

“Saying *God* with a Straight Face”: Towards an Understanding of Christian Soteriology in David
Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

by

David Gordon Laird

B.A., The University of British Columbia Okanagan, 2007

B.Ed, The University of British Columbia Okanagan, 2008

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the College of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

“Saying *God* with a Straight Face”: Towards an Understanding of Christian Soteriology in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

submitted by David Laird in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts (English).

Daniel Keyes, University of British Columbia (Okanagan)

Co-supervisor, Professor

Paul Milton, University of British Columbia (Okanagan)

Co-supervisor, Professor

George Grinnell, University of British Columbia (Okanagan)

Supervisory Committee Member, Professor

Jeff Severs, University of British Columbia (Vancouver)

University Examiner, Professor

20 June 2016

(Date Submitted to Grad Studies)

Abstract

This thesis considers the intersections between David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* and Pauline notions of Christian soteriology articulated in the New Testament. In my analysis, I argue that the novel presents a worldview that demonstrates a theological dialogue with biblical concepts of fallenness, human value, and redemption, most powerfully embodied in the main characters Hal Incandenza, Don Gately, and Mario Incandenza. Of the novel's sweeping cast of characters, these three particularly capture a range of salvation states akin to a Pauline understanding of the human condition, calling to attention the influence of orthodox Christian theology on the novel. This dialogue is considered through the lens of postmodernism and the New Sincerity movement in contemporary U.S. fiction, and offers that the novel urges readers to countenance what it means to be human living amidst the binary tensions of sin and salvation, reinvigorating a traditional understanding of grace and redemption in a present and prophetic way.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, David Laird.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

“Once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face.” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 591)

“The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.” —Lyle (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 389)

Since the death of David Foster Wallace in 2008, scholarship on his writing has centered heavily on the virtues of authenticity, sincerity, and post-ironic/post-secular belief that characterize his work. Literary critics such as David H. Evans, Lee Konstantinou, and Michael J. O’Connell, as well as creative peers of Wallace such as Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, George Saunders, and Zadie Smith have underlined the prominence of the reinstatement of affect, relationship, community, and moral virtues in Wallace’s fiction and literary non-fiction alike, as well as in his numerous interviews with literary and cultural publications. Such thematic concerns in Wallace’s work thus signal a departure from the detached, sardonic, and largely existentialist ethos of postmodernism that marked U.S. literary fiction up until the end of the Cold War, a time—as Konstantinou argues—that signals the end of the postmodern era in fiction. Wallace’s 1996 encyclopedic opus *Infinite Jest*—which registers 1,079 dense pages—has garnered significant attention in its treatment of deeply felt human concerns, as it imagines a semi-distant future America where consumer capitalism has reached such an alarming point that year titles have been corporatized,¹ environmental toxicity threatens regional livability,² entertainment has become fatally addictive, and substance abuse and various other addictions have reached a critical mass, threatening the fabric of responsible society. The novel centers on three main storylines: that of the Incandenza family who run the Enfield Tennis Academy in Boston MA, the story of Don Gately, a convalescing drug addict and resident at the Ennet

¹ Four digit numbers have been replaced by products, and given titles such as “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” and “Year of the Whopper,” for example (223).

² With a contained nuclear waste site called the Great Concavity having taken over four northeastern U.S. states, with giant fans that blow toxic fumes up into Quebec and the Maritimes, giving the novel an apocalyptic sensibility.

Recovery House just down the hill from the Enfield Academy, and a lengthy conversation between a wheelchair-bound Quebecois separatist and a U.S. government agent about a fatally addictive film named *Infinite Jest*, and its use as a terrorist weapon. The novel presents a commercial dystopia in which the characters and society at large have generally embraced unfettered narcissism and addiction,³ but in some cases struggle against these forces to achieve a semblance of community, compassion, and general restoration from the culture's pharmaceutical and spiritual toxicity.

Based on this thematic content, *Infinite Jest* and Wallace's other works are most commonly interpreted through Wallace's 1993 "E Unibus Pluram" essay, his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, and his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech, commonly known as "This is Water."⁴ These three expressions of the late writer demonstrate a castigation of postmodernism's embracing of what Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnoses as "incredulity towards metanarratives" (482), instead advocating "single-entendre principles" (Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram" 81), the restoration of "some fucking order" to a generation of U.S. literature poisoned by the caustic skepticism, cynicism, and irony of postmodernism (McCaffery 150), and a clarion call to awareness, self-sacrifice, and the livability of religious traditions. These gestures towards a return to authenticity find purchase in Wallace's notion that

in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or

³ Which novelist Don DeLillo describes as a "dead serious frolic of addicted humanity" (DeLillo 23).

⁴ With such intertextual interpretations existing despite New Critical formalist anxieties spawned by the likes of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, and French post-structuralists Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who question the role and prominence of the author in relation to their writing.

the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. (“Kenyon Commencement Speech” 362)

These and numerous other spiritually-laden expressions from Wallace have earned him a reputation as a moralistic cultural commentator, heavily critical of consumer capitalism, environmental irresponsibility, the atomizing effects of hyper-individuality and solipsism, and a kind of “hip fatigue” that reflects the apathetic millennial American zeitgeist (Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram” 81). Many critics, such as Mary K. Holland, Adam Kelly, and Toon Staes have remarked on the tendency in Wallace scholarship and among fan readers⁵ to view Wallace’s worldview as one of earnest authenticity, recognizing him in relation to the “New Sincerity”⁶ movement in contemporary literary fiction. The New Sincerity contingent commonly includes writers such as Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, George Saunders, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Lethem, Junot Díaz, Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan, and of course, David Foster Wallace, as addressing heartfelt and unironic issues in their work.⁷ This fairly recent New Sincerity trend⁸ generally exhibits tendencies that situate it as an empathetically motivated literary landscape to confront the clever, self-reflexive, ironic, and perhaps even at times existentialist ethos—particularly as it is associated with twentieth and twenty-first century atheism or agnosticism—of postmodern literature and culture. This resistance to secular modernity is not to say that New Sincerity aligns with any kind of religious or faith-based

⁵ Who have a significant online presence in the discussion of Wallace and his work, most notably on *The Howling Fantods* website (thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/), reading groups such as 2016’s “Infinite Winter” (infinitewinter.org) and its related Reddit forum (reddit.com/r/InfiniteWinter/), and *The Great Concavity* podcast, which is entirely dedicated to the casual and critical discussion of David Foster Wallace (<http://greatconcavity.podbean.com/>).

⁶ A term coined by film critic Jim Collins in 1993 to denote media typified by honesty and a preoccupation with affect (“Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity” 245).

⁷ See Lee Konstantinou’s March 2016 *Salon* article, “We Had to Get Beyond Irony: How David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and a New Generation of Believers Changed Fiction,” for example.

⁸ Although it has been argued by Kelly and others that there is nothing particularly new about it, given the moralistic and spiritual legacy of writers such as Leo Tolstoy, John Gardner, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, and many others.

tradition(s), but that it does seem more likely than postmodernist fiction to entertain the possibility of spirituality as an answer to some of life and literature's most substantial questions.

As the characterization of Wallace as a key player in this development towards sincerity and post-ironic, post-secular belief marks his literary legacy as one concerned with central questions of the human condition in relation to notions of transcendence, meaning, and possibly even the divine,⁹ there exist a variety of spiritual and religious readings of his work, both in academic and fan discourses. Paul Giles asserts that Wallace's fiction fits in the tradition of historically "Americanist" values, aligning with Transcendentalism's ideals of community, spirituality, and self-dependence in matters of truth and value (4). Giles goes on to compare Wallace's Kenyon address to Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1844 "The Poet" essay, drawing parallels between Wallace's proclamation of the sacred "unity of all things," even amidst the sustained grocery store "consumer-hell-type situation" description, and Emerson's observation that mundane situations common to U.S. life are in fact "landscapes of 'wonder'" (7). Parallels between Wallace's work and Buddhism have also been remarked upon. As writer George Saunders notes, Wallace's prose itself embodies an "openness that I might call *terrified-tenderness*: a sudden new awareness of what a fix we're in on this earth, stuck in these bodies, with these minds," leading Saunders to the conclusion: "I don't know much about Dave's spiritual life but I see him as a great American Buddhist writer, in the lineage of Whitman and Ginsberg. He was a wake-up artist" (Saunders 53-54). Christopher Kocela outlines specific Buddhist influence throughout *Infinite Jest*,¹⁰ particularly as it applies to discourses on tennis between the characters, receiving a kind of Zen-like treatment throughout the novel. Some of

⁹ Questions like: Where are our origins traceable to? Is there some kind of God or Higher Power that endows life with intrinsic meaning? Do we have moral responsibilities towards this Being and fellow humans, and if so, what are they? How can the human condition change or be redeemed, if at all? What is humanity's final destination after death?

¹⁰ In his 2014 Paris "Infinite Wallace" conference paper, "Engaging Buddhism in the Work of David Foster Wallace: Continuous Practice, *Infinite Jest*."

Hal's interior thought tendencies also exhibit aspects of Buddhist tradition, according to Kocela. Similarly, Krzysztof Piekarski's dissertation on Wallace and Buddhism¹¹ explores a wide range of Wallace's short fiction, novels, and non-fiction. The focus on Transcendental and Buddhist influences appears to be at the forefront of the post-secular spirituality discourse in Wallace scholarship, though some critics have drawn connections to Semitic, monotheistic religions as well.

Paving the way for a scriptural reading of *Infinite Jest* are observations by critics Timothy Jacobs, David H. Evans, and Lee Konstantinou. Jacobs' essay¹² argues that the form and thematic concerns of Wallace's largest work closely parallels Dostoevsky's novel of similar girth, and, to some extent, theologically-charged spiritual substance. Noting "both artists' unflinching eschatological depiction of debased and despairing human nature toward a redemptive end," Jacobs aligns Wallace with what Dostoevsky scholar Joseph Frank calls Dostoevsky's "eschatological imagination" (Jacobs 290), a formulation that includes cataclysmic dramatizations through which characters experience spiritual redemption. Despite pointing to theological realities in *Infinite Jest*, O'Connell notes of Jacobs' piece that it "does not discuss the specifically Christian elements in Wallace's belief structure" (288). David H. Evans' essay¹³ traces the philosophical and theological influences of William James on Wallace's work, focusing heavily on the significance of free will over determinism in relation to faith, as well as on some of the redemptive elements of the Kenyon address and *Infinite Jest*, particularly in the storylines and characteristics of Don Gately and Mario Incandenza. Lee Konstantinou takes a more general, open-ended belief approach to Wallace's texts, drawing significant attention to the

¹¹ Entitled "Buddhist Philosophy in the Work of David Foster Wallace," 2013.

¹² Entitled "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*."

¹³ Entitled "'The Chains of Not Choosing': Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace."

way in which “Wallace sought to use techniques historically associated with metafiction to generate forms of affect that theory held to be impossible and relink private and public life...via an ethos of postironic belief” (“No Bull” 85). In other words, Wallace challenges the foundation of postmodernism’s assumed skepticism¹⁴ by using ironic literary gestures inherent in the movement to critique the state of U.S. fiction and reinstate sincere faith and postironic belief as viable modes of epistemology and ontology. As Marshall Boswell similarly notes, “irony is also a cage the doors of which his work wants to spring. He opens the cage of irony by *ironizing* it....The purpose behind this layered strategy is to create a space outside his work where direct, ‘single-entendre’ principles can breathe and live” (207). In the estimation of these critics, Wallace’s fiction, and *Infinite Jest* in particular, opens the metaphorical prison doors that had previously been closed and locked by the insular self-reflexivity and congenital irony of postmodern fiction, allowing for the possibility of faith or belief to be considered. While other essays on Wallace also point to more specifically theological implications of his work, these of Jacobs, Evans, and Konstantinou present a framework through which Christian resonances in *Infinite Jest* might begin to be countenanced.

It is here that the present analysis engages the spirituality discourse in Wallace scholarship, offering a deeper exploration of the theological tendencies and reflexes of the novel *Infinite Jest* in particular, which are substantial, and, I argue, inform the text at several foundational thematic levels, to an even greater extent than the traditions of Transcendentalism and Buddhism—which are not insignificant—that have been outlined above. Some essays on *Infinite Jest* briefly mention the novel in relation to Christian spirituality, and others provide a

¹⁴ Which Jacques Derrida refers to as a “decentering,” a “rupture,” and a “disruption” inherited from the contributions of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, Sigmund Freud’s critique of self-presence, and Martin Heidegger’s “destruction of metaphysics” and “onto-theology” (“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Humanities” 247-48).

sustained treatment of Wallace's work in relation to Catholic theology¹⁵ and Christian Existentialism/Unitarian Universalism.¹⁶ Michael O'Connell argues here that Wallace ought to be considered in the canon of Catholic writers, with the likes of Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Graham Greene, while Jill Braithwaite articulates the novel's dialogic interaction with Paul Tillich's theology of art and salvation, leading to the claim that *Infinite Jest* invites the reader to consider themes of "estrangement, from self, others, and God" (29), in the context of Unitarian Universalism's unique approach to soteriology, which is distinct from that of orthodox Christianity's approach to soteriology. However, an extended analysis that posits the novel's universe as one that exhibits significant elements of the biblical metanarrative, in soteriological terms, namely those of a specifically New Testament, Pauline derivation, as mediated through a Protestant lens, has yet to be conducted. O'Connell's essay presents a substantial, specifically Christian theological mapping of *Infinite Jest*, spending about seven pages discussing the spiritual malaise of the novel's characters and offering subsequent models of hope in the characters Don Gately, Mario Incandenza, and Barry Loach, before moving on to similar preoccupations in *The Pale King*, thus demonstrating a spiritual interest in a large swathe of Wallace's work.

While it does not appear that critics have intentionally shied away from the specific theological implications of the morally bound, theistically-charged universe displayed in *Infinite Jest*—indeed, there is ample openness to this line of thought in Wallace scholarship—there is only a small amount of substantial, sustained commentary in this area that delves deeply into the specifics of *Infinite Jest*'s theological impulse. O'Connell makes a similar observation, stating "a number of critics have noted the spiritual dimension of *Infinite Jest*, although none has explored

¹⁵ See Michael J. O'Connell's "'Your Temple is Self and Sentiment': David Foster Wallace's Diagnostic Novels."

¹⁶ See Jill Braithwaite's MA thesis "'Dying to Give Our Lives Away': *Infinite Jest* as a Rich Resource for a Renewed Theology of Sin and Salvation."

Wallace's treatment of faith in this novel with any depth or specificity" (273). While questions about human significance and moral imperatives and their necessary or unnecessary relation to a deity are age old in the history of philosophy, I argue that *Infinite Jest* engages in a significant conversation with ideas specific to Christian theology, exhibiting elements of the Christian metanarrative as integral to notions of human worth, moral values, the fallen human condition, and most significantly, to salvation and redemption. While other religious traditions—especially within monotheistic belief systems—incorporate many similar ideas to Christianity about the value of human life, the objectivity of ethical responsibilities, and prescriptions for salvation, I argue that *Infinite Jest* intersects most closely with a New Testament paradigm through its form and characters, exhibiting Pauline notions of worth, depravity, and grace-based redemption that are unique among the world's religious traditions.¹⁷ These three categories—referred to more technically in Christian theological discourse as axiology (the study of value, worth), hamartiology (the study of sin), and soteriology (the study of redemption, salvation), respectively—function in the present argument most significantly in relation to the characters Hal Incandenza, Don Gately, and Mario Incandenza, and their relationships to these branches of theology, informing what I argue here is a tripartite theological map of Pauline Christianity throughout *Infinite Jest*. While others before me have commented on the theological proclivities of Wallace's fiction, I offer another way in which *Infinite Jest* may be read, one which pays close attention to the way salvation is articulated in the novel in relation to central tenets of historic Christianity, to the end that the novel resists the ironic gaze of literary postmodernism, and subconsciously demonstrates a reconsideration of traditional faith in relation to human recovery.

In contrast to this position of many of *Infinite Jest*'s thematic ideas being founded on sacred notions of Christian soteriology, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly posit that “one

¹⁷ Particularly the idea of salvation by grace through faith.

finds in Wallace no hope for salvation by God, nor even any resignation to the loss of this hope....He seems to have lost even the memory for the sacred as it was traditionally understood” (“David Foster Wallace’s Nihilism” 45). While *Infinite Jest* certainly chronicles the lives of people floundering to be free of addiction in a post-Christian society, the prominent nihilism of many characters does not necessarily signal consent or promotion for such a bleak outlook, but instead, highlights the shortcomings of such a spiritually-barren landscape, offering in its place a new and hopeful approach to being human through old theological belief and orthodoxy.

O’Connell makes a similar insight in his analysis of Dreyfus and Kelly, saying, “Indeed, while individual sections of his work are nihilistic, the works as a whole tend to reflect a worldview that values the possibility of transcendence and universal meaning” (“Your Temple is Self and Sentiment” 268). Tom Bissell adds,¹⁸ “while I have never been able to get a handle on Wallace’s notion of spirituality, I think it is a mistake to view him as anything other than a religious writer. His religion, like many, was a religion of language. Whereas most religions deify only certain words, Wallace exalted all of them” (*Infinite Jest* xiii). Bissell’s comment here does not necessarily invoke religion in the traditional sense of an organized belief-system, but does remark on Wallace’s elevation of the written word, the embodiment of which is celebrated and extolled in Christian theology through the worship and adoration of Christ, who is also referred to as “the Word” (John 1.1-3, 14).

