

INTRODUCTION.....2

CHAPTER I—David Foster Wallace’s Sense of Humor.....6

 Humor, Irony, and David Foster Wallace

 Redeeming Comicality in *Infinite Jest*

CHAPTER II—Interdependence of the Comic and the Sacred.....20

 The Dialectic of the Comic and the Sacred

 Imaginative Access through Mario Incandenza

CHAPTER III—Kierkegaard’s Religiousness in *Infinite Jest*.....32

 Kierkegaard’s Dialectical Framework

 Don Gately: Wallace’s Modern Believer

CONCLUSIONS.....54

ENDNOTES/BIBLIOGRAPHY.....59

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The Comic and the Sacred in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

In an increasingly secular world, it seems more and more difficult to experience something as sacred. This problem serves as the foundation for Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's co-authored book, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. For Dreyfus and Kelly, the paradigmatic nihilism of the contemporary world has serious existential ramifications for modern notions of sacrality and meaning. "Our Contemporary Nihilism," as the second chapter of their book refers to it, has left us with "a world that no longer has any God or gods, nor even any sense of what is sacred and inviolable, to focus our understanding of what we are."¹ This kind of groundlessness has thus called into question how we can live a meaningful life in the contemporary world.

For Dreyfus and Kelly, sacrality bears the necessity of having its power originate externally from the individual who experiences it. In their eyes, an individual who experiences something sacred "[is] drawn by a force outside [himself] but [is] not enslaved to it."² Keeping this in mind, the values that ought to be pursued for the sake of finding meaning in a secular age are the ones which allow us "to live a life guided by something experienced beyond oneself."³ According to Dreyfus and Kelly, these kinds of values were precisely the ones coveted by the ancient Greeks of Homer's polytheistic paradigm. While these redemptive avenues still exist, Dreyfus and Kelly find that they are not prevalent in the contemporary world.* More often than not, the modern individual instead finds himself paralyzed by indecision stemming from his inability to "find the significant differences among the possible actions in [his life]."⁴ The contemporary malaise of nihilism, then, has grown out of a lost affinity for what used to be

* Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 7. Dreyfus and Kelly believe that this kind of experience may only be exemplified in the transcendent moments of athleticism or skilled craft.

considered sacred. And for Dreyfus and Kelly, no author represents the tragedy of that nihilism more poignantly than David Foster Wallace. But is this truly the case?

Dreyfus and Kelly believe that Wallace's view of the sacred, where "the lone source of meaning in human existence [is] the strong individual's force of will," is ultimately 'impoverished' because it has no regard for gratitude.⁵ Furthermore, they feel that Wallace's project privileges human agency over a more traditional view of faith, where meaningful experience is attributed to something outside of the self. Dreyfus and Kelly take Wallace's proposition to be almost entirely contrary to this traditional view of sacrality. They synthesize Wallace's core thesis by citing both his posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*, and his 2005 Commencement speech to Kenyon College. Together, these two works propose the idea that happiness lies in experiencing the "eternal present" of excruciating boredom. Dreyfus and Kelly reduce Wallace's writings into one ultimate point: "that the choice to experience the world as sacred and meaningful—to do so by dint of effort and will—is a choice that takes strength and courage and persistence, of course, perhaps it takes even a kind of heroism."⁶ In addition to having an impoverished view of sacrality, Wallace's endeavor is utterly "impossible."⁷ In their eyes, his proposition requires modern individuals "to become gods" in their effort to impose meaning on their experiences⁸:

[T]here is no joy in Wallace's world. It is as if the true burden of this responsibility – the responsibility to escape from the meaningless drudgery of a godless world by constructing a happier meaning for it out of nothing, literally ex nihilo as God himself once had done – was too much for any human spirit to achieve.⁹

In essence, Dreyfus and Kelly take Wallace's contrived notions of spirituality, not only to be 'impoverished' but also 'impossible' for any human to achieve. However, I would argue that Wallace intended to do the very opposite of what Dreyfus and Kelly highlight.¹⁰ Taking the godlessness and drudgery of the world as givens in almost all of his works, Wallace's ultimate

proposition does not call for us ‘to escape’ the world. His magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, actually plays a crucial role in demonstrating the redemptive potential of the comic phenomenon for alleviating the burdens of nihilism that Dreyfus and Kelly aptly diagnose.

Dreyfus and Kelly’s book is ultimately concerned with reviving western culture’s sense for meaningfulness. The literary postmodern movement, is one that Wallace thought contributed immensely to perpetuating nihilist sentiments. Wallace thought of the postmodernist movement as a kind of teenage house party. In the beginning, the party is enjoyable:

You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For a while it’s great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat’s-away-let’s-play Dionysian revel... It’s not a perfect analogy, but the sense I get of my generation of writers and intellectuals or whatever is that its 3:00 AM and the couch has several burn-holes and somebody’s thrown up in the umbrella stand and we’re wishing the revel would end.¹¹

He goes on to say, “we’re kind of wishing some parents would come back... And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren’t ever coming back—which means ‘we’re’ going to have to be the parents.”¹² Often sentiments of becoming the Gods of our own worlds—as opposed to letting the meaning come from a power outside of ourselves—is attributed to Nietzsche. Dreyfus and Kelly mistakenly attribute this Nietzschean sentiment to the Wallace canon. Far from being a nihilist, Wallace’s greatest aspiration as a writer was to redeem the modern man’s potential for religiousness, especially during the dark times of contemporary nihilism:

In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.¹³

While Dreyfus and Kelly’s critique of Wallace is fair with respect to any traditional notion of sacrality or spirituality, it suffers greatly from a failure to consider what was arguably Wallace’s

greatest strength as an author and a thinker: his sense of humor. I contend that *Infinite Jest* illustrates the redemptive potential for the comic phenomenon to recover a sense of religiousness for the modern ‘unwilling agnostic.’ The idea that a book riddled with drug-addicted, characters who are enduring a great spiritual struggle can simultaneously be labeled “a comedic tale” you read “with a constant grin” begs for an analysis of the intersection between these themes.¹⁴ Ultimately, Wallace’s self-proclaimed views of the comic coupled with the prominence of laughter and smiling in *Infinite Jest* demonstrate the ways in which the novel is a desperate attempt to find meaningful ways to live within the world—the result of which holds open up the space for religiousness to enter into the contemporary world once again.*

* See e.g. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Willard R. Trask transl. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1987). p. 213. My emphasis: Eliade argued that religiousness was recoverable—even if it had been forgotten in a sense—due to its primal characteristic in human nature. Even though Eliade believed that modern man would only be content when he had killed the last God, religiosity’s primacy is what made it recoverable, even in an age of contemporary nihilism:

[I]n his deepest being, [non-religious man] still retains a memory of [religious being], *as, after the first “fall,” his ancestor, the primordial man, retained intelligence enough to enable him to rediscover the traces of God that are visible in the world.* After the first “fall,” the religious sense descended to the level of the “divided consciousness”; now, after the second, it has fallen even further, into the depths of the unconscious; it has been “forgotten.”

Chapter 1: David Foster Wallace's Sense of Humor

*Mario, what do you get when you cross an insomniac, an unwilling agnostic and a dyslexic?
I give.*

*You get someone who stays up all night torturing himself mentally over the question of whether
or not there's a dog.*

-David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

Humor, Irony, and David Foster Wallace

In order to investigate the significance of Wallace as a humorous writer, we need to survey some of the scholarly work that has been done on the nature of his style. Additionally, it will be important to understand how Wallace himself viewed humor and the comic phenomenon in the context of American culture and its reflection in literature.

Scholars who have addressed the comical nature of Wallace's writing tend to focus solely on the significance of irony. More often than not, 'humor' as a term does not appear in the academic works that focus on his status as a comical writer.¹⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I believe that one scholar has contributed most significantly to the discussion of Wallace's humorous style—Wilson Kaiser. In an essay published in 2013 titled, "Humor after Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony," Kaiser gives an astute account of Wallace's style, which designates with the term, 'proximal irony.' Although at first glance, Kaiser's work seems to be concerned with the study of irony specifically, his conclusions signify the redemptive nature of the comic through having a sense of humor. Furthermore, his analysis of Wallace will inform us of the comic's inextricable relationship with the sacred throughout Wallace's writing.

Kaiser's essay is unique because it calls attention to Wallace's authorial concern with differentiating humor from irony. In doing so, Kaiser develops the terminology for a redemptive

capacity of humor that he calls “proximal irony,” which as a literary style “maintains its playful sensibility while also acknowledging an un-distanced emotional involvement with the narrative’s characters and events.”¹⁶ A detailed examination of the nuanced variations of irony and humor are beyond the scope of this paper. So, it is sufficient—for our consideration—to regard irony and humor in the following ways. Humor can be described as the faculty by which an individual perceives the comic phenomenon; hence the familiar reference, ‘a sense of humor.’¹⁷ Irony is a bit more particular than this. Essentially a subordinate to humor, irony manifests primarily in the comic inversion of sincerity. We might think of irony, then, as a detached and disengaged perspective that sees truth yet never truly feels it.* While humor and irony are both different, it is beneficial to regard them both as comic sensibilities, particularly within the framework of Kierkegaardian philosophy, which I go into later in Chapter 3. Wallace himself referred most often to ‘postmodern’ irony—as it manifested in popular culture—as a kind of “hip cynicism, a hatred that winks and nudges you and pretends it’s just kidding.”¹⁸ Wallace’s view of postmodern irony is our primary concern. Kaiser is sensitive to Wallace’s conception and coins his own term, ‘proximal irony.’ For Kaiser, proximal irony—as a literary term—facilitates a semi-disengaged perspective that remains trapped within the enworldedness of fictional worlds.

According to Kaiser, Wallace’s inspiration for his proximally ironic style is best demonstrated in two of his own essays; one that addresses the adoption of postmodern irony by U.S Television titled “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction”; another which discusses the ‘*komisch*’ style of author Franz Kafka titled “Laughing with Kafka.” Ultimately, what Kaiser sees in most of Wallace’s writings is the fact “that [Wallace] is too close to judge the strange fictional characters he creates in his novels and essays.”¹⁹ Offering an insightful characterization

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1989), 49: This definition is a combination of both Kierkegaard’s commentaries on irony and distance in addition to a discussion I had about irony with Professor Kosky.

of Wallace's humor, Kaiser further claims that "[Wallace's] humor is rarely *about* his characters, but rather shares in their experiences and debacles, seeking points of connection *from within the rhythms of their worlds*."²⁰ Here Kaiser's interpretation serves as a direct affront to Dreyfus and Kelly's argument that Wallace's proposed solution implies an escape from the world. Sure enough, postmodern irony is precisely the kind of mechanism that assumes the kind of detached perspective that Dreyfus and Kelly denounce. As Kaiser points out beautifully, Wallace's conclusions often "describe an involved irony that is fundamentally different from the detached irony of postmodernism, which depends on the kind of distanced observation unavailable to Wallace's characters."²¹ Ultimately, Wallace's mastery of "hilarious description"²² allows him to abandon postmodern irony in favor of an "enworlded humor of proximal irony [that] gives us more perspectives from which to recognize the humor of lived experience."²³ What Kaiser deduces for us then, is the idea that Wallace's humor manifests itself in the form of, 'proximal irony.' Contrary to postmodern irony, Wallace's 'proximal irony,' draws its humor and comicality from the "claustrophobic intensity"²⁴ of his writing. Similar to Kaiser's methodology, we need to understand Wallace's own perspective on humor. In the following part of this section, I start by examining a few of the journalistic pieces that Kaiser referred to in order to contextualize our analysis.

Wallace avidly critiqued both postmodern irony's destructive influence on the values of his generation in addition to its permeation into the intellectual development of younger generations, whom he had the privilege of teaching. In his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction," Wallace documents the intersection of mass media consumption with TV's adoption of postmodern irony as a mechanism for self-reflexive entertainment. In Wallace's opinion, authors like John Barth, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon comprise the group of "black humorists"²⁵ who pioneered the literary technique that would later be called postmodern

irony. During the 80's and 90's, novelists were using postmodern irony to be incessantly self-referential in ways that eventually emptied postmodern of its culturally disclosive nature.²⁶ At the time, Wallace claimed that “television [had] been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative.”²⁷ Ultimately, TV adopted irony as a kind of inoculant against critique, simply as a means of furthering its mass consumption. In the context of the very malaise that Dreyfus and Kelly refer to in their book, TV—according to Wallace—facilitated the existential ailments that were crippling his generation. TV, as a form of mass media, was depressingly good at doing on thing: “discerning what large numbers of people think they want, and supplying it.”²⁸

From Wallace's perspective, TV's adoption of postmodern irony allowed viewers to reconcile themselves to obscene amounts of media consumption by simultaneously reveling in the fact that they were in on TV's jokes (i.e. through its fundamental mechanism of emotional detachment). For Wallace, this was made TV's so popular—continuing to watch TV essentially became a necessary exercise in social literacy. Seeing naiveté as a trait that Americans mistakenly deplored, Wallace thought that the consumer's relationship with TV had terribly adverse effects on American culture as a whole—humor was merely one facet that was effected. American televisual culture valued cynicism and ironic detachment, thus conditioning Americans to “see humor as something you get—the same way we've taught them that a self is something you just have.”²⁹ This was precisely the kind of reception Wallace focused on in a later essay titled “Laughing with Kafka.” In the essay, Wallace ruminates on the effects that TV had in conditioning American kids to see humor as primarily a source of entertainment instead of something genuinely existential. When he used to teach Kafka to college students, Wallace saw that it was incredibly difficult “to get them to see that Kafka is funny... Nor to appreciate the

way funniness is bound up with the extraordinary power of his stories.”³⁰ Having been conditioned to primarily value entertainment for its escapist utility, American kids were not able to relate to Kafka’s humor because “[it had] almost none of the particular forms and codes of contemporary U.S amusement.”³¹ Wallace’s revelations here are crucial for our analysis because they demonstrate the ways in which American culture sacralizes entertainment solely for its mediation of escape. Furthermore, this sacred view of escape has distorted our ability to engage with the comic in a genuine manner. What, then, did Wallace take to be ‘real humor’?

