

Infinite Jest's Voice(s) Notes for an (Audible) Map

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Abstract We often refer to a book as having a voice that sounds uniquely distinctive, a voice that stays with us after a book is over. Voice is a key narratological term; together with its twin partner – focalization – it constitutes the skeleton of a given storyworld. The first – experiential – conception of voice is difficult to grasp and articulate and has something to do with a specific tonality we perceive in a direct, almost visceral way. The second – scholarly – produces a host of definitional moves, which tend to crystallize it in a dominant mode of articulating a story. "*Infinite Jest's* Voice(s)" aims to bridge the two conceptions of voice just sketched, trying to give the sense of the book's having a distinctive, unforgettable, voice as far as the reader's experience is concerned.

Keywords David Foster Wallace. *Infinite Jest*. Voice. Narrator. Madame Psychosis. Joelle van Dyne.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 In Search of *JJ's* Vocal Map. – 2.1 Madame Psychosis. – 2.2 Joelle van Dyne. – 3 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Richard Aczel, who contributed the entry “voice” to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, after detailing the narratological birth of the term (with Genette) and its meandering critical history (from Chatman’s to Bakhtin’s to Fludernik’s takes), concludes:

One might do better to think of voices less as given qualities present writing texts, and more as constructs of the readers who interpret these texts. Literary works are perhaps best seen as acts of complex ventriloquism, where the ultimate ventriloquist is the reader. (1998, 636)

Aczel’s final, somewhat provocative, statement and the metaphor of ventriloquism he employs, align particularly well with the aim of the pages that follow: presenting a vocal map of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (henceforth *IJ*)¹ as it takes shape in the reader’s experience of the text. The notion of ventriloquism condenses well the basic idea that a literary text is the result of an authorial intentional system, which both hides and shows the source of its own materiality and can be productively thought of in terms of voice. Here we intend to reflect on what it might mean to re-center the notion of ventriloquism on the reader as Aczel suggests: we will thus take the reading experience as the (main) reference point to assess the vocal contours of Wallace’s novel.

The typical recent narratological analysis of narrative texts has asked either too much or too little of the notion of voice restricting and limiting its much vaster field mainly to the issue of narrative voices (with their unnatural variants)² and/or to their polyphonic interweaving. The concept of voice, furthermore, instead of marking the departure for an analytical experience of the text, represents the culmination of a static classification, which tends to ignore the intrinsically dynamic nature of every act of reading (and especially re-reading).

We would rather posit voice as “a formal indication” – to echo Heidegger³ – that any act of understanding must avoid objectivizing traps and aim at a transformation both of our way of looking and

Although this article is the result of a close and mutually enriching collaboration, Adriano Ardivino is the author of section 1, of footnotes 14 and 15 and of the paragraph that precedes footnote 15. Pia Masiero is the author of section 2 and of the conclusion.

1 All parenthetical page numbers without other indications come from Wallace (1996).

2 Richardson 2006.

3 This theme, whose importance goes well beyond the phenomenological method and conceptualization, is discussed on many occasions. See especially Heidegger 1995, 291 ff. and 2004, 39 ff.

of our way of listening. Putting this transformation center stage implies claiming the necessity of considering the reader's contribution as essential to give performative completion to (narratological) concepts - voice in the case at hand - that cannot generate themselves without the reader's experiential participation. To return to Aczel's suggestion, the transformation in perceiving and listening to a text takes shape in the reader's becoming the text's own ventriloquist - making the sound of the text his/her own. This is not very far from what Wolfgang Iser in his foundational *The Act of Reading* wrote: "the text establishes itself as a correlative in the reader's consciousness" (1978, 107).

We treat voice not as mere function and not as mere effect but as an indication/invitation whose existence depends on the reader's listening to the text, on his/her complex relationship between remembering and forgetting the text's voices and their interrelations and ultimately on the acceptance of their suspension. The reader, in this respect, is called to listen to the differential system of voices of the text (Voice hereafter) and let it resonate within him/her.

Given this first premise, we need to add a second one that qualifies our objective: focusing as much as we can on the variations of the vocal theme and try to pinpoint the cumulative overall voice both of the novel itself and of its author's. When we think about the physical and cognitive experience of reading a book, in fact, we easily recognize the very common tendency to consider reading a given text as an imaginative and vocal experience. What remains with readers is the verbal and mental persistence of a voice they claim to be unmistakably dear or fastidious and that stays with them no matter how many times the experience is renewed.

To round up these introductory remarks, we would like to introduce the notion of vocal field as it appropriately conveys the kind of multilayered dynamics at the center of our proposal. Firstly, the term subsumes well the dimensional and differential aspects that the notion of voice condenses: the mental, spatial, temporal, functional and structural angles that emerge once we consider Voice as referring to the author, or the narrator, or the characters, or the text itself. Secondly, the term lends itself to a heuristic analogy, well beyond its metaphorical suggestiveness: the vocal field might be productively compared with the group of events and properties that bear the name of electromagnetic field. The analogy considers the central fact that in its quantic articulations, an electromagnetic field describes transformative and multidimensional phenomena governed by a fluctuating and intrinsically indeterminate set of events that conjugate consistency and materiality with evanescence and emptiness. Much more than the apparently readier analogies with the acoustic or gravitational fields, electromagnetism concerns those dynamic and not easily objectifiable aspects we associate with the notion of Voice. As

the human voice contains both its absolute individuality and intrinsic self-dissipation and disappearance, similarly *IJ*'s unique vocal dimension reminds us of the paradoxical coexistence of emptiness and fullness, reality and evanescence. This dimension is, we would argue, more relevant than the coexistence of what is visible and invisible, what is hidden and manifest.

