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Title: Spaces of Open Constraint in *Infinite Jest*

Abstract:

This paper interrogates two sites in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as spaces of Open Constraint: The Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House and the Enfield Tennis Academy. Both sites create tension by offering a space of openness and a space of constraint to the characters. Significantly this paper explores the thematic and theoretical underpinnings of each of the sites, characterizing them as spaces of Open Constraint and creating a new dialogue between them.

My approach builds on the recent works on *Infinite Jest* that recognize the importance of the spatial for DFW (e.g. Paul Quinn's chapter on 'Location's Location: Placing David Foster Wallace') by looking at Wallace's use of physical, psycho-geographical and narrative constraints within the novel.

The climber in 'Mr Squishy' perhaps best exemplifies Wallace's exploration into immediate physical encounters with the built environment. His interest in the topography and the psycho-geographic extends all the way from his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, to lines and geometry in 'Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley'.

Yet the spatial analysis of the twin sites offered here differs from existing works by examining them as spaces of 'Open Constraint' and interrogates them via the qualities of internal conflict and (self)discipline that characterise both. It shows how within these two sites it is this notion of Open Constraint and its relation to the issue of choice - that dominates not only the spatial construction of the sites, but also the psychological makeup of the characters and the structure of the narrative contained therein.

Biographical note:

Jonathan Laskovsky is a PhD candidate at Monash University in the Literary and Cultural Studies program. He has research interests in modern and postmodern literature with a particular focus on fictional space and critical theory.

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Keywords:

Space – David Foster Wallace – choice – narrative – prison – language

Introduction

David Foster Wallace explores space in a number of ways. Whilst the climber in the story ‘Mr Squishy’ perhaps best exemplifies his exploration into the immediate physical encounters with the built environment, Wallace’s interest in topography and psycho-geography extends all the way back to his first novel, *The Broom of the System*. In *Broom*, the city that forms the site of the narrative, East Corinth, when viewed from above takes the shape of actress Jayne Mansfield’s profile (Wallace 1987). Wallace also shows the wide range of his interest in the spatial in ‘Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley’ (Wallace 1997), where the realms of narrative and mathematics collide in a discussion of lines and geometry.

Infinite Jest (Wallace 1996) is no exception to this. In fact, one of the defining features of Wallace’s opus is the inherently spatial language throughout. This is true from the primarily descriptive terms used in the AA Scenes associated with the character Gately: ‘coming in’, ‘life on the outside’ ‘out there’; through to the Boston slang used throughout the novel: ‘map’ for face – ‘demapping’ for killing and so on. This language echoes the backdrop of spatial and political tension between the US and Canada played out through the Marathe and Steeply story arc.

I am interested in Wallace’s use of the spatial in *Infinite Jest* – specifically what I am calling spaces of Open Constraint. This term, as it suggests, brings together the two connected themes of openness and constraint. Here I am using this term to refer to a space where the occupants are not physically held against their will by walls or chains, but are nonetheless constrained by the internal rules that govern that space. I am applying this concept to two spaces within *Infinite Jest*: the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (*sic.* – hereafter EH) and the Enfield Tennis Academy (hereafter ETA), as well as the story arcs that are associated with these two parts of the narrative.

I am arguing here two points:

1. Wallace uses spaces of Open Constraint in *Infinite Jest* as a structural technique with the tension between the openness and the constraint forming the driver for the story arcs.
2. That the issue of choice fundamentally underpins the spaces and forms the basis of the critique inherent in the narrative.

Addiction and the notion of choice, has been discussed previously in the context of *Infinite Jest* in Jan Harris’s ‘Addiction and the Societies of Control’ (Harris 2008). Yet whereas Harris examines (via Sedgwick and others) the relationship between choice and freedom, I am interested in the way that choice theoretically underpins the structure via this intersection of openness and constraint. In other words, the intersection between the spatial constructs, and the issue of choice that this construct necessitates.

Open Constraint as structure and critique

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace’s focus on the spatial extends beyond the linguistic to the physical, geographical and psychological. This is embodied by the juxtaposition of

the Enfield Tennis Academy, sitting aloft on its ‘geoengineered site’ and the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, whose residents have ‘hit a figurative bottom’ to use Heather Houser’s language (Houser 2012: 119). The physical link and juxtaposition of the two sites is obvious. One towers above the other; one embodies success and prestige whilst the other is a backwater of addiction. One is custom made – with the very earth cleft to make way whilst the other is just one part of many; one of ‘seven moons orbiting a dead planet’ (Wallace 1996: 93).