Wallace contended that the stereotypically adolescent anxieties regarding the onslaught of adulthood had been perpetuated by the American valuation of entertainment. The result of this perpetuation is an impoverished view of the comic. Wallace illustrates this clearly when he talks sarcastically about ‘real humor’ in “Laughing With Kafka”:

[I]t’s not difficult to see why we as a culture are so susceptible to art and entertainment whose primary function is to “escape.” Jokes are a kind of art, since most of us Americans come to art essentially to forget ourselves... it’s no accident that we’re going to see [Kafka] as not all that funny, in fact as being the exact sort of downer-type death-and-taxes thing for which “real” humor serves as a respite.³²

The American affinity for humor, then, is deeply impoverished by an obsession with entertainment as a form of escape. Wallace defines Kafka’s comedy as a coexistence of tragedy and “immense and reverent joy.”³³ In this way, “Kafka’s humor – not only neurotic but *anti*-neurotic, heroically sane – is, finally, a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality against which even Ms. O’Connor’s bloody grace seems a little bit easy, the souls at stake premade.”³⁴ Here it is evident that Dreyfus and Kelly’s nihilistic characterization of Wallace as an author who sought to escape the world is entirely misguided. Wallace wanted to find a way to live in the world meaningfully, despite its daunting insincerity. Real humor does precisely this—seeing both the joy and tragedy

of existence and acknowledging them concurrently with laughter or even a smile. Admittedly, Wallace's self-proclaimed confusion, upon first hearing that critics thought *Infinite Jest* was incredibly funny, may appear to muddy the waters of our own analysis.* However, *Infinite Jest*'s inclusion in the Western canon as a "comic epic" and "comic masterpiece" is not without legitimate foundation, despite its author's "humble" intentions to write a sad book.³⁵

Redeeming Comicality in *Infinite Jest*

Kaiser only briefly acknowledges the thematic prevalence of proximal irony in *Infinite Jest*, claiming that the "size and intensity...prohibit any thoroughgoing study of proximal irony in Wallace's magnum opus."³⁶ I feel that the brevity of his analysis is insufficient, and aim to pick up where he left off in the following section.

At its core, *Infinite Jest* is a dramatized diagnosis of the American obsession with entertainment and pleasure which, as Wallace claims, form the contemporary basis of American views of sacrality today. The book takes its name from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the famous graveyard scene, Hamlet picks up the skull of poor Yorick, a court jester from his childhood, and ponders the sadness of such a man's death: "Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath born me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is."³⁷ The novel is fragmented into multiple plot lines and has a perplexingly non-chronological sequence, where the first few pages actually portray the last event in the book's timeline. The story portrays a dystopian America, where, having annexed most of North America into itself, it has now become the Organization of North American

* David Foster Wallace, by unknown interviewer, *German television ZDF*, November, 2003: Wallace responds to the acclaimed humor of *Infinite Jest* by saying, "I'm not often all that aware of stuff that's really funny in the book. In the American version of *Infinite Jest*, I set out to write a sad book and when people liked it and told me that the thing they like about it was that it was so funny, it was just surprising." [Link](#).

Nations (O.N.A.N).^{*} For the most part, the book takes place in Boston, Massachusetts, oscillating between the settings of the prodigious Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. The respective protagonists of each plotline are Hal Incandenza and Don Gately. Forming the backdrop of the book, is the search for a missing movie cartridge titled “Infinite Jest” of which Hal’s late father, James O. Incandenza, is the acclaimed creator. The film is rumored to be so “fatally entertaining” it renders the viewer utterly incapacitated.³⁸ Furthermore, *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Roulants* (The Wheelchair Assassins), a Quebecois separatist organization who seek to unleash “Infinite Jest” on the American public as an act of terrorism, are ceaselessly searching for the master cartridge. The U.S ‘Office of Unspecified Services’ aims to stop them by finding the master copy first.

The seemingly eschatological imminence of the film’s proliferation throughout the U.S illustrates Wallace’s critique of American culture, where the sacred right of ‘individual choice,’ simultaneously offers liberation while also risking self-annihilation. America is “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual’s right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct. Defended with teeth and bared claws.”³⁹ This results in the American ‘sacred’ right to be killed by entertainment in the pursuit of “[m]aximum pleasure” and “minimal displeasure.”⁴⁰ Wallace’s diagnosis identifies an American view of the sacred that is indeed impoverished. The simple fact that the movie is a threat to the American public is a commentary in and of itself. But, how does this cultural obsession manifest in the comic sensibilities of important characters in the book?

^{*} See e.g. New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Onanism or *coitus interruptus*. Originates from the biblical story of Onan in Gen 38:8-10: ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.” ⁹ But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.

Eventually, the narrator reveals that in a stunning feat of irony, James O. Incandenza—Hal’s later father—intended the film to be a medium of salvation for his son. In fact, he created “Infinite Jest” out of love; to pull his son out of a solipsistic nosedive by simply by making him laugh. Having committed suicide early on in the book’s timeline, James visits Don Gately in the form of a wraith explains that in creating “Infinite Jest,” he had only one intention:

[C]ontrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. . . His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to *laugh*.⁴¹

As a father figure, James was incredibly self-centered. He was almost entirely absent from the childhood of his sons, and thus Hal and his older brother Orin frequently refer to James as “Himself.”⁴² The true irony in James’ intention with “Infinite Jest” is illustrated by his misguided notion of entertainment as something magical. Though his longing to wrench Hal out of his, ‘fall into the womb of solipsism,’ is a loving gesture, it is born out of an impoverished sense of sacrality. For laughter, here, is being viewed merely as a function of entertainment. The result, is a film so entertaining that there is not even room for amusement, only pure narcotization. The Incandenza boys are all quite familiar with their father’s filmic works, particularly Hal.

Hal’s critique of his father’s “dark points” as a filmmaker are particularly significant because they reveal to the reader how James’ intellectual narcissism ultimately subverts his attempts to make a film that is compellingly funny. At one point, Hal remembers that during his father’s career, there were times “when abstract theory-issues seemed to provide an escape from the far more wrenching creative work of making humanly true or entertaining cartridges,” and that his father “made films in certain commercial-type genre modes that so grotesquely exaggerated the formulaic schticks of the genres that they became ironic metacinematic parodies

on the genres.”⁴³ Perhaps no film illustrates this obsession with abstract theory better than, “the most hated Incandenza film, a variable length one called *The Joke*.”⁴⁴ ‘The Joke’—Hal’s father’s most hated film—was marketed through an “anti-ad” campaign where viewers were overtly warned, “*You Are Strongly Advised Not to See This Film.*” Taking this to be a “cleverly ironic anti-ad joke,” a variety of “art-film habitues” would pile into showings for *The Joke*, only to find that they were watching a live feed of themselves watching themselves on screen:

The Joke’s total running time was just exactly as long as there were even one cross-legged patron left in the theater to watch his own huge projected image gazing back down at him with the special distaste of a disgusted and ripped-off-feeling art film patron, which ended up being more than maybe twenty minutes only when there were critics or film academics in the seats, who studied themselves studying themselves taking notes with endless fascination and finally left only when the espresso finally impelled them to the loo.⁴⁵

It is possible that the aesthetically forced self-reflexivity of ‘The Joke’ is precisely its central thesis. James’ intention with *Infinite Jest* was to provoke a laugh out of his son to facilitate his salvation from solipsism. However, James had in fact “confessed that he’d loved the fact that *The Joke* was so publicly static and simple-minded and dumb, and that those rare critics who defended the film by arguing at convoluted length that the simple minded stasis was precisely the film’s aesthetic thesis were dead wrong, as usual.”⁴⁶ Thus, James most likely elevated the stylistic narcissism above any real concern with creating works with true substance to them. With Incandenza reportedly claiming that the ‘simple minded stasis’ was *not* the essential thesis of the work, it is safe to assume that self-centered intellectualism was his true motivation. As Hal claimed, his father’s obsessions with entertainment and escape resulted in his avoidance of creating films that were truly meaningful and human. Though his notion of entertainment as magical is slightly impoverished, his acclaimed intention of making Hal laugh as of a means of combatting solipsism is significant, and beckons us to analyze the nature of laughter in the book.

Kaiser's view of, 'enworldedness,' serves as the point of departure for our examination of the comic's importance in *Infinite Jest*, specifically in the context of laughter. In his essay, Kaiser explains that, "Wallace's characters in *Infinite Jest* frequently demonstrate the shifting relationship between the comic and tragic that comes out of the enworlded, experiential networks in which they struggle to establish a sense of self."⁴⁷ Kaiser argues that Wallace's humor resembles the *komisch* style of Kafka. This is most apparent in the narrator's explicit description of different character's laughs in *Infinite Jest*. For instance, the mother of Ennet House member Jack Lenz, is said to have a laugh which makes it sound like "she was being eaten alive."⁴⁸ Similarly, another Ennet House member's laugh "always sounds like she's being eviscerated."⁴⁹ This description of laughter perhaps comes out of Wallace's description of Kafka's laughter. In an interview with German Television station ZDF, Wallace was asked if he thought it was cliché that something funny had to come out of something sad. With a pained look on his face, he responds:

[S]ome of what I teach is Kafka, and there's a story about Kafka that in some of Kafka's most horrific stories, his neighbors would complain because he would be laughing so hard late at night as he wrote these stories. He found them very, very funny. And there are things in them that are funny. But, I don't know that many people would understand laughing so hard that your neighbor's would complain...⁵⁰

In many respects then, the coexistent sentiments of amusement and tragedy in different character's laughs turns out to be reminiscent of an author whose sense of humor Wallace deeply admired. While this is an explicit example of how Wallace's commentary resembles Kafka's *komisch* style, Wallace develops a much broader continuum of comic sensibilities that further illuminate the sacred power of the comic phenomenon.

Wallace best showcases the sacred power of comicality in the setting of various A.A. meetings throughout the book, where the comic frequently manifests itself as an 'intrusion.' The

concept of the comic intrusion is most notably explicated by Peter Berger in his book, *Redeeming Laughter*. In the book, Berger demonstrates the significant phenomenological similarities between a comic and sacred experience. The similarities between the two spheres as external sources of power are highly relevant for our refutation of Dreyfus and Kelly's critique that Wallace's notion of sacrality is impoverished. Early on in the book, Berger explains that, "the comic is ubiquitous in ordinary, everyday life."⁵¹ For Berger, the comic "weaves in and out of ordinary experience"⁵² and unless we are "philosophically inclined"⁵³ we most likely do not often inquire into the nature of its appearance. Subsequently, Berger acknowledges that most often "the comic typically appears as an *intrusion*."⁵⁴ With the recognition of the comic's intrusive nature, it is sufficient to say that the comic can be seen as a varied form of perception, wholly other from the consistent perception which dominates a majority of our everyday interactions and experiences. Berger starts his investigation by conceiving of the comic as a form which is perceived by us, which intrudes into our everyday experiences, and has a particularly "fugitive"⁵⁵ or transient nature. While the comic *can* be manufactured or formulated, through the telling of a joke or the performance of a comedy act, it most often "*happens to or befalls* the individual."⁵⁶ He goes on to argue that the comic is not only something to be perceived, but it is actually a fundamental form of human perception; "an exclusively human phenomenon."⁵⁷

To summarize Berger's main points, the comic phenomenon, is perceived in an otherwise undisclosed dimension of reality. Furthermore, Berger argues that our perception of the comic occurs in every possible realm of experience.⁵⁸ Berger's explanation of the comic as an other-worldly phenomenon leaves us with two important conclusions that will highlight the significance of the various scenes from *Infinite Jest*. First, the comic is a transient phenomenon which, in everyday life, most often occurs as an intrusion. Second, while the comic manifests itself as a phenomenon, one's comic sensibility is indicative of particular *form of perception*. We

can now begin to understand the inextricable nature of the relationship between the comic and the sacred and how that entanglement is played out in *Infinite Jest*.