In *IJ*, our argument goes, similarly but more radically than in other masterpieces of contemporary literature, a clear and recognizable voice does not antagonize the myriad sounds that inhabit the text. As in the human voice the purity of vowels coexists with the impurity of consonants, *IJ* presents a vocal paradox: as much as its Voice keeps at bay the determinacies that belong to impurity and approaches the indeterminacies of a field governed by interactions and differences, it becomes more recognizable and unforgettable; it becomes, to put it differently, the essence without essence of all its voices, the Voice that sustains and intersects all the coexisting voices without coalescing in a static whole.

Explaining the concrete form all this takes is the challenge we take up in the pages that follow. Among the many possible examples *IJ* provides, we will single out the textual places devoted to just one character: Madame Psychosis/Joelle van Dyne.⁴ We would argue that the vocal map we have in mind emerges in its key components once we follow the narrative trajectory of this central character. She is central not in the mere sense that the novel revolves around her in myriad ways, but because she occupies the center of the novel's vocal field. All the other characters too present a distinctive voice and interact in their own singular and specific manner with the differential field that constitutes the novel, but she is the one character who manifests in the clearest of ways how it is not possible to think about the inhabitants of Wallace's storyworld bypassing a reflection on each one's oscillatory engagement with vocality.

Specifically, we will focus on Madame Psychosis's radio program on October 22nd of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and we will then consider the scene in which we meet Joelle for the first time, on November 7th of the same year, at Molly Notkin's party. Along this textual path, some other related scenes will be touched upon.

⁴ There is another (possible) name that emerges during Molly Notkin's interview by R. Tine Jr. many many pages later: Lucille Duquette. We could easily file this as depending on Molly Notkin's (unreliable) perspective - she tells "everything she believed she knew" (788); however, we would rather consider this detail and the web of references that it entails as a further example of the tendency of the novel to open up windows of possibilities, in this instance referring to Joelle's being the daughter of an E. Duquette, in the circle of James Incandenza's film related friends (mentioned by people attending Molly's party, by Orin, in the JOI's filmography, for example). The tenuousness of the relationship notwithstanding, what the text wants us to do is entertain and accept this possibility together with all the others.

2 In Search of *IJ's* Vocal Map

2.1 Madame Psychosis

Our attempt at drawing a vocal map of *IJ* starts with listening to Joele who reaches us “in the guise of ‘Madame Psychosis’” (Alexander 2017, 3-4) as hidden both behind a pseudonym and a veil, which doubles, so to speak, her coming to us only as voice: the scene – significantly – is built on two aural horizons, one belonging to Mario who listens to the program from his sitting room and one belonging to the student engineer at the radio station who listens from “the Union rooftop” and monitors the broadcast “from a height” (185). It is worth dwelling on the presentation of the scene as it goes a long way in helping us to begin to single out some features that qualify the meaning of Voice as we have described it – not as mere phonation, but as the emblem of everything each discourse admits, fosters, evokes, allows: words both meaningful and meaningless, monologic and dialogic, together with the silence that precedes and follows them.

The E.S.T. clock’s trackable hand carves off the last few seconds from the five minutes of dead air Madame Psychosis’s contract stipulates gets to precede her show. You can see her silhouette putting out the cigarette very methodically [...]. Madame Psychosis is smoking again, listening, head cocked. Her tall screen will leak smoke for her show’s whole hour. The student engineer is counting down from five on an outstretched hand he can’t see how she sees. And as pinkie meets palm, she says what she’s said for three years of midnights, an opening bit that Mario Incandenza, the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA, across the river, listening faithfully, finds, for all its black cynicism, terribly compelling [...].

A toneless male voice is then cued in to say It’s Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis On YYY-109, Largest Whole Prime On The FM Band. The different sounds are encoded and pumped by the student engineer up through the building’s corpus and out the roof’s aerial. (183-4)

This passage abounds in vocal details: Madame Psychosis’s “terribly compelling” opening follows five minutes of “dead air”, which is then followed by “a toneless male voice” announcing the program, whose sounds are then encoded and pumped out in the air to be welcomed by faithful listeners. All these details are in themselves highly significant in sketching the dance between absence and presence on which Madame Psychosis grounds her ensnaring power. We would nonetheless like to pause on other features of this scene that give it the kind of emblematic texture we are trying to describe.

The obvious question that all those who tried to square the narratological circle of *IJ* could not avoid asking concerns the narrative instance in *IJ*. We would like to approach this foundational issue circumscribing it to the textual space we are working on: here, who is in charge of Madame Psychosis's presentation?

The narrative pact that takes shape when crossing the threshold of any fictional text is rather fluid, maybe impossible to sign, with *IJ*. Maybe this impossibility is what makes this novel what it is. Filippo Pennacchio perceptively speaks of "an extreme flamboyancy" and of an "utmost vocal confusion" (2018, 227; Authors' transl.) that demands of the reader a remarkable interpretive endeavor.