It is this project’s contention then that such a claim from Dreyfus and Kelly overlooks some very essential thematic theological resonances in *Infinite Jest*, and while I do not by any means assert or argue for the planting of the conquering Chi Rho banner in Wallace’s watershed text, claiming it as a properly “Christian” novel (if such a thing exists), I do posit that the novel converses with significant aspects of the Christian narrative, offering readers a new

¹⁸ In his introduction to the 20th Anniversary Edition of *Infinite Jest*.

hermeneutical framework or thematic orientation through which to read and consider the text's implications. This framework could perhaps even extend beyond *Infinite Jest* into Wallace's other fiction, as well as to novels by other authors that might share a similar preoccupation with ideas related to spirituality's relation to affect, texts that might be categorized as falling under the umbrella of New Sincerity.

While there is something of a limited precedent for a scholarly, ecclesiastical approach to *Infinite Jest*, most of those publications that have marked Christian parallels are relatively introductory or mention such resonances only in ecumenical passing, inviting a more comprehensive theologically-founded inquiry. Such an endeavor comes at a pivotal time in David Foster Wallace studies, as spiritual approaches to his work are becoming more plentiful and have piqued the curiosity of both scholars and fan readers alike. For example, the "Infinite Wallace" conference of September 2014 in Paris featured five presentations in the two-part "Post-secular Wallace?" portion of the event—the question mark in the title indicating this as a new and possibly burgeoning direction for Wallace studies—which included papers on the influence of Buddhism in *Infinite Jest* (Christopher Kocela), religious eschatology in Jewish and Christian literature in relation to *Infinite Jest* (Jason Ford), self-worship and religion in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Jeffrey Fisher), neomonastic communities in the fiction of Wallace and DeLillo (Jurrit Daalder), and ghosts and possession in *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* (David Hering). More recently in May 2015, at the 2nd Annual David Foster Wallace Conference in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, there appeared several theologically-focused papers, including Jill Braithwaite's "'Dying to Give Our Lives Away': *Infinite Jest* as a Theological Resource for Re-Imagining Sin and Salvation," Matt Bucher's "The Fogle Novella: Catalysts in the Conversion Narrative [in *The Pale King*]," and my own "Irony, Belief, and the Shadow of David Foster Wallace in Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City*." Numerous articles

speculating on Wallace's personal faith convictions have been prominent since his death as well, notably that of Wallace biographer D. T. Max, who in a 2012 *New York Times* online interview explained about his Wallace biography¹⁹ that

religion is a *huge* part of the story I tell. One big reason I wanted to spend all these years with Wallace was to help me with my own questions of faith by examining his. But faith is different from worship in houses with pointy roofs. David did go to church sometimes, but as a sipper. He liked one's pageantry, the other's earnestness, the Danishes at a third. Yet God was central to his thoughts. He had no natural predisposition for belief in a divine being, but I think he forced himself to overcome it mostly to remind himself he wasn't He. (Williams)

Both in textual and biographical scholarship on Wallace, the topic of faith and spirituality is of burgeoning interest, and this thesis seeks to add to the conversation of how readers engage with religious themes in Wallace's most celebrated and central work.

Regardless of the extent to which Wallace's own muddled, perhaps pluralistic, and mysterious faith tendencies are considered in relation to his writing—and even how much, if at all, his own commentary on the subject is worth considering,²⁰ I argue that *Infinite Jest* independently marks a significant dialogue with the orthodox Christian schema, and as such, presents a departure from postmodernism's incredulity towards such an approach. The present project of reading *Infinite Jest* as being in a significant conference with a New Testament framework is, therefore, not about deciphering Wallace the man, but about exploring how the novel itself engages theological and scriptural concerns, which coincidentally, bears close association to the theme of redemption Wallace envisioned for his fiction—the cornerstone of

¹⁹ Entitled *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*.

²⁰ As Wallace remarks to McCaffery, "This is the way Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism's helped me most as a fiction writer: once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead" (McCaffery 40).

the Christian metanarrative. At the same time, *Infinite Jest* is gravid with religious and philosophical doubt, uncertainty, and an inability to truly define “God,” let alone align the concept of a Higher Power with any specific religious tradition—especially in the AA portions of the novel associated with The Ennet Recovery House and Don Gately—making the text a significant site of interest for spiritual discourse. Despite these textual proclivities towards religious ambiguity, it is maintained here that questions and interrogations theological in nature in *Infinite Jest* are an inherent part of the legacy of the ecclesiastical tradition, from earlier thinkers such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, to Søren Kierkegaard, to modern theologians such as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, and religious fiction writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Flannery O’Connor and Graham Greene, all of whom invite rigorous critical questioning to issues of faith, and perhaps also a faith in rigorous questions.

The present thesis argues that *Infinite Jest* exhibits an important preoccupation with Christian theology, noting sites of significant doctrinal conversation between the novel and the ecclesiastical tradition, with discoveries of the book being twofold: one, that it more closely engages an interface with the Christian tradition than with any other spiritual system previously pointed out in Wallace scholarship, and two, that the novel’s conversation with theology challenges the notion that there is such a thing as an entirely secular outlook, that indeed, spirituality is an integral and unavoidable part of what it is to be human. In this way, *Infinite Jest* posits a remapping of what “spiritual” really means, offering it as a hard-wired, unavoidable component of humanity rather than something that is always specifically practiced in houses of worship. Wallace’s texts, and *Infinite Jest* particularly, thus functions as an important site for the resurrection of religious inquiry in literary fiction and philosophical thought in the context of what is commonly referred to in the contemporary moment as post-postmodernism, a time in which interest in spiritual traditions has increased within literary, cultural, and critical

scholarship. Not only does *Infinite Jest* embody a significant theological dialogue, but it also serves to raise significant questions about the politics of representation and mediation when it comes to faith or spiritual inquiry, which is explored throughout the present project. The hermeneutical analysis for the specifically New Testament, Pauline inquiry of *Infinite Jest* outlined in the present work is of import to the burgeoning conversation surrounding Wallace and spirituality, as no similar large-scale exploration of the novel has yet been conducted, and as it offers a reading of the text with implications beyond the subject of literary fiction itself. The goal of the present study is not to necessarily challenge or overthrow secular or other religiously inclined readings of the novel, but rather to offer a hermeneutical exploration through which theological meaning can be constructed, pointing to the novel's curiosity with a specific ecclesiastical schema which has been only moderately explored to this point in Wallace scholarship.

For all the aforementioned complications and anxieties surrounding Wallace's own paratextual interviews, remarks, addresses, and generally genre-specific statements, some of the language and terminology he uses in the Kenyon commencement speech and elsewhere is helpful in framing *Infinite Jest*'s theological tendencies that comprise the present argument about the novel's exchange with Christian doctrine. The great problem of the human condition, according to Wallace's speech, appears in the form of a "hard-wired default setting" ("Kenyon Commencement Speech" 358), which he describes essentially as a form of narcissism so complete that it excludes all consideration for other people, ordering individuals to be "lords of [their] tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation" ("Kenyon" 363). The critical thesis of Wallace's famous speech is that an awareness of this egotistical default setting and the conscious choosing to defy it constitutes "real freedom," manifesting itself in the form of "attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to

sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty little unsexy ways every day” (“Kenyon” 363). The alternative situation, according to Wallace, is “unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing” (“Kenyon” 363). The present contention about *Infinite Jest* is that this missing “infinite thing” is most economically reflected in the personal God of the Christian worldview—as articulated in orthodox ecclesiastical theology—and humanity’s losing the opportunity to be in meaningful relationship with a personal Creator. The novel presents a cast of characters who are deeply, existentially haunted by various kinds of loss—of self-control, sanity, relationships, personal and political autonomy, loved ones, among many others—which in small scale are reflective of a more total and cosmic kind of loss articulated by humanity’s chosen divorce from God—which might be termed sin, or as Wallace puts it, a “hard-wired default setting”—as described in Christian theology.

Whether Wallace specifically articulated his religious views in interviews, literary non-fiction or otherwise, his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* closely engages a conversation with a theistic and moral universe engrained with ethical responsibility, specifically reflected by a Pauline, Judeo-Christian worldview articulated in the New Testament, often in very Rabelaisian, carnivalesque manner. This interface is seen through *Infinite Jest*’s tripartite fascination with three core tenets of the orthodox Christian metanarrative:

1. Humanity is infused with innate, sacred, and infinite value, and thus has purpose being created in the *Imago Dei* (image of God). Furthermore, this created value implies that moral imperatives are binding, that human beings have specific responsibilities towards each other and their Creator.
2. Despite this value and purpose, humanity has fallen from its original, created intention through the exercise of free will, which has created a departure from the way the world

was intended to be. Regardless of this condition, humanity still maintains its sacred value, and each person is deserving of respect, love, and compassion. This point of fallenness or ontological poverty—generally articulated through the ubiquitous addictions, afflictions, and criminal behaviours of the novel’s characters—is perhaps *Infinite Jest*’s greatest territory of theological exploration in terms of sheer page-space granted to the topic, as well as those of Wallace’s other works. Yet despite such a lamentable condition—indeed, *because of it*—the novel’s narrative voice maintains compassion and empathy for its characters, as they are reflective of humanity’s condition *en masse*.

3. Humanity’s significance and fallenness are married through a redemptive, self-sacrificial schema predicated on the concept of grace that provides a semblance of renewal to its original, created intent. While only a few of *Infinite Jest*’s characters are redeemed in a palpable way within the given pages, there are numerous poignant moments of restoration that furnish the reclamation of human value, most notably seen in and through the characters Don Gately and Barry Loach, with Mario Incandenza playing a specifically Christological role in the text. As a result of Don Gately’s conversion narrative, many of his specific actions embody a self-sacrificial, New Testament ethos.

As such, *Infinite Jest* presents a universe infused with theistic meaning, where the characters are deeply significant—not just as conduits of narrative plot but as representational human beings—while simultaneously being extremely messy and fallen, mired in addiction and narcissism, who ultimately benefit from a redemptive model typified by grace—or undeserved favour—that provides an escape from their purgatorial hopelessness. While resonances between myriad spiritual/religious traditions could and have been applied to Wallace’s work, most notably Transcendentalism and Buddhism, the present analysis argues that the worldview *Infinite Jest* most actively engages a conversation with is best described as Pauline, primarily due to the

nature of a redemptive schema based on grace that is unique to the Christian metanarrative. While the other major monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam also contain notions of creation, value, and human fallenness, Christianity contains the distinctive notion of redemptive grace, in salvific relation to human value and fallenness, which *Infinite Jest* bears a marked preoccupation with. My close look at salvation states in the novel—most particularly through the characters of Hal Incandenza, Don Gately, and finally Mario Incandenza—reveals that *Infinite Jest* is a soteriological novel, preoccupied with the question of human redemption, and as such, engages the biblical metanarrative which is consumed with the same concerns.²¹

It is worth noting at this time that a great many other approaches to Wallace's work and *Infinite Jest* are taken by the scholarly community, exploring his writing through the critical lenses of feminism, post-colonialism, post-humanism, disability studies, philosophy, psychology, structuralism, deconstructionism, trauma theory, and affect theory. A large percentage of these publications have been noted and waves of Wallace scholarship mapped by critic Adam Kelly in his "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline" essay,²² though publications on Wallace have been released at an explosive rate in the past several years since its publication.²³ While my thesis addresses some of these critical disciplines in a tertiary way, its central preoccupation is theological in nature, and is thus primarily designed to consider

²¹ It is worth noting that these three characters are all male, begging the question of the female's place in the salvation structure of *Infinite Jest*. Female characters also exhibit the spectrum of fallenness and redemption throughout the novel and are addressed throughout this thesis, but Hal, Gately, and Mario are the most developed articulations of these concerns. Wallace has been accused of being a masculine writer, though this question has been a primary topic of conversation and debate at Wallace conferences and online dialogue about his work. See Clare Hayes-Brady's treatment of this question in chapter 8 of *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, for example.

²² Originally published in *The Irish Journal of American Studies* in 2010, then updated and released again in 2015 in Philip Coleman's collection, *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*.

²³ This overwhelming surge of scholarship was discussed by howlingfantods.com/dfw proprietor Nick Maniatis, Matt Bucher, and myself on Episode 10 of *The Great Concavity* (a podcast dedicated to the work of David Foster Wallace and associated scholarship), and on Episode 12 with Wallace scholar David Hering.

how *Infinite Jest* understands soteriological aspects of spirituality, and what may be possible to understand about the human experience through such elements, via a close analysis of the novel.

The progressive story arc of creation, fall, and redemption in the biblical metanarrative is reflected in the range of salvation states in the novel's key characters of Hal, Gately, and Mario, and is perhaps most logically understood in the same chronological structure of the present work's chapter layout. Chapter 2 centers on *Infinite Jest*'s engagement with the theological concept of a meaningful, significant universe, where individual characters matter on an ontological level, thus reflecting the theological doctrine of *Imago Dei* (Image of God). I argue that the novel infuses its world with significance through the narrative arc of character change, and through the narrator's consistent commentary on axiological value. The character of Hal Incandenza is a central point of focus here, as he embodies a salvation state that is outside the realm of redemption, given his mental and physical breakdown in the final chronological scene of the novel, despite his attempts throughout the book to achieve significant human relationships and a restoration of affect from his condition of general anhedonia and existential ennui.

Chapter 3 considers the previous chapter's case regarding significance, arguing that such value is corrupted or degraded in the novel by the depths of depravity, addiction, and fallenness the characters exhibit, though their value is not irrevocably lost. It is also argued that the absurd, dystopian future North American landscape envisioned in the novel exacerbates and enables the fallenness of the characters, serving as a macrocosm of the spiritual poverty of the characters, thus marking a second point through which the text engages with Christian ideas. Despite this condition—indeed because of it—the redemption of Don Gately is the center of this analysis, as his salvation state progresses from doomed to redeemed, through the notable impositions of charity and grace. Gately's salvific progression from sinner to saint leads here to a look at his role as an imitator of Christ, particularly in his near-fatal, self-sacrificial rescue of the morally

despicable Randy Lenz. While it may be challenging to prove a definitive fact or clear-cut moment of redemption for Gately—or of unredemption for Hal in the previous chapter—I explore *Infinite Jest*'s soteriological reflex more as a concept than as a specific event, with conversion as more of a state of being than of a particular instance in time.

Chapter 4 weds the previously explored notions of human significance and fallenness in a biblical conception of salvific redemption mediated through grace, arguing that *Infinite Jest* exhibits an attraction to this theological concept, as it incorporates the significant themes of hope and restoration into the humanity of the novel's characters through both particular moments that occur within as well as between them. Mario Incandenza receives the bulk of attention in this chapter, characterized as the novel's defining model of salvation—almost even superseding the need for salvation—being the closest representation of an imitator of Christ the novel offers. I argue here that Mario is unique among the novel's characters, resembling a kind of Messianic archetype. A discussion of Mario's unique characteristics in relation to Christ's will demonstrate him to be the pinnacle of the novel's depiction of salvation states, and the highest expression of grace in the text. While these three chapters on Hal, Gately, and Mario are specific character studies, the wider issue of the novel's dystopian geopolitical landscape and its own possible redemption is also taken into account, namely by addressing microcosmic individuals as constituting the larger national (or intranational, as the case is here) body politic, though the emphasis of this paper more so centers on individual salvation rather than a kind of national awakening or revival-type preoccupation. Were this paper to extend into doctoral work, the novel's chapters featuring the conversation between U.S. agent Hugh Steeply and Quebecois terrorist Rémy Marathe would be paramount to such a macrocosmic analysis of national

salvation,²⁴ but for the purposes and limitations of this thesis, a more individual human approach is addressed, outlining the ways in which spirituality is integral to the human experience, with the novel rethinking the scope of what can be deemed as spiritual. Moreover, my argument demonstrates how aspects of the novel can be understood as spiritual through the application of a soteriological analysis.

The final concluding chapter details the literary significance of *Infinite Jest*'s soteriological map as explored through the spectrum of character salvation, discovering that the postironic, post-secular propensity of the novel is not only a watershed moment in the development of post-Cold War U.S. fiction—as it constitutes a prophetic diagnosis and assessment of a present and future U.S. culture in moral, spiritual, and environmental peril—but also that the novel itself is a wake-up call to the culture outside of the fictional story it presents, with all of the decadences and related pitfalls embodied in Francis Fukuyama's so-called “end of history's” associated triumphant system of unfettered free-market capitalism. I contend that any kind of sincerity in contemporary U.S. fiction, about which so much is being made in recent scholarship, leads necessarily to a larger conversation about spirituality, the foundations of which *Infinite Jest* anticipates and engages with calculated urgency and doctrinal specificity. How such a theological reading of this novel might contribute to the future literary discussion of religion and spirituality, or the notion of the post-secular in David Foster Wallace studies, is finally considered, namely the framing of *Infinite Jest* on some level as a secular text fascinated with sacred doctrine, a novel which perhaps urges the reader to consider theology as a discipline worthy of both literary consideration and real-world application to present and future America.

²⁴ Cultural, environmental, and otherwise.