Using the confessional-style A.A. meetings as a backdrop, Wallace portrays how different character's comic sensibilities are often receptive to something that manifests outside them. Furthermore, it manifests outside the realm of their willing it. Don Gately is the central character of the Ennet House plotline in the book. He is an ex-Demerol-addict and a live-in staffer at the recovery house. Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace channels his conception of A.A. primarily through Gately, often through internal remarks about the nature of A.A. and an addict's relationship to its sometimes frustrating demands. For example, Gately is ever-conscious of the fact that "A Boston AA is very sensitive to the presence of ego."⁵⁹ It is for precisely this reason that a self-conscious speaker who attends one of the meetings is "dreadfully, transparently unfunny: painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse and impress them."⁶⁰ This speaker's attempts to put forth a comical account of his struggles are instead received painfully by the AA's who respectfully encourage the speaker to just "Keep Coming!"—thus making the speaker comical himself.⁶¹ The speaker who follows takes a completely different approach, and is met with a completely different response. "In equally paradoxical contrast," the next speaker's story elicits a completely unintended reaction. Crippled by his addiction, he explains that at work, he often fakes repairs with a hammer whenever people try to enter his department store. The confession gets an uproariously comic response from the A.A.'s in the room:

What I did finally, Jesus I don't know where I got such a stupid idea from, I brought this hammer in from home and brought it in and kept it right there under my desk, on the floor, and when somebody knocked at the door I'd just. I'd sort of *dive* onto the floor and crawl under the desk and grab up the hammer, and I'd start in to pounding on the leg of the desk and hard-like whacketa whacketa, like I was fixing something down there. And if they opened the door finally and came in anyhow or came in to bitch about me not opening the door I'd just stay out of

sight under there pounding away like hell and I'd yell out I was going to be a moment, just a moment, emergency repairs, be with them momentarily.⁶²

The AA's in the audience reply by 'roaring,' 'wheezing,' and 'stomping both feet on the floor.' Gately explains, "even though, as the speaker's confusion at their delight openly betrays, the story wasn't meant to be one bit funny: it was just the truth."⁶³ Much to the surprise of the speaker, then, his truthful sharing allowed for the comic phenomenon to manifest itself in the room, resulting in an experience that is healing for various members of the audience.

Needless to say, the comic phenomenon is prevalent throughout *Infinite Jest*. Even more importantly, Wallace's illustration reinforces the comic's redemptive potential for recovering a genuine sense of spirituality for what he refers to as 'unwilling agnostics.' As a great thinker of his time, Wallace believed that suffering was an inherent part of being human. As a great writer of his time, he believed that fiction had a major role to play in accepting that fact sincerely. In a rough draft of his Commencement speech to Kenyon College, he wrote that, "the two greatest vectors of meaning in daily life are jokes and clichés."⁶⁴ For him, fiction was a kind of art, and the comic had a major role to play in making that art genuinely important for his readers. Wallace believed people were drawn to art because it offered "an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of 'generalization' of suffering."⁶⁵ Throughout his entire career, Wallace was desperate to offer something more to his readers than a simple distraction from everyday suffering. He wanted to give his readers "imaginative access to other selves."⁶⁶ Before writing *Infinite Jest*, he spent a great deal of time reflecting on his career as a young writer, ultimately disavowing the popular tendency among writers of his generation to merely be clever for clever's sake. This realization awakened him to the less redemptive parts of his own comic sensibility; the parts that had "a grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that's nothing but funny, and which [he] sometimes [stuck] in for no other

reason than funniness.”⁶⁷ The fact that it can be difficult to tell whether not comical passages are genuine comedy or merely ‘gags’ can make *Infinite Jest* a frustrating read. Even so, one character in the book stands as a testament to the inextricable nature between the comic and the sacred; between happiness and suffering. In doing so, he makes the readers job a bit easier. In balancing the two spheres, Mario Incandenza—brother of protagonist Hal—shows how the coexistence of the comic and the sacred actually yields joy.

Chapter 2—Interdependence of the Comic and the Sacred

Religious expression functions within a delicate dialectic between faith and laughter. On the one side is the peril of idolatry; on the other side is the peril of cynicism. Faith without laughter leads to dogmatism, while laughter without faith leads to despair.

-H. Conrad Hyers, *Holy Laughter*

The Dialectic of the Comic and the Sacred

In his 1969 essay titled, “The Comic Profanation of the Sacred,” M. Conrad Hyers, a late American Professor of Religion and Ordained Presbyterian Minister⁶⁸, continued a project that he believed the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard started in the 19th century. In the essay, Hyers addresses the importance of sacrality for human existence. Hyers’ believed that most—if not all—examinations of sacrality had largely ignored the important role that the comic had to play in “the dialectical interrelation of the sacred and the comic, of holiness and humor.”⁶⁹ While Hyers initially cites Kierkegaard for his contributions to the philosophical literature on the comic phenomenon, he makes no explicit references to Kierkegaard’s most extensive work on the topic, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Even so, Hyers’ insistence on the interdependent nature of sacrality and comicality is lucid and can indeed be substantiated by ample references to Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*, which I analyze in Chapter 3.

Hyers begins the essay by first addressing the skepticism of many thinkers before him who doubted whether or not humor belonged in a legitimate discussion of Religion and sacrality. He first clarifies that, “there is a qualitative difference between taking something humorously and taking it lightly. Genuine seriousness is human; and insofar as it remembers its humanity it finds the profane act of humor not sacrilege but a moral and religious necessity.”⁷⁰ Hyers founds his argument on the idea that many orthodox religions, specifically Christianity, have the tendency to devolve into pretentiousness and absolutism. In his opinion, the arrogance of these

sentiments proves that “the absence of humor and the loss of the comic perspective signifies the pride symbolized by the fall, and comedy a reminder of paradise lost.”⁷¹ Hyers moves on to address the correlation between the sacred and the comic. Citing Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Hyers argues that the balance achieved by a comic profanation of the sacred actually ensures cultural health. One example he gives is that of religious festivals wherein “a restriction is imposed on the ultimacy of the sacred, preventing it from becoming relentlessly and irrevocably absolute. The profanation of the sacred keeps the religious cosmos and the moral cosmos, on the one hand, psychologically human and, on the other hand, ontologically human.”⁷² The idea of ontological foundation will be crucial to our later considerations in Chapter 3.

Hyers argues that the balanced interrelation of the comic and the sacred facilitates religious existence. In this way, then, he further argues that the two phenomena are interdependent: “the sacred apart from the comic... is as close in its own way to the demonic as is the comic apart from the sacred.”⁷³ Now, Hyers covers his bases by acknowledging that humor, as an existential perspective, in no way guarantees the kind of religious expression that he sees in the dialectic he is proposing. The dialectic is a delicate one, the imbalance of which leads to demonic possibilities in both realms—hence the epigram to this chapter.⁷⁴ At this point, Hyers makes what is possibly his most important point. He further acknowledges that overtly external forms of humor—namely humiliation and an overall lack of seriousness—are not what he is talking about. Instead, his proposition refers to an ‘inner’ dialectic: “[i]n this context the comic spirit is more than a keen wit, quick repartee, clever wordplay, or the wag’s talent for making others laugh.”⁷⁵ Hyers’ proposition entails a perception of the comic phenomenon, but one that perceives the sacred just as profoundly.

As mentioned above, Hyers is aware of the fact that “[h]umor can become an easy path of escape from intellectual labor, moral accountability, and religious commitment. It can degenerate into a frivolous diversion from the tortuous and often intractable issues that confront mankind.”⁷⁶ He also comes to the same conclusion that many theologians and philosophers had before him; namely that “In itself [humor] is powerless to solve the deepest problems of human existence.”⁷⁷ However, he surpasses the theologians and thinkers before him by going one step further and explaining that for this very reason “[t]he comic, therefore, requires the sacred as much as does the sacred the comic” and that with the sacred as its ground, “[the comic] can play its own peculiar role in the inner dialectic of the sacred and the comic.”⁷⁸ Hyers insistence on an inner-dialectical balance between two seemingly opposing phenomena give an entirely newfound significance to our consideration of the comic phenomenon. According to Hyers, the coincidence of the comic and the sacred indicates a supremely important relationship; one that urges us to further analyze the significance of their interdependence. I substantiate his argument using specific references to Kierkegaard in Chapter 3. For now, I argue that *Infinite Jest* bears the resources for allowing us to observe his proposition in a literary setting.

Imaginative Access through Mario Incandenza

There is a small group of scholars who have examined the particularly religious significance of Mario Incandenza, Hal’s brother, in *Infinite Jest*. For instance, Michael J. O’Connell argues that Mario “represents the possibility of human decency, and thus the existence of God in the world.”⁷⁹ With Gately as a representation of faithful surrender in the novel, O’Connell sees Mario as symbolic of the need for community support.⁸⁰ In addition to O’Connell, David Gordon Laird uses Mario as an example of “the culmination of *Infinite Jest*’s doctrinal engagement with Christian soteriology.”⁸¹ The recognition here of Mario’s unique

standing as one of the most redeemable characters in the book is cause enough for our own consideration of him. Both O'Connell and Laird's sensitivity to his significance is well-founded. I aim to demonstrate that Mario's character validates Hyers' argument about religious existence.

By all accounts, descriptions of Mario in the novel portray him as a deeply pitiable and sad character, akin to Beckett's Molloy. A passage detailing Mario's birth explains the extent of both his mental and physical disabilities, which serve as his defining characteristics. Mario was actually a complete surprise and his mother finds herself overcome with pain "in the seventh month of a hidden pregnancy."⁸² Having sat down on a flight of stairs with her husband James, "the first birth of the Incandenza's second son was a surprise"⁸³ and even more gruesome given that "he had to be more or less scraped out, Mario, like the meat of an oyster from a womb to whose sides he'd been found spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive, attached by cords of sinew at both feet and a hand, the other fist stuck to his face by the same material."⁸⁴ The damage of his 'first birth,' resulted in serious physical disability, "[forcing] Mario to move in the sort of lurchy half-stumble of a vaudeville inebriate, body tilted way forward as if into a wind, right on the edge of pitching face forward onto the ground, which as a child he did fairly often."⁸⁵ As far as his mental disability is concerned, although he is described elsewhere in the novel as "a hopeless retard,"⁸⁶ Mario is, "slow... the Brandeis C.D.C found – but *not*, verifiably *not*, retarded or cognitively damaged or bradyphrenic, more like refracted, almost, ever so slightly epistemically bent, a pole poked into mental water and just a little off and just taking a little bit longer, in the manner of refracted things."⁸⁷ Mario's physical disabilities are alleviated by a Rude Goldberg assembly of mechanical parts including a "NNYC-apartment-door-style police lock, a .7-meter steel pole that extends from a special Velcroed vest and angles about 40° down and out to a slotted piece of lead blocking... placed by someone understanding and prehensile on the ground before him."⁸⁸ In the book, Mario's life at ETA "is by all appearances

kind of a sad and left-out-type existence.”⁸⁹ Despite his apparently ‘sad existence,’ coupled with his strikingly deformed physical appearance, one of Mario’s most characteristic features is his smile.

Consistent descriptions of Mario’s facial features, including his smile, are blatant signifiers of his comic sensibility which evidently plays a major role in his depiction as the only joyful character in *Infinite Jest*. In Simon Critchley’s book, *On Humour*, he claims that, “it is the smile that is powerfully emblematic of the human” and that in certain cases, smiling “is the essence of humour.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, Critchley explains “the smile does not bring happiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation... We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.”⁹¹ Critchley’s illuminates the meaningful aspects of Mario’s smile throughout the novel. First, various descriptions suggest that Mario is almost always smiling, and not entirely of his own volition. For instance, the narrator notes points out that Mario’s smile is, “involuntarily constant.”⁹² In another instance, Mario is described as, “constantly grinning, like an idiot,” with his face sometimes “[resembling] a comically distorted face made to amuse an infant.”⁹³ At the funeral for one of his friends named Clipperton Mario even keeps his smile through tears.⁹⁴ Perhaps the most significant description of his comic disposition is the fact that it is seemingly affected by a power outside of his control. Not only is Mario’s constant smile involuntary, “he also has the tendency to involuntarily laugh with others.”⁹⁵ Mario’s physical incapacitation seems like it would be anything but grounds for joy. However, Mario frequently smiles despite his disabilities and his comic sensibility renders him the only truly joyful character in the entire novel.

Mario’s joy manifests in the coincidence of comedy and sacrality in scenes that are both implicitly and explicitly humorous. These scenes thematically blend the comic and the sacred together resulting in the fairly overt portrayal of Mario as the only character in the book who

takes joy in anything. For instance, Mario inherited his love of filmmaking from his father and is “notoriously fond of undulating flesh-colored squares and will jump at any opportunity to edit them in over people’s faces.”⁹⁶ Contrasted with the rampancy of drug addiction in the book, Mario’s love for simple pleasures depicts his innocence and joyfulness clearly. For example, he has a close relationship with the school’s tennis coach, Gerhard Schtitt, and is delighted merely by bottoming out in Schtitt’s car or watching him blow failed smoke rings.⁹⁷ In many respects, Mario’s joy calls to mind a quotation that Wallace would make much later make in his Commencement speech to Kenyon College in 2005. In the speech, he characterizes the allure of Religion as he sees it: “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 the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.”⁹⁸ Indeed, Mario is the only one in the book who experiences wholesome joy and delight. In this way, Mario is emblematic of the redemption that had been lacking in the postmodern fiction that Wallace wanted to rise above:

[W]e already know U.S culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn’t engage anybody. What’s engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn’t have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not?⁹⁹

Wallace’s diagnosis engages his readers because it offers examinations of the human capacities that he was thoroughly interested in: that postmodern novelists before him failed to explore. Through Mario, he illustrates that the coincidence of comedy and sacrality yields a genuinely enlightening perspective in that values, ‘stuff that doesn’t have a price.’