This is definitely the case: the narrative voice oscillates macroscopically - from third person to first person contexts - and microscopically - from authorial and omniscient to particularized, that is, internally focalized or intradiegetic. Our working hypothesis is that this "vocal confusion" is precisely the kind of overall vocal field that readers associate *IJ* with and that they are required to sustain and allow.

Let us return to the above passage: the present tense gives the passage a precise coloring bespeaking simultaneity and process. Both convey immersion and rawness. Madame Psychosis waits *now*: the impact on the deictic field of the reading moment - which is now too - is amplified by the conjuring up of a 'you' who can see what she is doing. The engineer student is the one there that sees and whose perspective we are offered and invited to share, an invitation that passes through the spelling out of the 'you' that inevitably engages the reader beyond its generic employment.⁵ Indirectly but unmistakably, the same movement staged in the presentation of the scene - first what the student witnesses here and now on October 22nd, and then what Mario Incandenza listens to now, but from an elsewhere - is reflected in the crossing of narrative levels the 'you' implies.

It is furthermore worth noticing how the now is connected both to the future - "her tall screen will leak smoke for her show's whole hour" - and the past as she repeats the same opening "she's said for three years of midnights". This knowledge concerning the temporal underpinnings of the show, complemented by the detail of what the engineer student does not know - "he can't see how she can see" - and what Mario thinks, is indicative of a privilege transcending the student's perceptual positioning. The male voice launching the program may be "toneless" and well in keeping with Madame Psychosis's eschewing "chatty openings and contextual filler", but what the reader experiences is not toneless, but specifically connot-

5 For a detailed account of the rhetorical effects of the employment of the second person pronoun, see Fludernik 1993.

ed: the vocal connotation will turn out to be a systematic blurring of perceptual, cognitive, temporal and spatial coordinates that may be macroscopically confusing, but is fairly easy to navigate at the level of the single scene. In other words, we may not be sure of the voice in charge of the telling, but the dominant present tense and the heavy employment of *heres* and *nows* and *yous* that collapse singular individuation in favor of a shared existential positioning, shape a vocal field we grow familiar with page after page and that allows us to sustain suspension, to accept (and expect) that the past, the present and the future, the here and there, the (diegetically) inside and outside, the beginning and the end will keep turning into one another leaving traces of their reciprocal fertilization.

This oscillatory vocal quality is manifested in other details, which belong both to this scene and the novel as a whole.⁶ One such detail is the structuring of the scene on fragmentation and juxtaposition. The broadcast of Madame Psychosis's reading a long list of categories of people who could join the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.D.) is interspersed with scenes from the Headmaster's House at E.T.A. which are not limited to describing Mario's listening to the program from there, but concern details on Avril and Jim's marriage, Avril's own biography, snapshots on Mario's educational trajectory, Jim's will, the configuration of the interior of the HmH. This latter architectural consideration - no interior doors - follows an interesting detail that enriches the vocal canvas of the scene and allows us to illuminate another important feature of the vocal field we are trying to describe taking the (re-)reading experience as its measure:

He really does have to sit right up close to listen to 'Sixty Minutes +/-...' [...] because Avril has some auditory thing about broadcast sound and gets the howling fantods from any voice that does not exit a living corporeal head, and though Avril's made it clear that Mario's free at any time to activate and align the Tatsuoka's ghostly-green tuner to whatever he wishes, he keeps the volume so low that he has to be lowered onto a low coffee table and lean in and almost put his ear up against the woofer's tremble and concentrate closely to hear YYY's signal over the conversation in the

⁶ Mary Shapiro demonstrates magnificently how Wallace worked on many linguistic variables at all levels to create a narrative language that can be dubbed "poetic" (2019). The details we are here presenting are more macroscopic than hers, but - we believe - go in the same, vocal, direction. In her conclusions Shapiro writes: "[t]he great payoff in Wallace's writing has never been plot-related (as readers often struggle to make sense of a plot at all, and Wallace consistently denies us any closure), nor is it the creation of particularly likeable or memorable characters (although there are some of these here and there); it is the pleasure readers take in his distinctive voice" (2019, 31). We agree.

dining room, which tends to get sort of manically high-pitched toward the end of supper. Avril never actually asks Mario to keep it down; he does it out of unspoken consideration for her thing about sound. (*IJ*, 189)

Avril's "thing about sound" is that she freaks out when a voice cannot be connected to a "living corporeal head". This may qualify as an obsessive (paranoiac) need for clear-cut cause and effect relations and - interestingly - contrasts radically with Mario's own reaction to Madame Psychosis's music, her voice and the show itself: "Mario thinks of the word haunting, like in 'a haunting echo of thus-and-such'" (191). Mario relishes in the effects of suspension and indeterminacy, accepting the fluctuations inherent in an electromagnetic quantic field and thus becoming the textual embodiment of *IJ*'s ideal reader: the one who accepts the way it privileges an evocative and evanescent rather than grounded rhetorical manner. Thinking in vocal terms, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that this notation about Avril is embedded in a scene that is centered on a radio program, which is quintessentially a voice without a body. Mario's enjoying the program provides the trigger for this juxtaposition and keeps weaving the oscillatory movement of the novel, shifting between embodied voices and disembodied ones. Madame Psychosis amplifies this oscillation as she is, as we have already underlined, much more than a local radio star without a body and a face for her audience because she is faceless and bodiless for the engineer student too. We should nonetheless avoid the easy leap that associates the veil with the magnification of a voice, for, as we will see later on, the situation is more complex than this - both an allurements to create connections which are then dwarfed and the instantiation of the very concept of showing/hiding we are trying to pinpoint.

