working on his novel, *Infinite Jest*, he wrote a review of four volumes of the Dostoevsky scholar Joseph Frank's five-volume intellectual biography of Dostoevsky.³ (The fifth volume had not yet come out.) What Wallace highlighted about Frank's discussion of Dostoevsky tells us something

³ Wallace's review, entitled "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," first appeared, with the title "Feodor's Guide: Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky," in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (April 9, 1996: 15–18). An expanded version was published in David Foster Wallace's book, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005). My citations will be from the first paperback edition [Wallace 2007].

Joseph Frank, Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University who later became a professor at Stanford University, combined Dostoevsky's biography with the historical and cultural contexts in which the writer was working, and with a literary analysis of Dostoevsky's fiction and journalism. The four volumes which Wallace reviewed are: Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (Princeton University Press, 1983); *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (Princeton University Press, 1986); and *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865–1871* (Princeton University Press, 1995). Frank's fifth and final volume, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871–1881* (Princeton University Press), came out in 2002.

about his own writing. What he liked, he stated, was the combination of biography and detailed analysis of the works, and the placing of Dostoevsky in the intellectual, cultural, and historical contexts of his time. What Wallace also liked was Frank's placing of Dostoevsky's "...moral-spiritual themes against the background of Russian history" [Wallace 2007: 258].

Frank goes into detail as he describes, for example, the underground man's objections to Chernyshevsky's ideas about rational egoism, to French Utopian Socialism, and his objections, in general, to the Russian nihilists of the 1860s. Wallace writes that he sees parallels of those aspects of the 1860s in Russia, with certain tendencies of the 1990s in the United States. Wallace compares the isolation present in the 1860s in Russia, to the detrimental effects of isolation in America of the 1990s.

In his review of Frank's four volumes about Dostoevsky, Wallace included his own reflections about the Russian writer's novels, many of which he had read in high school. He explains that he reread them while working on his essay on Frank's four books. He declares that while working on the review, he also read *The Idiot*, which he had not read before.

His remarks engage with a variety of Dostoevsky's works. It is difficult to understand, he muses, "...how a destitute 'former student' like Raskolnikov or an unemployed bureaucrat like the Underground Man can somehow afford to have servants" [Wallace 2007: 263]. Wallace comments that Dostoevsky "...seems like the first fiction writer to understand how deeply some people love their suffering..." [Wallace 2007: 264]. The example that he gives is that of Nastasya Filippovna in *The Idiot*. He also points out, about that novel, that Frank does not elaborate upon or give reasons for Dostoevsky's failure to focus on the few months during which Myshkin is in Moscow [Wallace 2007: 266].

Interspersed in Wallace's focus on Frank and Dostoevsky are passages, set off by double asterisks, about his own questions and issues that dovetail with aspects of Dostoevsky's works. One of those passages deals with faith. Wallace asks what the meaning of faith is. "As in 'religious faith,' 'faith in God,' etc. Isn't it basically crazy to believe in something that there's no proof of?" [Wallace 2007: 259]. This, of course, is familiar to readers of *The Brothers Karamazov*, who know that Ivan, with his Euclidean mind, demands logical proof before he can believe. He believes in God, he says, but he cannot understand how a just God could construct a world that allows for the suffering of innocent children.

Another of Wallace's asterisked passages is about freedom and responsibility. He states that Americans "...talk a lot about our 'special

rights and freedom,” but, he asks, “are there also special responsibilities that come with being an American? If so, responsibilities to whom?” [Wallace 2007: 268]. As we have noted, this is an important theme in *The Brothers Karamazov* and in “This Is Water.”

There are occasions upon which Wallace identifies himself with characters in Dostoevsky’s novels and with Dostoevsky himself. In his review of Frank’s books, he openly admits that some of Smerdiakov’s personality traits are similar to his own as well. He has been talking, here, about his admiration for Dostoevsky’s creation of characters that are “alive” [Wallace 2007: 264]. Among the characters listed in this category is “...the unbelievably repellent Smerdyakov, that living engine of slimy resentment in whom I personally see parts of myself” [Wallace 2007: 265]. Dale Peterson, Wallace’s thesis advisor, his professor in a course on American literature, and family friend, at Amherst College, from which Wallace graduated in 1985, told me that Wallace was “fascinated by Smerdiakov.”⁴ Peterson also briefly discussed a letter from Wallace that included observations about Gorianchikov’s relationship with the common people in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the House of the Dead*.