Mario should make the readers laugh throughout their time with *Infinite Jest*, as a means of returning them to a distinctly human faculty of perception. Even more importantly, Mario’s

alleged status as a uniquely sacred and joyful character demonstrates the validity of Hyers' idea. Mario's comical enjoyment manifests itself in many different forms. For instance, in a few scenes Mario's obvious clumsiness is followed by mockery, even from his own family. At one point walking down the street with Schtitt, the two are mocked by three passing kids.¹⁰⁰ At another point, Mario falls out of his chair at dinner only to be "helped up by one of the tennis players amid much hilarity."¹⁰¹ These scenes are explicit references of humor in the book, which lead the reader to pity "poor old Mario."¹⁰² Upon closer investigation to Mario's pitiable situation, we find that really, the joke is on us. One scene in particular describes Mario's sadness, not at his own 'misfortune,' but the nihilism of others:

The worst-feeling thing that happened today was at lunch when Michael Pemulis told Mario he had an idea for setting up a Dial-a-Prayer telephone service for atheists in which the atheist dials the number and the line just rings and rings and no one answers. It was a joke and a good one, and Mario got it; what was unpleasant was that *Mario was the only one at the big table whose laugh was a happy laugh*; everybody else sort of looked down like they were laughing at somebody with a disability. The whole issue was far above Mario's head, and he was unable to understand Lyle's replies when he had tried to bring the confusion up. And Hal was for once no help, because Hal seemed even more uncomfortable and embarrassed than the fellows at lunch, and when Mario brought up real stuff Hal called him Booboo and acted like he'd wet himself and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change.¹⁰³

Mario's happiness here is a function of his comic disposition, which evidently disburdens him of the despairing possibility that the line would in fact ring and ring for anyone that dialed in. While it disburdens him, this is not to say that he does not comprehend the great tragedy inhered in such a joke. This is precisely what makes Mario's comic disposition authentic. The other kids at the table exemplify a more detached, ironic laughter, a perfect example of the kind of postmodern irony that Wallace abhorred. They all look down self-consciously, too afraid to treat such a serious topic with any kind of sincerity. When Mario tries to bring up his confusion with the rest of the group, they mock his physical disability and treat him like an infant. For once, the

fit of ironic laughter does not facilitate a pleasurable detachment from the situation, as it does for the Wallace's TV viewers he describes in the essay on Television. This time, the joke is on everyone else at the table. Mario is the only one who is joyful, because he is not beholden to anything which threatens to, 'eat him alive.' In this way, Wallace is moving past the self-obsessed avant-garde style that he sought to disavow. It is tempting to see Mario's sincerity as naïve. Wallace shows us—through the reaction of Mario's classmates—that the disgust with naiveté renders us deeply sad. Mario's utility as a character through whom Wallace inverts cultural norms does not stop here.

Ultimately, Mario's true literary function is to grant the reader "imaginative access to other selves."¹⁰⁴ Wallace arguably does this with Mario by implicitly depicting him in comical situations that are not necessarily funny for the characters, but funny for the reader. These kinds of situations happen throughout the novel and, again, they reiterate Wallace's sense that the comic is something which intrudes into our perception, and yet is predicated on it all at once. For example, Mario walks in to Coach Schtitt's room to find him asleep in a chair. Due to certain "grim childhood experiences at a BMW-sponsored 'Quality-Control-Orientated Austrian Akademie,'" Schtitt can only fall asleep to the sound of "excruciatingly loud European Opera."¹⁰⁵ As Mario walks in to greet him, Schtitt is dead to the world and does not awake for anything, "not even when Mario falls twice, loudly, trying to get to the door with his hands over his ears."¹⁰⁶ The comicality of Mario's situation manifests itself in the juxtaposition of his efforts to engage in human interaction that are only met with physical injury and absurdity. In another comical duet between Schtitt and Mario, they are walking through the streets of Boston. Schtitt philosophizes with Mario, the only one "with whom Schtitt speaks candidly, lets his pedagogical hair down."¹⁰⁷ He rambles on to Mario about "the rather Kanto-Hegelian idea that jr. athletics [is] basically just training for citizenship, that jr. athletics [is about learning to sacrifice the hot

narrow imperatives of the Self.”¹⁰⁸ Along the way, the comic befalls them as a situational interjection when Mario “clips his shoulder on the green steel edge of a dumpster, pirouetting halfway to the cement before Schtitt darts in to catch him, and it almost looks like they’re doing a dance-floor dip.”¹⁰⁹ Not missing a beat, Schtitt continues his elaboration, “life’s endless war against the self you cannot live without”: the game of tennis.¹¹⁰ The comic interjection here is subtle, yet it highlights the befallen nature of the comic as a magical perspective that intensifies the experience of Wallace’s fiction, and though it may be a coincidence, one description of Mario seems to fly directly in the face of Dreyfus and Kelly’s book.

In the midst of these comical passages, Mario’s character stands out as “a very rare and shining thing.”¹¹¹ Mario’s comical portrayal, then, is meant to avail us of the comic’s redemptive potential. Wallace illustrates this most clearly when in the last few pages of the book later, Mario actually plays a soteriological role in the spiritual life of Barry Loach, another coach at ETA. Barry Loach has at this point been challenged by his brother to stand out in the streets of Boston among the homeless until he can get just one person to touch him. Well into the ninth month of the challenge, Barry is risking permanent disappearance “into the fringes and dregs of metro Boston street life.”¹¹² Just when his faith in human decency is about to fail, he is redeemed when none other than Mario Incandenza reaches out and touches his hand. While both Mario’s physical and mental disabilities suggest that his life is, in all respects, pitiable and sad, Wallace portrays him as the only truly happy character in the book. Furthermore, Mario’s explicit affinity for the comic forms the basis of his status as joyful character. Most characters in the book exhibit signs of unwilling agnosticism, utterly afraid of addressing meaningful situations with a sense of sincerity. Mario on the other hand, is a unique and ‘shining’ character in the novel, playing the role of a deeply redeeming character who empowers the reader to gain ‘imaginative access,’ to his comic sensibility. While Mario is one character who illustrates the redemptive potential of

the comic and the sacred's co-incidence, he is not the only one through whom we can observe the potential recovery of religiousness in the modern world.

As an author, Wallace understood that the comic had many roles to play in everyday life. For instance, he once stated that, "there are forms of humor which offer escapes from pain and forms of humor that transfigure pain."¹¹³ While I see Mario's status in the book as a shining character clearly, the degree to which he 'transfigures' or 'escapes' from pain through his comic disposition may very well be subjective. Wallace saw Kafka's humor as a comic sensibility that archetypally transfigured pain. Even more so, Wallace adored Kafka's humor, particularly for its religious nature, claiming that it was "finally, a religious humor, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms, a harrowing spirituality."¹¹⁴ While there is plenty of room to analyze Wallace's work through the lens of any one of these three comparisons, Wallace's allusion to Kierkegaard as a paragon for 'religious humor,' is the most significant for our own analysis, given the theological nature of its content. In many ways, Wallace's endeavor as a thinker was not unlike Kierkegaard's, seeing as both of their canons were rooted in the opposition of ideologies which they both found to be inherently destructive of their cultures. Wallace's adversaries were the postmodern ironists and Television. Kierkegaard's, on the other hand, were speculative thinkers and Hegel.

Wallace and Kierkegaard were both thinkers who realized the great faults of their respective generations. One way to see this is by observing what each thinker sought to achieve in their respective philosophies. While Kierkegaard recognized the negative influence of Hegel on Christianity, Wallace sought to bring attention to the effects that Television had on American culture. *Infinite Jest* is most certainly Wallace's greatest attempts to illuminate the malaise that Television was accelerating. Wallace's rejection of cultural postmodernism is very similar to Kierkegaard's rejection of speculative thought. Wallace's unwavering belief in the power of

fiction made him quick to defend any cultural movement which threatened to make it less powerful. In fact, he regarded postmodernism as “fiction’s fall from biblical grace.”¹¹⁵ Wallace had always tried to be open about his intentions as a writer, because he wanted to salvage the magical qualities of fiction. Though Kierkegaard published a majority of his works pseudonymously, he arguably took the same approach. At the end of the *Postscript* in a chapter titled, “A First and Last Explanation” he disclosed himself as the author of nearly all his known works. Pseudonymity is one of the more identifiable characteristics of his philosophical works.¹¹⁶ In fact he once famously said that “the highest principles for all thinking [could only] be demonstrated indirectly (negatively).”¹¹⁷ While his style may seem sensible in retrospect, Kierkegaard found it very difficult to come up with a format to express what he thought were profound truths. He claimed that “just because I had become clear about the form of communication, it did not mean that I had something to communicate.”¹¹⁸ That being said, one of the things Kierkegaard strove to achieve in the *Postscript* was to redeem Christianity. The best way Kierkegaard could conceive of redeeming Christianity was by making it unbelievably difficult to become one. In a 1993 interview with Wallace, Larry McCaffery identified that Wallace appeared to be “making the familiar strange” in his books.¹¹⁹ In the same ways that Kierkegaard believed that it had become so easy to become a Christian, so familiar, Wallace saw that it was important to realize that our instinctual aversion to difficulty might not be a good thing; “that most ‘familiarity’ is mediated and delusive.”¹²⁰

Kierkegaard’s indirect approach, then, is similar to Wallace’s de-familiarization of the familiar. Wallace very much intended to offer his readers a respite from the daunting solipsism of modern life. Again, in a manner eerily similar to Kierkegaard, Wallace saw that the magic of fiction lay in its paradoxical nature:

[I]f you're going to try not just to depict the way a culture's bound and defined by meditated gratification and image, but somehow to redeem it, or at least fight a rearguard against it, then what you're going to be doing is paradoxical. You're at once allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche— the writer's, or some character's, etc.—and you're "also" trying to antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone... This paradox is what makes good fiction sort of magical, I think.¹²¹

Wallace was truly skeptical of whether or not he could shed his arrogant, postmodern tendencies and "provide a payoff and communicate a function rather than just seem jumbled and prolix."¹²² Thus, *Infinite Jest* took on a kind of indirect form, by which he could communicate profound truths without subjecting them to scrutiny of modern cynicism. In the following chapter, I argue that Wallace's status as an epically comic writer, coupled with Kierkegaard's epic commentary on the comic phenomenon reveals the religious capacity inhered in Wallace's illustrations of modern spirituality.

Chapter 3: Kierkegaard's Religiousness in *Infinite Jest*

Hidden inwardness must also discover the comic, which is present not because the religious person is different from others but because, although most heavily burdened by sustaining an eternal recollecting of guilt, he is just like everyone else.

-Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else.

-David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The following chapter presupposes a legitimate inclusion of the comic phenomenon in any discussion regarding modern spirituality. Commentaries from prominent contemporary theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr give precedent to such an assumption.* Ironically enough, out of all 19th century theologians, the ‘melancholy Dane,’ Søren Kierkegaard had the most to say about the comic phenomenon.¹²³ His most comprehensive work on the topic—the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—was written pseudonymously under the name Johannes Climacus or ‘John the Climber.’ Climacus was a self-proclaimed humorist, who understood Christianity, but longed to understand what it was truly like to be a Christian. Furthermore, his primary motivation behind writing the *Postscript* was to re-examine the significance of Christianity for the modern man. Now, as Kenneth Hamilton aptly notes in *The Promise of Kierkegaard*, it is easy for one to get bogged down in the particularities of any one of Kierkegaard’s complex, philosophical works.¹²⁴ Heeding his warning in earnestness, we will nevertheless attempt to gain an understanding of the comic phenomenon as Kierkegaard saw it.

* See e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr. Robert McAfee Brown ed. *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, “Humour and Faith” (Yale UP: New Haven, 1986), 111: “Humor is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer.”

Kierkegaard's Dialectical Framework

Climacus wrote the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with the intention of positing an antithesis to Hegel's claims made in his *Logic*.^{*} Climacus refers to the Hegelian system of thinking as 'speculative.' Speculation was an inherently objective way of looking at existence. Climacus argued for a fundamentally different view, one which he refers to as 'inwardness.' Inwardness implied that the existing individual viewed existence subjectively[†] as opposed to objectively. Subsequently, speculative thought and inwardness each assumed fundamentally different conceptions of truth. Climacus explains that, "*Objectively the emphasis is on **what** is said; subjectively the emphasis is on **how** it is said.*"¹²⁵ Given their differing conceptions of truth, each viewed the truth of Christianity in entirely different ways. For instance: "[t]he *objective issue*, then, would be about **the truth** of Christianity. The *subjective issue* is about the **individual's relationship** to Christianity."¹²⁶ Given the popularity of Hegel's speculative thought at the time, Climacus felt the need to clarify that Christianity itself was not merely a doctrine, but an "existence communication."¹²⁷ Speculative thought—in its aspiration towards attaining pure objectivity (i.e. the unity of thinking and being)—sought to abstract itself from existence. To Climacus, this kind of teleological effort was a blatant denial of existential facticity.¹²⁸ The very nature of human being is that "a human being thinks and exists, and existence [Existents] separates thinking and being, holds them apart from each other in

* See e.g. Kenneth Hamilton, *The Promise of Kierkegaard*. (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1969), 43-45: As Hamilton notes, any understanding of Kierkegaard's theological contributions can be grounded in his fundamental rejection of Hegelian philosophy.