Avril's "thing about sound" is, furthermore, associated with the powerful theme of vocality as David Hering interprets it in the first chapter of his latest book. Hering, in fact, is concerned with voices without bodies, that is, ghostly voices - specifically the wraith's as far as *IJ* is concerned - which he connects with Wallace's "anxiety over narrative authority" (2016, 25). This is not the place to rehearse Hering's persuasive mapping of this connection; we would like simply to mention his describing the wraith as "a site of authorial confusion" (27) and its conversation with Gately as resulting "in a narrative register that is virtually impossible to disentangle, as it is unclear to what extent the wraith is inflecting Gately's 'brain-voice'". He concludes this description by pointing out that this is "the first time in Wallace's fiction [in which] we see the kind of 'permeable narrator' described by Richardson, whereby the dead directly influence the linguistic choices of the living" (28). We would argue that this concerns the entire vocal field of Wallace's masterpiece: the permeabil-

ity Hering detects here is *both* the source *and* the consequence of the forces that play in the novel's vocal field whose structuring skeleton is vocal contagion, the cohabitation of different voices that are not necessarily (always) distinguishable. The fact that Voice and authorship are interwoven is suggested by our case character too: Madame Psychosis displays the kind of mastery of her show that we tend to associate with authorship – that is, possessing the absolute command of one's materials.

The scene in this instance too is exemplary of the kind of vocal experience the novel fosters: the disruption of linearity through fragmentation and juxtaposition of other scenes belonging to other places and times that might make sense once the vocal threads are gathered and held together by a reader who accepts this gathering and holding as the attitude this novel requires and, in requiring, allows. It is important for us to reinforce here our reading: *IJ* is not simply a fragmented and non-linear novel, but rather a novel that makes fragmentation and non-linearity its dominant and structuring essence. As such we could take a further step and suggest that *IJ* is the quintessential literary text – that is, a text that stages the aesthetic experience of confronting what is not a representation but an invention.

We should not forget a further detail belonging to this oscillatory dynamics of interruptions and blanks in this scene: Madame Psychosis herself reaches us first in note 24 as probably (her name is followed by a question mark) featuring in *Infinite Jest (IV)*. The reader who has accepted the task of reading through the very long note may presume that Madame Psychosis might be relevant, simply because she is mentioned in reference to (one of the versions of) *Infinite Jest*, but s/he has to wait to connect this detail to others and recompose them all in a meaningful whole, hoping in a possible completion in a book in which closure is macroscopically prevented by the chronology gap that structures its plot. Against the backdrop of a text that is radically suspended, that does not close the circle between the most recent element of the novel's chronology represented by the opening scene with the preceding scene – that is, the scene that closes the book, every moment of (partial) recognition cannot but be lived as a gift. The first re-reading inevitably targets this glaring gap; the reader, however, re-reads in vain. The search for an explanation may produce some candidates,⁷ that cannot, in spite of their plausibility, be textually verified: suspension and interruption are structural principles of the novel; they belong to the vocal field of the book. This and many other details – not the least the one concerning Mad-

⁷ See the detailed reasoning Carlisle offers at the end of his book, *Elegant Complexity* in a specific section titled “What Happens from Late November Y.D.A.U. to Late November Y.G.?” (480-5).

ame Psychosis/Joelle's veil – remain unvoiced. This amounts to saying that the reader is explicitly, we could say programmatically, called to ventriloquize this vocal trait and produce in him/herself an attitude that sustains and maintains the suspension and refrains from resolving or contrasting it with the imposition of this or that explanation. Suspension is crucially shared by the author in his inventive search for his novel's storyworld and the reader who has to gather and listen to its components.

Suspension and indeterminacy⁸ are predicated upon in another way throughout the novel, namely, the massive employment of what Heather Houser calls “arcana” (2014, 745) – from (actual) physics and chemistry to (invented) political and geographical configurations – that baffle the reader and require him/her either to stop reading and search for an answer (be it outside the text or in a footnote) – entering what Frank Cioffi aptly calls “paratextual mode” (2000, 162) – or to privilege the flow of reading accepting the – hopefully provisional – indeterminacy.

At least programmatically, Clare Hayes-Brady connects incompleteness (specifically a “consistent resistance to closure” or an “antiteleology” and “plurality”, or a “decentered and unfixd narrative”, 2016, 21, 22, 28) with vocal choices.⁹ Even if the actual chapter 2 puts much more emphasis on communication and its failures and mentions “vocal frames” (2016, 40) and narrative voice only in its final paragraph, Hayes-Brady indirectly confirms our own reading of incompleteness together with fragmentation as pertaining to vocal-ity. A confirmation of this connection comes from choices at the sentence level as well.

Madame takes one phone call per show, at random. Mostly she solos. The show kind of flies itself. She could do it in her sleep, behind the screen. Sometimes she seems very sad. The engineer likes to monitor the broadcast from a height, the Union's rooftop, summer sun and winter wind. *The more correct term for an asthmatic's inhaler is 'nebulizer'.* (185; italics added)

The description comes to us in a multiform way: as factual in the first two sentences, as subjectively colored in “the show kind of flies itself”, which cannot but be the opinion of an enthusiastic audience, as potentially privileged in “she could do it in her sleep” since, strictly

⁸ A different, but interrelated, issue concerns the “sense of interminability” (2020, 222) that Robert Seguin considers central to Wallace's imaginative attention “to matters of pattern and form” (220).