Wallace biographer D.T. Max refers to a letter that the writer wrote to Peterson, in which he compared himself to Dostoevsky, whose life experiences provided fuel for *Notes from the House of the Dead* [Max 2013: 141], his fictionalized account of the time he spent in a Siberian labor camp. Max provides background for this comment. Wallace had been accepted, beginning with the fall semester of 1989, as a doctoral student by Harvard University’s Department of Philosophy. During this period of his life, he was drinking heavily. In November of that year, he was admitted to the addiction unit of the Boston area psychiatric hospital, McLean Hospital, which is affiliated with the Harvard Medical School. After spending four weeks there, he chose to go to a halfway house, Granada House, a rehabilitation residence, in Brighton, Massachusetts, for the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction [Max 2013: 135–141].

⁴ Dale Peterson, professor, in telephone conversation with the author, May 28, 2019, Princeton, New Jersey, — Amherst, Massachusetts. Peterson, now Professor Emeritus of English and Russian, said that Wallace had never taken a course on Russian literature with him. Stanley Rabinowitz, Professor Emeritus of Russian at Amherst, stated that Wallace was signed up to take his course on Dostoevsky, but that he did not take it because he took a medical leave of absence from college (Stanley Rabinowitz, in telephone conversation with the author, June 6, 2021, New York, New York, — Amherst, Massachusetts).

In the letter to Peterson that Max quotes, Wallace remarked that “‘going from Harvard to here’ was like ‘House of the Dead... with my weeks in drug treatment composing the staged execution and last minute reprieve from same’” [Max 2013: 141]. He hoped, as Max writes, that the parallels in Dostoevsky’s and his life would result in the same kind of “creative surge” that characterized Dostoevsky’s post-reprieve writing trajectory. Of course, we know that what Wallace is referring to is the famous episode in Dostoevsky’s life in which, after his arrest, in 1849, he and the others awaiting execution were, at the last minute, granted a reprieve by the tsar.

Before we examine the role of Dostoevsky’s novels, especially that of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in *Infinite Jest*, let us briefly turn our attention to Wallace’s knowledge of literature. He was a voracious reader. He was widely read in American literature and in the literatures of other countries, including Russian, Eastern European, Latin American, Italian, Japanese, and English literature.⁵ In fact, the title, *Infinite Jest*, comes from words spoken by Hamlet as he holds Yorick’s skull: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” [Shakespeare 1993: 1013].

The Russian writers whose works he read included, in addition to Dostoevsky, Pushkin Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Goncharov, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Nabokov, Kharms, Yevtushenko, and Pelevin [Thompson 2016: 90]. When Wallace compares Tolstoy to Dostoevsky, he declares, “You need only compare the protagonists’ final conversations in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and FMD’s *Crime and Punishment* in order to appreciate Dostoevsky’s ability to be moral without being moralistic” [Wallace 2007: 269]. Yet Wallace did not only criticize Tolstoy. He expressed great admiration for him, declaring that he must be the only contemporary American postmodernist writer who worships Tolstoy.

Let us now turn to a discussion of *Infinite Jest*.⁶ For those who have not read the book, a brief summary is in order. (That is difficult, given the fact that the length of the novel is 1079 pages, 90 of which are endnotes printed in a tiny font!) The plot of *Infinite Jest* focuses on a dysfunctional family, the Incandenzas. James O. Incandenza, whose initials, J.O.I. are

⁵ For a detailed analysis of Wallace’s reading of these literatures, see [Thompson 2016].

