

ALCOHOLICS POLYPHONOUS: WITTGENSTEIN'S LINGUISTIC PHILOSOPHY
IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May 2013

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines David Foster Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest* in terms of its relationship with the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Starting from a summary of the later Wittgenstein's famous Private Language Argument, I analyze the way Wallace adapts the idea of the Private Language User (PLU) as an archetype for his novel's characters. The third chapter details Wallace's use of the Wittgensteinian notion of the "language-game" as an antidote to the epistemological and existential solipsism entailed by the private referential or mentalistic paradigm of language, while the fourth concludes with a look at the formal implications of Wallace's use of Wittgenstein for what has already been rather unfortunately termed the nascent aesthetic of "postpostmodern" fiction.

INTRODUCTION

The most popular and cohesive trend in the still-embryonic field of David Foster Wallace studies involves critics' portrayal of the writer as the progenitor of a third wave of literary modernism. In the standard critical narrative, this Wallacesque movement—christened the “New Sincerity” by Adam Kelly and sometimes referred to as postpostmodernism—takes as its essential trait a rejection or, more precisely, an inversion of postmodern irony and cynicism. These critics see Wallace's greatest stylistic innovation to be his use of what A.O. Scott calls “meta-irony,” a technique by which Wallace ironizes ironic ridicule and self-reference for the purpose of revealing these classic postmodern techniques' obsolescence and moral bankruptcy. The rhetorical orientation of this reading generally tends to be intentional, with the most common critical move being the application of Wallace's famous essay “E Unibus Pluram” to his (usually shorter) fiction.

The argument of “E Unibus Pluram” need not be reproduced here. I merely wish to use this meta-ironic reading as a point of departure from which to introduce a more focused examination of Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest*. While convincing, this reading neglects much of the philosophical substructure of Wallace's work, and fails to appreciate how, on occasion, his fiction even uses irony in a way that is neither postmodern nor necessarily “postpostmodern,” but that nevertheless expedites his philosophical agenda. I will argue that in *Infinite Jest* this substructure is essentially Wittgensteinian. In my reading, the novel's primary conceptual tension is between the two diametrically opposed models of the nature of and relation between thought, language, and the problem of the subject-object interface Wittgenstein explored over the course of his career: on the one hand, the positivistic and, in Wallace's rendering of it,

solipsistic model of 1921's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and, on the other, 1953's posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*, whose most elegant and enduring contribution to the philosophy of language is the model of the so-called public "language-game," the idea that all discursive meaning is one-hundred percent contingent upon the way language is customarily used in a given system, community, or set of circumstances.

While Wittgenstein's work is not entirely alien to the field of literary study, it has sadly been most often deployed in meta-theoretical polemics focusing on the value of his methodology. Wallace's own essay "The Empty Plenum," a highly philosophical "review" of David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is the clearest explication I have read of the way a fiction writer might put Wittgenstein to thematic use. In the body of Wallace criticism, only Marshall Boswell has attempted an extensive Wittgensteinian analysis of any part of the Wallace canon, though only in his chapter on *The Broom of the System*. Boswell is not to be faulted for this, of course, as *Broom* is nothing if not arch-metafictionally forthright about its own philosophical debt to Wittgenstein: the central character's missing grandmother—whose absence provides young Lenore with a certain amount of discursive space in which to develop even as she dictates the terms of her granddaughter's various language-games (literally) from "behind the scenes"—studied under Wittgenstein at Cambridge and prizes her well-thumbed copy of the *Investigations* most of her possessions. Boswell's is the only analysis bringing Wittgenstein to bear not exclusively upon the work-in-question's theoretical orientation but also the extent to which the Austrian's ideas pervade such formal techniques as characterization and diction. I contend, however, that, despite the refined subtlety of its debts, *Infinite Jest* is at least as much if not more of a Wittgensteinian work than *Broom*,

and as such necessitates a sort of hyperawareness of the language and implications of Wittgenstein's arguments conspicuously absent from Boswell's chapter on *Infinite Jest* and, indeed, from much extant DFW scholarship. Petrus van Ewijk, for instance, devotes only about one and a half of his essay's twelve pages to the novel's Wittgensteinian elements. Put broadly, then, my task will be a comprehensive (though by no means exhaustive) examination of the way *Infinite Jest* dramatizes the logical and existential conflict between Wittgenstein's Private Language User (PLU) and the "game" in which any linguistic discourse is by definition already involved.