Chapter 2 – “A Way More Than Hal-Sized Hole”²⁵

Infinite Jest opens with the introduction of eighteen-year-old Hal Incandenza in what is chronologically the last chapter of the book, signifying an alpha/omega narrative structure that eventually prods the reader towards eschatological epiphany. The reader is not privy to this information of chronology until page 223, which serves as the Rosetta Stone for interpreting the novel’s jumbled timeline, and even then, it is not until the final pages featuring Don Gately’s flashback that it can be determined that Hal’s opening scene is the finale of the novel. This cold opening is challenging to understand upon first read, as characters and events are referenced for which no context is provided. In it, Hal is at a scholarship interview at the University of Arizona in which he appears to have a psychological breakdown, to the horror of the three Deans interviewing him. This scene sets the tone for the novel and begins the thematic narrative of soteriological concerns, unveiling the fate of Hal, a central character who appears to be in a very bad way, in psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual terms. Toon Staes paraphrases Marshall Boswell’s idea that the general scholarly approach in Wallace studies to discussing Hal’s disassociated state comes through “Wallace’s aesthetics of sincerity as opposed to the ironic self-reflexivity of his postmodernist forefathers”²⁶ (67), meaning that Wallace’s fiction embraces matters of the human heart, calling attention to what it means to be fully human. In contrast, the postmodern literature of Wallace’s predecessors²⁷ was concerned with demonstrating the constructed and metafictional nature of literature, more interested in exploring

²⁵ *Infinite Jest* 785.

²⁶ In which Boswell originally says “These echoes all support a reading of the final section of the novel as an enactment of Wallace’s conflicted attempt both to honor the heritage of his artistic forefathers and to kill them off at the same time” (168-69).

²⁷ Such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gass, William Gaddis, Don DeLillo (to some extent), etc.

the ideas of continental philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, Jean Baudrillard, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, often estranging those matters from a human world in ways that could make such literature appear merely self-reflexive and even uninterested in human experience.²⁸ An earnest concern with affect and ontological value is closer to Wallace's approach here, as *Infinite Jest* poses the question of how Hal's narrative forms the basis of a practice of authenticity that strives to situate redemption and moral responsibility at the core of human experience.

Hal's development throughout *Infinite Jest* is dynamic and absorbing, and while there exists a tradition of redemptive narratives for central protagonists in Western literature, Hal's story does not end in a positive, salvific way within the pages of the novel,²⁹ but rather serves as a demonstration of spiritual and emotional impoverishment, with Hal as a poster-child for the perils of self-reflexivity. Thus, the novel offers, in the form of Hal's character arc, an ongoing set of reflections on development and redemption in general, and as a particular preoccupation of the story. In terms of Christian soteriology, Hal is ultimately detached, alienated, and spiritually displaced, removed from himself, others, and a meaningful notion of the divine. I thus pose the question of if Hal's unpromising sense of spiritual isolation might form the basis for an understanding of human recovery that invites the reader to consider what redemption is and what it means, not only for the novel's characters, but also in the world of its readers. Given Wallace's primary concern for writing authentically about human suffering and struggle, *Infinite Jest* develops a notion of soteriological reclamation that introduces the importance of a theological approach to thinking about the novel and its real-world implications. On the spectrum of

²⁸ While Wallace is certainly not immune to the metafictional and self-reflexive exploration of critical theory in his work, especially in his early writing such as *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*, this is more a characterization of his later work from the mid-90s and onward, which takes up more immediately human affairs.

²⁹ Along the lines of the conflicted and unresolved Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare's tragedy, which is further explored later in this chapter.

salvation articulated in Pauline theology, Hal is thus found to be a “slave of sin” (Romans 6.17) and therefore “dead in...trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2.1), despite his efforts to establish meaningful connections and relationships with his family and friends, which are not insignificant. Hal’s spiritual state thus seems akin to the novel’s description of addiction as “a fuckin death-in-life,” resulting in “unbelievable psychic pain, a kind of peritonitis of the soul, psychic agony” (346), and as being “undead, not alive” (347), which sounds a great deal like St. Paul’s description of spiritual death throughout his epistles in the New Testament. While critic Allard den Dulk characterizes Hal’s state as being on a path towards recovery (“Good Faith and Sincerity” 213-15), I argue that his efforts to escape his dependency on substances and re-engage with the world, while not insignificant, are ultimately unfulfilled, with addiction exhibiting merely a symptom of a more significant internal spiritual state of distress and crisis within Hal.

Unlike the novel’s other central protagonist Don Gately, who is also deeply fallen, addicted, and affected by his deleterious choices, Hal does not encounter grace in the same way, making his character arc distinctly unique. As such, Hal and Gately represent something of a soteriological binary, despite their similar challenges with addiction. Despite Hal’s best attempts to recover a sense of affect and human connection, his place on the soteriological spectrum is ultimately one of spiritual homelessness, articulated in the novel through the culmination of his traumatic childhood experiences and relationship with his father, drug addiction, and inability to connect meaningfully with members of his immediate community. Hal represents the most developed portrait of a character outside a state of theological grace, with this lack of grace as an important starting point in discussing *Infinite Jest*’s dialogue with salvific theology, especially in contrast with key characters Don Gately and Hal’s older brother Mario Incandenza, the three of whom Allard den Dulk also considers to be the novel’s most important characters in the context of sincerity narratives (211). The logical extension of sincerity, I argue, has theological

implications, since it relates to questions about humanity's ontological value and moral responsibilities to fellow man and God.³⁰

In *Infinite Jest*, Hal is described as “empty but not dumb” (694), and like other marijuana addicts, as suffering from a “poverty of affect” (503). For Hal, striving to become a whole, emotionally well-adjusted person comes at the great cost of his being viewed by his peers as sentimental and naïve, and consequently seen as “goo-prone” and “infantile,” which is “the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America” (694-5). Hal's self-conscious outlook essentially stems from his fear of being seen by his peers as unhip, and yet, he is at odds with himself at having to project a hatred for the affect he truly longs for, “that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia” (695). Despite Hal's lexical and academic prodigiousness and “possible genius at tennis”—being in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment the fourth ranked junior player in the U.S.A. (155)—Hal appears to have everything going for him, and yet, like the tennis balls he hits thousands of times *per diem*, he is “empty inside, utterly, a vacuum,” as described by his grandfather to Hal's father James (160). Hal's own meta-reflection, “in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows,” is a clear moment of spiritual diagnosis (694), in his awareness that he is emotionally devoid of affect, feeling, and that which might make him most fully human.

The subsequent sentence's paradoxical proclamation that Hal does in fact have one feeling, “the one thing he feels to the limit lately: he is lonely,” thus must equate to an ethereal, existential, and wraithlike sensation, rather than a genuine and deeply-felt rendering of emotion (694). Having lost his sense of community and emotional feeling, describing himself as “far

³⁰ While belief in God is by no means required for one to be moral or sincere (as argued by many of the New Atheists, such as Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens), a discussion of this and other virtues often does overlap with theology, as it raises the question of morality's origins, whether axiological laws are derived from a divine or human source.

more robotic than John Wayne” (694), endnote 36’s explanation of the term *Verstiegenheit* as “Low-Bavarian for something like ‘wandering alone in blasted disorienting territory beyond all charted limits and orienting markers’” thus appears as an apt description of Hal’s spiritually and emotionally abject condition (994). Hal’s is therefore “a certain very strange type of sadness that appears as a kind of disassociation from itself” (765), and one which removes him from himself and others, ultimately placing him at a negative terminus on the spectrum of spiritual health and vitality, a hyper self-reflexive self.

Elizabeth Freudenthal classifies Hal’s breakdown in the novel’s opening scene as an entrapment in a “pseudo-autistic state, where his thoughts and feelings have no way out of his head” (200), with the “episode depict[ing] in stark relief the pain of a tendency towards isolated introspection, ratiocination, and introversion” (203). This description of Hal’s condition in the Dean interview characterizes Hal’s as a prison of total solipsism, implying complete aloneness, and the absence of any relational intimacy whatsoever. As Hal is thoroughly alone here at the end of the novel, trapped inside the cage of his own psyche, Gately’s alternately salvific end highlights the role of community, a key factor in the novel’s prescription of salvation and the redemption narrative of Gately. Though Gately is similarly trapped in his final major scene, intubated and essentially paralyzed in a hospital bed from his gun wound, unable to communicate meaningfully with others, his prison is of a different kind, his arrival there having come through an act of self-sacrifice and imputed grace towards another member of his recovery community.

As literary critic Marshall Boswell remarks about Hal and other marijuana addicts in the novel, their condition is one of “Kierkegaardian aesthetic despair” (139), though I would offer the caveat here that Hal’s despair usually comes without any spiritual kind of hope that is inherent in Kierkegaard’s theistic worldview. Kierkegaard’s unique form of despair instead leads

ultimately to faith, requiring a leap towards the divine, despite the lack of empirical evidence the rational mind might desire. This kind of fideism appears more as a feature of Gately's character arc than Hal's, as Gately, despite his theological disbelief, prays faithfully to a Higher Power each morning and night for respite from his addicted will, even despite his initial incredulity (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 466). Boswell adds to his previous observation the note that Kierkegaard would diagnose Hal's particular form of depression as "hiddenness...that most intensely identifies the aesthete," who uses reflexive thinking as a strategy to hide from themselves, as the thoughts "double back on themselves into a 'paralytic thought-helix'" (139-140). It is no wonder that Hal experiences life and thought in such a way, as his father James and his father before him also have a similar experience, making the theme of recurring generational psychological pain and genetically-disposed depression a prominent and resounding motif in *Infinite Jest*, and a beginning point for understanding Hal's ultimately (un)salvific condition.

A variety of factors coalesce throughout the novel to bring Hal to the emergency state in which he is seen in the last chronological scene, beginning with his childhood and adolescence, most of the trauma of which is associated with his father, James O. Incandenza, commonly referred to as "Jim" and as "Himself" by his sons. In his childhood years, scenes depicting Hal's inability to meaningfully communicate with his father James likely stem from James' own detached internal life, which Hal's brother Orin describes to Joelle van Dyne as "a black hole," and that he has come to view his father as "autistic, almost catatonic" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 737). Himself reveals to Joelle—the star of his lethally entertaining *Infinite Jest*, for which the novel is titled—that he simply does not "know how to speak with either of his undamaged sons without their mother's presence and mediation," as Orin "could not be made to shut up, and Hal was so completely shut down in Jim's presence that the silences were excruciating" (743).

During a scene in which Hal is almost eleven years old (27), a bizarre exchange unfolds between

him and a professional conversationalist, who is revealed at the scene's end to be Hal's father. This artificially engineered situation appears to be James' only way of being able to communicate with his son, and it is ultimately ineffective in providing a meaningful connection point with Hal.

This problematic state of communication between Hal and his father is illuminated by the 1960 Tucson scene, in which James' own father attempts to teach him valuable lessons about tennis and the body, but which soon becomes a stage for verbal and emotional abuse by his father. This generational problem of paternal communication reaches back to Hal's great grandfather in this scene, as James' father remarks of him that he never attended any of his tennis matches, and on the one occasion that he did—due to it being business-related—was overheard saying, “Yes, But He'll *Never Be Great*” in response to his client's remark, “Good godfrey Incandenza old trout but that lad of yours is *good*” (166). James' father holds a remarkable grudge against his own father, noting that his comments to him were clichéd, “assuming he said anything at all” (167), “may he rot in hell's rubber vacuum when he finally kicks on the tenth tee” (163). Hal himself implies the complicated and distressed relationships between his father and grandfather in his tennis documentary with Mario, *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, with the statements, “have a father whose own father lost what was there” and “have a father who lived up to his own promise...and didn't seem just a whole hell of a lot happier or tighter wrapped than his own failed father, leaving you yourself in a kind of feral and flux-ridden state with respect to talent” (173). With the appearance of James Incandenza's wraith in Gately's hospital room (829)—and the implication that his ghost is responsible for the bizarre rearranging of objects such as the tripod, Ortho Stice's bed, and brooms in the Enfield Tennis Academy's dining hall—the novel takes an unexpected turn into what might be considered gothic

imagination or magical realism, introducing a spiritual realm and affirming the existence of human souls or spirits.

Given that the wraith of James Incandenza reveals highly specific and accurate information about Hal and the Incandenza family to Don Gately in the hospital, and that the wraith is able to manipulate physical objects—as including the ceiling tiles that hide Michael Pemulis’ stash of the drug DMZ—it is reasonable to conclude that the wraith is more than just a figment of Gately’s imagination, and actually exists in the world of the novel. Speaking about Hal, the wraith reveals to Gately, “no horror on earth or elsewhere could equal watching your own offspring open his mouth and have nothing come out. The wraith says it mars the memory of the end of his animate life, this son's retreat to the periphery of life's frame” (837). Hal’s trajectory towards total solipsism thus appears to be the wraith’s primary concern in the afterlife, as Hal himself has been barreling towards a ghostly existence in his waking life since an early age. It is perhaps no coincidence that coach Gerhardt Schtitt refers to Hal as “his ‘revenant’” (260), foreshadowing his fate to mirror that of his own spectral father. Connectedly, in the scene in which Ortho “The Darkness” Stice has his forehead stuck to a freezing window, he tells Hal that he felt the presence of a ghostly figure behind him, inducing a “full-body shiver” at his retelling (870). Hal tells Stice that “Himself allegedly used to see his father’s ghost on stairways sometimes... And good old Mario says he’s seen paranormal figures, and he’s not kidding, and Mario doesn’t lie....So belief-wise I don’t know what to think....I would withhold pre-judgement on the whole thing” (870),³¹ projecting Hal’s damned future of following in his father and grandfather’s phantasmal footsteps.

³¹ Marking yet another point of indecision for Hal, denoting a further connection point with Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a conflicted protagonist paralyzed by uncertainty and indecision, which Elizabeth Freudenthal refers to as Hal’s “tortured embodiment of Hamlet” (205).

Like Prince Hamlet's expired father in Shakespeare's tragedy,³² Hal's father is also deceased and appears too in ghost-form, with the young protagonists stumbling through a maze of indecision and existential conundrums, and their fathers' marriages having been usurped by male in-laws.³³ With the title *Infinite Jest* alluding to *Hamlet's* graveyard scene in which Hamlet interfaces with the skull of "poor Yorick... a fellow of infinite jest" (5.1.185-87), the graveyard scene depicting Hal and Gately digging up James Incandenza's skull in search of the master copy of his own film *Infinite Jest* puts Hal in a direct confrontation with his own fate, in relation to that of his doomed father. Further, as Christian theology envisions God as a Father,³⁴ Hal's own distinct separation from his own father throughout the novel, in life, and especially now in death, denotes Hal's distance from any kind of spiritual Father as well, with the alienated father and alienated Father marking a theological parallel. As such, Hal lacks the meaningful guidance of any of kind of father, human or divine, which is a source of his difficulties throughout the novel, and an important element of Hal's unredeemed state. While Avril Incandenza is generally portrayed as a supportive and loving maternal figure, Orin and Hal resent her parental technique of what they call "Politeness Roulette," a form of self-denial so extreme that Orin believes she intentionally goes "around with her feelings out in front of her with an arm around the feelings' windpipe and a Glock 9 mm. to the feelings' temple like a terrorist with a hostage, daring you to shoot" (523). Avril's perceived shortcomings as a mother may be supplemented by the Enfield Tennis Academy staff, who act *in loco parentis*, pushing Hal towards high levels of athletic and academic achievement, the associated standards and approval of his absent father, without the usually associated affect of a paternal relationship. Even with such guidance, Himself's suicide

³² As Stephen J. Burn notes, early critical readings of the novel emphasize its "coded rewrites" of *Hamlet*, as well as *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Ulysses* (63).

³³ Claudius and Charles Tavis, respectively.

³⁴ As in the start to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6.9, "Our Father in heaven..."

in Hal's adolescent years has left an indelible mark on his tender psyche, arguably contributing to his trajectory towards the emotional and spiritual malaise of his father.

Hal appears to be thus generationally doomed from the outset, inheriting a lineage of paternal dysfunction with respect to meaningful dialogue and relationship, invoking an almost Old Testament notion of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34.7).³⁵ This is similarly the case with Hal's oldest and similarly lost brother Orin,³⁶ but Mario is something entirely *other*, his physical and mental limitations putting him on another spiritual plane, perhaps in part due to his being exempt from the quest for physical excellence inherent in Enfield's athletic program. In soteriological terms, Mario is the most abled character in the novel, bordering on being a kind of enlightened Christological figure, as is developed in Chapter 4. This issue of generational inheritance of sin or salvation raises the question of fatalism, prompting the consideration of whether or not Hal is doomed from the outset of his life regardless of his choices.

The question of predestination, whether God foreordains the souls of humanity to redemption or destruction, was of great significance during the Protestant Reformation, with theologians Jacobus Arminius, Martin Luther, and John Calvin arguing along a spectrum about the realities of humanity's free moral agency versus the foreordination of a sovereign God (Barrett 471). *Infinite Jest* is preoccupied with such concerns as well, exploring the nature of human choice, especially in relation to addiction and substance abuse. Wallace calls the reader to consider what it means when a nation becomes almost unconsciously enraptured with consumerism, narcissism, narcotics, and personalized entertainment—for which Himself's

³⁵ Though this is certainly on a more familial than national level (as might be more implied by Exodus).