† In order to mitigate any confusion regarding Kierkegaard's concept of subjectivity, it is worthwhile to note that it does not indicate a solipsistic *mora relativism* commonly attributed to the postmodern movement. Put simply, Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity can be thought of in terms of that which matters to one most deeply. Being that humans exist in such a way that true empathy is impossible, Kierkegaard rejected the idea that we should try to transcend out subjective perception. Instead, Kierkegaard advocated for a taking up of one's most personal cares in the deepest way possible. Religiousness is the most personal aspect of one's existence, which is why Kierkegaard believed that it could only be found in the secrecy of 'hidden inwardness.'

succession.”¹²⁹ Subsequently, the speculative thinker’s attempt to be “exclusively eternal within time” was an “arrogation” in Climacus’ eyes.^{130*}

The existence medium implied an inescapable ‘claim of existence’[†] on the existing individual. Rather than calling for escape from this medium, Climacus argued for a return to inwardness. Essentially, objective abstraction made it impossible for one to be legitimately concerned about existence.¹³¹ Climacus argued that “all essential decision, [was and is] rooted in subjectivity.”¹³² This had to be the case, because subjectivity is essentially “an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness.”¹³³ Therefore, Climacus believed that subjective isolation was the only true path by which the existing individual could truly secure their own happiness. Furthermore, Christianity was an existence communication that “wants the subject to be infinitely concerned about himself.”¹³⁴ Climacus expressed throughout the *Postscript* that the movement away from philosophical objectivity towards subjective isolation had to be carried out through the process of “double reflection”; the initiatory movement of his dialectical framework.[‡]

For Climacus, there are essentially three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical and the religious. Between each sphere, there are corresponding border territories: irony and humor. Irony is the boundary between the esthetic and the ethical while humor is the boundary between

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992), p. 19. A good illustration of the speculative thinker’s hubris is demonstrated by Climacus’ identification of God as the only entity to whom speculation is truly available: “[the speculative thinker] is he who himself is outside existence and yet in existence, who in his eternity is forever concluded and yet includes existence within himself—it is God.”

† Ibid. p. 73. Essentially, individual human beings exist, “continually in the process of becoming.” Consequently, Climacus argues that, “even if a good-natured thinker is so absentminded as to forget that he himself is existing, speculative thought and absentmindedness are still not quite the same thing. On the contrary, that he himself is existing implies the claim of existence upon him.”

‡ Ibid. p. 73. Climacus’ explains that, “[t]he reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker’s double-reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but, as existing in this thinking, as acquiring this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.”

the ethical and the religious.^{135*} Within the larger existence spheres, there are particular stages. What is most significant about the stages is that each one can be qualitatively differentiated based on the nature of their comic sensibility. Climacus claimed that the comic was, “present in every stage of life (*except that the position is different*), because where there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comic is present.”^{136†} The comic phenomenon, then, manifests itself primarily in the contradictions of life and varying degrees of the comic sensibility will perceive the contradiction differently. Climacus organizes the dialectical stages hierarchically based on the degree to which they each have the comic outside themselves.¹³⁷

The particular stages are Immediacy → Finite Common Sense; Irony → Ethics with irony as its incognito → Humor; Religiousness with humor as its incognito (Religiousness A) → Christianity (Religiousness B).¹³⁸ Immediacy, being the first stage, has the comic completely outside itself. For instance, the comic is outside of immediacy “because wherever there is life there is contradiction, but the contradiction is not in the immediacy and therefore comes from the

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992), p. 253 and 504. Esthetic existence is best characterized as, “an existence possibility that cannot attain existence.” An aesthete exists immersed entirely in the sensuousness of existence, but at most exists in the form of pure possibility which inevitably results in, “a depression that must be worked upon ethically.” Through irony, the aesthete detaches himself from the immediacy of his sensuous existence, “because he comprehends the contradiction between the mode in which he exists in his inner being and his not expressing it in his outer appearance.” The ethicist then differentiates himself from the superficiality of immediacy in “the movement by which he inwardly joins his outward life together with the infinite requirement of the ethical.”

See also e.g. Mark C. Taylor, “Humor and Humorist” in *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana: Concepts and Alternative in Kierkegaard*, Marie Mikulova Thulstrup ed. (Copenhagen: C.A Reitzels Boghandel, 1980). p. 222. Taylor explains that inward movement of the ethicist can be contextualized by the fact that, “the ethicist understands life primarily in terms of duty.”

† See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992), p. 515 f.n. We get a better understanding of Climacus’ comic sensibility a few paragraphs later where he illustrates the comic phenomenon he is talking about by telling a few jokes. For example, he tells a small tale about a man who applies for a permit to be an innkeeper, but sadly is turned down. This in and of itself is not comical. However, he goes on to explain that, “if [the application] is turned down because there are so few innkeepers, it is comic, because the reason for the application is used as the reason against it.”

outside.”^{139*} This mode of comic perception is vastly contrasted with a stage like humor. In humor, the comic phenomenon undergoes a kind of diffusion in the sense that “[h]umor has the comic *within itself*.” While humor has the comic within itself, Climacus argues that its compartmental flaw is that it is completely immersed in the comic. This immersion is the humorist’s way of legitimizing his life. It is flawed because it does not inherently have any relation to God and therefore his existence is not characterized by religiousness. Even so, the humorist bears redemptive qualities. For example, though the humorist himself is not religious, he is in fact “the closest approximation to the religious person.”¹⁴⁰ While both the religious person and the humorist can assume the same outward appearance, they are qualitatively differentiated by the degrees of their respective inwardness:

In his innermost being, the religious person is anything but a humorist; on the contrary, he is absolutely engaged in his relationship to God. Neither does he place the comic between himself and the others in order to make them ludicrous or to laugh at them (such an outward orientation is away from religiousness), but since he, by virtue of true religiousness as hidden inwardness, does not dare to express it in the outer world, because it is thereby secularized, he must continually discover the contradiction. Just because he still has not been entirely successful in calling back the inwardness, humor becomes his incognito and an *indicium* [indicator]. He does not hide his inwardness in order to perceive others as comic; no, just the opposite—in order that the inwardness within him can truly be, he hides it, and he thereby discovers the comic, but he does not take the time to comprehend it. Neither does he feel himself to be better than others, because such comparative religiousness is outwardness and thus not religiousness.¹⁴¹

The first stage of religious existence alluded to here is what Climacus calls ‘Religiousness A’ or “the religiousness that has humor as its incognito.” ‘Religiousness B’ or Christianity will be the primary stage of our concern.

* In sensuous existence one exists inextricably from their environment, as an infant does. In the infinite possibility of imagination, contradictory ideas coexist with one another in a non-contradictory way. Hence the lack of the comic in the interior.

It is important to note that the dialectical spheres do not annul one another in their succession. Consequently, in the later stages of the dialectic, the religious person maintains a comic sensibility similar to that of the humorist, but he has a more reflexive relationship to humor. This means that Religiousness A “is able to turn to see the humorous as comic, but it has legitimation to see it only by continually keeping itself in religious passion oriented to the relationship with God, and thus perceives [the comic] only as continually disappearing.”¹⁴² The differentiation between humor and religiousness can be identified primarily in their relationship to the suffering that is their life. * For the religious person “the actuality of suffering means its essential continuance as essential for the religious life.”¹⁴³ Conversely, the humorist—while still bearing an “essential conception of the suffering in which he is,” instead of reflecting on the suffering itself “it occurs to him that it most likely is not worth the trouble to become involved in explaining it. The revocation is the jest.”¹⁴⁴ The jest, for Climacus, is the action which secularizes the inwardness of subjectivity and thus annihilates the passionate movement. Conversely, the religious person perceives the contradiction between his own hidden inwardness and the world he exists in, but he does not revoke it in jest.¹⁴⁵

As opposed to abstracting himself out of existence entirely the religious person turns inward in the movement of absolute passion: “In absolute passion, the passionate person is at the peak of his concrete subjectivity by having reflected himself out of every external relativity.”¹⁴⁶ In contrast to the religious person, “[t]he humorist continually... joins the conception of God together with something else and brings out the contradiction—but he does not relate himself to

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992), p. 399 and 402 respectively. The existing individual is outside of existence when he is in a state of passion; a moment which subsequently, “gains the momentum to exist” yet again. In other words, the existing individual expresses his orientation towards his ‘eternal happiness’ in the form of pathos: “in temporality, the *expectancy* of an eternal happiness is the highest reward, because an eternal happiness is the absolute τέλος, and the specific sign that one relates oneself to the absolute is that not only is there no reward to expect but suffering to endure.”

God in religious passion [in the strictest sense of the word].”¹⁴⁷ The religious person makes a fundamentally different movement because “in his innermost being he relates himself to God.” Thus, we end up with a more developed conceptualization of Religiousness A: “the unity of absolute passion (inwardly deepened dialectically) and spiritual maturity, which calls religiousness back from all outwardness into inwardness and therein it is again indeed the absolute religious passion.”¹⁴⁸ At this point in the dialectical framework, Climacus formulates the most significant bifurcation of religious existence into two types: Religiousness A and Religiousness B.

Christianity (Religiousness B) is inwardness that is entirely hidden, which consequently does not even have humor as its incognito:

The religiousness that is hidden inwardness is *eo ipso* inaccessible for comic interpretation. It cannot have the comic outside itself because it is hidden inwardness and consequently cannot come into contradiction with anything. It has itself brought into consciousness the contradiction that humor dominates, the highest range of the comic, and has it within itself as something lower. In this way it is absolutely armed against the comic or is protected by the comic against the comic.¹⁴⁹

While Religiousness A is an existence “inwardly deepened dialectically” Christianity is characterized by “paradoxical religiousness.” In paradoxical religiousness, the dialectic itself is of secondary importance, as opposed to in Religiousness A where the dialectic comprises existence itself.¹⁵⁰ Even more important is that no individual can consider dialectical movement into Religiousness B without first existing in Religiousness A. While the difficulty of Religiousness A ensures that the individual will “always have sufficient task in it” throughout his life, Religiousness B is still higher because its task is even more strenuous. Climacus intended to make it difficult to become a Christian. And based on his conception of Christianity, it would in fact be “qualitatively and essentially difficult for every human being, because, viewed essentially, it is equally difficult for every human being to relinquish his understanding and his

thinking and to concentrate his soul on the absurd.”¹⁵¹ By the absurd, Climacus means that which cannot be reconciled by reason. Therein lies the continual difficulty of having faith as a Christian: “it is the most difficult of all to relate oneself day in and day out to something upon which one bases one’s eternal happiness, while maintaining the passion with which one understands that one cannot understand.”¹⁵² That which cannot be understood here is Christianity’s absolute paradox, which constitutes it as the paradoxical religious sphere of existence.

The absolute paradox of Christianity is that an existing individual’s eternal happiness is based on something historical: “that the god [*Guden*], the eternal, has come into existence at a specific moment in time as an individual human being.”^{153*} In “being nailed to the paradox of having based his eternal happiness” on this historical knowledge, the Christian individual maintains the incomprehensibility of existence. He must then put his faith entirely in God for no justifiable reason: by ‘virtue of the absurd.’[†] Hidden inwardness, then, can only be achieved in the total absence of understanding, given the fact any understanding inherently subjects Christianity to the outwardness which is constitutive of misunderstanding which occurs between individuals. Thus, Climacus claims that any attempt to reconcile the incomprehensibility of the absolute paradox is not Religiousness because it effectively misunderstands Christianity.

There are five concepts that we should take away from Climacus’ dialectic that are essential to understanding the nature of Religiousness and its implications for modern spirituality

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). This was “The Issue” that Climacus addressed in the preceding book, *Philosophical Fragments*.

† See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1983), pp. 43 and 47. Christianity’s purity results from the ultimate negation of publicness that Kierkegaard believed to be constitutive of genuine religiousness. Christianity, as the highest expression of inwardness, is effectively characterized its complete hiddenness; an interiority that is closed off entirely from others. This is Abraham’s great struggle that Johannes de Silentio ponders in *Fear and Trembling*. The unbelievable burden of the secret that has to be kept for absolutely no reason at all; by ‘virtue of the absurd.’

as illustrated in *Infinite Jest*: First, Religiousness A manifests itself in the dialectical inward deepening of subjectivity. Second, it has only “universal human nature as its presupposition,” making it inappropriate for any existing individual.¹⁵⁴ Third, it is not constituted by the leap of faith (i.e. orientation towards the absolute paradox). Fourth, while it is not constituted by the leap of faith it *is* in fact constitutive for the hidden inwardness of Christianity^{155*} Lastly, in Christianity, the Religious individual holds fast the objective uncertainty of the absolute paradox through faith, effectively comporting himself continually towards his own eternal happiness. In *Infinite Jest*, faith and belief are often characterized by doubt, making it seem like Religiousness A would be the primary form of spirituality exhibited by supplicants of A.A. The title of *Infinite Jest* also makes this comparison tempting. However, in the next section I show how Don Gately’s commitment to his higher power is actually reminiscent of Religiousness B and that his character actually stands as Wallace’s most compelling portrayal of religiousness in the contemporary world.