As with any study—but especially with one making heavy use of Wittgenstein to elucidate a novel set largely in an elite private tennis academy—we must first establish the rules of the game in which we as readers find ourselves engaged. In short, my first chapter comprises three parts: a summary of the later Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument and of its fraught relation to the positivistic linguistics of the *Tractatus*, a synopsis of how Wallace sketches his own orientation toward that argument in "The Empty Plenum," and an analysis of the way Hal Incandenza, one of the central characters in *Infinite Jest*, embodies (Wittgenstein is ultimately the philosopher of linguistic immanence, after all) Wallace's take on the Wittgensteinian Private Language User and thus elaborates the essay's attempt to describe the PLU as a literary archetype.

In my second chapter, I examine the ways in which the novel's various drug addicts function as Private Language Users, and how their compulsive solipsism brings them into logical conflict with one of the novel's two main public language-games: Alcoholics Anonymous. I detail the way this Wittgensteinian mechanism animates certain of Wallace's formal decisions in these characters' dedicated sections. For

instance, in one brief scene structured as the transcript of an interview between recovering alcoholic Tiny Ewell and “Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (*sic*)” director Pat Montesian, Wallace gives us only the text of Ewell’s side of the dialogue, and we are to (re)construct the whole of the conversation based on his remarks alone. Fittingly, Ewell’s speech concerns the definition of a word, the word “alcoholic,” which he is reluctant to attribute to himself and his behavior. It is his Denial-ridden insistence on a rigorous, logical definition that prevents him from grasping how “alcoholic” is used in the language-game of AA, or, as Wallace has it, “Recoveryspeak” (*IJ* 202).

That Ewell does indeed describe the way AA uses “alcoholic” even in his demand for a definition (with “definition” and “description” being the words with which Wittgenstein himself characterizes his projects in the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, respectively) is this chapter’s point of departure from the prenominate post-ironic reading. I do not wish to argue here that Wallace’s literary agenda does not include an obversion of the aesthetic conventions of literary postmodernism and metafiction, only that such readings fail to account for the rich philosophical substructure of the instances in which *Infinite Jest* in fact makes poignant use of irony. And since this conceptual structure so deeply undergirds the novel’s form, to misunderstand it is also to misunderstand why and how *Infinite Jest* is indeed the progenitor of an as yet incompletely dissected new strain in American fiction. With respect to the one-sided dialogue involving Tiny Ewell and (provisionally) Pat Montesian, the way Tiny Ewell’s diction ironically undermines its own rhetoric instantiates, in a more humorous way, the substance of the Private Language Argument: that a private language would both require and deny itself the use of the

public rules and conventions that make a system of discourse a valid (i.e. functional) language in the first place; that the phrase “private language” is itself oxymoronic.

Chapter Three explains Wallace’s answer to his own critique of the idea of the private language by analyzing the way he characterizes both tennis at the Enfield Tennis Academy and Alcoholics Anonymous at Ennet House as public language-games. I argue that Wallace presses beyond a model of the language-game that would simply involve neologisms and idiosyncratic forms of public expression (though these are no doubt present and significant, especially the clichés via which AA dispenses its recovery advice), taking these two environments instead to manifest systems in which otherwise private, *a priori* present selves encounter otherness, the fundamental absence on the basis of which subjectivity is not only constituted but made intelligible. Enfield Tennis Academy head coach Gerhardt Schitt, for instance, propounds a theory of tennis in which the lines of the court become the perimeter of a “second world,” a two-person community both linguistic and existential whose chief imperative is not merely that one compete or win, but that one develop an understanding of one’s own subjectivity as contingent on the fact that the self—in the guise of the opponent—is something to be met and beaten according to the circumscribed rules of the game. The fact of the game’s publicity, in other words, opens a space where each player is forced to confront the fact (if not its implications) that he or she only “occurs as a player” in relation to the “other” competitor (*IJ* 110-112).

Much the same is true of Alcoholics Anonymous. On the linguistic level, AA’s canned aphorisms provide a public, systemic vocabulary via which each meeting’s speakers and listeners translate their “pointless addictive pain”—pain being for

Wittgenstein the ultimate test case for the privacy of sensation—and the pain of withdrawal and recovery into a publicly expressible form. In displacing their private pain (the pain that originally drove them to the still more private anesthetic of drug addiction), or rather the privacy of their pain, into this form of public expression, the AA member encounters the otherness whose bare formulation was incommensurable for the addict's private language. In developing this argument, I have followed Marshall Boswell's chapter on *Infinite Jest*, which explains the self-other interplay in terms of Kierkegaard's definition of religion. In my estimation, though, Boswell's observation that "AA is a community, whereas Kierkegaard focuses always on the subject in isolation—or, at any rate, in private contact with God" all but demands the sort of Wittgenstein reading that Boswell reserves only for his chapter on *The Broom of the System* (Boswell 145).