³⁶ Who is among the novel's most morally suspect characters, being a pathological liar and having a sexual penchant for young mothers (his own Moms included). So in terms of salvation narratives, Orin is in a particularly bleak place on the spectrum by the novel's end.

lethally addictive film *Infinite Jest* serves as a perfect metaphor—and forsaking the virtues of charity, community, modesty, and sobriety that make for a healthy national landscape. It is one thing when a nation is overcome by another through political coercion or military force, but what does it mean when a collective of citizens exercises their volition, either actively or even unconsciously in such an inward and solipsistic way as to lead to national and environmental destruction, with consent towards a hyper-consumerist model of capitalism the novel portrays? I offer that the novel generally interrogates the nature of human choice in both national and personal contexts as a way to enforce the notions of responsibility and awareness, leveraging humanity's free moral agency towards positive community endeavors. This theme is especially articulated through the sentiments of Marathe, as communicated to Steeply:³⁷ “Our attachments are our temple, what we worship, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith... Attachments are of great seriousness. *Choose* your attachments carefully. *Choose* your temple of fanaticism with great care” (emphasis mine 107). Though Hal's fate presents a particularly intriguing case that might imply evidence of fatalism in the story, thus engaging the whole spectrum of salvific considerations in Christian soteriology,³⁸ it is clear that Hal also demonstrates choices of his own making throughout the novel, though often in a state of tension between calculated volition and the underlying conditions that define, apart from consciousness or consent, the range of his life's decisions.

This paternal issue and other revelatory moments stemming from Hal's childhood—such as his ingestion of mold at age five (10-11)—provide a window into Hal's psychological issues, which are exacerbated by James' suicide that occurs one year after the professional

³⁷ Marathe and Steeply being Canadian and U.S. secret agents working to secure the master copy of *Infinite Jest*, and characters with significantly shifting identities and loyalties, complicating Polonius' sentiment “to thine own self be true” in *Hamlet* (1.3.78).

³⁸ The free will and determinism issue is an important theological topic raised by the novel, and one about which a great deal more could be written, though it surpasses the scope of the current analysis, which is generally more concerned with modes of salvation rather than means of salvation.

conversationalist scene with Hal. Hal's existential ennui is understandable given the trauma associated with his father's grisly microwave suicide, the adolescent Hal being the unfortunate party to have found Himself's body first, thus making him "thirteen going on really old" (248), in his own estimation. Orin diagnoses that Hal "must have been traumatized beyond fucking belief" at this event (252), which helps to explain the origins of Hal's condition and continued emotional challenge throughout the novel, and his subsequent spiritual malaise that finds him on the lowest end of the range of salvation states presented in *Infinite Jest*. Further, Hal's long series of failed sessions with the grief counselor, which he describes as "Kafkaesque interfaces...day after day, week after week" (254), highlight his inability to emotionally function after his father's suicide, intensifying his emptiness. In these exchanges, Hal finds himself to be increasingly incapable of generating any kind of authentic emotional response to the trauma, and must artificially generate a display of emotion to satisfy the grief counselor's expectations, which are clearly not beneficial in any meaningful way. Such circumstances suggest that conditions beyond Hal's control have a significant impact on shaping his choices, corraling them towards increasingly insular emotional expression.

An outcome of Hal's childhood traumas is his foray into the world of drug use and addiction, another indicator of Hal's fallenness and "spiritual torpor" (692). A seventeen-year-old Hal—his age during the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, during which the main action of the novel takes place—is introduced early in the story as frequently sneaking beneath the Enfield Tennis Academy's intricate tunnel system to covertly smoke marijuana, exhaling into an industrial exhaust fan (49). Hal is equally addicted to the high-resin "Bob Hope"—argot for marijuana throughout the novel—as he is to the secrecy of his habit, noting only a handful of friends are aware of his clandestine ritual (49). Though Hal's recreational substance use is not unique to him among his competitive tennis peers, his penchant for nearly exclusively solitary

usage is distinctive, and indicates an element of Hal's detachment from community and relationship, possibly a psychically necessary expression of survival.

Hal displays the effects of this total mental dependence on marijuana, which are agreed upon by members in an intro Narcotics Anonymous meeting as insidiously having ravaged their bodies, minds, and spirits...concurring on the hideous psychic fallout they'd all endured...: the social isolation, anxious lassitude, and the hyperself-consciousness that then reinforced the withdrawal and anxiety—the increasing emotional abstraction, poverty of affect, and then total emotional catalepsy. (503)

Undoubtedly, Hal's escape into solitary marijuana usage and subsequent addiction to both the substance and the secrecy are indicative of Hal's spiritual distress and contribute to his ultimate undoing in the novel's final scene. As Hal's confession to Mario foreshadows this end,

it's been like forty hours without Bob Hope and already I'm bats inside and I can't sleep without more of the horror-show dreams. I feel a hole. It's going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole....And the hole's going to get a little bigger every day until I fly apart in different directions. I'll fly apart in midair. I'll fly apart in the Lung, or at Tucson at 200 degrees in front of all these people who knew Himself and think I'm different. (785)

Hal's prediction proves accurate, as his "flying apart" in the final scene occurs in Arizona during his scholarship interview, in a visceral display of complete verbal and physical abjection that incites total horror in the three Deans.

Yet despite Hal's conditions of addiction and detached sadness, he does make attempts to escape his cage, seeking meaningful connections with others and an overcoming of his drug dependence. In his opening scene before the three Deans, under which he sits in a kind of final judgement in the novel, Hal thinks he declares, "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an

intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex....I'm not a machine. I feel and believe" (11-12), though this sentence appears to be heard differently by the three Deans, whose visual response to this is "horror" (12), thus marking the first indication of Hal's linguistic entropy and associated breakdown. Not long before this final scene, Hal deliberately seeks help for his marijuana addiction by going to what he thinks is a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, but accidentally ends up at the Inner Infant support group, another 12-step program. During the meeting Hal hopes "desperately for some sort of hopeful feeling to emerge" (801), and prays a "really desperate and sincere prayer" not to be recognized by Kevin Bain, a former associate of his family's (808).³⁹ Similarly to these other expressions of genuine felt emotion and hope, Hal's love for Mario is also clearly defined, as he "almost idealizes Mario, secretly....Mario floats, for Hal" (316). On the whole, Hal's world is one in which meaning, love, and responsibilities do indeed exist, but he is overcome by factors either beyond his control in the final scene, or that are the direct result of his destructive choices, such as taking the DMZ.

In addition to Hal's humanness and attempted optimism, he also diagnoses humanity as having a spiritual reflex that "we are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly....To devote one's life, plunge in" (900). Hal is thus not a nihilist, and recognizes his own need to give himself away to something greater than himself, even if his chosen pursuits of high-level tennis, academics, and marijuana appear to be unfulfilling for him.⁴⁰ Though Hal expresses some theological uncertainties to Mario, mostly about the problem of evil, pain, and death—"I have administrative bones to pick with God, Boo. I'll say God seems

³⁹ Though this prayer might demonstrate Hal's own centre-of-the-universe outlook rather than serve as a genuine expression of desire to connect with the divine.

⁴⁰ "Meta-nihilist" may be a more accurate term here, as Hal recognizes the end of these obsessive pursuits, that things other than God(s) can serve as figurative "temple[s] of fanaticism" (107), to borrow Marathe's phrase.

to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death" (40)—he nevertheless exhibits moments of belief towards the novel's end, as evidenced by his sincere prayer moment at the Inner Infants meeting. Boswell notes that, for Hal, the search for God or a Higher Power is on the level of his pursuit for a genuine sense of affect and emotion, in light of the traumas of his past (149). But as Hal's search is ultimately unfulfilled by the novel's end, he becomes more like "postmodernism's paralyzed prodigy, a Kierkegaardian aesthete trapped in a cage that Tony Tanner has called the City of Words" (Boswell 149). It is thus ironic that Hal's lexical prodigiousness and genuine reverence for language ultimately fail him in the final scene,⁴¹ in which the Deans describe his indecipherable speech as "*subanimalistic* noises and sounds," "like some sort of animal with something in its mouth....A writhing animal with a knife in its eye," and "like a drowning goat. A goat, drowning in something viscous" (14). Perhaps as a product of what Hal has experienced and of the things he has chosen to give his life away to, he is found wanting, seemingly unable to connect to the things which he believes give life meaning and ultimate value.

Wallace's characterization of Hal suggests that humanity is in a perpetual state of tension between being confronted by conditions not of own choosing, while simultaneously having to consciously decide how to respond to them with our moral agency. How we are both formed and undone by these circumstances and decisions is a key theme of Hal's narrative here, in that he must choose despite the negative events that befall him beyond his control. In terms of salvation, this means that the reality of human fallenness is universal to all, but that volition becomes a distinctive factor in seeking grace from the fallen condition. While Hal moves closer towards this

⁴¹ Which, again, opens the novel, serving as a narrative alpha and omega; it is both the beginning and the end. Ironically, the effect on viewers of his father's film *Infinite Jest* offers a metaphor for Hal's experience in this scene, in which he is caught in an inescapable and recursive verbal-cognitive loop, rather than in a genuine interface with other people.

state as the novel progresses, as Allard den Dulk suggests throughout “Good Faith and Sincerity,” his final end seems to suggest that the tensions between circumstance and choice have been too great, and that he has been ultimately unable to navigate them.

Speaking to Hal’s attempts to locate meaning and purpose in spite of his “bad faith behavior” (213), den Dulk contends that Hal, along with Gately, undergoes a development that ultimately brings him into an attitude of sincerity, though he acknowledges that Hal’s development towards this end of sincerity is more complex than Gately’s (214). With the exception of Hal’s final breakdown scene in the Year of Glad,⁴² den Dulk diagnoses Hal’s development to be one of positive change, that he is “actually getting better” throughout the novel (215). Noting the scene in which Hal confesses his drug addiction and need for help to Mario, den Dulk characterizes this move as an indication of “unprecedented open-heartedness on Hal’s part” (216), and links this redemptive, confessional moment to Hal’s subsequent narrative shift from third to first person, as it demonstrates his development of a legitimate self (216). While I agree that Hal makes affirmative steps in the improvement of his psychological trauma, addiction, and sense of affect, I argue that his attempts are ultimately demonstrated to be unsuccessful, given his psychological collapse in the final scene, leading to the implication that the pressures on Hal have been too great, and that his chosen methods of coping have not delivered him from the binds that encircle him. While it may be conceived that Hal’s collapse in this scene is actually a therapeutic breakthrough, a kind of release from the robotic programming instilled in him by the paternalistic E.T.A.’s demands for athletic and academic perfection that have entrapped him—and from the further perpetuation of such pursuits the three Deans represent at an even higher level—I believe the negative and abject characterization of Hal’s

⁴² A pun that equates gladness/happiness in this case, and also suggests the corporate management of “waste” just as Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment signals the entropy of aging bodies and their biological systems.

behaviour in this scene lead more to the conclusion that Hal has psychologically collapsed rather than been emancipated. While the implications for a story in which the main protagonist is unredeemed may seem dire and work against the notion of sincerity the novel offers, it may also be read as cautionary, providing a sense of verisimilitude.

Several possible reasons for Hal's meltdown are typically cited, including his possible ingestion of the very potent street drug DMZ, the "call it something I ate" flashback to his ingestion of mold as a child (10-11), and den Dulk's further suggestion of Hal suffering an acute form of clinical depression akin to that of Kate Gompert's (217). While I think that these explanations are all plausible and likely, I would add that they are symptomatic of Hal's deeper spiritual condition of anhedonia. In notable contrast to Gately, perhaps a key difference to the (un)redemption narratives is Hal's lack of community in his struggle with addiction and emotional poverty, versus Gately's engagement with "fellow-sufferers" (den Dulk 219). If this is the case, *Infinite Jest's* vision of ultimate meaning and salvation are predicated largely upon what Michael O'Connell calls the "twin pillars of...transcendent significance in *Infinite Jest*—faithful surrender and the necessity of community support" (278). Hal's frequent and final escape into solipsism at the novel's end—in which Hal believes he is speaking very lucidly to the Deans, but in fact, is not—indicate that Hal's attempts at meaning ultimately put him outside the realm of the transcendent significance O'Connell identifies, having displayed evidence of genuine surrender, but without the support of an identifying community. Where Gately's community consists of convalescing addicts in AA supportively encouraging each other in pursuit of sobriety and wholeness, Hal's community consists of other substance users Michael Pemulis, Trevor Axford, and Jim Struck—not unlike Gately's own earlier community of other users Gene Fackelmann and Trent Kite—implying that Hal may need to extricate himself from this co-dependent community in order to begin his path toward genuine recovery.

Understanding the tension between Hal's negative emptiness and what den Dulk might refer to as his positive development can be understood in the context of theological soteriology, in the sense that it presents a vision of spiritual fallenness, while simultaneously affirming the valuable *Imago Dei*—"image of God"—nature of humanity. This tension is a cornerstone of understanding Pauline theology, that creation is fallen (Romans 3.23), but longing for redemption (Romans 8.21). Hal thoroughly exhibits this kind of strain, but is left unredeemed as far as the reader can tell, spiritually exhibiting Aubrey deLint's assessment of one of Hal's matches: "You just never quite occurred out there, kid," a phrase that "chills Hal to the root" (686). Hal never quite "occurs" or finds his way in a soteriological sense either as far as the reader is able to tell, with his status at novel's end unresolved and in limbo, unlike Gately and Mario, who do "occur" in various ways in this context. This is not to say that Hal is less valuable or worthy of redemption than the novel's other characters; it is a description rather than a prescription. The novel ends with Hal's psychic breakdown, though there is the mention of him digging up Himself's grave with Don Gately in the year prior to his meeting with the Deans, in search of the master copy of the Entertainment, his father's lethally addictive film *Infinite Jest*. In this analeptic description provided by Hal, John "No Relation" Wayne stands watch in a mask "as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17), and in Gately's proleptic dream/vision version of it, Hal is implied to be the "very sad kid" engaged in this act (934).

These passages imply that Hal and Gately's narrative intersection may offer at least the possibility for Hal's future recovery, especially now that Hal is somehow acquainted with Don Gately, a fatherless boy and a former drug addict who has miraculously experienced respite from his slavish addiction to narcotics, and who guides others in pursuit of sobriety. Hal's story beyond the novel's ending thus may not be utterly hopeless, and his spiritual state is hopefully salvageable, though Hal's "face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late*" in the graveyard

scene may be read as a statement not only about the whereabouts of the master cartridge (934), but of Hal's own salvation, with his collapse in Arizona signaling his final unredeemed state. While it is possible to imagine Hal's breakdown as his own rock-bottom moment,⁴³ the catalyzing incident that could put him on an eventual path to spiritual recovery, this can only be conjectural, as Hal's previous acquaintance with Gately in the graveyard would be the only real inference upon which to base such a reading. On the continuum of salvation states ranging from fallen sinner to redeemed saint, Hal thus remains fallen through to the novel's finale, though the two cryptic references to Hal and Don Gately together in the heavily *Hamlet*-inspired graveyard scene could offer a hope for Hal's possible redemption in the indeterminate future. In contrast to Hal, Gately's is a more optimistic, urgent, and immediately satisfying redemption narrative, one characterized by a similar level of fallenness and addiction, but with a significantly different outcome, as is developed in the next chapter.

⁴³ Like Gately's in the final pages of the novel, with him "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand" (981).

Chapter 3 – “There But For the Grace of God Goeth D. W. Gately”⁴⁴

Moving from Hal Incandenza’s unredeemed state of fallenness, anhedonia, and spiritual ennui, in which he is ultimately found to be isolated from himself and others, *Infinite Jest* offers a more hopeful portrayal of salvific grace in Don Gately. Gately’s beginnings are sordid and mired in addiction, stemming from an unimaginable childhood steeped in parental alcoholism and the ongoing physical abuse of his mother at the hands of her boyfriend. While Gately’s backstory comprises some of the most alarming scenes of depravity in the novel—his mother’s boyfriend’s killing of her cat by way of a kitchen sink garbage disposal (933), Gately’s burglaries (55), his anal toothbrush probing in burglary victims’ homes (56), accidental manslaughter of M. Duplessis (58-59), oral narcotics addiction (55), and massive Dilaudid binge (“[Gene] Fackelmann’s Mount Doom”) (886)—he ultimately transforms into a character that typifies sobriety, community engagement, and self-sacrifice, making him a key study for the redeemed-sinner archetype of *Infinite Jest*, and marking a second site of soteriological interest in the novel’s engagement with Christian theology’s salvation spectrum. It is worth noting, however, that “sobriety doesn’t exactly mean instant sainthood” (137). As this quotation implies, Gately’s transition is more complicated and nuanced than a simple formulation of sobriety instantly translating to piety. But as a figure of redemption, Gately marks an attempt by Wallace to think through what salvation entails in the hyper-capitalist age of the *Infinite Jest*, in which entertainment and consumption are high societal values, as well as what the limitations of such redemption might look like in this highly commercial setting. More, Gately’s narrative invites readers to consider what human recovery signifies in the context of a post-secular analysis of the novel, in a literary climate in which the incredulity of postmodern analysis has waned to some extent.

⁴⁴ *Infinite Jest* 196.

New Testament theology affirms the inherent fallenness of humankind since the advent of original sin (Romans 5.12), but offers a system of salvation from this condition by grace through faith (Eph. 2.8-9), predicated on the atoning work of Christ's self-sacrificial crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, rather than on one's own acts of righteousness and observance of divine law (Galatians 2.21). This Pauline conception of salvation is consistent throughout other New Testament epistles and affirmed by church fathers like Origen (Williams 655), Augustine (649), Polycarp (654), Pelagius (663), and many others, as consistent with the Protestant Reformation's Five Solas (649).⁴⁵ Through the spiritual progression of Don Gately's character, *Infinite Jest* relates significantly to many elements of the salvation prescription outlined above, such as grace and faith, though other ingredients beyond this understanding are involved as well, such as the reliance on human community as a support structure for sobriety, and not exclusively on a personal relationship with the divine. Gately's redemption is evidenced by the fallenness of his life in drug addiction and crime, his advancement to sobriety through Ennet House and its associated spiritual programs, the indication of his personal reformation through acts of penance and humility, and ultimately by his own Christological self-sacrifice in the defense of arguably the novel's most morally destitute character, Randy Lenz. In this way, Gately comes to resemble an unlikely saint in his imitation of Christ (Ephesians 5.1-2), most notably through his act of graceful intervention on behalf of the undeserving Lenz. Through this progression from sinner to saint, Don Gately illustrates core tenets of the Christian soteriology model, and represents a wide range of the salvation spectrum seen throughout *Infinite Jest*.