This spatial link is undeniably important – it allows Wallace to explore the temporal (the students at ETA look towards the future – to ‘the show’ of professional tennis whilst the residents of EH dwell on the mistakes of the past as they rebuild a life through the process of recovery). This spatial/temporal link also brings the two narratives together in a symbiotic relationship. For example, one of the EH residents Clenette works at the ETA as part of her recovery program, whilst Hal visits EH as part of his exploration into addiction and recovery – described by Johnette as a boy who ‘radiated high-maintenance upkeep and privilege and schools where nobody carried weapons, pretty much a whole planet of privilege away from the planet of Johnette Marie Foltz of South Chelsea’ (Wallace 1996: 786). This scene connecting the two arcs further emphasizes the gap between the respective social classes of both sites, bringing the spatial proximity into even greater focus. Hal’s brother Mario also visits EH in a scene about his insomnia (created by the absence of Madam Psychosis, now a resident at EH) creating a deeper connection between the two (Wallace 1996: 589-593).

Yet the spatial connection between the two sites is not limited to these interactions. In *Infinite Jest*, both of these spaces of Open Constraint are characterized by the tension created between their permeable boundaries, and the rules that prohibit or influence this movement. Wallace’s interest in boundaries is illustrated by his use of the cage as a metaphor for addiction throughout *Infinite Jest*.

Significantly, cages as addiction metaphors figure in the story arcs centred around both spaces. In the EH story arc this is true for Joelle’s personal narrative: ‘What looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage’ (Wallace 1996: 222), and in Gately in his descriptions of AA speakers’ own stories: ‘You cannot get drunk and you cannot get sober; you cannot get high and you cannot get straight. You are behind bars; you are in a cage and can only see bars in every direction’ (Wallace 1996: 347). They are also part of Gately’s own realisation of the surprising effects of the program:

More weeks went by, a blur of Commitments and meetings and gasper-smoke and clichés, and he still didn’t feel anything like his old need to get high. He was, in a way, Free. It was the first time he’d been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten (Wallace 1996: 467-8).

In the ETA arc, the cage of addiction is exemplified not only through Hal’s struggle with withdrawals from his marijuana addiction, but also via the ‘glabrous and high-gloss’ LaMont Chu, in his discussion with Lyle about fame and the tension between the desire for fame and being trapped by that desire (Wallace 1996: 388, ‘glaborous’ intentional).

(LaMont)

(L)ately, he won't take risks in tournament matches even when risks are OK or even called for, because he finds he's too scared of losing.... He's starting to fear that rabid ambition has more than one blade, maybe. He's ashamed of his secret hunger for hype in an academy that regards hype and the seduction of hype as the great Mephistophelan pitfall and hazard of talent....

(Lyle)

You feel these men with their photographs in magazines care deeply about having their photographs in magazines?... perhaps they did at first. The first photograph, the first magazine... After the first photograph has been in a magazine, the famous men do not *enjoy* their photographs in magazines so much as they fear that their photographs will cease to appear in magazines' (Wallace 1996: 388-9, emphasis in original).

In both of these story arcs, the semi-permeable nature of the cage allows its captive more than just a glimpse of what lies outside, and in *Infinite Jest*, recovery programs and training are predicated as the key to release from that cage. The boundaries of both sites (EH and the ETA) are even more permeable – they are prisons *sans frontiers*. Within both, the spaces are open: the occupants are constrained not by physical boundaries, but by the internal rules that govern them. The tension between this 'lack of freedom of movement, and the inability to manipulate important aspects of their immediate environment' are two 'particular frustrations' felt by prison inmates according to Leslie Fairweather (Fairweather and McConville 2000: 45) and the characters in *Infinite Jest* echo these frustrations.

Other prison-like characteristics are present as well: hierarchy, surveillance and ritual abound in the spaces and form an 'inmate code': an 'unwritten though explicit set of values and norms which exist alongside the official rules of the institution' (Asher 1986: 124). The most obvious example of this is Ennet House which, as a halfway house, already occupies the ontological status of somewhere between a prison and the land of the civilized. Gately emphasizes this when he admits that 'he'd first come to Ennet House only to keep out of jail, and hadn't had much interest or hope about actually staying clean for any length of time' (Wallace 1996: 464).