Don Gately: Wallace’s Modern Believer

A variety of scholars have identified the similarities between Wallace and Kierkegaard prior to my own examination. However, most if not all of them merely analyze each thinker’s commentary on irony in addition to each thinker’s respective meta-ironical styles.¹⁵⁶ As a result, their mere consideration of one comic sensibility (i.e. irony) fails to consider the larger significance of the comic phenomenon as it manifests itself in various comic sensibilities (i.e. ironists, ethicists, humorists, etc.). There is also a trend among scholars to level the unique

* See e.g. Michael Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 52. Weston makes it clear that Religiousness A dies away from immediacy completely, thus renouncing the, “absolute concern with finite results.” He further clarifies that, “Christianity or ‘religion B,’ goes beyond this by involving Faith.”

individualities of Wallace's characters in *Infinite Jest* by categorizing them all simply as Kierkegaardian aesthetes. I only stand on common ground with these scholars in one respect, that there is indeed a staggering likeness between the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Wallace. Those similarities go far beyond Kierkegaard's existential irony and furthermore that we can glimpse Kierkegaard's faith in one of the book's most heroic characters, Don Gately.

James K.A. Smith published, "David Foster Wallace to the Rescue" in *First Things* in 2013; a line in the first paragraph reads: "In the wake of his death, it is all too tempting to read Wallace's fiction as autobiography, turning every addicted, suicidal character into an anachronistic self-portrait."¹⁵⁷ I agree with Smith that scholars of Wallace should be weary in turning all of his characters into self-portraits. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that the inspirations for characters and ideologies in *Infinite Jest* were born out the real-life experiences Wallace had with alcohol, drugs, addiction, and recovery. Aside from a few basic authorial backdrops, Wallace's fictional portrayals of A.A. in *Infinite Jest* will largely suffice for our examination.

In another biographical examination of Wallace, D.T. Max describes that when Wallace joined A.A., "[he] found his outsized intelligence a liability" for the first time in his life.¹⁵⁸ A young writer at the time, desperate to stop drinking, Wallace started attending recovery meetings, only to find that the "logical tautology behind recovery," was absolutely incomprehensible.¹⁵⁹ The idea that people got on their knees to pray to a higher being they had no evidence to speak of simply made him feel "hypocritical."¹⁶⁰ Even so, Wallace eventually spent a considerable amount of time in a recovery house called Granada that would inspire much of the setting for the Ennet Drug and Alcohol Recovery House in *Infinite Jest*. Max notes that "within a few months of arriving, Wallace had already drafted a scene centered on one of the most intriguing residents

at Granada House, Big Craig.”¹⁶¹ Big Craig, a supervisor at Granada, was Wallace’s inspiration for Don Gately.

Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace uses Gately to symbolize what he believed to be a culture-wide struggle for faith; one he creatively labeled ‘unwilling agnosticism.’ Numerous scenes throughout the book portray Gately’s struggle to understand the higher power of A.A. Having stopped taking Demerol by relying on the central tenets of A.A. Gately still cannot help but dwell on the fact that he “has yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power.”¹⁶² Gately frequently complains about the “Nothingness” he experiences “when he tries to understand something to really sincerely pray to.”¹⁶³ Despite his efforts to willfully surrender his will, Gately “had nothing in the way of a like God-concept” and his desperate efforts to reconcile this tension continues through until the book’s final pages.

Nevertheless, throughout the book, he stands as an exemplary product of A.A.’s proposal in the power of belief. In a definitively comical sequence of A.A. truths, Gately lists off the various facts which are prevalent in a life of recovery, the most notable of which for my examination of comedy and sacrality are the following:

That AA and NA and CA’s ‘God’ does not apparently require that you believe in Him/Her/It before He/She/It will help you.

...

That logical validity is not a guarantee of truth.

...

That God – unless you’re Charlton Heston, or unhinged or both – speaks and acts entirely through the vehicle of human beings, if there is a God.

That God might regard the issue of whether you believe there’s a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it’s interested in re you.¹⁶⁴

Being set in Boston, Wallace’s depictions of A.A. are usually qualified by the particularities of Boston culture. The veterans of A.A.—known colloquially as the ‘Crocodiles’—give a solid depiction of their own comical role in the tenet of commitment:

Of course—the Crocodiles dig at each other with their knobby elbows and guffaw and wheeze—they say when they tell Gately to either Hang In AA and get rabidly Active or else die in slime of course it's only a *suggestion*. They howl and choke and slap their knees at this. It's your classic in-type joke. There are, by ratified tradition, no 'musts' in Boston AA. No doctrine or dogma or rules. They can't kick you out. You don't have to do what they say. Do exactly as you please—if you still trust what seems to please you. The Crocodiles roar and wheeze and pound on the dash and bob in the front seat in abject AA mirth.¹⁶⁵

Much like Climacus' conception of Christianity, then, A.A. is not authentically regarded as a doctrine. Despite the seemingly dogmatic aspect of the 12 steps, AA is an entirely subjective experience that, although largely played out in the setting of confessional forums and meetings, is most significantly contingent on the supplicant's relationship with their Higher Power. Gately, although extremely skeptical about A.A.'s higher power, is finally persuaded by "an epiphanic AA-related nocturnal dream."¹⁶⁶ On the night of the dream, Gately undergoes a kind of conversion. He finally, "took the basic suggestion to get down on his big knees by his undersized spring-shot Ennet House bunk and Ask For Help from something he still didn't believe in, ask for his own sick Spider-bit will to be taken from him and fumigated and squished."¹⁶⁷

Upon speaking to one of the new house members regarding the stereotypical A.A. language about God, Gately questions his own authenticity. Although the woman cuts him off, Gately describes his intent to "launch into a fairly standard Boston AA agnostic-soothing riff about the 'God' in the slogan being just shorthand for a totally subjective and up-to-you 'Higher Power' and AA being merely spiritual instead of dogmatically religious, a sort of benign anarchy of subjective spirit."¹⁶⁸ Gately's conception of A.A. can be viewed ironically by the reader in the scope of Kierkegaard's own conception of inwardness. In the prior section, we saw that Climacus conceived of true religiousness as an inward subjectivity that culminates in its complete abstraction from objectivity. Furthermore, it is oriented towards God through the infinite teleology of the absolute paradox. Gately, in a way, has fallen victim to one of Climacus'

principal worries; that the objective transformation of Christianity into a mere doctrine has plagued the modern individual to see it as something that needs to be understood. While Gately is at risk to fall victim to this tendency in full, he still goes beyond a purely humorous disposition in his fervent devotion and orientation towards his Higher Power.

Even in Gately's own comical inner-dialogue, he maintains a relationship to his 'God' or higher power. For instance, at one point the house members are huddled together in a church basement for a meeting, when Gately "joins the conception of God together with something else and brings out the contradiction" while simultaneously relating himself to God in inwardness. Down in the basement which is "literally blue with smoke," Gately tells one of the Crocodiles that "he feels like this is a pretty limp understanding of a Higher Power: a cheese-easement or unwashed athletic supporter."¹⁶⁹ He goes on to express his frustration with contemplating God: namely that all of his efforts result in him feeling "Nothing—not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he came in with."¹⁷⁰ Again, Gately is tempted by the modern understanding of Christianity to turn it "into a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and being a Christian into something negligible."¹⁷¹ Climacus's advocacy of Christianity as the highest expression of subjectivity is primarily twofold. For one, he argued that "the maximum understanding of Christianity is that it cannot be understood" and that this barred it from any kind of corruption at the hands of objectivity and appropriation. Secondly, that "the spiritual relationship with God in truth, that is inwardness, is first conditioned by the actual breakthrough of inward deepening that corresponds to the divine cunning that God has nothing remarkable, nothing at all remarkable, about him—

indeed, he is so far from being remarkable that he is invisible, and thus one does not suspect that he is there [*er til*], although his invisibility is in turn his omnipresence.”^{172*}

Gately’s experience, then, is indicative of what the inward relation to God would look like. While he essentially annuls it in his ‘outward’ communication to the Crocodile (i.e. Climacus’ ‘third party’) his description is the most indicative of an inward relation to God that would be highly unremarkable, hence the nothingness he frequently feels. Far from being indicative of Gately’s own atheism, the feeling of ‘Nothingness’ he experiences every time, “he tries to understand something to really sincerely pray to” is exactly what one would expect under the Climacian understanding.¹⁷³ Consequently, though there are times when Gately’s skepticism of God’s existence is outweighed by A.A.’s effective deterrence of his addiction, he still finds that, “The idea of this whole God thing makes him puke, still. And he is afraid.”¹⁷⁴ It is easy to see Gately’s questioning purely as doubt. However, Gately’s experience of uncertainty is in line with Climacus’ definition of faith: “the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest.”¹⁷⁵ Gately is never satisfied with his conception of God, yet he continues to pray anyway. Unlike a humorist, who would revoke his suffering in jest, Gately exists within his own suffering, thus relating himself to it in an authentic way. In this way, Gately has, “just as much of the comic as of pathos.”¹⁷⁶ This is best illustrated by an encounter between Gately and another character, ‘Bob Death.’

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). p. 217. God’s unremarkable nature stems from his absolute difference from man. This is partially what correlates to the ‘absolute’ nature of the absolute paradox (i.e. that ‘God has existed in human form’). Climacus explains that:

The difference is simply this, that a human being is an individual existing being (and this holds for the best brain just as fully for the most obtuse), whose essential task therefore cannot be to think *sub specie aeterni*, because as long as he exists, he himself, although eternal, is essentially an existing person and the essential for him must therefore be inwardness in existence; God however, is the infinite one, who is eternal.

After attending an A.A. session, Gately talks briefly with a recovering biker named Robert F., whose lapel reads, "*BOB DEATH*."¹⁷⁷ Bob Death asks Gately if he has ever heard the joke about the fish. One of Gately's house members mistakes it to be the one about the blind man walking through a fish market saying. Bob Death "smiles coolly" saying that was not the joke he meant:

[Bob Death] has to assume a kind of bar-shout to clear the noise of his idling hawg. He leans in more toward Gately and shouts that the one he was talking about was: This wise old whiskey fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away. The young biker leans back and smiles at Gately and gives an affable shrug and blatts away.¹⁷⁸

The reader, after having chuckled themselves, might be surprised to read that "Gately's forehead was wrinkled in emotional pain all the way up Rt. 3 home."¹⁷⁹ The joke, a lighthearted quip from Bob Death's point of view, leads to the somewhat revelatory experience for Gately that "[t]here's a serious pain in being sober, though, you find out, after time."¹⁸⁰ While Gately at times finds himself swept up in the comicality of certain members' confessions at meetings, he also demonstrates the balance between comic and pathos in his sincere comprehension of Bob Death's joke as indicative of an addict's perpetual suffering.

Bob Death's joke puts into perspective the differing states of sobriety that members of A.A. meetings are in at different times throughout the novel which are reminiscent of the different comical sensibilities associated with Climacus' dialectical stages. For instance, older 'whiskey' fish reflect on the pain and horror of sobriety in fits of uproarious laughter, not at the expense of someone else's belittlement, but in an act of disburdening catharsis. Assuming their comportment to be similar to that of Gately's, this is very much in line with Climacus' explanation that the religious person does not simply "place the comic between himself and the others in order to make them ludicrous."¹⁸¹ Furthermore, the religious person also does not "feel

himself to be better than others, because such comparative religiousness is outwardness and thus not religiousness.”¹⁸² This is best evidenced by the fact that the Crocodiles never blame other members for relapsing. Instead, “Boston AA stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member” and in the case of any member reverting to their abusive tendencies, “[the Crocodiles] want you to know they not only invite but urge you to come on back to meetings as quickly as possible.”¹⁸³

Conversely, the younger fish of A.A., have a much different reaction to these kinds of revelations. This kind of contrast is illustrated best by a distinctly A.A.-like experience, for “Only in Boston AA can you hear a fifty-year-old immigrant wax lyrical about his first solid bowel movement in adult life.”¹⁸⁴ After the Irish old-timer finishes his brutally comic “ode to a solid dump,” Gately and other veterans “fall about, laugh from the gut.” The newcomers have a different reaction: “the lightless eyes of certain palsied back-row newcomers widen with a very private identification and possible hope, hardly daring to imagine... A certain Message has been Carried.”¹⁸⁵ The significance of recovery here is palpable. The relatability of the ‘solid dump,’ for veterans of the program results in a stomach-wrenching bout of laughter. However, for younger attendees it produces a daunting sense of hope, for whom such an experience is still fresh. * With respect to Climacus dialectical framework, newcomers in the A.A. program may resemble existing individuals in the immediacy stage, where the comic contradiction manifests completely outside the self. In this way, shocking meetings such as the one described above might be said to mirror the initiatory movement of double reflection that ultimately culminates in

* For Wallace, entertainment was a world where nothing is worth despairing over, even tragic truths are presented as entertaining. Consequently, some characters in the book are confronted by them through the medium of entertainment, unable to either despair or laugh in a way that is sincere. Conversely, the coexisting nature of both despair and joy in Wallace and Kafka’s stories makes certain characters vulnerable to the truth. Naturally, this can sometimes lead to an unpleasant experience. Some of those who normally laugh may very well despair at tragic said truths. For example, Gately frequently bears the suffering of his addiction lightly through his reassuring laugh, although there are times when tragic truths evoke despair even in him (i.e. Bob Death’s joke).

the A.A. supplicant's dialectical approach towards Religiousness A. As we mentioned in section 1, movement through the spheres does not result in the annulment of previous ones. Gately's experiences illustrate this idea well in the severity with which he encounters the suffering of his own past.