⁹ “Chapter 2 undertakes an investigation of ideas of incompleteness in Wallace's work generally, pointing to and exploring the consistent resistance to closure that marks the writing in structural, *vocal* and narrative ways” (Hayes-Brady 2016, 12; italics added).

speaking, she is the only one to know, and as filtered in “sometimes she *seems* very sad”.

The engineer, here (and for the entirety of the show), is the one to whom we are invited to ascribe the governing point of view because of the expressions “behind the screen”, “seem” and, because, in a micro retrospective re-reading, the thought that “she could do it in her sleep” could be drained of any ulterior, external, knowledge. Then the drastic change, the italicized words, which, as in the case of the detail of what Madame Psychosis could do in her sleep, may be attributed either to the focalizing source, the engineer student, or to the external presence that is in charge of passages lacking an explicit focalizing candidate. The latter option would seem to be the more plausible as this sentence sounds like many others that have nothing to do with a specific focalizer, but with a generalized impulse to display linguistic precision readers tend – with the accumulation of pages – to ascribe to an authorial presence.¹⁰ The very fact that it could be argued that this sentence too belongs to the engineer student’s perceptual field is, in itself, part and parcel of the kind of electromagnetic-like forces *IJ*’s vocal field exercises. What we might dub the quicksand of attribution is one of those forces. We used the pair ‘either/or’, but it would be more pertinent to describe the vocal quality we are trying to pinpoint with the pair ‘both/and’.

The content of the program too goes in this (vocal) both/and direction: as we have seen, Madame Psychosis reads¹¹ a catalogue: not only does she echo the list of the dispossessed that Jesus Christ announces as belonging to the category of the blessed in the Gospel, but she reinforces another vocal trait of the novel – enumeration as a descriptive strategy. This strategy displays an encyclopedic tendency together with its intrinsic admission of “the impossibility of completion” (Houser 2014, 747).

Speaking about (possible) moments of authorial audibility, in one of the scenes that interrupts the flow of the program we find a different kind of vocal insertion: “Hal sometimes complains privately to Mario that he gets more than enough UV during the day *thank you very much*” (189; italics added). The reader here is made privy, we could say, overhears, what may be either something Hal has actually said or something he says internally. In this case too the vocal feature depends on an ambiguity, or rather, the co-existence of two distinguishable vocal effects.

Matters of attribution intermingle with vocal details in another vocally relevant passage:

¹⁰ Greg Carlisle employs another term, “meta-narrator” (205).

¹¹ It is worth stressing, at least in a note, the fact that Madame Psychosis wears the shoes of the reader. Her reading-performance adumbrates our own ventriloquistic one.

Madame Psychosis's broadcast accent is not Boston. There are r's, for one thing, and there is no cultured Cambridge stutter. It's the accent of someone who's spent time either losing a southern lilt or cultivating one. It's not flat and twangy like Stice's, and it's not a drawl like the people at Gainesville's academy. Her voice itself is sparsely modulated and strangely empty, as if she were speaking from inside a small box. It's not bored or laconic or ironic or tongue-in-cheek. 'The basilisk-breathed and pyorrhic.' It's reflective but not judgmental, somehow. Her voice seems low-depth familiar to Mario the way certain childhood smells will strike you as familiar and oddly sad. (189-90)

The detailed description of Madame Psychosis's accent is accurate and precise. It is not, however, generic; it is, like most of the descriptions throughout the novel, organized according to a local, that is, a diegetically attributable perspective, in this case the perspective of someone who may find the reference to Stice's accent or to people belonging to a specific (local) academy descriptively functional. And yet, this embodied perspective does not plausibly pertain to Mario because of the kind of terms employed. Once again we have both the phonetic precision we associate with an authorial voice and the localized comparisons we connect to the diegetic rendering of a detail. Significantly, as in a previous passage, here too we find a 'you'. The sentence in which the 'you' surfaces is – crucially, as far as the typical features of the vocal field of *IJ* are concerned – a particularized embodied situation. The general details about the kind of voice Madame Psychosis has is juxtaposed to the highly subjective response it triggers in Mario: from within this individualized response the 'you' creates the space for our own imaginative aural figuration of something which is *for us* "familiar and oddly sad" thus providing an emotional bridge between the reader and the text.