In the context of Gately's redemption narrative, Timothy Jacobs calls Gately "the novel's unlikely hero" (along with Mario, "the other possible hero-candidate") (272), and "the utterly

⁴⁵ Which are *sola fide* ("faith alone"), *sola gratia* ("grace alone"), *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), *solo Christo* ("through Christ alone"), and *soli Deo Gloria* ("glory to God alone") (Hindson 310).

fallible postmodern chivalrous knight” (283). Jill Braithwaite calls Gately “Wallace’s strongest symbolic expression of salvation in the novel,” offering “a contemporary interpretation of salvation that lies not in belief or doctrine, but in choosing a faith grounded in practice, in the power of story and empathy, in community, and in acceptance of grace” (54). David H. Evans sees Gately and Hal as moving towards freedom throughout the novel, through a series of decisive moments that ultimately determine their fate, not unlike Dante’s pilgrims (181), though, I would add, with both characters experiencing different outcomes by the novel’s end.⁴⁶ Here, Evans notes, Gately is confronted with the ultimate choice between suffering the agony of his gun wounds or taking the prescribed pain medication Demerol (182), the very drug to which he was previously addicted (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 55), “a faithful attendant at the goddess Demerol’s temple” (892). Evans cites Gately’s narrative as “by far the most important attempt to conceive of a form of religious faith that is possible in a post-metaphysical age” in the novel (186), with his very name suggesting a reference to the Sermon on the Mount: “Enter ye in at the strait gate....Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7.13-14). I would add to this observation that Gately’s name perhaps more specifically evokes Christ’s shepherd analogy from John 10, in which He claims to be both “the door of the sheep” (10.7) and “the good shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep” (10.11), as will be explored later in this chapter. While there is little “that is Christian about Gately in an orthodox sense,” according to Evans, he is repulsed by the purgatorial nature of his life’s past choices, and seeks to escape his “Diseased will” with a sincerity “as that of the most Bunyanesque of repentant sinners” (Evans 186). While it is true that Gately does not have overt personal leaning towards Christianity’s version of spirituality by specific name and

⁴⁶ Despite their similar physical positions of being prostrate on medical beds/stretchers, with Hal presumably about to be led out of Arizona State University on a stretcher by ambulance attendees, and Gately tenuously convalescing in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital.

content, I argue that his overarching redemption narrative does closely parallel the salvation schema articulated by Pauline theology. Gately's situation in this New Testament context is simultaneously a turn to orthodoxy and a reinvigoration of Christian tradition within the parameters of New Sincerity's literary concerns. This is to reaffirm that there is nothing particularly new about New Sincerity's vision, but rather that it is a reimagining of ancient verities in response to the incredulity of a certain version of postmodernism. In the case of *Infinite Jest*, this religious incredulity has contributed to a vision of America turned entirely inward to self-pleasure, at the risk of spiritual, social, and economic disaster.

Gately's ignoble past puts him in the company of the most fallen of *Infinite Jest*'s characters, alongside Orin, Hal, and James Incandenza, Ken Erdedy, Kate Gompert, Poor Tony Krause, Joelle van Dyne, Eric Clipperton, and Randy Lenz, who all exhibit profound depths of addiction and/or depression, of deep psychic pain and personal trauma. Like these and numerous other characters, Gately experiences a childhood steeped in pain and suffering. Between Gately's mother, who is a loving but cripplingly addicted alcoholic (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 446), his absentee Estonian father, Bulat (447), and his mother's abusive Navy M.P. boyfriend who "used to beat her up on a more or less daily basis for fucking years on end" (841), Gately's life is troubled from the outset, and sees him transition to a life of narcotics addiction and crime in his mid-twenties: "Don Gately was a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict...and a more or less professional burglar; and he was, himself, unclean and violated" (55), despite his "ferocious and jolly élan" (55). The terms "unclean and violated" used here by Wallace have a particularly biblical intimation, especially as they relate to the Torah's use of them throughout the Mosaic Law, closely relating to the concept of sin. Gately is thus set up to be a quintessential sinner from the novel's outset, a low-life drug addict and burglar, and is, therefore, a perfect candidate for an

orthodox Christian notion of conversion or salvation, a passing from figurative spiritual death to newness of life.

The nadirs of Gately's fallenness⁴⁷ are manifested in his accidental suffocation of A.F.R. organizer Guillaume DuPlessis and his "disastrous two nights of Dilaudid" (886) with Gene Fackelmann. This flashback binge sequence that finishes the novel sees Fackelmann with his eyes sewn open before his death at the hands of Whitey Sorkin's vindictive henchmen (979), and Gately being spared, coming to alone on the ocean shore, "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand...raining out of a low sky, and the tide...way out" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 981). This final line likely marks his "rock bottom" moment, and presumably the beginning of his transition into recovery at Ennet House. The implication of Gately's beach scene is of course that he has been spared death by Sorkin's underlings and deposited in a remote location, having been given a second undeserved chance at life,⁴⁸ with the beach serving as a kind of liminal space between his addicted life and the possibility of a fresh start, the latter of which he chooses. Gately's reawakening out of water in this last sentence, "And when he came back to" (981), invokes the Christian imagery of the sacrament of baptism, a symbol of spiritual rebirth through water, a passing from death into new life, as in Paul's characterization of it in Romans 6.4. Marshall Boswell thus remarks that this scene "is one of rebirth...the ocean as...a womb" and that it marks either the starting point of his drug recovery, or the beginning of his gun-wound recovery (178-79). In either event, Boswell calls this final line "both a death and a rebirth, an

⁴⁷ Indeed, Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill W. uses the phrase "nadir of...despair" to describe the rock-bottom type ennui that accompanies substance dependency (169), demonstrating that the novel engages several different theologically-based redemptive threads profoundly influenced by a Pauline foundation.

⁴⁸ Which, given the fraudulent situation Gately had been involved in with the Dilaudid, seems like a form of grace considering the brutal methods of Sorkin's ultraviolent and sadistic employees. As indicated in the final pages, "C told Gately quietly how Whitey said to say he knew Donnie wasn't part of Fackelmann's score to fuck Sorkin....That he didn't need to do anything except kick back and enjoy the party and let Fackelmann face his own music and to not let any like 19th-century notions of defending the weak and pathetic drag Gately into this....That he hoped Gately wouldn't hold it against him...and wanted no beef, later" (977-78).

exhaustion and a replenishment” (179). From this point, Gately obtains something akin to the “newness of life” spoken of here by Paul, as “about four months into his Ennet House residency, the agonizing desire to ingest synthetic narcotics had been mysteriously magically removed from Don Gately,” even despite his not having any previous “God or J.C.-background” (466). As with the Christian doctrine of Sanctification,⁴⁹ Gately’s baptismal awakening on the beach is a beginning point for his transition into sobriety, which is long and arduous, but ultimately fruitful given his aspired to list of virtues that are interestingly couched in relation to Gately’s personal challenges with Randy Lenz, “Patience, tolerance, compassion, self-discipline, restraint” (279), resembling the qualities endorsed by 12-step programs such as AA, and foreshadowing the significance of Gately’s later act of self-sacrifice to save Lenz’s life. These also closely parallel what St. Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5.22-23), marking another clear association with Pauline notions of salvation and sanctification.

Having such a background in addiction and crime, Don Gately is a strong prospective candidate for salvation given that he has serious sins to atone for, with an astonishing turnaround that includes a near-fatal self-sacrifice for Ennet House resident Randy Lenz. Yet, Gately’s path to redemption begins after the violent run-in with Sorkin’s henchmen, and his awakening on the beach is assumed to be the beginning of his detoxification process and admittance into Ennet House and the world of twelve-step programs. It is true that Gately’s arrival to AA’s spiritual program finds him initially incredulous of its theistic agenda,⁵⁰ as

⁴⁹ Sanctification being the idea that the Christian believer is made progressively more into the image of Christ, shedding their former slavishness to sin in a gradual trajectory towards holiness. St. Paul’s classification of the Christian believer as a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5.17), while true at the moment of conversion, implies the coming process of sanctification as defined by Rowan Williams as “the model of Christian growth and struggle” (Knight 415).

⁵⁰ With its presupposition of belief in a Higher Power as the essential ingredient of recovery.

the knee-stuff seemed like the limpest kind of dickless pap, and he felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee-motions that he went through faithfully every A.M. and P.M., without fail, motivated by a desire to get loaded so horrible that he often found himself humbly praying for his head to just finally explode already and get it over with. (466)

Similarly, Gately has a “pretty limp and lame understanding of a Higher Power” to the effect that “when he kneels...and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with” (443). Yet despite his initial agnosticism or what might be called “wastoid” nihilism (Wallace, *The Pale King* 154),⁵¹ Gately prays regardless to “something he still didn’t believe in...for his own sick Spider-bit will to be taken from him and fumigated and squished” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 360). Gately’s recognition that his addiction and sinful nature cannot be overcome by his own will’s efforts or merits displays a keen understanding of Christianity’s predication on “divine-type grace” (925), and of his own inability to ultimately free himself from the cage of addiction, congruent with AA’s first principle of surrender to a higher power. Divine-type grace is of course, *the* foundation of Pauline soteriology, as affirmed by the Reformation doctrines of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, and the aforementioned Ephesians 2.8-9.⁵² Further, Gately’s contempt for the superficial expressions of spirituality endorsed by AA, which often appear to be used only as an escape from addiction rather than as a genuine desire to commune with the divine, actually demonstrates Gately’s seriousness about the enterprise of spirituality he is confronted with. His

⁵¹ Which character Chris Fogle considers to be “the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who isn’t even aware he’s a nihilist” (154).

⁵² “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

skepticism and willingness to traverse a bleak landscape of godlessness in the face of great addiction suggests a greater potential for a meaningful form of spirituality that will not be satisfied with “the limpest kind of dickless pap”⁵³ (466). Thus as Gately’s feelings towards God and prayer become progressively genuine, as in the scene defending Lenz in which “it occurs to Gately by White Flag suggestion that who gives a fuck how it’d look, he ought to hit his knees right there on the headlit blacktop and ask for guidance on this from a Higher Power”⁵⁴ (612), his belief is made all the more meaningful by his previous incredulity.

This notion of undeserved grace makes Gately’s realization of liberation from addiction all the more significant, in that he has no comprehension of how such an internal miracle could occur:

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. He couldn’t believe it. He wasn’t Grateful so much as kind of suspicious about it, the Removal. How could some kind of Higher Power he didn’t even believe in magically let him out of the cage when Gately had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn’t believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of ever being let out of? (467-8)

Eventually, the formerly doubting Gately comes to identify so thoroughly with the dogmatic aspects of AA that he holds Narcotics Anonymous in relative contempt, seeing it as having “so little emphasis on Service or serious Message” (277). This attitude change comes on the back of a realization that after approximately one year in, “Boston AA really is actually sub-rosa

⁵³ Gately’s original conception of belief thus appears to be a striking kind of faith typified by a stoic machismo.

⁵⁴ The “headlit blacktop” evoking the image of Saul on the road to Damascus, with a light shining around him during a moment of spiritual anagnorisis/epiphany (Acts 9.3). It is worth noting though that “a Higher Power” is far less specific than Paul’s experience with Christ, leading to the conclusion that Gately’s belief is not specifically Christian, though the outworking of his belief follows a Christian model of redemption.

dogmatic” (356),⁵⁵ despite its appearance of being universalistic and advocating to individuals that they pray to God, however they may understand or conceive of such an entity. In this way, Gately’s experience resembles something of a conversion experience akin to those articulated in the New Testament, with the initial confession of faith leading to a life of repentance or turning away from former sins, with acts of service and good works evidencing some form of belief. Though Gately does not explicitly adhere to a specific religious system, he does progress towards general theological belief throughout the novel, with outward signs of service as confirmation of his acceptance. As St. James notes, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2.17), and Gately’s recovery narrative bears an articulation of a life dedicated to self-sacrifice and service to others,⁵⁶ reinforcing the notion that Gately has undergone a bona fide conversion experience.

While Gately’s recovery from addiction to narcotics is not an explicitly orthodox Christian conversion *per se*—nor does it need to be, since the important link to my argument here is that Wallace values this tradition and reinvigorates what redemption looks like and signifies in a postmodern context—his personal reformation is demonstrated through his acts of penance and humble service, in line with Christ’s encouragement to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3.8). In a passage that catalogues Gately’s prison tattoos, one of which—perhaps proleptically—is a “sloppy cross on the inside of his mammoth left forearm” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 210), Wallace notes that “these irrevocable emblems of jail are minor Rung Bells compared to some of the fucked-up and *really* irrevocable impulsive mistakes Gately’d made as an active drug addict and burglar, not to mention their consequences, the mistakes’, which Gately’s trying to accept he’ll be paying off for a real long time” (211). Part of the penance of

⁵⁵ “*Sub rosa*” literally meaning “under the rose,” happening or done in secret.

⁵⁶ As congruent with AA’s last step of returning the gift of sobriety to others.

Ennet House and AA's programs is its advocacy of menial physical labour, and part of being "Active" in Boston AA includes "sweeping the footprinty floor after the Lord's Prayer and making coffee and emptying ashtrays of gasper-butts and ghastly spit-wet cigar ends" (354). Similarly, Gately "has become, in sobriety, a janitor" (434), at the Shattuck Shelter For Homeless Males, an establishment that includes some of the basest and most grotesque descriptions in *Infinite Jest*, with the clients of the shelter suffering from "every kind of physical and psychological and addictive and spiritual difficulty you could ever think of, specializing in ones that are repulsive" (434-35). Gately's primary job here is to clean floors, toilets, and showers, in which there is "human waste...on a daily fucking basis" (434). In sobriety, Gately thus comes to serve a very marginalized subset of the population, who might be called "the least of these my brothers" (Matthew 25.40), which psychologically tormented and destitute men could be included with St. James' call for believers to tend to other neglected and marginalized groups in society (1.27).

The baseness and repulsiveness of this work causes Gately to shut "his head off as if his head has a kind of control switch" and "screen input with a fucking vengeance the whole time," but, nevertheless, leaves Gately with "his Gratitude-battery totally recharged"⁵⁷ at the end of each shift, given that he has so far been successfully removed from this kind of living situation induced by high-level addiction (435). Gately's janitorial work bears not only the serving of some of society's least fortunate and peripheral members, but also allows him an outlet for AA evangelism: "Gately'll slip them a finiski or a pack of Kools and maybe sometimes try and talk a little AA to them, if they seem like maybe they're ready to give up" (435-36), referring to those

⁵⁷ This expression linking good feeling with an electronic device may serve as a point of contrast to the novel's film technology *Infinite Jest* being a device of entrapment and death. Similarly, Gately is sometimes referred to in mechanical terms, as in "Gately feels adrenaline's warmth spread through him as his subdural hardware clicks deeper into a worn familiar long-past track" (612), suggesting perhaps that his addiction has hardwired into him robotic dependences and tendencies. Redemption thus works to make Gately less robotic and more fully human, with AA offering a return to a sense of human community.

who may be at a rock-bottom point in their addicted lives, thus demonstrating Gately's desire to share and propagate his newly found freedom from addiction and bring others to the same form of salvation.

In the process of Gately's salvific transformation, he goes from deeply fallen sinner to the novel's "hero," according to Bell and Dowling, "doing his best to aid other battered souls in their struggle with their own demons" (95-96). The pinnacle of Gately's transformation in this context begins in the climactic scene involving Randy Lenz, who is chased by the irate Canadian "Nucks" to Ennet House as a result of his throat-slitting of their dog (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 587). Lenz, a "small-time organic-coke dealer" (276) and secret cocaine user throughout his time in rehab (543), embarks on the disturbing torture and mutilation of domestic animals on his walks back to Ennet house from sobriety meetings in what is described as his "own dark way to deal with the well-known Rage and Powerlessness issues that beset the drug addict in his first few months of abstinence" (538). Killing rats, cats, birds, and dogs through the horrific means of fire, poison, kitchen sink garbage disposal, throat-slitting, and Hefty SteelSak trashbag capture (544),⁵⁸ his alarming acts of cruelty against animals—having so far gone undetected—are now witnessed by the Canadians who arrive with a firearm to Ennet House in pursuit of Lenz. These descriptions of Lenz's dark behaviours of cruelty, among creepy physical descriptions of him as moving vampirically with a "melting and wraithlike quality in the different shades of shadow" (587), mark him as one of the novel's most disturbing characters, and it is thus significant in the context of theological grace that Gately steps in to defend him in the altercation with the justifiably enraged Canadians.