⁶ The book was first published by Little, Brown and Company in 1996. My citations will be from the 2016 edition [Wallace 2016]. The novel was first translated into Russian, see [Уоллес 2018].

almost the same as the French word for joy, “joie,” is an alcoholic. He is the head of the Boston area Enfield Tennis Academy for students who attend the academy until the end of their high school years. He is also a director of “cartridges” (videos) and a neglectful father of three sons: the oldest, Orin, a Boston University football player; Mario, a Myshkin, Alesha type; and Hal, the cerebral, Ivan-like figure. Avril is their mother.

The action takes place in the tennis academy itself and in Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, a nearby halfway house for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. A main character there is the live-in staff member, Don Gately, who has been sober for more than one year. A third focus of the action has to do with a terrorist group of Quebec separatists, the Wheelchair Assassins, who want to find the last cartridge that Jim Incandenza created before his death. Its title is “Infinite Jest.” The reason that they want to find it is that people who watch it, die because they cannot stop watching. They are addicted to watching the cartridge.

In this plot line, two central figures are the double agent and Canadian, Rémy Marathe, a Wheelchair Assassin, and Hugh Steeply, an American. The reason that the Wheelchair Assassins want to kill Americans is that the president of the United States, Johnny Gentle, a former crooner, who is addicted to cleanliness, wants to dump American toxic waste into part of New England and upper New York state, areas that are now Canadian, but were once American.

When we consider the plot lines, it makes sense to mention a parallel with Tolstoy’s fiction, in terms of the structure of *Infinite Jest*. Thompson points out a brief reference, in Wallace’s novel [Wallace 2016: 95], to the famous first line of *Anna Karenina* in Hal’s statement, about an exam, “The exam was talking about the syntax of Tolstoy’s sentence, not about real unhappy families” [Thompson 2016: 106–107]. It seems to me that in constructing his novel in three major plot lines that overlap, the American writer uses the same technique as does Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, with its three overlapping plot lines: Anna and Vronsky, Levin and Kitty, and Dolly and Stiva. For instance, Don Gately, in the Ennet House plot line, and Joelle van Dyne, a part of the Incandenza plot line, begin to care for one another. Marathe, a Wheelchair Assassin, wants to find Jim Incandenza’s cartridge, and his plot line also overlaps with that of both Joelle and Orin. Moreover, as does Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, Wallace switches, in short chapters, from the story of one character to that of another.

In *Infinite Jest*, section headings which announce specific years during which episodes take place, are not identified by the actual years, but

rather are identified according to the products of companies that bought the rights to label the years. This concept, which Wallace has created, he calls “Subsidized Time.” Thus, we have sections, for instance, such as “Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar” [Wallace 2016: 37]; “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” [Wallace 2016: 95]; and sections with the specific day, “3 November Y.D.A.U.” [Wallace 2016: 109], etc.

In addition, throughout the novel, the chronology of what happens when, is not clearly delineated. With the out-of-sync time frame of the action, and with the designations of subsidized time, rather than a straightforward presentation of the actual year, the chronology can be confusing for the reader, so much so that Stephen Burn, the author of a reader’s guide to the novel, has included an appendix in which he places the entire action of the book in its proper chronological order. These dates, he claims, extend from 2002 to 2010. In addition, Burn lists the actual year, in brackets, of a subsidized time year. One example from Burn’s listings is “[2006] Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster” [Burn 2012: 96].⁷

Infinite Jest is, in part, playful. There is the M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) radio station, WYYY. This is playful, but it alludes to a key question in the book — *why* are things in present-day America the way they are? Some of the characters go to the “Unexamined Life” tavern. The name of the tavern, of course, contains Socrates’ words at his trial, in Plato’s *Apology*, that an unexamined life is not worth living. In another humorous episode, Mario likes the joke that Hal’s friend, Michael Pemulis, tells about wanting to establish a telephone Dial-a-Prayer service for atheists. The phone rings and rings, and no one answers.