A final example (among the many possible) of this vocal mix – authorial and particularized – comes from the very long and detailed description of the building itself:

The Union's soft latex-polymer roof is cerebrally domed and a cloudy pia-mater pink [...]. *From the air* it looks wrinkled; *from the roof's fire door* it's an almost *nauseous* system of serpentine trenches, like water-slides in hell. The Union itself [...] is a great hollow brain-frame, [...] and *is not as ghastly as out-of-towners suppose it must be*, though the *vitreally inflated balloon-eyes* [...] *take a bit of getting used to*, and *some like the engineer never do get comfortable with them* and use the less garish auditory side-doors; and the abundant sulcus-fissures and gyrus-bulges of the slick latex roof make rain-drainage complex and footing chancy at best, so there's not a whole lot of recreational strolling *up here* [...]. (*IJ*, 186; emphasis added)

The description of the building itself is vocally impressive, abounding in punctilious visual and tactile details which juxtapose the two vocal perspectives we are presenting: knowledgeable and Olympic - the roof's appearance "from the air", the misalignment between what out-of-towners suppose and what it really is, the time it takes to get used to its "vitreally inflated balloon-eyes", the fact that not even the passing of time does the trick of getting used to them, our engineer included - and localized and embodied - the roof's appearance "from the roof's fire door" and the "nauseous" feeling it provokes. The spelling out of the deictic "up here" collapses powerfully the two perspectives suggesting the permeability of narrative (and vocal) levels. A further detail that emerges in the lines that complete this description is worth mentioning: we are told that "the balcony resembles at once corporeal bone and numinous aura" (*IJ* 186) which condenses the simultaneous co-existence of materiality and evanescence, of corporeality and spirituality *IJ's* vocal field is made of.

It could be argued that our employment of the term Voice collapses the narratological distinction between voice and perspective. Well, yes, our notion of vocal field contains both classical items simply because they both make up what the reader brings home of a given text. We hope the analyses that we are presenting are - at least - convincing enough to propose this - non-ritual - conflation.¹²

To wrap-up this section devoted to Madame Psychosis, we would like to reflect on the fact that everything about this show may be read as metanarratively containing, in a sort of *mise en abyme*, the vocal map of the novel as a whole. Madame Psychosis's monologues "seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares. There's no telling what'll be up on a given night. If there's one even remotely consistent theme it's maybe film and film-cartridges" (185); her themes "are at once unpredictable and somehow rhythmic, more like probability-waves for subhadronics than anything else" (187); the music she cues for her readings "is weirdly compelling. You can never predict what it will be, but over time some kind of pattern emerges, a trend or rhythm" (190).

Let us follow the emergence of this rhythmical pattern in the section devoted to Joelle van Dyne's first appearance.

¹² In a very fascinating (narratological) analysis of endnote 123, Richard Stock maintains: "If we have a 'meta-narrator', then Hal-as-narrator (or perhaps 'subnarrator') can just as easily be called a focalizing character. The distinction between lower levels of narrator and characters presented as if they were narrators is largely irrelevant" (45). Even if it could be argued that defining Hal a focalizing character is not enough to explain Hal's employment of the first person to narrate, we would like to take up this suggestion as a reminder that from a readerly perspective - the one we are considering here - there is a natural, that is intuitive, way of making sense of texts. It is worth mentioning that Genette's initial distinction has gone through numerous re-visitations. See, most notably, Fludernik 2001.

2.2 Joelle van Dyne

Some 30 pages after the scene staging Madame Psychosis's show (and after 15 subsidized days), Madame Psychosis (re-)enters the stage as Joelle van Dyne. The reader is cued to connect Joelle to Madame Psychosis both indirectly – Joelle wears a “disconcerting veil”¹³ – and explicitly as we are told about “the doctoral program where Joelle – before her retreat into broadcast sound – had met [Molly]” (220): the incidental spells out the connection unmistakably.

The section titled “7 November Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” begins as follows:

You can be at certain parties and not really be there. You can hear how certain parties have their own implied ends embedded in the choreography of the party itself. One of the saddest times Joelle van Dyne ever feels anywhere is that invisible pivot where a party ends – even a bad party – that moment of unspoken accord when everyone starts collecting his lighter [...]. When everybody's voices recede down the hall. (219)

The reference to one of Joelle's “saddest times” is presented against an experience that can be recognized in its emotional texture by everybody, by a generic you and by the reader's you too. This texture is eminently embodied and is conveyed in vocal-aural details. The end of a party has a certain sound: we know what Joelle hears because we are asked to relate experientially to that distinct sound. Given these choices, it could easily be argued that the new section opens on a highly immersive note. The immersion is due not only to the implicit invitation to retrieve that sound, but to the possibility that we are already within Joelle's focalizing perspective and that we are actually hearing her own internal voice. This would not be a far-fetched hypothesis as the whole scene is internally focalized on Joelle and tips repeatedly towards Free Indirect Discourse.

She and poor Molly Notkin are just the same, Joelle reflects, seated alone, watching doctoral candidates taste wine – sisters, sororal twins. With her fear of direct light, Notkin. And the disguises and whiskers are simply veiled veils. How many sub-rosa twins are there, out there, really? What if heredity, instead of linear, is branching? [...] The whole and the partial. The damaged and the intact. The deformed and the paralyzingly beautiful. The insane and the attendant. The hidden and the blindingly open. The per-

13 “[T]he daughter of a low-pH chemist and homemaker from western Kentucky, a lot of fun to be with, normally, if you can get over the disconcerting veil” (220).

former and the audience. No Zen-type One, always rather Two, one upside-down in a convex lens. (220)