Theological understandings of grace typically define it as undeserved or unmerited favour, bestowed on humans by God through no goodness or righteousness of their own. Grace,

⁵⁸ Subsequently killing them by swinging the occupied bags into traffic signs and metal poles.

as it is understood in the context of Christian soteriology, is a vicarious impartation of salvation based on the atonement for sins at Calvary (Vander Schel 24-25). In this mode, Don Gately performs a self-sacrificial act in defending Lenz—an impartation of grace—who is clearly guilty of awful crimes, and does not deserve sanctuary from the consequences of his actions in any lawful sense. As the scene unfolds, Gately recalls a memory from the latter part of his addicted life that “he’d had sick little fantasies of saving somebody from harm, some innocent party, and getting killed in the process and getting eulogized at great length in bold-faced *Globe* print” (611), though Lenz here is no innocent party.⁵⁹ “There But For the Grace of God Goeth D. W. Gately” (196) gets turned neatly around in the action sequence involving the Canadians, as Lenz becomes the vicarious recipient of grace through the actions of Gately, who takes a literal bullet on Lenz’s behalf, becoming a surrogate of the punishment due to Lenz. In the ensuing chase in which two Canadians pursue Lenz around a car and another holds several Ennet House residents at gunpoint on the lawn (609), Gately steps between the pursuers and Lenz⁶⁰ and argues for a peaceful solution through dialogue with the Canadians, saying “twice very distinctly that he does not want to fight them” (612), though the Canadians attack him anyway with switchblades drawn.

After Gately deftly subdues the two attackers, he is shot in the shoulder by the third Canadian, and pierced and bleeding profusely, is attended to by Joelle van Dyne and other residents. Gately’s defence of Lenz and the rest of “the herd” (605) evokes the biblical allusion of his last name, in the context of his being a good shepherd of the sheep, and of his willingness to “lay down his life for the sheep” (John 10.11). His being pierced is also symbolic of the Old

⁵⁹ Lenz also characterizes the infantile, lip service posturing of NA, versus Gately’s real world, action-based expression of redemption.

⁶⁰ Who in cowardly fashion uses Gately “like a shield” (611), and appears not to recognize grace even in the obvious form it takes here.

Testament notion that the Messiah would be “pierced” in an act of vicarious self-sacrifice, as in Isaiah 53.5 and Zechariah 12.10, with these finding purchase in the Gospel records, with the piercing of Christ’s wrists, feet, and side (John 19). In this sequence, Gately transitions from the recipient of grace seen in his redemption story to the one bestowing grace upon an undeserving Randy Lenz in a Christ-like act of self-sacrifice, evidence of Gately’s own sanctification. This act marks an expression of his role as a “kinsman redeemer,” someone in Mosaic Law who acts vicariously on the behalf of someone—usually a relative—in significant distress or need (Elwell 456). In New Testament theology, Christ is considered the superlative kinsman redeemer, and Gately’s graceful action on behalf of Lenz that results in his own near-death mark a point of dialogue between *Infinite Jest*’s vision of salvation and that of Pauline doctrine, in the sense that Lenz’s life is undeservedly preserved through Gately’s act of grace, despite the consequences for sin being death that should otherwise result for Lenz.⁶¹

Very little is seen of Don Gately in the following 200 pages after his gun wound, but when his story is resumed, he is found in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in critical condition and horrendous pain, and facing the new challenge of deciding whether or not to take the doctor-prescribed pain medication for fear that his sobriety will be compromised. The long, agonizing scene of Gately grappling with his pain, and the mental anguish of refusing the Demerol takes on a biblical resonance as well, as his preservation of Lenz did in the previous sequence. Gately is described as coping with the agony of his pain through the mental attention to the AA concept of “Abiding again between heartbeats...by choice, straight...He could do the dextral pain the same way: Abiding” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 860), with this word “Abiding” featured heavily in Gately’s recovery scenes. Christ’s vineyard analogy in John 15 of the disciples abiding in Him as the branches abide in the vine also finds purchase in this portion of Gately’s redemption

⁶¹ As in Romans 6:23, “for the wages of sin is death.”

progress, as he—“in terrific infected pain”—is willed to “Abide between cravings for relief” (915) by remembering the scene from his past of his Dilaudid binge with Gene Fackelmann, and his allegorically baptismal rebirth on the ocean shore following that event. It is as if by Gately’s active remembering and reliving of these sequences in his mind that he is wilfully recalling the lowest depths of his addiction, and the revelation of his need for sobriety that followed his previous brush with death. Here at the close of the novel, Gately encounters another confrontation with his mortality, but one in which vicarious self-sacrifice is the cause, rather than an inevitably failed attempt at self-gratification through substances, which in the language of addiction is perpetually fleeting and ultimately not satisfiable. It is worth noting here that Wallace’s version of AA is also concerned with addiction to self-sacrifice and other virtues becoming their own forms of abusable escape and addiction as well,⁶² as previously seen in Gately’s admission of desiring to be glorified for his heroism. There is, however, no emphasis in Gately’s hospital sequence of his desire to be extolled in this public way, but rather, his primary concerns have to do with maintaining his personal sobriety and spiritual progress. In this way, Gately’s redemption narrative comes full circle, ranging from his being a fallen addict and criminal, to leader of sobriety at Ennet House, culminating in his willingness to lay down his life for Randy Lenz—Gately being “wounded in service to somebody who did not deserve service” (855)—who is himself in a similar state as Gately’s former self prior to his addiction recovery, constituting a full circle of grace.

In another kind of full circle in which grace is extended back to Gately—who in this instance does not deserve it—the Assistant District Attorney who was terrorized by Gately’s repulsive anal toothbrush probing and subsequent mailing of the photographs to him and his wife Tooty, presents himself at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in hopes of forgiving Gately for his actions,

⁶² Such as thought, yoga, reading, charity work, political activism, religious zeal, relentless helpfulness, etc. (998).

being himself on the ninth step of a twelve-step program. The photograph depicting Don Gately in a clown mask “with his pants down and bent over...with the enhanced focus handle of one of the couple’s toothbrushes protruding from his bottom” (56), results in Tooty’s horrendous emotional and psychological trauma, in which her lips have been “white pulp from the peroxide, her enamel in tatters from the constant irrational brushing and brushing and *brushing*” (962) since the incident. The A.D.A.⁶³ explains his hatred and resentment of Gately to Pat Montesian (the manager of Ennet House), in addition to his previous plans to enact punitive revenge on him through the court system for his wife’s dentally related phobic flare up, and how his pitching of Don’s criminal file containing all of his old “*highly* convictable charges” is necessary for the sake of his own recovery (962-63). Further, the A.D.A. shares that he must also make amends with Gately, asking for Gately’s forgiveness for his own inability to forgive Gately, in what would be “the only way I’ll be able to forgive him” (963). Yet, the A.D.A. has tried on several occasions to enter Gately’s room and has not “yet been willing. Yet. I wish to emphasize *yet*” (964). This in the light of the very challenging fact that the A.D.A. believes Gately to be “rotten—no, *evil*...that son of a bitch is *evil* and *deserves* to be removed from the community,” that it was a “*sick, twisted, sadistically evil* and *sick* thing he did to us, to her” (963). While the A.D.A. never appears again in the novel to make good on his promise of personally forgiving Gately, it may be assumed that he does based on his final “*yet*” comment, which signifies something of a passing over of Gately’s former sins.⁶⁴ This scene also works to underscore the past that Gately has overcome in his post-addiction life, serving to contrast his old and new selves, the current version of which lies in a hospital bed for an act of heroism and grace towards

⁶³ “One of the most powerful and remorseless constables in three counties” (961), which demonstrates his unlikeliness to forgive.

⁶⁴ Even if the A.D.A. cannot bring himself to face Gately yet, he has clearly forgiven him in his own mind, despite the challenges a face-to-face encounter entails.

another character, Randy Lenz, who could easily be classified as sick, evil, and twisted, as Gately himself once was.

While the novel is somewhat ambiguous about whether or not Gately lives or dies in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, the several cryptic references to his digging up of James O. Incandenza's grave with Hal, in hope of finding the master copy of the Entertainment appear to suggest that he does recover from his infected wound. This is first seen with Hal's note from Year of Glad that "Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17), and Gately's own vision in the hospital in the previous Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment that "he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important" (934). The assumption is that these characters come to be connected to one another, possibly through Joelle van Dyne, who becomes Gately's love interest, and who is the star of Jim Incandenza's film *Infinite Jest*, as she has special information through Incandenza's burial arrangements that the master copy of the film be buried with Incandenza (999). If this connection between the unredeemed Hal and the redeemed Gately is the case, Gately's recovery suggests the hope of a new life of continued sobriety, with his self-sacrifice for Lenz being justified or accepted on some cosmic or theological scale.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, such a hopeful conclusion is counterbalanced by the stoic notion that redemption comes primarily through suffering as Gately struggles against the tension of his profound physical pain and his fear of returning to addiction through the physician-recommended painkilling medication.

⁶⁵ This of course excludes the larger apocalyptic arc of the novel towards a nation at the mercy of the A.F.R., who by all accounts seems to possess the master copy of *The Entertainment* by the end of the story. As stated in the introduction, my focus here is on personal soteriology rather than on national or environmental salvation, though Gately's redemption offers its own significant form of hope in the possibilities for human recovery.

Returning to the claim of Dreyfus and Kelly from the introduction that “one finds in Wallace no hope for salvation by God”⁶⁶ and their additional claims that “Wallace’s vision is a Nietzschean one” and that “God casts no shadow at all in the world of *Infinite Jest*” (“David Foster Wallace’s Nihilism” 45), I have undertaken to demonstrate here that Don Gately’s redemption narrative is a significant counter-point to these assertions. While their claim may find greater purchase in the storyline and conclusion of Hal Incandenza’s unredemptive narrative (as explored in the previous chapter),⁶⁷ I believe that Gately and Mario, among others, provide significant refutation of such a notion that *Jest*’s is a nihilistic universe. Commenting on *Infinite Jest*’s relationship to postmodern fiction, Marshall Boswell cites Wallace’s remark that “it’s almost like postmodernism is fiction’s fall from biblical grace. Fiction became *conscious* of itself in a way it never had been” (148), and, therefore, that Gately’s secular background prior to his induction into Ennet House and AA makes him “postmodernism’s baby: he must begin his spiritual journey at postmodernism’s zero point, where even modernism’s secular sacred has been exhausted” (148). Based on my overarching redemptive analysis, I would add to Boswell’s observation that Gately demonstrates a reimagining of orthodox notions of salvation, offering a fresh vision of the form and function redemption can take and signify in a postmodern, hyper-consumerist imagining of the society *Infinite Jest* portrays. Further, Gately presses upon readers the urgency for which redemption is deeply needed in such a bleak societal context that the novel predicts. Since Gately’s “spiritual journey” follows a redemptive progression, Dreyfus and Kelly’s further assessment that Wallace’s is a “godless world” that requires “an escape...by constructing a happier meaning for it out of nothing, literally *ex nihilo* as God himself once had done” (“David Foster Wallace’s Nihilism” 46) is also puzzling in light of the theistic

⁶⁶ Also noted by O’Connell (268).

⁶⁷ But even despite Hal’s unredeemed state, he is still treated with dignity and great care, both as a human being, and as an addict actively seeking respite from his narcotic dependency.

implications of Gately's story, as well as in Mario's Christologically figurative narrative explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – “Mario Floats”⁶⁸

In the previous chapters, I have analyzed *Infinite Jest*'s display of salvation predicated on divine grace and the means of salvation, namely through community, belief, and confession, to which some characters in the novel adhere, with the discovery that the novel envisions a new mode of conceiving of redemption in a post-Christian, hyper-capitalist society that reinvigorates orthodox ways of thinking about the personal salvation process. Having looked at the novel's preoccupation with the salvation states of Hal Incandenza as so-far-unredeemed, and of Don Gately as a redeemed addict-turned-kinsman redeemer—which are leveraged towards demonstrating a tension in the Christian soteriological ethos—I now turn to the culmination of *Infinite Jest*'s doctrinal engagement with Christian soteriology in the character of Mario Incandenza, who, in several significant ways, bears a figurative imitation of Christ, in terms of his personal moral character, physical disabilities—which, I argue, have theological implications—his relationship with the divine, and his role as redeemer. This is not to say that I am suggesting Mario is to be conceived of as a supernatural being by any means, or that the surrounding details of his life are even largely analogous to Christ's,⁶⁹ but instead that there are elements of Mario's role in the novel that strongly suggest his character, actions, and spiritual disposition situate him as having a special role in the redemption picture the novel presents.

As theologian Karl Barth conceives of human identity not in terms of nature, but through a Christological framework “based in a grace-filled *disruption of nature*” (Daniels 253), Mario's role is similarly disruptive in *Infinite Jest*, providing a counterexample to the decadent, addicted

⁶⁸ *Infinite Jest* 316.

⁶⁹ I.e. virgin birth, twelve disciples, betrayal for 30 pieces of silver, crucifixion and resurrection, etc. Indeed, there are many elements of Mario's situation that work against such an analogy, such as his absent, suicided father-figure who is referred to as “Himself” by many of the novel's characters (a god-like title), and who has created a killer video capable of eradicating humanity. It might be conceivable, however, to think of the parodic play between James and Mario in dichotomous Old Testament judge/destroyer versus New Testament rescuer/redeemer roles, respectively.

world in which most of the novel's characters find themselves enmeshed. His character is thus unique and unparalleled in the novel's cast of messy and deeply addicted characters, having a purity so refined it is almost as if he appears to have no need of salvation himself, and pointing the way for others towards a more rich way of being alive and human. He rather demonstrates the ability to convey a disruptive sense of grace to others, such as with his poignant role in Barry Loach's redemption story and with the invitation of grace to the deeply distressed character Eric Clipperton, evoking a figurative rendering of redemptive power according to Pauline and Apostolic expressions throughout the New Testament. Mario thus fulfills the soteriological spectrum of fallen sinner (Hal), fallen sinner-turned-saint (Gately), and innocent saviour (Mario), serving as the pinnacle example of the salvation states demonstrated in the world of *Infinite Jest*, as one who, at times, bears an almost allegorical likeness to the Messianic figure in Judeo-Christianity. As Krzysztof Piekarski asserts, "it seems like Mario comes closest to being an embodiment of spirituality" (160), a statement I affirm, and from which I see an opportunity to discuss Mario's disruptive role in the context of a Pauline faith tradition—with Mario interrogating the prominent thought-forms of addiction and narcissism inherent in his culture—as he relates to the prominent soteriological concerns of the novel so far developed through the lens of Pauline theology.

Mario's place in the critical literature on *Infinite Jest* tends to be relegated to that of a secondary character, with Don Gately and Hal Incandenza receiving the bulk of critical attention. This makes sense given Gately's and Hal's centrality to the story and in light of the novel's themes of addiction and recovery, but Mario's conspicuous lack of critical attention presents an opportunity for further discussion here. Jill Braithwaite opens a discussion for Mario's role in the context of salvation narratives, remarking that "through the voice of Mario, Wallace shows that for Hal there is a way out of his predicament, whether he sees it or not" (43), indicating a

possible direction for reading Mario as having a salvifically instructive role. Allard den Dulk conceives of Mario as “a deviation, an abnormality: he stands for a different way of thinking about the self and its relation to the world, symbolizing the much-needed change that the rest of the novel illustrates” (211). This conception of Mario, coupled with his exemplary empathy (212), moves the conversation of Mario’s theological role further towards my discussion of his allegorical significance, viewing him as a kind of enlightened, unworldly thinker. As Greg Carlisle adds, Mario is “able to choose, to contribute, not caught in a cycle of stasis and passivity” (199), as are the other addicted characters throughout the novel, elevating him as enlightened beyond the scope of the average person. Timothy Jacobs reads Mario as akin to the “holy fool” Alyosha in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, calling both “idiots” in the Dostoevskian sense of the word (272), and thus putting the conversation into religious territory, which I take further here.

Unlike Don Gately—who we have seen in the previous chapter undergoes a radical transformation from narcotics addict, thief, and unintentional man-slayerer,⁷⁰ to that of an addiction counselor at Ennet Recovery House—Mario Incandenza has no dark history of addiction, no moral failings, and thus, nothing immediate apparently that requires his being redeemed *from*. Instead, he bears the sins of others, such as those of his incestuous mother and father, whom the novel implies at various points to actually be Avril Incandenza and her half-brother Charles Tavis—who runs E.T.A. after James’ death and accompanies Hal to his Arizona State interview—rather than James Incandenza as Mario’s father.⁷¹ As such, Mario functions in a

⁷⁰ Of A.F.R. leader M. Duplessis, in the unfortunate incident involving Gately’s binding him to a chair, “a good old oily-smelling fake-linen dish towel” gag, and a severe head-cold, the particulars of which are outlined in Duplessis’ plea to Gately: “Do not gag me, I have a terrible cold, my nose she is a brick of the snot, I have not the power to breathe through the nose, for the love of God please do not gag my mouth” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 58). Duplessis’ appeal to divine grace notwithstanding, Gately becomes responsible for his death, and thus becomes entangled in the larger continental plot involving the A.F.R. and James Incandenza’s lethal entertainment.

⁷¹ E.g.: “the thing [Mario] it’s not entirely impossible he [Tavis] may have fathered asleep up next to the sound

distinctly unique way from that of Gately and other characters who demonstrate a sinner-to-saint modality, who in some cases demonstrate self-sacrificial action, but first have significant need of redemption themselves. Morally speaking, Mario is by all textual accounts unfailingly guileless, immutable, sincere, and empathetic, and apparently free from the addictions and enslavements of many of the novel's other characters, who need to very specifically work through their issues to achieve a semblance of freedom.