There is sometimes the very distancing that troubled Wallace about contemporary American literature. There are references to Sylvia Plath. Kate Gompert, a clinically depressed Ennet House resident who has attempted suicide, is “...reading somebody called Sylvia Plate” [Wallace 2016: 593], no doubt a reference that the reader could surmise, is to Sylvia Plath. There is the funny, but *sick* inclusion of the words, “the bell jar of her denial” [Wallace 2016: 794], a description of the state of the character, Joelle’s mother, as she commits suicide by cutting off her limbs and shoving them down the kitchen garbage disposal. In a snarky aside, the narrator writes that he wonders how it is possible to do that. We know that Plath killed herself by sticking her head into an oven, and that she wrote

⁷ For the entire appendix, see “Appendix: The Chronology of *Infinite Jest*” [Burn 2012: 91–103].

the book, *The Bell Jar*. Jim Incandenza kills himself by sticking his head into a microwave oven. These incidents in *Infinite Jest* are funny, but it is really horrible when one thinks about the reality of the situation.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace stated that he was disappointed with most of the reviews of the book because they concentrated on the humor. He said, “I wanted it to be extraordinarily sad” [Wallace 1997: 20:56–21:13].

After this brief introduction to *Infinite Jest*, let us proceed to the question of how Wallace deals with Dostoevsky in his 1996 novel. There are the overarching themes, several of which we have already encountered in other Wallace writings and utterances — the spiritually empty condition of America and the causes of that condition; the importance of looking inward, of facing the past in order to free oneself; the importance of responsibility to others; the importance of choosing a healthy spiritual path; the importance of connecting to people in an authentic and honest way. There are aspects, bits and pieces of *The Brothers Karamazov* and other Dostoevsky novels, woven, but not in a clear-cut way, into the fabric of *Infinite Jest*.

Why would Wallace give us bits and pieces, a disjointed narrative, and a confusing time sequence? Why didn’t he directly address some of the important issues like God and faith? He said that in 1990s America, one cannot write a novel like Dostoevsky’s, in which people sit around and talk about deep, serious questions. Therefore, he said, he put discussions of those topics into the scenes that take place in A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings, because people *do* address the powerful questions there [Lipsky 2010: 82].⁸

He also stated that he wanted, in *Infinite Jest*, to reflect the way in which people think — in a distracted way, with thoughts that keep getting interrupted. That is perhaps why the novel can seem to be chaotic. His editor, Michael Pietsch, wanted the notes to be footnotes, at the bottom of pages. Wallace insisted that they be kept as endnotes [Pietsch, Moody 2012: 213] so that the reader would have to be interrupted. When asked why there were so many loose ends at the end of the novel, Wallace declared that he wanted the reader to work hard.

Let us now examine some of the specific aspects of Dostoevsky’s novels that are relevant to a discussion of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace deals with

⁸ Lipsky had accompanied Wallace during the last five days of Wallace’s book tour that promoted *Infinite Jest*. Lipsky’s interviews with the author comprise *Although of Course*.

these aspects, sometimes in a straightforward way, sometimes not in a clear-cut way, sometimes in bits and pieces, sometimes in layers, sometimes exaggerating, and sometimes in an undermining manner. For example, in a conversation that Hal and Mario have, there is a distinct connection to what Ivan tells Alesha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Hal says, "...I have administrative bones to pick with God, ... I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about" [Wallace 2016: 40]. In acknowledging that he does not believe in death, he is like Ivan, for both declare that they, unlike God, would have constructed the world differently. Both question the structure of the world as it is.

In the following quotation, Wallace directly refers to a Dostoevsky novel. Barry Loach, a minor character, has an older brother, close to being ordained as a Jesuit priest. The older brother is having a crisis of faith. Wallace writes that Loach "...managed to engage the brother in some rather heated and high-level debates on spirituality and the soul's potential, not that much unlike Alyosha and Ivan's conversations in the good old *Brothers K.*, though probably not nearly as erudite and literary, and nothing from the older brother even approaching the carcinogenic acerbity of Ivan's Grand Inquisitor scenario" [Wallace 2016: 969].

In order to help his brother restore his faith, Loach wears ragged clothes and goes to a busy Boston subway station. Unlike the homeless and downtrodden who ask passersby for money, Loach asks to be touched. Only Mario, who happens to be going by, does so. Thus, examples of goodness do exist in the world.