Yet despite this skepticism, Gately, stays on and after becoming a staff member, finds himself forming an integral part of the prison-like surveillance, embodying the notion of Foucault's Panopticon in that he 'can see everything without moving or moving his head or either eye' (Wallace 1996: 276). This surveillance is also enabled by Ennet House's open plan design, the architecture of which explicitly 'discourages the secrecy associated with drug use and facilitates interaction' (Houser 2012: 119). This construction makes it possible, in the words of Foucault, 'to substitute for force or other violent constraints the gentle efficiency of total surveillance' and makes the notion of architecture 'transparent as the administrator of power' (Foucault 1995: 249). What makes EH an interesting departure from Foucault's description of a prison, is that the architecture is the administrator of power, but that this administration does not come in the form of physical constraint. Residents and students alike are free to leave both places at almost any time both in a temporary and

permanent sense, curfews notwithstanding. This freedom is highlighted in Ennet House where ‘the doors have no locks and people and feelings flow unimpeded’ (Houser 2012: 119).

Randy Lenz, further highlights this feeling. Described by Gately as someone who ‘rarely leaves the House except under compulsion, avoids windows, and travels to the nightly required AA/NA meetings in a disguise that makes him look like Cesar Romero after a terrible accident’ (Wallace 1996: 276-7), Lenz’s reluctance to leave the house at all only serves to emphasise the freedom allotted to the residents.

Yet for both the residents and students alike, the only repercussion of not meeting curfew, is expulsion – the ‘old administrative boot’ (Wallace 1996: 195). Wallace dedicates a whole footnote to this point (note 247 for those playing along at home):

A Restriction means just no Overnight that week and an extra Chore; a House Restriction means you have to be back an hour after work and nightly meetings; Full House is no leaving the House except for work and meetings, and 15 minutes to get back, and no even leaving to, buy smokes or a paper, or even to go out in the lawn for oxygen, and one violation means a Discharge: F.H.R. is Ennet’s version of the Hole, and it’s dreaded (Wallace 1996: 1045).

This passage shows the progressive constraint on the residents’ freedom associated with behavior considered unacceptable. Yet Ennet House is specifically structured both physically and in spirit to emphasise the voluntary nature of recovery. Given this, and the fact that the characters are already free to leave at any time, this is a constraining threat that is illogical without the notion of choice. A point explored in more detail below.

The characters within the ETA likewise are free to leave at any time but the ‘academic boot’ (as opposed to EH’s ‘administrative boot’) is still viewed as the ultimate punishment. Like Ennet House, ETA it has its own echoes of prison in the form of institutionalized ritual, hierarchy, masochism/sadism. The exhausting drills – tap and whacks (Wallace 1996: 450-461), butterflies, etc. – all conjuring up for the reader nightmare recollections of high school gym classes. A seemingly endless ritualized sadistic program as Troeltsch explains:

Boys, what it is I’ll tell you it’s repetition. First last always. It’s hearing the same motivational stuff over and over till sheer repetitive weight makes it sink down into the gut. It’s making the same pivots and lunges and strokes over and over and over again, at you boys’s age it’s reps for their own sake, putting results on the back burner, why they never give anybody the boot for insufficient progress under fourteen, . . . At like fourteen, give and take, they figure here. Just do it. Forget about is there a point, of course there’s no point. The point of repetition is there is no point (Wallace 1996: 117-8).

Troeltsch’s language about repetition with no point echoes the commonplace definition of insanity (repeating the same action yet expecting change). Part comedic parody and part institutional analysis then, Troeltsch here points directly at the contradiction between the program that emphasizes repetition as a means of transformation and the explicit acknowledgment of the participants that, in fact, there

is no point to the repetition. Exercise in the ETA forms part of the routine. Accepted by all like the time allocated to the exercise yard of a prison; its significance not the outcome of the exercise, but the routine, the repetition.

Like prison, hierarchy and the ‘inmate code’ at ETA is also made explicit, though through rankings rather than shankings. As Hal notes:

We know where we stand entirely in relation to one another. John Wayne's over me, and I'm over Struck and Shaw, who two years back were both over me but under Troeltsch and Schacht, and are now over Troeltsch who as of today is over Freer who's substantially over Schacht, who can't beat anyone in the room except Pemulis since his knee and Crohn's Disease got so much worse (Wallace 1996: 112).

Wallace also echoes the prison notion of ‘time served’ through Ken Blott:

But I look at these guys that've been here six, seven years, eight years, still suffering, hurt beat up, so tired, just like I feel tired and suffer, I feel this what, dread, this dread, I see seven or eight years of unhappiness every day and day after day of tiredness and stress and suffering stretching ahead, and for what, for a chance at a like a pro career that I'm starting to get this dreary feeling a career in the Show means even more suffering (Wallace 1996: 109).

The physical punishment – undertaken by the predominantly male characters – forms the most prevalent characteristic of the ETA: routine and along with classes create a space that, like Ennet House falls between classification: half School and half prison.