Interestingly, the sliding toward FID marks a sliding toward Madame Psychosis's voice and her cataloguing of October 22nd. Here a list of binaries riffs on some of the themes that we will later discover constitute Joelle's existential predicaments. Vocally speaking, the rhythm stresses the oscillatory movement we have already hinted at: intriguingly the first and the two closing couples remind us of the metaphor of ventriloquism we started off from. Readers listen to and handle the text while becoming more and more aware that "the hidden and the blindingly open" material the novel provides reaches them as the novel articulates its clues; in their turn they are mobilized to engage in a recomposing job which trades in the experiential stuff their own lives are made of. "The hidden and the blindingly open" binary here listed together with the others - "the whole and the partial" and "the performer and the audience" - direct us once again to Joelle's veil. We cannot develop this element rich in Heideggerian undertones thoroughly,¹⁴ but we would like - at least - to suggest that the veil in itself may be read as a synecdoche of *IJ's* vocal field: Joelle's veil is a textual locus that activates the dynamics of an open concealment, that is, of a concealment that instead of hiding becomes the manifestation of the act (of concealment) itself. As such, veiled Joelle is both the emblem of the general notion of veiling/concealing and a highly individualized (and cherished) character. Her "odd empty half-accented voice" (618) stands - partially - for the whole that contains it.

Because of Joelle's emblematic presence, we cannot refrain from sharing a brief reflection on the very complex relationship between body, voice (word) and mind. If on the one hand, voice, as an embodied phenomenon, is, rather literally, the sound of the body, on the other, in its impalpability, it represents the most advanced stage of a trajectory that heads toward dematerialized purity as it transforms each physical object and visible image into listening. This constitutive trajectory alludes to and inaugurates a mental, spiritual and at times hallucinatory dimension. Furthermore, once we return to the

14 We are here referring to Heidegger's interpretation of the Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, as un-concealment, that is, not so much as a removal of concealment, but as the opening up of a space in which concealment is possible. It is worth stressing in the wake of this possible reading, a specific reference (both ironic and allusive) to "a Heideggerian perspective" (233) and to his analysis of the form un-concealment takes in our present times, namely, a technologically constituted space (enframing), in the fragments of a conversation during Molly Notkin's party. In this "space as a concept [...] enframed by technology" (233), Heidegger subsumes broadcasting considered as the distribution of audio/video content to a dispersed audience via any medium using the electromagnetic spectrum. About Wallace's familiarity with Heidegger's thought, see the excerpt of a letter he sent to Gerry Howard quoted in D.T. Max's biography (2012, 75).

notion of oscillation we are working on, voice appears as representing every disembodied phenomenon, not as mere being without or beyond the body, but as pointing to the perpetual differential tension between being body (and mind) and being voice. Needless to say, and, once again, Joelle condenses perfectly this tension, that in the very moment in which the voice of the body, thanks to the body, gives voice to a pure mental experience, it cannot do it without referring to the image or the trace of a body, be it veiled or unveiled, beautiful or deformed, represented as present or evoked as absent. Thus, in spite of the impossibility of reducing voice either to the body or to the mind, as it does not coincide with either, Voice is both body and mind according to the internal tension we have just sketched.

Let us return to Joelle.¹⁵ As these passages make clear, the scene of the party mirrors the scene of the radio program as far as vocal features are concerned: the juxtaposition of perspectives, the jumbled chronology, the interruption of the flow of the narrative of the party that is not only interrupted by the walk that precedes the party, and by memories of herself in the past, but by the out-of-the-blue confirmation of the “CHRONOLOGY OF ORGANIZATION OF NORTH AMERICAN NATIONS’ REVENUE-ENHANCING SUBSIDIZED TIME™, BY YEAR” (223) too.

Sounds and voices are all over the place in this scene: they begin even before Joelle arrives at the door – “[t]he party-sounds start around the second landing” (228) – and reach a pinnacle when Joelle looks at her veil “instead of through the translucent cloth”. Thus concentrated in “the Improbably Deformed’s equivalent of closing the eyes in concentration on sound”, she lets her very last party “wash over her, [...] listening to different mingling voices the way the unveiled young taste wine” (231).

15 A note on Hal Incandenza is in order here. Well in keeping with Madame Psychosis’ radiophonic existence, Hal is the one who leaves a message on Orin’s answering machine that says “[t]his is the disembodied voice of Hal Incandenza” (854), which will be later commented by his brother ironically – “I’m surprised you were even there. In person. I was expecting the Disembodied Voice” (1009). Hal, furthermore, stages the complexity of voice as an embodied matter well past its ordinary communicative dimension. In the scene opening the novel, Hal’s embodied voice is presented as a frustrated endeavor, that is, as occluded or obstructed in nature manifesting itself with its “subanimalistic noises and sounds” (14) the indistinct space between human and non-human: these sounds may be read either as bespeaking the body’s own journey toward its own individualized voice connected with a fully human mind, or as the disquieting reality that human voice (and the human more broadly) may regress toward the non-human that emerges in *Infinite Jest* as technological and subanimal, disturbingly disembodied and frustratingly embodied. According to our reading of the oscillatory nature of the vocal field in *Infinite Jest*, thus, whereas in *Madame Psychosis*/Joelle van Dyne’s case the Voice is not only figure of the subtracted body, but emphasis on the veiling of a body that manifests itself as not appearing, in the episode staging Hal’s crisis, it is the body that manifests itself as the place in which a voice is hiding but might be on its way to reconstitute itself.