Timothy Jacobs, in an article on *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, lists some of the straightforward parallels [Jacobs 2007].⁹ He includes Wallace's direct reference to Ivan and Alesha (which I quote above) in the conversation that Loach has with his brother [Wallace 2016: 273–274]. He does well when he discusses the incident with Loach and Mario [Wallace 2016: 273–274], for he speaks about the parallel with what Ivan tells Alesha near the beginning of Dostoevsky's chapter, "Rebellion." Ivan confesses that he "...could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one can't love, though one might love those at a distance" [Dostoevsky 2011: 204] («...я никогда не мог понять, как можно любить своих близких. Именно близких-то,

⁹ The examples of Wallace and Dostoevsky parallels that I bring up in the next three paragraphs are based on insights that Jacobs makes in his article.

по-моему, и невозможно любить, а разве лишь дальних» [Достоевский 1972–1990, 14: 215]).

Jacobs does well when he focuses on the parallel of the Loach and Mario scene to what Ivan then tells Alesha about St. John the Merciful: “...a hungry, frozen beggar came to him, and asked him to warm him up, he took him into his bed, held him in his arms, and began breathing into his mouth, which was putrid and loathsome from some awful disease” [Dostoevsky 2011: 204] («...к нему пришел голодный и обмерзший прохожий и попросил согреть его, лег с ним вместе в постель, обнял его и начал дышать ему в гноящийся и зловонный от какой-то ужасной болезни рот его» [Достоевский 1972–1990, 14: 215]).¹⁰

Another of the parallels that Jacobs focuses on, in both Dostoevsky and Wallace, are the father/son relationships (Fedor and the Karamazov brothers; Jim Incandenza and his sons). He notes that both Fedor Karamazov and Jim Incandenza are drunkards. He points out that there is a parallel between Fedor and Dmitry competing for Grushenka’s attention, and Jim and Orin competing for Joelle’s attention. Jacobs characterizes Mario as someone who, like Alesha, listens, who does not lie, and who is not cynical. In addition, Jacobs points out that there are parallels of Ivan’s “everything is permitted” philosophy, and in *Infinite Jest*, the conversation of Steeply and Marathe on that topic.

I do not agree with Jacobs, though, when he suggests that perhaps Dostoevsky is playing “an elaborate joke” on the reader and that what is narrated in *The Brothers Karamazov* did not happen [Jacobs 2007: 279].

I shall now concentrate on other aspects of the Wallace connections with Dostoevsky in *Infinite Jest*. The following episode, linked to the father and son theme, is one of the layered ones. When a wraith visits Gately in the hospital, and it is uncertain whether this is a dream of Gately’s or an hallucination, we can think of Ivan and the devil.¹¹ In that scene, there

¹⁰ A note keyed to this passage explains that the scholar Leonid Grossman traced Ivan’s anecdote to Gustave Flaubert’s story, “La Légende de Saint Julien Hospitalier” (1876). Turgenev’s translation into Russian (1877) was published in the thick journal *Вестник Европы* (no. 4). Ivan’s attribution substituting Ioann (Ivan, John) for Julien, the note continues to explain, links Flaubert’s story of Julien’s murder of his father and subsequent lifelong atonement, to later developments in Ivan’s trajectory in Dostoevsky’s novel. See “Commentary” by G.M. Fridlender and others («Примечания» Г.М. Фридлиндера и др.) [Достоевский 1972–1990, 15: 551].

¹¹ Thompson draws this parallel: [Thompson 2016: 101]. Thompson devotes an insightful chapter, Chapter 3, “Wallace and Russia,” to Wallace and his ties to Russia [Thompson 2016: 89–116]. He calls one section of the chapter “Wallace’s Dostoevsky Obsession” [Thompson 2016: 93–106].

is also a link to *Hamlet*. Hamlet's ghost visits Hamlet. Wallace's wraith seems to be Jim Incandenza, who comes to Gately, who is not acquainted with the Incandenza family. The wraith says that the only reason that he, when he was still alive, made the cartridge, "Infinite Jest," was so that Hal would speak to him since he felt that Hal had not been speaking to him. He wanted to entertain Hal.