In the face of his seemingly unwavering skepticism, Gately is for the most part outwardly optimistic to the house's residents; often bearing the horrors of his and other's addiction in 'booming' fits of laughter while simultaneously relating himself to his higher power and acknowledging his suffering as opposed to merely 'revoking it in jest.'^{*} One passage in particular describes that "[t]he best noise Gately produces is his laugh, which booms and reassures, and a certain haunted hardness goes out of his face when he laughs."¹⁸⁶ One of the few character's in the book ardently striving for sincerity through the A.A. program, Don Gately's laugh is one of the many reassuring things about his demeanor that make him a helpful live-in staffer. Often by laughing, Gately bears the weight of his burgling, Demerol addicted past with a transient sense of lightness. This is a mere glimpse into Wallace's illustration of the comic's redemptive power in the novel.

Gately's laugh is brought into relief when contrasted with the laughter of the novel's other protagonist, Hal Incandenza. For instance, in a conversation between Hal and his older brother Orin, Hal recounts his brief stint in grief-therapy following the suicide of their father. Having been the one who found his father in the kitchen post-event, Hal was singled out for grief-therapy in the family. In an attempt to accelerate the grieving process, Hal turns to a textbook on grief-therapy in order to convincingly feign "absolution" and healing to his therapist,

^{*} See e.g. Paul Abbott. "What Isn't Water—David Foster Wallace and the Ambiguity of the Punch Line." *The Explicator*. (*The Explicator*, 2017) p. 253. This is not surprising, given the idea that Wallace's humor is justifiably in service of something more redemptive, as I argued in Chapter 1. Abbott remarks that, "Wallace's humor is often more complex than the seeking of amusement" and that Wallace's humor is not simply meant as, "an advocacy of distraction from sadness," but is actually geared towards, "an acknowledgement of it."

who intriguingly never had his hands visible during any of their sessions. In their last session, when Hal's "traumatic grief was professionally pronounced uncovered and countenanced and processed," he sticks out his hand for an irrefutable handshake, "[the therapist] stood and brought out the hand and shook my hand, I finally understood":

His hands were no bigger than a four-year-old girl's. It was surreal. This massive authoritative figure, with a huge red meaty face and thick walrus mustache and dewlaps and a neck that spilled over the rim of his shirt-collar, and his hands were tiny and pink and hairless and butt-soft, delicate as shells. The hands were the capper. I barely made it out of the office before it started.¹⁸⁷

Orin mistakenly assumes that what was starting was "the cathartic post-traumatic-like-reexperience hysteria" when in reality Hal rushed to the men's room only to begin "hysterically" laughing in a mirthful fit of near comical insanity. While Gately's laugh is reassuring, bearing a characteristic lightness, Hal's laugh erupts in a fit of "hysterical mirth" at the belittlement of an authoritative figure who he has bested psychologically.¹⁸⁸ As his father suggests, Hal is in fact a deeply anhedonic character in the novel, and the manifestation of superiority in this scene may very well be seen as a cathartic release. Even so, his laughter bears significant difference to that of Gately's, taking on a more detached perspective with a likeness to Kierkegaard's ironist. Gately's laughter, on the other hand, resembles that of Climacus's religious person.

Gately's adherence to A.A. illustrates the kind of religious devotion that is indicative of Religiousness B. Throughout the novel, Gately constantly questions the nature of his God, and is frequently unsatisfied. We know that Gately expresses his frustration with the incomprehensibility of A.A.'s higher power to the older members of the group. He reveals to the crocodiles that "he still as yet had no real understanding of a Higher Power."¹⁸⁹ Gately's lack of understanding, then, is not a misunderstanding of God. If nothing else, Gately perceives the paradoxical absurdity of A.A.'s Higher Power in the same way that Kierkegaard's Christian

would. After being freed from the “kind of mental cage” of addiction, Gately recounts his suspicion:

He wasn't grateful so much as king 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?

After affirming that “there was no way something he didn't understand enough to even start to believe in was seriously going to be interested in helping to save his ass,” one of the Crocodiles—Ferocious Francis—calms Gately down with a simple reply.¹⁹⁰ Even though he does not understand why it was helpful, Gately still felt relief when the Crocodile “suggested that maybe anything minor-league enough for Don Gately to understand probably wasn't going to be major league enough to save Gately's addled ass.”¹⁹¹ Months after this conversation, Gately “no longer much cares whether he understands or not. He does the knee-and-ceiling thing twice a day, and cleans shit, and listens to dreams, and stays Active, and tells the truth to the Ennet House residents, and tries to help a couple of them if they approach wanting help.”¹⁹² *

Gately's alleviation here indicates his own humility in relating himself to God. Climacus writes in the *Postscript* that the religious individual would be remiss to actually comprehend the ‘highest good,’ going on to explain that “if it is the highest good, then it is better that I definitely know that I do not possess it, so that I can aspire to it with all my might, than to be entranced in illusion and to imagine that I possess it and consequently do not even consider aspiring.”¹⁹³ The idea of resigning oneself to questioning or uncertainty comes up again when Climacus claims, “if I remove the uncertainty in order to obtain an even higher certainty, then I as a believer do not

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1983). pp. 48-49. “By faith I do not renounce anything; on the contrary, by faith I receive everything exactly in the sense in which it is said that one who has faith like a mustard seed can move mountains.”

have humility, in fear and trembling, but an esthetic coxcomb, a devil of a fellow who, figuratively speaking, wants to fraternize with God but, strictly speaking, does not relate himself to God at all.”¹⁹⁴ God and man are absolutely different in that man is a finite existing individual while God is eternal. It is because of this absolute difference that “*worship* is the maximum for a human being’s relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God, since the qualities are absolutely different.”¹⁹⁵ After having given up the objective attempt to understand God, Gately *continues* to be ‘Active’ and do the ‘knee-and-ceiling-thing twice a day.’ The reason is—according to Climacus—that the greatest space for moving in “the most rigorous gesture of infinite passion” toward eternal happiness is one in which there is uncertainty of knowledge regarding the eternal happiness, because only then can it truly be ventured.¹⁹⁶

The fractured storyline of *Infinite Jest* ends on a scene with Gately waking up on a beach—assumedly within a dream—which makes it difficult to claim that the novel ends with any kind of finite resolution. Some scholars have argued that the novel itself is a kind of mirror image to the film “Infinite Jest” while others think it to be a general ironic commentary on consumer culture in the U.S.¹⁹⁷ The final line of the book describes a flashback in which Gately—in the midst of a drug overdose—finally blacks out, only to wake up and find himself “flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out.”¹⁹⁸ The frustration with this ending is understandable, given the fact that it follows a nearly 172 page-long journey through Don Gately’s excruciating struggle to avoid painkillers following a gunshot wound that he suffered after defending his residents from thugs outside Ennet House.¹⁹⁹ Gately embodies Kierkegaardian faith in these last pages. Enduring through the horrible pain of his gunshot wound without painkillers, Gately recalls how “he’d never before or since felt so excruciatingly alive.”²⁰⁰ If we take into account the conceptualization of Climacus ‘infinite teleology,’ we can view the book’s fractured timeline and

uncertain ending as indicative of a negative resolution which does not fall victim to the threats of objective appropriation. For instance, Climacus believed that “the highest principles for all thinking can be demonstrated only indirectly (negatively).”²⁰¹ He furthermore argued that a teleology which completes itself in existence actually “renders existence meaningless.”²⁰² Gately’s previous resignation to never understand God is challenged here when Gately is forced to wonder about the teachings he learned from the Crocodiles:

His right side is past standing, but the hurt is nothing like Bird’s hurt was. He wonders, sometimes, if that’s what Ferocious Francis and the rest want him to walk toward: Abiding again between heartbeats; tries to imagine what kind of *impossible leap* it would take to live that way all the time, by choice, straight: in the second, the Now, walled and contained between slow heartbeats... It’s a gift, the Now: it’s AA’s real gift: it’s no accident they call it *The Present*.²⁰³

Now, this kind of intense focus on ‘the present’ is exactly what Dreyfus and Kelly criticize the most, particularly the way Wallace portrays it in *The Pale King*. They argue that Wallace’s conception puts all the agency on Gately. This is gross misreading, for the nature of gifts is that they are received: given to one by another. In the midst of his pain, Gately does not defer to himself: “What’s unendurable is what his own head could make of it all.”²⁰⁴ And so Gately defers instead to his Higher Power. His persistent inhabitation of uncertainty continues to the end of the book, culminating in a lack of resolution that mirrors Kierkegaard’s conception of the infinite teleology. Gately admits to himself that “it’s a bit hard to see why a quote *Loving God* would have him go through the sausage-grinder of getting straight just to lie [there] in total discomfort and have to say no to medically advised substances.”²⁰⁵ And so Gately ‘hunkers’ down in his state of perpetual uncertainty. The idea behind this rests primarily in Climacus’ clearest identification of faith: “Faith *must not be satisfied* with incomprehensibility, because the very relation to or the repulsion from the incomprehensible, the absurd, is the expression for the

passion of faith.”^{206*} Gately’s wavering is precisely how we can identify him as one who has faith. While his own situation is seemingly absurd, he remains devoted to his Higher Power by virtue of the absurd.

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). p. 611. Climacus defines faith in the following way at the end of the *Postscript*: “the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest.”

Conclusion—*Res Ipsa Loquitor**

Wallace's spiritual struggles throughout his life were undergirded by his experiences in A.A. His personal expressions of 'unwilling agnosticism' further characterize the spiritual struggles that are pertinent to fictional illustrations in *Infinite Jest*. Though mostly a non-believer throughout his life, he wrote a deeply spiritual piece titled "All That" which surfaced after his death that would eventually make it into his posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*. This story, is in many ways a commentary that illuminates the true redemption of Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*. "All That," is told from the viewpoint of a man recollecting the days of his childhood, a time when he found it impossible to doubt anything. Most of the story centers around his memories of a toy truck with a cement mixer, whose drum only spun when he was not looking—so his parents told him. As a child, he spent a large amount of time analyzing and monitoring the cement mixer's drum—not to prove that it was not really magical but instead to "verify that [he] could not," thus salvaging the drum's magic in his continued empirical failings.²⁰⁷ The author recounts that "the toy cement mixer is the origin of the religious feeling that has informed most of my adult life."²⁰⁸ In another passage, he explains that he was indeed "a religious child—meaning I was interested in religion and filled with feelings and concerns that we use the word 'religious' to describe."²⁰⁹ A particular aspect of the story revolves around the author's persistent self-consciousness as to the fact that he is not "articulate, and the subjects that I am trying to describe and discuss are beyond my abilities."²¹⁰ This is reminiscent of Climacus' claim that true religiousness cannot assume an outward form of expression, hence the inwardly deepened dialectic.[†] Nevertheless, the primary point is that, while Wallace had ambivalent

* 'The thing speaks for itself.' If Only.

[†] See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). p. 79. Climacus best describes impossibility of such an endeavor in analogizing it with an attempt to, "paint a picture of Mars in the armor that makes him invisible."

feelings about spirituality, he had always advocated for its importance.* Most likely an unwilling agnostic himself, it is safe to assume that he inhabited an attitude similar to the narrator of “All That,” who writes that “the fact that the most powerful and significant connections in our lives are (at the time) invisible to us seems to me a compelling argument for religious reverence rather than skeptical empiricism as a response to life’s meaning.”²¹¹ While D.T Max controversially disavows Wallace’s own personal affinity for Religion and belief,[†] it seems clear that he nevertheless believed in the power of belief, even if he felt—like many in the modern world—that he himself was incapable of it. Furthermore, the importance of Christianity and its influence on Wallace’s writing is well-documented.²¹² The saddest part of “All That” is that the author has forgotten how to believe. In the wake of Wallace’s suicide, it is difficult not to draw similarities between the two.[‡] However, Gately’s awakening on the beach among the ebb and flow of the waves is a comforting portrayal that renders the book’s overall lack of resolution tolerable, perhaps even preferable. Gately is Wallace’s greatest attempt at illustrating the religiousness of a

* See e.g. David Foster Wallace, “Transcription of the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address.” (2005). Wallace’s own admission as to the importance or power of belief is, again, evidenced best one of the most quoted lines from his Commencement address to Kenyon College in 2005, where he famously said, “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 the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles -- is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.”

† See e.g. D.T Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. (Viking: New York, 2012). p. 166. D.T Max controversially disavows Wallace of any real and personal concern with Religion, claiming, “Wallace’s real religion was always language anyway. It alone could shape and hold multitudes; by comparison God’s power was spindly.” What is interesting to note is Wallace’s intentions of receiving the sacraments in order to have a Catholic wedding with American Poet Mary Karr—an alcoholic herself and fellow supplicant of A.A.—whose baptism Max describes, “would be a key moment in her recovery from alcohol.” Max recounts the somewhat comical story of Wallace’s intentions to receive the sacrament which was he was forced to let go of when, “the priest told him he had too many questions to be a believer, and he let the issue drop.”