Through Mario's demonstration of a wide variety of virtues, significant parallels emerge with the character of Christ as displayed in the Gospels. According to Hal, Mario is incapable of lying, as he expresses in several scenes: "Mario doesn't lie" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 249) and "good old Mario says he's seen paranormal figures, and he's not kidding, and Mario doesn't lie" (871). Unable to reconcile the absolute nature of what he has experienced to be Mario's infallible truth-telling record, Hal is forced to suspend belief or disbelief on a subject he is inclined to hold in contempt, as previously remarked on in Chapter 2. The writer of Hebrews⁷² makes a similar claim about Christ the incarnate deity, that "it is impossible for God to lie" (6.18). Similarly, Mario is described as immutable—"Mario never changes" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 590)—evoking Christ's unchanging nature.⁷³ Mario's sincerity is another defining feature of his character, as he is described as "the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA" (184), and takes great pleasure in Madam Psychosis'⁷⁴ radio program, which unlike the dominant culture of irony and hedonism is about "stuff that was real," and it being "increasingly hard to find valid art that is

system with its claws on its chest and four pillows for bradypnea-afflicted breathing" (451) and the description of Charles' mother Elizabeth Tavis who in her wedding photo "seems almost certainly to have been a dwarf...one khaki-colored cheek pressed affectionately against his belt-buckle" (901). When compared to "this is probably also the place to mention Hal's older brother Mario's khaki-colored skin, an odd dead gray-green that in its corticate texture and together with his atrophic in-curved arms and arachnodactylism gave him, particularly from a middle-distance, an almost uncannily reptilian/ dinosaurian look," the resemblance to Tavis' mother is uncanny (314).

⁷² Who goes unnamed, but some scholars argue it is St. Paul, such as Christos SP. Voulgaris (199).

⁷³ "Jesus Christ is same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13.8).

⁷⁴ The on-air alter ego of central character Joelle van Dyne.

about stuff that is real in this way” (592). Such a penchant for empathy or authenticity is especially highlighted in a country in which Subsidized Time’s preoccupation with consumerism suggests a national straying from spiritual expression to a cynical and materialist consumerism, demonstrating Mario’s unique predilection for sincerity and authentic empathy for human struggles and concerns.

Perhaps Mario’s lowest morale point in the novel is when Madam Psychosis goes off-air,⁷⁵ with Mario suffering insomnia as a result, as well as other psychological/emotional ailments such as losing his usually acute pulse on Hal’s emotional state (589-90). Mario’s sincerity is further developed by his appreciation for authenticity as he reflects upon a visit to Ennet House on one of his insomniac walks during this period:

nobody...comments on a disability and the Headmistress is kind to the people and the people cry in front of each other.....Mario’s felt good both times in Ennet’s House because it’s very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside.
(591)

Similarly, Mario’s favourite film by his late auteur father James O. Incandenza is *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat*, “possibly because of its unhip earnestness,” a film which Hal “maintains [is] goo” though also admires in secret (689). In a letter from Avril to Orin Incandenza, Mario’s emotional sincerity is displayed again, as she recounts airport goodbyes with Orin: “I cried like a fool every time, as of course I did all over again yesterday, embarrassing everyone but Mario, who also cried (1006).⁷⁶ In his emotional appreciations and expressions, Mario demonstrates a

⁷⁵ When Joelle van Dyne enters Ennet House for drug rehabilitation.

⁷⁶ Marking a counter-point to the false sincerity Orin employs to seduce his female “Subjects.”

kind of emotional intelligence and depth of humanity akin to that of Christ's at the death of Lazarus, in the shortest verse in Scripture, "Jesus wept" (John 11.35), and in his "weep[ing] with those who weep," a prescription Paul outlines in Romans 12.15. Mario also displays profound emotional depth in his affection for his brother Hal, a character we have seen displaying a deep need for redemption: "Mario loves Hal so much it makes his heart beat hard" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 590), and when Mario says to him, "Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way, Hal" (772). Mario's deep-rooted love for Hal and emotional care for him throughout the novel convey the notion of his desire to see Hal in a state of wholeness and recovery, and as Hal increasingly unravels throughout the novel, Mario's response is one of deep care and distress, in a way that conveys his attention to human recovery and redemption, the primary concerns of a redeemer-figure.

Mario's extreme philanthropic disposition extends beyond Hal and the members of his family as well, as seen during his walk through the Ennet House neighbourhood, which also features disability housing: "he can see people on the ground floors all together....a lot of the people in the different brick houses are damaged or askew and lean hard to one side or are twisted into themselves, through the windows, and he can feel his heart going out into the world through them" (590). In a passage narrated by Hal, Mario's heart receives a literal description that bears a curious synergy with the previous quotation: "I helped Mario on with his police lock's vest and affixed the Velcro nice and tight. Mario's chest is so fragile-feeling that I could feel his heartbeat's tremble through the vest and sweatshirt" (942). It is as if his heart is near to bursting through his chest with love for his fellow man, the imagery of which evokes the image of the Sacred Heart of Christ,⁷⁷ a visual representation of His divine love for human creation. Mario's personal character is beyond reproach, as is Christ's in 1 Peter 1.19, that he is morally

⁷⁷ A Catholic icon that depicts Christ's heart on the outside of His chest.

“without blemish or spot,” and thus, in a figurative sense, has no apparent or immediate need for redemption himself, but is in the unique position to offer it to other characters on some level in *Infinite Jest*. I want to be clear here that Mario is not necessarily excluded from original sin or universal human fallenness, as he clearly lives with a great deal of physical challenges of his own,⁷⁸ but that the novel’s conspicuous lack of characterizing him in any kind of addicted, morally compromising, or even sinful way, makes allegorical/figurative parallels to Christ plausible to entertain.

Physically, Mario is described throughout the novel as profoundly deformed, and challenged by a range of medical issues that accompany his physical complications. Krzysztof Piekarski notes that the extensive, encyclopedic list describing his disabilities serves to underscore the fact that Wallace desires for Mario to be “a symbol that is trans-human,” wanting us to “conceive of Mario as somehow ‘Other’ and metaphorically inhuman” (156), having “a kind of presence that merely resides in a human body for the narrative purposes of cohabiting with other humans and acting as a foil” (160). Mario’s trans-humanity thus marks a patent site of confluence with the doctrine of hypostatic union⁷⁹ in Christianity, which holds that Christ, while fully God, was also fully human, or “God-human” (Holmes 63). Through the incarnation, Christ is viewed in New Testament theology to be essentially a God-human “cohabiting with other humans”⁸⁰—and as Wallace says to Larry McCaffery about the role of fiction—Christ fully “illuminate[s] the possibilities for being alive and human” in the world (McCaffery 26). In this way, the theological Word and the written word of literature intersect in the character of Mario, who demonstrates sincerity, authenticity, and human empathy like no other character in the novel, evoking den Dulk’s sentiment that “Mario is good faith”—as in the very embodiment of

⁷⁸ Or what might be referred to in Christian theology as effects of the Fall.

⁷⁹ Also known as “the Incarnation.” See John 1.1 and 1.14 for primary foundation for this doctrine.

⁸⁰ As in John 1.14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

it—and “the paragon of what it means to be human” (213), which has a very theological resonance indeed.

Mario’s surrounding community of high-caliber tennis athletes at the Enfield Tennis Academy also serves to highlight his disabilities. Players like John “No Relation” Wayne and Ortho “The Darkness” Stice are perfect physical specimens, their bodies capable of the highest level of competitive tennis in their age-range, as “Wayne’s game could be described as having a kind of automatic beauty” (260), and Stice’s body “is an unearned divine gift....A beautiful sports body, lithe and tapered and sleekly muscled, smooth—like a Polycleitos body, Hermes or Theseus before his trials” (636). Emily Russell comments on this phenomenon of body politics in the novel, remarking that its “homology of physical and textual forms finds its crystallizing expression in Wallace’s image of the characteristic asymmetry of athletic bodies” (147), demonstrating that the constructed-looking nature and “hastily assembled” quality of the E.T.A. players is a politically-charged feature of the book. In contrast to Wayne, Stice, and the other players, “the leptosomatic Mario I., so damaged he can’t even grip a stick, much less flail at a moving ball with one” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 79), being “too physically challenged even to play low-level recreational tennis” (153), is excluded from the athletic activities of the Academy, and stands out as the only physically hindered member of the community: “Mario’s life there is by all appearances kind of a sad and left-out-type existence, the only physically challenged minor in residence, unable even to...stand unaided behind a boundaried space” (314). Mario is “stunted and complexly deformed” (744), possessing spiderlike fingers (216), block feet that hinder Mario’s movements (313), a head that is twice or three times as large as is average (1022), with a dental makeup composed entirely of identical bicuspid (1022), and composing a collection of “lifelong character-building physical challenges” (313), which also include bradypedestrianism

and bradykinesia,⁸¹ resulting in “an almost gerontologic lentissimo about most of Mario’s movements” (1022). Despite Mario’s general popularity at E.T.A., his physical condition does make him a target of strangers’ unkindness: “Three passing...street-kids mock and make fun of Mario’s appearance behind the pair’s backs” (84), which Mario generally takes “with a kind of extra-inclined half-bow that mock[s] his own canted posture without pity or cringe” (316), functioning as a kind of turning of the other cheek.

Emily Russell views Mario’s disabilities and challenges, rather than contributing to positive change in others, as slipping into politically static territory, constituting “the most significant danger lurking in the model of assemblage” (166). He is thus a trope akin to having “the disability-produced purity of Tiny Tim” (166), rather than as a bona fide purveyor of human recovery. While I appreciate Russell’s sentiment that disability can be a cheap vehicle for sentimentalism, I maintain that Mario’s role goes beyond just the platitudinal “God bless us, everyone” of Dickens’ Tiny Tim. Rather, part of his unique theological significance comes in conjunction with his physical state, his disabilities marking him as a singular figure amidst the athletically perfected bodies of E.T.A.’s elite athletes, with his state of spiritual near-perfection a point of contrast to the robotic, unfeeling conditioning of characters like John Wayne and Hal. Catherine Nichols also comments on the Rabelaisian nature of physical bodies in *Infinite Jest*, calling to attention the huge forearm of Hal and distended thigh of Orin Incandenza, noting that these “carnavalesque distortions” and “deformities in pursuit of perfection” ultimately engage them “into closed, tangible objects of consumable entertainment” (10), whereas Mario’s physical descriptions might imply an important site of meaning in the novel, rather than a carnivalesque critique of the culture’s unquenchable thirst for entertainment.

⁸¹ “Variations on the medical root *brady*, from the Greek *bradys* meaning slow” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1022).

While descriptions of Christ's form in the New Testament nowhere approach the level of Mario's disabled body, there is a curious confluence in the way Mario's bodily characteristics function amidst a whole community of other perfected, hyper-developed bodies. This similarity bears a significant theological resonance, namely that in New Testament doctrine, the resurrected bodies of saints are held to be glorious and perfect, without pain or disability,⁸² while the Gospels make it clear that Christ bears the marks of his crucifixion *after His resurrection*, serving as an eternal reminder of His salvific act. In the famous "Doubting Thomas" passage of John, Thomas denies the first resurrection appearance to the disciples, from which he was absent, saying, "unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe" (20.25). At a later appearance, Christ addresses Thomas' skepticism, offering an empirical demonstration of his corporeality after death: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe," to which Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God!" (20.27-28). The post-resurrection scarring/disability of Christ thus illustrates the wounds to be carried forward. Reflecting on the eternal Passion wounds of Christ, theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar notes that

the fact that the marks of Christ's wounds are visible to Thomas is a revelation of the way in which temporality is integrated into eternity by being transposed and transformed. These wounds indicate the presence of Christ's past in eternity not just as a memory but as a present reality...since they exist now in the resurrected, victorious Christ. (O'Hanlon 100).

⁸² As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15.40-44.

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas also holds to the eternity of the wounds of Christ,⁸³ so there is a long-standing precedent for this view. The feature of wounds on the risen body of Christ thus makes His the only disabled body in the Christian conception of the afterlife, and a distinct point of comparison with Mario's disabled body amidst the array of hyper-perfected athletic bodies at E.T.A. This analogy secures an important site of discussion for my reading of Mario's elevation, in that his character is much more than an appeal to sympathy, as if he were amidst an array of the Muscular Dystrophy Association's "Jerry's Kids," but that his disabilities are, in part, what makes his character's figurative comparison to Christ's act of grace tenable. The novel evokes this specifically Christological imagery in its treatment of Mario to the effect that it establishes a pinnacle for its intersection with soteriology, and to reinforce its preoccupation with the concepts of grace and salvation. Again, this is not to say that Mario's being figuratively analogous to Christ is in any way a complete or perfect parallel,⁸⁴ but instead that the connections that do exist serve to highlight that Mario's priorities disrupt the dominant motivations of his nation's culture and offer a more spiritual possibility for human existence in the novel's world.

Mario's resemblance to Christ is further reflected in his personal faith in God, a topic he often raises in conversation with Hal, which Timothy Jacobs notes as an invocation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, with Mario resembling the pious Alyosha (Jacobs 271), and Hal the doubtful Ivan. In a bedtime interchange with Hal, Mario enquires about Hal's spectacular tennis performance earlier in the day: "I was going to ask if you felt like you believed in God, today, out there, when you were so on," to which Hal expresses fatigue

⁸³ As seen in Question 54, Article 4 "The Quality of Christ Rising Again: Whether Christ's Body Ought to Have Risen with its Scars?" in the *Summa Theologica*.

⁸⁴ Mario does not endure temptation in a desert, does not perform massive public miracles, is not persecuted by governmental authorities, does not die for the sins of the world, etc.

regarding the repetitive line of questioning, “This again?... You ask me this once a week” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 40). Mario’s response notes a kind of incredulousness about Hal’s theologically skeptical position: “I don’t get how you couldn’t feel like you believed, today, out there. It was so *right there*. You moved like you totally believed” (40). For Mario, athletics represent a site of theological significance, as a meeting place between aesthetics and the divine, not unlike Wallace’s own statements about professional tennis player Roger Federer, that “he may well (I think) be: a creature whose body is both flesh and, somehow, light” (“Both Flesh and Not” 20).⁸⁵ Further, Mario’s theological convictions are demonstrated by his faithful nighttime prayer routine, which “take almost an hour and sometimes more and are not a chore. He doesn’t kneel; it’s more like a conversation. And he’s not crazy; it’s not like he hears anybody or anything conversing back with him, Hal’s established” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 590). Such a dialogic prayer regimen demonstrates Mario’s religious devotion, and resembles that of Christ’s prayerful tendencies as recorded in the Gospels. As in Matthew 14.23, in which “Jesus...went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone” and Mark 1.35, “rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He departed and went out to a desolate place, and there He prayed,” Mario’s consistent supplication to God denotes an imitation of Christ in his interpersonal connectivity with the divine.

Mario’s redemptive role is most significantly realized in his life-affirming interactions with Eric Clipperton and Barry Loach, both of whom are marked pariahs in their own way. Clipperton is socially and morally reprehensible to the Enfield tennis community, and Loach voluntarily takes to a life of isolated homelessness in an attempt to avow the goodness of

⁸⁵ Evidenced further by the piece’s original *Play Magazine* and *New York Times* title “Federer As Religious Experience.” The question may be raised at this time of whether Wallace’s consistent invocation of religious imagery in relation to the male body has any relation to a queer reading of his work, though such a line of inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper.

humanity to his spiritually jaded, Jesuit-in-training brother, in a social experiment gone wildly awry, save for Mario's timely intervention. I suggest that Mario's engagement with these characters is the most demonstrative site of his Christological role in the novel, since Mario's disruptive ethos of grace is most acutely conveyed in the unwarranted goodwill he extends to them. Eric Clipperton is a sixteen year-old independent competitive tennis player in the regional East Coast tournament circuit who

lent the cliché 'Win or Die in the Attempt' grotesquely literal new levels of sense...derived from the fact that this Clipperton kid owned a hideous and immaculately maintained Glock 17 semiautomatic sidearm...that he brought...out on the court with him...and from his very first appearance on the East Coast jr. tour made it clear his intention to blow his own brains out publicly, right there on the court, if he should lose, ever, even once. (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 408)

This absurd and unrealistic demonstration of sport⁸⁶ leads to Clipperton's understandable status as a social leper among his athletic peers, as he wins tournaments "by what is essentially psychic default" (410). Yet despite Clipperton's status as a social exile, at age eight, Mario Incandenza's first act of grace is to befriend Clipperton, making him "his only even remote friend on the jr. tour," and Mario "is kind to him and seeks out his company, Clipperton's, or at any rate at least treats Clipperton like he *exists*" (410), unlike the great host of detractors at E.T.A. Mario's affirmation of Clipperton's humanity derives from his ability to empathize with the pain of others due to his own life's challenges, in this case with Clipperton's own emotional suicidal pain.

⁸⁶ Which Clipperton undermines any sense of with his form of emotional blackmail. Perhaps more urgently, we should refer to this as Clipperton's profoundly disturbing psychological behaviour.