In terms of attempting to connect the Incandenza brothers to the brothers in *The Brothers Karamazov*, we have seen that Jacobs asserts that Orin is like Dmitry. Thompson, as we have seen, believes that Gately is like Ivan because of the presence of Gately's wraith and the presence of the devil in Ivan's nightmare. It seems to me that Orin is not a Dmitry-like figure. It is true that like Dmitry, he sometimes focuses on women. Yet unlike Dmitry, he is never redeemed. He lies. He deserts Joelle after her face has been disfigured.

To me, Don Gately resembles Dmitry much more than does Orin. Even when he had still been addicted to drugs, there was a part of Gately that was kind. And as a child of nine, he did not join the neighborhood boys who left dog feces in a paper bag on the porch of Mrs. Waite, a neighbor. Instead, Gately went to visit her. The fact that he retained his kind-hearted nature even at the lowest points of his life is very like Dmitry, who, even at his low points, preserved some elements of decency.

Like Dmitry, Gately admits his flaws. He says that he kept watching television as his stepfather, on a daily basis, beat his mother. He is honest. He becomes sober. Like Dmitry, Gately is emotional. He loves speeding down the city streets. He cries when he is presented with a cake in celebration of a year of sobriety. He is redeemed by *choosing* to take responsibility for himself and become sober and stay sober. While in the hospital, in the face of terrible pain, he chooses to refuse to take painkillers because, acutely aware of his history of addiction to drugs, he does not want to get addicted to them again.

It could seem to the reader that there might be no happy ending for Gately. Here is one of those loose ends of the novel. Near the end of the book, the wraith visits him. We know that a wraith is an apparition of someone who has died, who appears to a person, often before that person's death. But perhaps Gately *will* recover. We have just read that the fever from his toxemia, after surgery, has spiked. Does he die? We do not know whether the last few pages of the novel are his flashback to a nightmarish episode during the time of his heavy use of drugs. The last line of the book, before the endnotes, is, "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back

on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” [Wallace 2016: 981].

Hal’s fate, as we know, is described at the beginning of *Infinite Jest*, out of order chronologically, with the previous events of his life that we later learn. The first pages of the novel take place a year after what we subsequently read about him. We do not know what happened in that year. At the end of the book, he was suffering from the effects of withdrawal from marijuana addiction. In the first pages of the novel, he is being interviewed by deans and a tennis coach at the University of Arizona. He ends up in an ambulance, for he emits only gurgling sounds. We see his inner thoughts and intellect — for instance, that Kierkegaard’s influence on Camus is underestimated. Has he suffered from having taken the drug DMZ, that has lethal effects on people? Is this a psychotic breakdown? We are not told.

Wallace’s comments partially substantiate our conjectures. The imprecision, on Wallace’s part, was on purpose. D.T. Max reveals that Wallace told his editor, Michael Pietsch, that he absolutely would not tie up any loose ends. He specifically mentioned the lack of clarity concerning the reasons for Hal’s condition in those first pages of the book. The author offered three possible explanations. Hal had seen his father’s cartridge, “Infinite Jest,” he had taken DMZ, or he was “detoxing from marijuana” [Max 2013: 193].

There is a parallel here with Ivan Karamazov’s brain fever. Dostoevsky does not make it clear whether or not Ivan will recover. It is true, though, that Ivan has understood that he has to act responsibly toward others, after he hears from Smerdiakov the consequences of an “all is permitted” philosophy. He does go to court to defend Dmitry, even though the reader knows that the evidence that he produces, the 3000 rubles, could be any 3000 rubles and not the 3000 rubles that Smerdiakov had stolen from Fedor after he murdered him. There *is* hope for Ivan.

Often in *Infinite Jest*, there are episodes that recall *The Brothers Karamazov*, but Wallace either undermines the possible happy outcome and/or exaggerates the horror of a specific incident. In Dostoevsky’s novel, a group of boys, age 12 to 15, make a bet. One of them, Kolya Krasotkin, almost 14 years old, says that he will lie down between railroad tracks and will not move when a train comes by. Fortunately, he is not injured. The later fate of Kolya is positive. He becomes a devoted disciple of Alesha.