The schedule emphasizes this mechanical, institutional nature of the program and echoes again Foucault's Panopticon: ‘a system of individualizing and permanent documentation’ (Foucault 1995: 250). As narrated: ‘Tuesday, 3 November, Enfield Tennis Academy: A.M. drills, shower, eat, class, lab, class, class, eat, prescriptive-grammar exam, lab/class, conditioning run, P.M. drills, play challenge match, play challenge match, upper-body circuits in weight room, sauna, shower, slump to locker-room floor w/ other players’ (Wallace 1996: 95).

This also echoes Asher's observations on prisons whereby the inmates are ‘subject to a timetable which ensured that their lives were rigidly organised’ (Asher 1986: 42). This repetition and routine is again a form of control and in a surreal inversion, at ETA the reward for embracing this routine is simply more of the same. K. D. Coyle shows us this inversion when he ‘opines that he doesn't see why the better players’ reward for hard slogging to the upper rungs is dawn drills while... (lower ranked players) for instance Pemulis and the Vikemeister et al. are still horizontal and sawing logs’ (Wallace 1996: 453).

The characters of both plotlines are thus bound by the internal rules, rituals and routine governing the spaces, and are rewarded or punished for good and bad patterns of behavior, mimicking the structures and inmate codes established within prisons. But if it is not the physical that creates spatial constraint then, but the social, and if the characters are undeniably constrained (as we have seen they are), then the question of what underpins this constraint brings up the second point in my argument.

Choice as fundamentally underpinning

For Wallace, the prison-like behavior of the students and residents is more than a common postmodern technique. This parodic structure has two purposes:

Firstly, it allows Wallace to play with the institutionalized nature of the programs inherent to both spaces (namely AA and professional tennis training). Both are posited as positive alternatives to their respective negatives of failure, prison, ‘washing up’, or death and in a broad sense, they are. Recovery in a halfway house is clearly a more enticing prospect than prison and for residents and students alike both EH and the ETA come with a sense of belonging that the sections featuring Poor Tony Kruse for example, only highlight further. The spatial constraint allows Wallace to structurally within the narrative, mimic the separation between the two spaces, both in a physical and class sense (exemplified by Johnette’s speech about Hal’s radiating privilege).

Secondly, Wallace’s deliberate echoing of the institutionalized nature of education and reform – ritual, ranking, surveillance – is both a sharp reminder of that alternative and a showing that the alternative doesn’t come easily in either a physical and psychological sense. Within the spaces of Open Constraint then, the characters have this prison-like behavior brought out of them because, in one sense, they are already imprisoned by the alternative.

This might *prima facie* seem like a form of hard determinism – as though Wallace is condemning his characters to a lifetime of institutionalization. There is certainly a meta-critique of institutionalization occurring (playing off the spatial and institutional gambits in the Marathe/Steeply narrative) and Wallace definitely brings this question of institutionalization into relief through the twinning of the sites. More importantly though, the tension between the seemingly impossible alternatives and the difficult nature of participating in either program, raises and critiques the issue of choice.

The very deliberate outcome of this narrative structure is that the choice to engage in the social, in the programs, is thrown starkly and entirely back on to the characters. Indeed, the only option available to the students and the residents *is* that of choice. The choice to engage, or to be left out in the cold.

Choice thus fundamentally structures both spaces. It is fundamental to the program of recovery that the EH residents must participate in, in that it is a voluntary act for residents to ‘come in’ and receive treatment. We saw that characters are already free to leave at any time so spatial constraint is a threat that is illogical without the notion of choice.

EH as a space of Open Constraint, is a space of enabling – and ultimately promotes choice, self-determination and will back on to the characters. With a limited numbers of places available and a waiting list for future residents, the choice is part of the test that the residents must pass. This test goes beyond the willingness to ‘come in’ and beyond even Pat Montesian’s interview process where petting the ‘two hideous white golden retrievers’ with suppurating scabs and skin afflictions... (will) betray a level of desperate willingness that Pat says is just about all she goes by, deciding’ (Wallace 1996: 278). Here we can read this willingness as a desire to commit to that choice

which extends to an embracing of the open constraint of EH – effectively, embracing the choice of sobriety vs addiction or relapse vs recovery. This choice, unsurprisingly, echoes the AA program – where the inane epithets of ‘it works if *you* work it’ and ‘Keep *coming* back’ (Wallace 1996: 270 - emphasis added) reflect the meta-choice of participation and eventual recovery.