And again:

she [Molly] *has no idea* that Joelle's been in a cage since Y.T.S.D.B., has no idea what she and Jim Incandenza were even about for twenty-one months, whether they were lovers or what, whether Orin left because they were lovers or what, [80] or that Joelle even now lives hand-to-lung on a grossly generous trust willed her by a man she unveiled for but never slept with, the prodigious punter's father, infinite jester, director of a final opus so magnum he'd claimed to have had it locked away. Joelle's never seen the completed assembly of what she'd appeared in, or seen anyone who's seen it, and doubts that any sum of scenes as pathologic as he'd stuck that long quartz auto-wobbling lens on the camera and filmed her for could have been as entertaining as he'd said the thing he'd always wanted to make had broken his heart by ending up. (228)

The number of details we are showered with in these ten lines is astounding. Everything comes to us as what Molly "has no idea" of. As in other examples that we have presented, the attribution of the source of this info is debatable. Even more so once we consider the endnote here referenced: note 80¹⁶ tells us what Orin "knew", what Mrs. Avril Incandenza "did not know", what Jim "hadn't know" about this or that item, thus displaying a clear (authorial) privilege only to be undermined by adverbs such as "apparently" and "presumably" (999).

The account of her walk is a masterful example of a description that depends heavily on the focalizer's, that is, Joelle's positioning:

cars sheening by with the special lonely sound of cars in rain, wipers making black rainbows on taxis' shining windshields. [...] And the sound of her wood-sole clogs against the receding staccato of brittle women's high heels on brick westward as Charles St. now approaches Boston Common and becomes less quaint and upscale [...]; and the rustle and jut of limbs from dumpsters being sifted by people who all day do nothing but sift through I.W.D. dumpsters; [...] and the little cataract of rainwater off the edge of each dumpster's red annex's downsloping side and hitting refrigerator boxes' tops with a rhythmless thappathappappathap; somebody going Psssst from an alley's lip. (221)

Joelle's alleged last walk instantiates a kind of perceptual immersion (both visual and aural) that counterbalances another kind of de-

16 Speaking about (authorial) privileged knowledge: in note 80 readers find crucial information about the cartridge and Jim's will, which allows them to fill some of the gaps they had been facing.

scription, which targets perceptual overflow. Here, the description follows Joelle's perceptions as they change while she walks - "the receding staccato", "now approaches [...] and becomes less quaint", "appears" - and is thus centralized. Unlike the kind of description Heather Houser convincingly analyses as "decentralizing a managerial ego", that is to say, requiring "more and more narratorial nodes" (749), this description allows a possible perceptual alignment and in so doing, instead of "sidelining the human subject" (Houser 2014, 751) as is the case with Houser's example, a human subject is favored. The passage we are commenting on is just an excerpt from the long description of Joelle's walk and it could be argued that, in its entirety, it presents examples of other narratorial - that is, perceptual - nodes. Yes. Our point concerns the overall vocal map: (perceptual) centering and decentering too, belong to the oscillatory movement the reader progressively recognizes as what *IJ* sounds like.

3 Conclusions

As we all know, Joelle will not, eventually, kill herself at Molly's party and she will end up crossing paths with Don Gately. We would like, then, to conclude our search for the experiential mapping of *IJ*'s vocal field with the moment in which Don recognizes Joelle's voice.

At the party we are told (by the authorial narrator? through Joelle's own filtering perspective?) that, while perched alone, Joelle has been "glanced at covertly by persons who don't know they know her voice" (228-9), and now, some 400 pages later, Don Gately lies in front of the Ennet House with a bullet in his shoulder:

'Get him off the phone! Say prank for Christ's sake! You hear me?' Her kimono smells good. Her voice has a Staff-like authority. The scene out here has changed: Gately's down, Madame Psychosis is in charge. 'We're going to get him up and we're going to get him inside,' she says to the circle. 'Lenz.' [...] Her voice is that one Madame lady's voice on no-subscription radio, from out of nowhere he's all of a sudden sure, is where he heard that odd empty half-accented voice before. [...] 'I knew I knew you,' Gately says to Joelle, whose veil remains inscrutable. [...] 'Boy do I know guys loved that show you did'. (618-19)

This scene too juxtaposes two voices: the external referring to Joelle as Madame Psychosis, and the internal (focalized through Don Gately) referring to her as "that one Madame lady". It is an epiphanic moment, in which in spite of the persistence of the inscrutable veil, Don says out loud that he knew he knew her. The voice is more than enough to grant this feeling.

This is exactly what we have been trying to say about the Voice of *IJ*: as Madame Psychosis's music, *IJ* resounds within us as "both predictable and, within that predictability, surprising: it's periodic". "It suggests expansion without really expanding. It leads up to the exact kind of inevitability it denies. [...] Mario thinks of the word haunting, as in 'a haunting echo of thus-and-such" (191).

Note 66 says about Madame Psychosis's listeners: "Some M.I.T.s are compulsive about taping the shows and then listening to the music again and trying to track them down in stores and college archives" (997). We might be compulsive too in considering the novel's Voice "queerly powerful and compelling" and find it haunting and the reason might actually be that "it tends to give you the feeling there's an in-joke that you and [it] alone are in on" (191). You and it alone: the listener of Madame Psychosis's program/the reader of Wallace's novel as the protagonists of that exclusive intimacy and understanding Wallace hoped his writing could achieve. Mario would love to tell Madame Psychosis "she'd feel a lot better if she listened to her own show" (190); we are telling David Foster Wallace that the Voice of his novel makes us feel a lot better too.

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