In *Infinite Jest*, there is a scene reminiscent of the Kolya Krasotkin railroad episode. A group of Quebec boys, age ten to approximately 16, in-

vent a game, “The Game of the Next Train” (“Le Jeu du Prochain Train”).¹² The idea is to get across the tracks before an approaching train goes by. Many of the boys do not make it in time. They lose their legs, end up in wheelchairs, and ultimately become Wheelchair Assassins. In *Infinite Jest*, the “game” leads to the terrorist goal of killing Americans.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, in another episode devoted to Kolya Krasotkin, he brings Zhuchka, the dog, to Iliusha. Smerdiakov, who, in the past, had thrown cats from a wall, had taught Iliusha the trick of sticking a pin into a piece of bread and feeding it to Zhuchka. Therefore, Iliusha had thought that he had killed the dog. When Kolya brings Zhuchka to him, it is a happy reunion since Iliusha learns that he had not killed the dog. Kolya had been training Zhuchka, whom he calls Perezvon, in secret, with the intention of giving him to Iliusha. In Dostoevsky’s novel, Kolya, who, in the past, had caused a goose’s neck to break, switches from being a disciple of Rakitin’s to being a disciple of Alesha’s. There is the positive ending of the link of Alesha and Kolya and the boys.

What does Wallace do with an incident having to do with poisoning pets? In *Infinite Jest*, a Smerdiakov-like man, Randy Lenz, is at Ennet House in order, supposedly, to recover from an addiction to narcotics. However, Lenz continues to keep cocaine in a hollowed-out book by William James, *Principles of Psychology and the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*. (In a humorous touch, Wallace calls the distinguished author of the book “Bill” James.) Lenz kills dogs. He feeds them poisoned meatloaf and then shoots them. He feeds poisoned food to cats and then kills them, too.

Instead of a positive resolution of the incident with Zhuchka in Dostoevsky’s novel, in Wallace’s novel, the actions of his character, Lenz, lead to a negative outcome. The Canadian owners of a dog that Lenz killed want to murder him. Gately, in a Father-Zosima-like action of active love, defends Lenz. He is acting responsibly toward another person by getting into a fight with the Canadians. Gately is badly injured, develops toxemia, and as we have seen, we do not know whether or not he dies. Lenz leaves the halfway house, is homeless, and feeds his cocaine habit by stealing.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima preaches the lesson of forgiveness, a lesson he had learned from his older brother Markel, as Markel was dying. Even with forgiveness, in *Infinite Jest*, the issue gets derailed. A law enforcement official who has ties to Gately sits outside

¹² Thompson briefly brings up this Dostoevsky — Wallace parallel [Thompson 2016: 101].

Gately's hospital room. He has come in order to tell Gately that he forgives him, yet he cannot get himself to do so.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace deals with the Dostoevsky theme of the freedom to choose by folding it into the A.A. discussions of the choice to stay sober, thereby connecting to those inner issues that people have not wanted to look at. By examining those issues, people free themselves from destructive and self-destructive impulses.

It seems to me that *The Brothers Karamazov* is not the only Dostoevsky novel that makes an appearance in *Infinite Jest*. As we have seen, we have many examples of the connections between the two works. One further example has to do with Mario, who, like Alesha, offers emotional support to his Ivan-like brother. He tells him, "Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way, Hal" [Wallace 2016: 772]. Yet Mario also brings to mind Myshkin, in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Myshkin, the "positively beautiful person," suffers from epilepsy. Wallace creates his Myshkin-like character, Mario, but when dealing with his physical disabilities, he exaggerates.

He makes Mario horribly physically deformed. We read about his "...withered-looking... arms... which curled out in front of his thorax... ." We read about his "...not so much club feet as more like *block* feet: not only flat but perfectly square." We read that he moves "...in the sort of lurchy half-stumble of a vaudeville inebriate, body tilted way forward as if into a wind, right on the edge of pitching face-first onto the ground..." [Wallace 2016: 313]. We read that he often falls forward. We read that he has "...khaki-colored skin, an odd dead gray-green that in its corticate texture and together with his atrophic in-curved arms... gave him... an almost uncannily reptilian/dinosaurian look" [Wallace 2016: 314].