Gately’s struggle with the identification of a higher power is another way Wallace highlights the dilemma of choice. Gately’s own disbelief in the notion of a higher power (which forms an integral part of the AA program’s own emphasis on agency), is juxtaposed against his absolute willingness to get on his knees every morning (Wallace 1996: 466). This illustrates not only the huge internal struggle of his addiction, but his absolute willingness to do anything to escape the cage of addiction. Narrated through the emblematic Betty-Crocker cake packet story and culminating with his being gifted a cake to celebrate his first year clean, Gately’s struggle with this issue illustrates the absolutely voluntary nature of AA as a choice. Gately’s graduation from addict to resident to staff member, and his entire narrative, shows that he sees escape only through further embracing the choice of institutionalization.¹

In the ETA, the issue of choice is explored via the students’ active participation in the repetitive, physically demanding program. The students, like Gately, need to be ‘rabidly active’ (Wallace 1996: 445) in their enthusiasm for working the program in order to remain competitive or risk ‘washing out’. Hal’s physical and psychological break with marijuana and subsequent slump in form is played out against, and emphasized by, this backdrop.

Like Gately, the students at ETA also struggle with the acceptance of a higher power – embodied in this case by instructors and teachers. Torn between the hard physical work of the program and a questioning of the intentions of the instructors, the students begin to analyse their own behavior with an associated sense of wonder of transcendence. As described by Troeltsch:

The court might as well be inside you. The ball stops being a ball. The ball starts being something that you just know ought to be in see you as being at one of the like crucial plateaus. Fifteen, tops. Then the concentration and character shit starts. Then they really come after you. This is the crucial plateau where character starts to matter (Wallace 1996: 118).

If there is an accepted higher power at ETA, it comes in the form of Lyle: The oiled guru of the weights room who wears spandex and literally lives off the perspiration of the students working out. Lyle sits in ‘full lotus in Spandex and a tank top’ willing to impart a ‘nugget of fitness-guru wisdom’ in exchange for salty sweat (Wallace 1996: 127-8) and forms a most unlikely god-head at the ETA.

The fervency of the students’ zeal for the program is palpable and within the ETA, quantifiable. The addiction levels are measured – illustrated in numeric rankings both externally by national rank, and internally by age group and level of skill within that group as we have seen. Yet becoming washed up in the tennis academy is also a real risk – not working hard enough, not training and skill plateauing, all point towards the choice of participation. Students need to keep working the program, to avail themselves of the help that surrounds them (strongly mirroring Gately’s experience of

the AA program) with such strong programmatic conditioning that the desire to escape the physical often isn't even considered by the students and physically leaving/escaping is usually a function of psychological breakdown.

Arguably then, it is exactly the kind of pressure that the ETA places on young minds and bodies that creates a desire to choose an escape. In the case of Hal, this is initially realized through drugs firstly but subsequently as the desire to escape the escape: to fully realize the choice.

Wallace connects this issue of choice to addiction in the form of programmatic routine, but via the spatial— via the open constraint of the ETA which forms both the cause for the desire to escape, and embodies the program that is seemingly the path to escape. In twinning the two sites though he is showing Hal that ultimately, both paths can lead to the same place: that the openness of choice may just be another form of enclosure. That embracing the choice may simply be replacing one cage with another.

Conclusion

To conclude then: by underpinning the spaces of Open Constraint in *Infinite Jest* with the issue of choice, Wallace provides himself with a means of structuring the narrative in a way that connects the two story arcs, as well as a (typically) sophisticated exploration of the issue of choice underpinning the spaces.

Within Ennet House, the twin desires of relapse vs. recovery are played out spatially against the detailed program of meta-institutionalization in the form of organized voluntary rehabilitation programs, typified by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and, Narcotics Anonymous (NA). In truth though, Wallace is showing us that the residents of EH are simply choosing to replace one routine with another. The difference is all in the choice, which is why the number of days a resident is clean become a kind of psychological currency, and self-restraint is measured as a yardstick of moral fibre.

Within the ETA, Hal's choice to move away from drugs – effectively working the program of EH from within the ETA – should arguably move him (emotionally if not physically), away from Ennet House. Instead this break causes his game to slide, increasing psychological pressure on him and ironically increasing his likelihood of breaking, and thus and ultimately closer to Ennet House.

Through this exploration of both of these arcs, Wallace shows the slim line between the student and the resident, the resident and the addict, saying clearly to the reader: there but for the grace of god, goes you.

Endnotes:

¹ Perhaps the only exception to this is his interactions with Joelle Van Dyne – the veiled Madam Psychosis.

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