While the rest of the E.T.A. community understandably despises Clipperton for his repulsive on-court behaviour, Mario recognizes his existential suffering through not only a long-standing friendship, but a willingness to comfort him when he appears at the gates of E.T.A. being “in a terrible way” (432):

little Mario Incandenza sways down the steep path to the portcullis in the warm rain and interfaces with Clipperton through the bars and has the attendant hold the intercom button down for him and personally requests that Clipperton be admitted under a special nonplay codicil to the regulations, saying the kid is in truly desperate psychic straits....Clipperton...his expression so blackly haunted that even the hard-boiled attendant told some of the people back at the halfway place⁸⁷ later that the spectral trench-coated figure had given him sobriety’s worst fantods,⁸⁸ so far. (432)

Being granted access, Clipperton confers with Mario and his father James Incandenza in an “unused top-floor room in Subdorm C of East House, the structure nearest the front gate, for some sort of psycho-existential CPR-session or something” (432), resulting in Clipperton’s suicide with the Glock 17, in which he “blows out his legitimated brains out for real and all time, eradicates his map and then some; and there’s just an ungodly subsequent mess in there, and the Incandenzas respectively stagger and totter from the room all green-gilled and red-mist stained,” emerging out of the room “in a miasma of cordite and ghastly mist...resembling miners of some sort of really grisly coal” (433). As if this experience is not traumatic enough for young Mario, he insists to his father on cleaning up the messy aftermath, after the police have come and removed Clipperton’s body from the scene: “It took the bradykinetic Mario all night and two bottles of Ajax Plus to clear the room with his tiny contractured arms and square feet; the 18’s

⁸⁷ A reference to Ennet House, at which Don Gately is a resident.

⁸⁸ A recurring term for psychologically haunting phenomena, usually preceded by the adjective “howling.”

girls in the rooms on either side could hear him falling around in there and picking himself up, again and again; and the finally spotless room in question has been locked ever since” (433-4). There exists here in this scene an interesting exchange between Mario’s physically demanding and horrific encounter with carnage and elements of the Passion sequence of Christ in the Gospels, in the sense that the themes of cleansing, blood, and closure are engaged in both narratives. This is by no means to say that Mario’s pious sacrifice of cleaning Clipperton’s remains approaches that of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, entailing the excruciating grisliness of ancient crucifixion⁸⁹—in which Christian theology maintains that Christ cleans the tainted, fallen state of all humanity’s sin, to be made forever clean, with atonement paid in full⁹⁰—but that there is a symbolic exchange between these scenes.

Like Mario’s complete and final cleaning of the Subdorm C room, the act itself a physical hardship, the redemptive work of Christ on the cross in Christian theology is a complete and final cleansing of humanity’s transgressive state, and the metaphorical room has been locked ever since with eternal finality. This is not to say that Mario’s action of cleaning up the scene of a suicide equates to theology’s understanding of Christ’s universal atonement, but the connection to blood, cleansing, and final closure serve as curious site of intersection. While it could be argued that Clipperton’s suicide marks Mario’s inability to effectively affirm or redeem others, I contend that this action does not reflect an inability on Mario’s part, but rather highlights the significance of human free will in the equation of salvation that Christian theology affirms. The novel thus signals the possibility for redemption for its cast, but at the cost of each character’s personal volition and response to the grace they are offered. In this case, Clipperton has experienced an invitation of grace through friendship with Mario, but has ultimately marshaled

⁸⁹ Indeed, “excruciating” derives from the Latin word *excruciat*, meaning “out of the cross” (Edwards 1461).

⁹⁰ As the writer of Hebrews notes: “He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up Himself” (7.27).

his free will toward other designs. Regardless of his decision to complete suicide, Mario still serves to honor Clipperton's memory and humanity by cleaning the aftermath of his grisly choice. As the sin of despair embodied here by Clipperton is of paramount consequence in Catholic theology specifically, Mario might be considered to play something of a redemptive role here, affirming Clipperton's humanity through his pious act of service.

In a more positive instance of restoration, the chronicle of E.T.A. trainer Barry Loach showcases the effects of Mario's redemptive character, as is foreshadowed early in the novel: "Trainer Barry Loach all but kisses the kid's ring,⁹¹ since it's Mario who through coincidence saved him from the rank panhandling underbelly of Boston Common's netherworld and more or less got him his job" (316). This story is not told in full until the last chapter of the novel, just prior to the finale of Don Gately's backstory, and has a mythic reputation on the Enfield campus: "One E.T.A. tradition consists of Big Buddies recounting to new or very young Little Buddies the saga of Loach and how he ended up as an elite Head Trainer" (967). As previously noted, Barry Loach takes to the streets in a social experiment about the goodness of humanity in a wager with his seminary-dropout brother, who

suffered at age twenty-five a sudden and dire spiritual decline in which his basic faith in the innate indwelling goodness of men like spontaneously combusted and disappeared—and for no apparent or dramatic reason; it just seemed as if the brother had suddenly contracted a black misanthropic spiritual outlook...a kind of Lou Gehrig's Disease of the spirit—and his interest in serving man and God-in-man and nurturing the indwelling Christ in people through Jesuitical pursuits underwent an understandable nosedive. (967-68)

⁹¹ A papal reference that signals Loach's Catholic background.

Seeking to restore his brother's faith in a meaningful theological universe, and being "understandably way out his depth on the theological turf of like Apologia and the redeemability of man" (968), Barry Loach becomes homeless to demonstrate "that the basic human character wasn't as unempathetic and necrotic as the brother's present depressed condition was leading him to think" (969), with the simple goal of "instead of stemming change simply ask passersby to touch him. Just to touch him. Viz. extend some basic human warmth and contact" (969). After almost ten months of unsuccessful experimentation, "Loach's own soul began to sprout little fungal patches of necrotic rot, and his upbeat view of the so-called normal and respectable human race began to undergo dark revision" and his near "disappearing forever into the fringes and dregs of metro Boston street life and spending his whole adult life homeless and louse-ridden and stemming in the Boston Common and drinking out of brown paper bags" (970) is interrupted by the intervention of Mario Incandenza. In a humanity-affirming act, Mario "extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily shaken Loach's own fuliginous hand, which led through a convoluted but kind of heartwarming and faith-reaffirming series of circumstances to B. Loach, even w/o an official B.A., being given an Asst. Trainer's job at E.T.A." from which he is promptly promoted to Head Trainer (971). Mario's exchange with Loach here, and the subsequent redemption that results, is, I argue, perhaps the highest representation of grace and recovery in *Infinite Jest*, and a distinct moment highlighting Mario's Christological resonance that bears significant consideration.

David H. Evans' brief reading of Barry Loach's redemption privileges Don Gately's redemption narrative, calling it "by far the most important attempt to conceive of a form of religious faith that is possible in a post-metaphysical age" (186). He does, however, note *Infinite Jest's* "occasional eruptive and redeeming moments of grace, like Mario Incandenza's spontaneous grasp of the 'fuliginous hand' of Barry Loach" (185). While I do not necessarily

disagree with his assessment of Gately's theological importance,⁹² I do believe he misses an opportunity to comment comprehensively on the concept of grace as demonstrated through Mario, and of Mario's own theological significance to the novel. Critic Timothy Jacobs also remarks on this scene—again, convincingly comparing Mario to Alyosha from *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the Loach brothers' wager to an anecdote from the "Grand Inquisitor" and "Rebellion" chapters—stating of the Barry Loach chronicle that "in a complex intertextual twist the Alyosha-figure, Mario (as saint), performs the crucial action that redeems Barry Loach through human contact" (274-75). I agree with Jacobs that Mario's reaching out is a crucial action in the salvation narrative of Loach, but would take his "Mario (as saint)" observation even further by modifying it to "Mario (as figurative Christ)," arguing for his Christological symbolism in the novel, beyond that of a saint merely being one who is like Christ. I contend that this sequence takes the analogy much further than just saintliness, and extends Mario into the realm of allegorical saviour.

The redeeming handshake in the Barry Loach street sequence unwaveringly evokes the account of Jesus and the leper, which is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels: "While He was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged Him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him" (Luke 5.12-13). Given the extremely contagious nature of leprosy, and its incurable, untreatable status in first century Palestine, the concept of getting near someone afflicted with the disease, let alone touching them, was preposterous. Lepers were social and biological pariahs, and lived truly destitute and miserable lives, having to follow the Torah's commands about living outside the

⁹² As evidenced by the last chapter.

city so as not to infect others (Hamm).⁹³ While Barry Loach is not afflicted physically with such an infirmity, Loach's "necrotic rot" is essentially a leprosy of the soul, and Mario's willingness to physically touch him causes Loach's socio-emotional and existential healing, restoring his faith in basic human goodness. Mario—as figurative Christ—thus performs the crucial action in Loach's redemption, through an extension of grace that re-affirms his human value, saving him from a future of literal and spiritual homelessness and social exile.

In addition to Mario's character, disabilities, connection with the divine, and role as redeemer, the statement "Hal's next-oldest brother Mario doesn't seem to resemble much of anyone they know" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 101) can be read as more than a physical description,⁹⁴ signifying Mario's divine symbolism and Christological significance. Bolstering this Messianic connection further, "Hal almost idealizes Mario, secretly. God-type issues aside, Mario is a (semi-) walking miracle, Hal believes. People who're somehow burned at birth, withered or ablated way past anything like what might be fair, they either curl up in their fire, or else they rise....Mario floats, for Hal" (316), and like Christ in biblical theology, Mario rises.⁹⁵ The point may be raised about whether Hal's elevated view of Mario is distinct from that of the novel or narrator's view, but given the ways in which Mario is treated and revered by most of the E.T.A. characters and is frequently discussed in the context of empathy, sincerity, and authenticity, I hold that Hal's high view of Mario is synonymous with the rest of the novel's. In the salvific trajectory of the three main male protagonists of Hal, Gately, and Mario, Mario thus fulfills an elevated, symbolic Christological role in *Infinite Jest*, thus rounding out the novel's dialogue with Christian theology's soteriological concerns. Mario is thus a disruptive force, representing

⁹³ Leviticus 13.45-46: "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp."

⁹⁴ And nod to the previously discussed issue of his incestuous origins.

⁹⁵ Figuratively speaking, of course.

the possibility of change, which is difficult to contemplate for so many characters in the novel. His importance may not be as a literal saviour of the citizens of O.N.A.N. and beyond, but rather as a representation of another way to be more completely human, leading others by the example of his benevolent existence, and serving to pose the question of what redemption means and how it is most fully expressed. This reading of Mario is necessary, I believe, because without a saviour-figure such as him, the intersections between the novel and theology would be much more limited to a particular place on the salvation spectrum articulated in Pauline doctrine, rather than representing the full range of fallen, redeemed, and redeemer that Hal, Gately, and Mario represent, respectively.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

In my analysis of *Infinite Jest*'s dialogic engagement with Christian soteriology, we have seen an exchange of ideas between the novel's thematic concerns and Pauline theology that establishes the significance of creation, humanity's deep fallenness, and its options for recovery and redemption. In the guru character Lyle's estimation that "the truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 389), the novel offers no tidy answers about how deeply addicted humans can achieve freedom from their narcotized temples of worship and the entertainment that so thoroughly enslaves them. Instead, the novel presents a messy, chaotic world whose parody of the cultural, political, and environmental landscapes of North America comes much closer to the present moment's situation than might be desirable, in an oddly prophetic forecast, that twenty years after its publication, rings more true than ever, given the rise of Netflix, Skype, Facebook, virtual reality, and 2016 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, whose policies bear a staggering resemblance to those of *Infinite Jest*'s fictional president, Johnny Gentle. The novel's disjointed and challenging organizational form thematically adds to the ways in which it envisions its characters navigating the tensions of what it means to be "alive and human" in this world (McCaffery 26), contributing to the messiness of its portrayal of the human condition. As Krzysztof Piekarski says, *Infinite Jest* is "an encyclopedia of suffering" (153), and its characters are clearly bound in the world of pain in which they must seek to escape their various torments. Lyle's adage rings true in that some characters do approach a semblance of freedom by the novel's end, but only through great physical and psychological hardship and tough personal choices, with no truly clear sense of finality. Hal has not reconciled with personal reclamation yet, Gately appears to be well on his way towards it, and Mario seems to have known it all along, offering a spectrum of conditions of salvation that explore the range of human decision and experience in a theological context. The

novel thus provides fertile ground for thinking about what redemption is, how it is meaningful and urgent, and through what means it is acquired or achieved.

The question of what this Pauline conception of redemption signifies in the world of *Infinite Jest*, and of what its effects are on the characters provides an invitation for considering the novel's place in the context of a New Sincerity framework, of which Wallace is often considered to be a figurehead. As George Saunders remarked at Wallace's memorial service—amidst a room that included Don DeLillo, Zadie Smith, and Jonathan Franzen—"Dave...was first among us" (55), signifying Wallace's unrivaled ability to capture the human experience in profound ways, and acknowledging his place within a burgeoning literary tradition that seeks to elevate matters of what it means to be human. New Sincerity's preoccupation with such concerns as empathy, attention, consciousness, and, I daresay, grace, makes its title paradoxically vexing in that there is nothing new about these verities. But when put in contrast with the ironic, self-reflexive forms of postmodern U.S. fiction of the post-war period, more often concerned with interrogating the relationship between literary form and content than providing what Kenneth Burke calls "equipment for living"—outlining ways to be human and alive in the world—the title New Sincerity suggests a return to or reinvigoration of a previous mode of literature concerned primarily with the human experience. *Infinite Jest's* emphasis on and vision of human regeneration thus articulates Pauline notions of redemption within a contemporary/semi-distant framework, engaging a biblical understanding of soteriology that is transformed through fiction into a map of freedom for its alienated and addicted characters. In this way, the novel subtly plots a model for existential and spiritual hope, amidst a very dark apocalyptic vision of the future.

Infinite Jest's, like the New Testament's, is a world in which personal salvation occurs amidst a larger national and international eschatological backdrop, with the state of O.N.A.N. in

great peril by the novel's end. The juxtaposition between personal and national salvation evokes Wallace's use of the Anthony Burgess quote as the epigram to his short story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" that, "as we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Only very minor literature aims at apocalypse" (Wallace 232). Wallace, like the New Testament authors, bridges this divide between solipsism and apocalypse by dealing with both personal and national forms of salvation, though in this thesis I have opted to focus more on the personal elements of soteriology the novel articulates because this is where Wallace's vision of salvation is most relevant, at the personal level. Since national salvation might seem the more pressing concern by the novel's end—with the *samizdat* appearing to be in A.F.R. hands and threatening to enslave the U.S. public with death by entertainment—I contend that the novel is more concerned with the individual human struggle between sin and salvation, and that it offers the thesis that national recovery and freedom must first start with its individual citizens at the grassroots level, rather than through governmental reforms and legislation. As Marathe contends, each individual must choose their own "temple of fanaticism with great care" (107), and it is at this level that the novel is most concerned. Mario in this particular context would thus not be a national, Messianic saviour, vicariously able to erase the national sins of O.N.A.N., but his individual contributions to human recovery at the personal level provide a paradigm for the salvific possibilities of grace for each character.

An extension of this thesis might explore this curious relationship between individual and national salvation, with a variety of considerations available, such as the novel's invocation of environmental, commercial, aesthetic, and narcotic problems, all approaching levels of untenable livability and continental emergency in the world of *Infinite Jest*. As Timothy Jacobs notes, Wallace, like Dostoevsky, employs an "unflinching eschatological depiction of debased and despairing human nature toward a redemptive end" (266), which could be applied in a more

macro-level analysis of *Infinite Jest*, as well as to a broader range of the novel's cast, such as to characters that include James, Avril, and Orin Incandenza, Joelle van Dyne, Kate Gompert, Lyle, Hugh Steeply, Rémy Marathe, Randy Lenz, and many others. Exploring the thematic intersections between other pieces from Wallace's body of work and their engagement with *Infinite Jest*'s model of soteriology might also be another direction for further inquiry in a larger work, as publications such as *The Pale King* and "E Unibus Pluram" share similar preoccupations with empathy, grace, and forms of redemption. I insist that it would be a challenge to avoid the theological implications of these themes throughout Wallace's work, thus making his literary oeuvre ripe for not only a larger scriptural analysis, but much more importantly, that the model of redemption found in the New Testament's conception of it can be the basis for an enlarged and theologically-inflected discussion of what redemption is and does. Wallace thus shows that redemption can speak to the strange present and to a fictional conception of the world in ways that not only affirm existing moral prescriptions, but identify the possibility of creating new ones that relate to the technological developments so culturally prevalent in the world he writes. Such a progression does not invalidate a strict orthodox understanding of biblical redemption, but instead ratifies its importance and courageously develops what it can mean for the present.

Returning to the present work, this thesis extends an understanding of Michael O'Connell's claim "that it makes sense to think of him [Wallace] as a Christian writer" (267), given the range of themes and dialogic resonances his work shares with Pauline Christianity here in *Infinite Jest*. While I still maintain that it would be too narrow to classify Wallace and *Infinite Jest* exclusively in this way,⁹⁶ limiting the possibility of other modes of understanding the novel

⁹⁶ With which O'Connell agrees: "Thus, while Wallace was not an orthodox Christian believer, his work does manifest a sensibility profoundly influenced by his engagement with the Christian tradition" (288).

and his larger body of work converses with, I have sought to demonstrate how the novel's engagement with Christian soteriology offers new ways of thinking about the role and nature of human regeneration, and for what it means to be fully human in a world mired in various kinds of addiction, increasing narcissism, and environmental degradation. This idea may similarly extend into academic understandings of the role and function of New Sincerity's brand of fiction as well, given its relevance to Wallace's call for a new generation of writers to confront humanity's deepest challenges and longings, "literary rebels" who might "emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue" (Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram" 81). Wallace similarly envisions good art as that which "locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 26), a sentiment which I have shown to have been successfully achieved through the soteriological elements of *Infinite Jest*. Since this kind of identification with regeneration is at the heart of Wallace's project, it makes sense to consider his work in theological terms, as empathy is also the cornerstone of the Christian metanarrative's conception of the Incarnation of God in Christ, in which God comes to fully identify with creation, knowing firsthand what it is like to be human and to suffer, to live in the tension of a fallen world with the hope of redemption for all.

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