Epilepsy, the disease from which Myshkin suffered, does make an appearance in *Infinite Jest*. Pat, a staff member in Ennet House, has an epileptic dog. Thus, just as we have bits and pieces of *The Brothers Karamazov* in Wallace's novel, we also have, albeit many fewer, bits and pieces of *The Idiot* scattered in it.

There are also bits and pieces of *Notes from Underground* that inhabit *Infinite Jest*. Like the underground man, Hal has a toothache. The underground man is from the most abstract and premeditated city in the world. Like the underground man, Hal is imprisoned in his swirling mind. He lives in abstractions. For instance, he memorized the entire Oxford English Dictionary. All of the addicts who have not sought help in order to free themselves of their addictions are imprisoned in their minds.

Wallace is like Dostoevsky in another way. The underground man says, “I’ve only carried to a logical conclusion in my life what you yourselves don’t dare to take more than halfway” [Dostoevsky 2003: 123] («...я только доводил в моей жизни до крайности то, что вы не осмеливались доводить и до половины») [Достоевский 1972–1990, 5: 178]). In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace takes to a logical conclusion the consequences for individual lives, of what happens to a society when isolation rules and human connections are severed.

It seems to me that there is also a reference to *The Demons* in *Infinite Jest*. Orin telephones Hal in order to ask him whether he has heard of a separatist terror plot. He says that men in wheelchairs are following him. As the two brothers are conversing, Hal is clipping his toenails. The detail is reminiscent of the terrorist Petr Verkhovensky, who cuts his fingernails. Moreover, Verkhovensky had founded a secret terrorist group (based on the real-life figure, Sergei Nechaev).

An important theme in *Crime and Punishment* is also briefly touched upon in Wallace’s novel. Raskolnikov believes that he, as someone who can transcend barriers, can determine who does not have the right to live. When he asks Sonya who should live, Luzhin or Katerina Ivanovna and the children, she answers, “But I can’t know God’s intentions... How could it depend on my decision? Who made me a judge of who should live and who shall not?” [Dostoevsky 1989: 344] («Да ведь я божьего промысла знать не могу... Как может случиться, чтоб это от моего решения зависело? И кто меня тут судьей поставил: кому жить, кому не жить?» [Достоевский 1972–1990, 6: 313]).

In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately’s thoughts are reminiscent of Sonya’s words. He feels that Geoffrey Day, one of the Ennet House residents, will be out on the street within a month. His sense is that it would be good, instead, to open up a slot to someone who will take recovery from addiction seriously and adhere to the treatment program. We then read, “Except who is Gately to judge who’ll end up getting the Gift of the program v. who won’t, he needs to remember... Except who is Gately to think he can know who wants it and who doesn’t, deep down” [Wallace 2016: 273].

After our consideration of some of the ways in which Wallace dealt with Dostoevsky, we return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: Are the two writers on parallel tracks? The answer, based on the evidence presented here, is yes and no. As we have seen, Wallace adhered to some of the same moral and spiritual values that Dostoevsky espoused. He raised some of the same questions that Dostoevsky did. He greatly

admired the Russian writer, yet he was acutely aware of the fact that the differences in circumstances in 19th-century Russia and late 20th-century America required a different approach of addressing the deep philosophical issues that are found in Dostoevsky's fiction.

While discussing *Infinite Jest*, Wallace told Charlie Rose, "Reality is fractured now," whereas "text is linear and unified." Thus, there are the fractured multiple narratives. He emphasized that he wanted, therefore, to retain the fractured quality of the text, but at the same time, not have it be too disorienting for the reader [Wallace 1997: 19:03–19:36].

It should come as no surprise, then, that the ways in which Wallace incorporates, reflects and responds to Dostoevsky is itself fractured, with the bits and pieces of Dostoevsky themes and characters interwoven into the fabric of *Infinite Jest*.

In short, I repeat that Wallace and Dostoevsky are and are not on parallel tracks.

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