See also e.g. David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). pp. 308-309. However, in the final pages of David Lipsky’s book, he recounts how excited Wallace was to attend a Baptist church for “Dance Night.” In particular, he enjoyed Wallace idea of people harmoniously interacting in a community, even if everyone there, “more or less wants to leave each other alone.”

‡ Wallace’s suicide followed decades of struggle with depression and a desperate attempt to take matters into his own hands by getting off his own anti-depressants. The later inclusions of EST in his therapy almost certainly changed him in ways that backward-looking analyses of his spiritual health could never truly account for.

modern unwilling agnostic. If Mario is the reader's imaginative access to comicality, Gately may very well be the reader's imaginative access to faith.

Aside from the overall contributions made by Wallace on the nature of modern spirituality, we can see how the nexus of Wallace's writings and Kierkegaard's philosophy substantiate M. Conrad Hyers' own thesis about the interdependence of the comic and the sacred—a realization that should be enlightening for any contemporary considerations of faith and Religion. As Kierkegaard explains in the *Postscript*, the subjective thinker “is continually just as negative as positive, for his positivity consists in the continued inward deepening in which he is cognizant of the negative.” Furthermore, the subjective thinker, does not “mediate” existence into a positivity that can be grasped once and for all, instead:

[the genuine subjective existing thinker] is cognizant of the negativity of the infinite in existence; he always keeps open the wound of negativity, which at times is a saving factor (the others let the wound close and become positive—deceived); in his communication, he expresses the same thing. He is therefore, never a teacher, but a learner, and if he is continually just as negative as positive, he is continually striving.²¹³

Not only does the genuine subjective existing thinker have as much as the positive as he does the negative, he also has as much of the comic as he does pathos.²¹⁴ In this somewhat different expression of the relationship between positivity and negativity, we begin to see where Hyers' claims may have originated:

According to the way people exist ordinarily, pathos and the comic are apportioned in such a way that one has the one, another the other, one a little more of the one, another a little less. But for the person existing in double reflection, the proportion is this: just as much of pathos, just as much of the comic. The proportion provides an interdependent safeguard. The pathos that is not safeguarded by the comic is an illusion; the comic that is not safeguarded by pathos is immaturity. Only he who himself produces this will understand it, otherwise not.²¹⁵

We can see the echoes of Hyers' explanation in this passage very clearly. For one, Climacus criticizes 'ordinary' existence on the basis that people have a tendency to embody the extremes,

without balance. In other words, having only seriousness or only comedy, without a balance between the two. However, the genuine existing subject attains a balance between the two, and he does this 'himself.' Furthermore, the language of interdependence is not merely coincidental, for pathos and the comic are responsible for safeguarding one another. As much as the objective thinker wishes to abstract himself from existence, he still exists as a being in the continual process of becoming. As much as modern man attempts to kill every last god and forget his religiousness, 'he still retains a memory of it,' even if it has descended to a great depth:

That the existing subjective thinker... is striving infinitely, is continually in the process of becoming, something that is safeguarded by his being just as negative as positive and by his having just as much of the essentially comic as of the essentially pathos-filled, and that has its basis in his thinking. The process of becoming is the thinker's very existence, from which he can indeed thoughtlessly abstract and become objective. How far the subjective thinker might be along that road, whether a long way or a short, *makes no essential difference* (it is, after all, just a finitely relative comparison); as long as he is existing, he is in the process of becoming.²¹⁶

Climacus argues that "the subjective thinker is a dialectician oriented to the existential; he has the intellectual passion to hold firm the qualitative disjunction."²¹⁷ Furthermore, Climacus explains that, to understand oneself is to understand extreme opposites contemporaneously.*

Hyers' more lucid conceptualization of the comic and the sacred' interrelation help us to see how considering the two phenomena together reveals more about modern spirituality than considering the sacred alone would.

Finally, we can see how the coincidence of both phenomena is not only evident throughout *Infintite Jest*, but that in a way, Wallace's efforts to have them coexist resulted in a character whose devotion is emblematic of the potential for recovering religiousness in the

* See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992). p. 350. "Similarly, for a subjective thinker, imagination, feeling, and dialectics in impassioned existence-inwardness are required. But first and last, passion, because for an existing person it is impossible to think about existence without becoming passionate, inasmuch as existing is a prodigious contradiction from which the subjective thinker is not to abstract, for then it is easy, but in which he is to remain."

contemporary world. Dreyfus and Kelly thought Wallace was worth reading because he was, “trying to find a way into the light.”²¹⁸ Elevating their own search above his failures, Dreyfus and Kelly abandon the search for faith in the modern ‘secular’ world, by instead searching for meaningfulness alone. As I have argued, their disregard for Wallace in general is a philosophical and theological oversight. Furthermore, they fall victim to the presupposition that comicality implies a lack of seriousness and therefore has no place in a discussion regarding true meaningfulness, let alone Religion and Faith. This too is a grave oversight, for Hyers’ argument is in fact substantiated by writers like Wallace. Dreyfus and Kelly’s efforts to, ‘Find Meaning in a Secular Age’ are valiant and exceedingly important in 21st Century America. Even so, they could benefit immensely from a less incredulous consideration of an author whose place among the canon of Western Classics is well-deserved.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011). p. 7.

² Ibid. p. 8.

³ Ibid. p. 21.

⁴ Ibid. p. 12.

⁵ Ibid. p. 40.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 40 and 48.

⁷ Ibid. p. 42.

⁸ Ibid. p. 46.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ I am not alone in feeling that Dreyfus and Kelly's exposition misreads Wallace's Canon.

See e.g. Martin Brick, "A Postmodernist's Progress: Thoughts on Spirituality Across the David Foster Wallace Canon." (*Christianity & Literature*, 2014).

See also e.g. James K.A Smith, "David Foster Wallace to the Rescue: The Acclaimed Novelist's Postmodern Conservatism." (*First Things*, 2013).

See also e.g. Michael J. O'Connell, "Your Temple is Self and Sentiment": David Foster Wallace's Diagnostic Novels." (*Christianity and Literature*, 2015).

¹¹ Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1993).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James K.A Smith, "David Foster Wallace to the Rescue: The Acclaimed Novelist's Postmodern Conservatism." (*First Things*, 2013).

¹⁵ See e.g. Allard Den Dulk, "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (*Studies in the Novel*, 2012).

See also e.g. Matthew Steven Campora, "The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to David Foster Wallace" (Master's Dissertation, University of Queensland, 2003).

See also e.g. Timothy Urban, "Liberating Irony: Investigating Postmodern Techniques in David Foster Wallace's Short Fiction" (*BSU Master Theses and Projects*, 2016).

¹⁶ Wilson Kaiser, "Humor after Postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and Proximal Irony" (*Studies in American Humor*, 2013). p. 31.

¹⁷ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). p. 1.

¹⁸ Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1993). p. 9.

¹⁹ Kaiser, p. 31.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 32. My emphasis.

²¹ Ibid. p. 38.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. p. 42.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 33.

²⁵ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction" (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1993). p. 168.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 169-170.

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- 27 Ibid. p. 173.
- 28 McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."
- 29 Wallace, "Laughing with Kafka" (*The Absurd*, 2011). p. 49.
- 30 Ibid. p. 47.
- 31 Ibid. p. 48.
- 32 Ibid. p. 49.
- 33 Wallace, "Laughing with Kafka," p. 49.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*. (1996. New York: Back Bay books, 2016). Book jacket.
- 36 Ibid. p. 41.
- 37 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor eds. (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006). p. 452.
- 38 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 230.
- 39 Ibid. p. 424.
- 40 Ibid. p. 423.
- 41 Ibid. p. 839. My emphasis.
- 42 Ibid. p. 737.
- 43 Ibid. p. 703.
- 44 Ibid. p. 397.
- 45 Ibid. p. 398.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Kaiser, p. 41.
- 48 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 557.
- 49 Ibid. p. 736.
- 50 David Foster Wallace, by unknown interviewer, *German television ZDF*, November, 2003
- 51 Berger, p. 4.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid. p. 5.
- 54 Ibid. p. 6.
- 55 Ibid. p. 13.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 367.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid. p. 368.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid. pp. 368-369.
- 64 Martin Brick, "A Postmodernist's Progress: Thoughts on Spirituality Across the David Foster Wallace Canon." (*Christianity & Literature*, 2014). p. 69.
- 65 McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 M. Conrad Hyers, "Comparing Biblical and Scientific Maps of Origins," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum*, 2000.
- 69 M. Conrad Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred." *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 10.

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- ⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 13.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. p. 15.
- ⁷² Ibid. p. 16.
- ⁷³ Ibid. pp. 21-22.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 24.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 25.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid. pp. 25-26.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. pp. 25-26.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 27.
- ⁷⁹ See e.g. Michael J. O’Connell, “‘Your Temple is Self and Sentiment’: David Foster Wallace’s Diagnostic Novels.” (*Christianity and Literature*, 2015). p. 278.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ See e.g. David Gordon Laird, “‘Saying God with a Straight Face’: Towards an Understanding of Christian Soteriology in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” (*The University of British Columbia*, 2016). p. 57.
- ⁸² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 312.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 313.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 737.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 314.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 315.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 314.
- ⁹⁰ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Pp. 109 and 111.
- ⁹¹ Ibid. p. 111.
- ⁹² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 314.
- ⁹³ Ibid. pp. 229 and 83.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 433.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 85.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 154.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid. pp. 701 and 82.
- ⁹⁸ Wallace, “Transcription of the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address.” (2005, 8).
- ⁹⁹ McCaffery, “A Conversation with David Foster Wallace.”
- ¹⁰⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 84.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 746.
- ¹⁰² Ibid. p. 153.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 592. My emphasis.
- ¹⁰⁴ McCaffery, “A Conversation with David Foster Wallace.”
- ¹⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 756.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 79.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 84.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 84.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 84.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 317.
- ¹¹² Ibid. p. 970.
- ¹¹³ David Foster Wallace, by unknown interviewer, *German television ZDF*, November, 2003.

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- ¹¹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 368-369
- ¹¹⁵ McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."
- ¹¹⁶ Michael Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 43.
- ¹¹⁷ See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton UP: New Jersey, 1992), 625 (Hereafter *CUPPF*).
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 249.
- ¹¹⁹ McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace."
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²² *Ibid.*
- ¹²³ Berger, p. 26.
- ¹²⁴ Kenneth Hamilton, *The Promise of Kierkegaard* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1969). p. 43.
- ¹²⁵ Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 202.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17. My emphasis.
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 379-380.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 123.
- ¹²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 332
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 56.
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 16.
- ¹³² *Ibid.*
- ¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 33.
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 130.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 502.
- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 513-514.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 520.
- ¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 531, fn.
- ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 447.
- ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 510.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.* p. 521-522.
- ¹⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 447-448.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 447-448.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 511
- ¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 509.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 505.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 505-506.
- ¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 522.
- ¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 556.
- ¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 557 f.n.
- ¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 578.
- ¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 559.
- ¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 611.
- ¹⁵⁶ See Footnote 16.

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- 157 Smith, 2013.
- 158 D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (Viking: New York, 2012). p. 114.
- 159 Ibid. p. 140.
- 160 Ibid.
- 161 Ibid. p. 141.
- 162 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 443.
- 163 Ibid. p. 444.
- 164 Ibid. pp. 201-205.
- 165 Ibid. p. 356.
- 166 Ibid. p. 358.
- 167 Ibid. pp. 359-360.
- 168 Ibid. p. 366.
- 169 Ibid. p. 443.
- 170 Ibid. p. 443.
- 171 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 380.
- 172 Ibid. p. 245.
- 173 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 444.
- 174 Ibid. p. 444.
- 175 Ibid. p. 611.
- 176 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 87.
- 177 Ibid. p. 445.
- 178 Ibid.
- 179 Ibid.
- 180 Ibid. p. 446.
- 181 Ibid. p. 510.
- 182 Ibid.
- 183 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 356.
- 184 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 351.
- 185 Ibid. p. 352.
- 186 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 362.
- 187 Ibid. p. 257.
- 188 Ibid.
- 189 Ibid. p. 442.
- 190 Ibid. p. 468.
- 191 Ibid.
- 192 Ibid.
- 193 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 381.
- 194 Ibid. p. 455.
- 195 Ibid. p. 413.
- 196 Ibid. p. 426.
- 197 See e.g. Iannis Goerlandt, “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*” (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 2010).
- 198 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 981.
- 199 Ibid. pp. 802-981.
- 200 Ibid. p. 362.
- 201 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 860.

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- 202 Ibid. p. 137.
- 203 Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 860. My emphasis.
- 204 Ibid.
- 205 Ibid. p. 895.
- 206 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 611.
- 207 Wallace, "All That." (*The New Yorker*, 2009).
- 208 Ibid.
- 209 Ibid.
- 210 Ibid.
- 211 Ibid.
- 212 See Footnote 10.
- 213 Kierkegaard, *CUPPF*, p. 85.
- 214 Ibid. p. 87.
- 215 Ibid. p. 87.
- 216 Ibid. p. 90-91.
- 217 Ibid. p. 350.
- 218 Dreyfus and Kelly, p. 29.

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