CHAPTER ONE: SUMMARY OF RELEVANT WITTGENSTEIN AND OF WALLACE'S TAKE ON IT AS EXPRESSED IN THE ESSAY "THE EMPTY PLENUM," PLUS AN ANALYSIS OF HOW *INFINITE JEST*'S HAL INCANDEZZA FUNCTIONS AS A WALLACESQUE VERSION OF THE WITTGENSTEINIAN PRIVATE LANGUAGE USER

Maybe the best-known portion of *Philosophical Investigations* is the so-called Private Language Argument Wittgenstein advances in sections 258-265. This aphoristic sequence attempts to answer the questions of how and when linguistic signs can be said to make communicative sense. Wittgenstein asks us to consider the case of what commenters—Norman Malcolm being foremost among them—have christened the Private Language User (hereafter PLU). This PLU, Wittgenstein writes, resolves “to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign ‘E’ and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation” (*PI* 258). The ‘privacy’ of the language here consists in the PLU’s attempting to define the sign E solely by associating it with a thought or sensation known to him or her alone. Another way to illustrate this mechanism would be to think of the private language as structurally analogous to Saussure’s idea of the signifier as sound-image, representative of an interior state or perception (N.B. that this basic mechanism applies just as easily to the PLU’s perception and naming of objects outside his or her own mind—the important thing is, as Wittgenstein says at *PI* 261, that the PLU “has *something*” in mind).

Wittgenstein attacks this model on the grounds that it could never attain the degree of internal consistency (and thus, to Wittgenstein, validity) necessary for it to actually be used. If the PLU possesses no way other than his own mental association to secure the meaning of a sign, then he or she has no criterion for infusing a given sign with the same meaning on different occasions through time. And for the later

Wittgenstein, infusing a given sign with the same meaning is equivalent to *using* the word to mean the same thing. Anticipating and mimicking the objection of a private-language-proponent, Wittgenstein writes,

But 'I impress [a sign's definition] on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right' (*PI* 258).

It does not even make sense to speak about the 'definition' of a sign in a private language, since both 'definition' and 'sensation' are always already intelligible (even to the PLU) only because they function in public language. The logical structure of the private language thus precludes the PLU's appeal to the very public linguistic rules that would secure the intelligibility of his or her private definitions. The private language's rules are only "the impressions of rules," and "The balance on which impressions are weighed is not the *impression* of a balance" (*PI* 259).

In the subsequent sections comprising the Private Language Argument, Wittgenstein concedes the possibility that the PLU could manage to define his or her signs with perfect consistency across a period of time, only to point out that there would still be no way for the PLU to ensure that the signs' original use would have had any public meaning (with 'meaning' here, per usual, being inextricably "a word of our common language"). The PLU's appeal to its own imagined use-consistency would be "As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true" (*PI* 265). Against the private, correlative model of language, the

later Wittgenstein asserts that all linguistic sense depends on the way language is used within a system of public discourse, which he famously refers to as a “language-game.” If I have done my job, the distinction between private languages and language-games will become clearer as we look at how Wallace treats these concepts in his work.

In his early essay “The Empty Plenum,” a review of David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* that is actually less a book review than a highly condensed survey of his own aesthetic and philosophical agenda, Wallace hails the Markson novel as “a sort of weird cerebral roman à clef,” a novel that somehow dramatizes or encodes a “highbrow or intellectual issue” in a way that goes beyond simple illustration (*EP* 218). Wallace sees *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* as an existential dramatization of Wittgenstein’s early work. ‘Early’ here specifically means 1921’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and its proto-positivist theory of language as fundamentally referential, the theoretical model that the *Philosophical Investigations*’s Private Language Argument razes to the logical ground. In this model, the basis of the early-twentieth-century metaphysics known as logical atomism, Wittgenstein conceives of language according to the paradigm of a mathematical or logical calculus. Words here stand in a direct, one-to-one relationship with the facts (i.e. true-or-false statements regarding possible states of affairs) and objects that they name. The simplest statements (generally names of objects), which Wittgenstein aptly enough refers to as “simples,” make sense only if their referential truth-function is not contradicted by some other valid statement in the language. Simples are irreducibly basic, but may be combined to form larger units of meaning (generally statements describing states of affairs, as opposed to merely naming discrete objects). For the early Wittgenstein, all meaning is constituted by the logical validity and

consistency of any given statement's relation to the object or state of affairs it claims to describe.

The somewhat grim existential implications of logical atomism are salient even in the opening section of the *Tractatus*:

- 1 The world is everything that is the case.
 - 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
 - 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts.
 - 1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
 - 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
 - 1.2 The world falls apart into facts.
 - 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

The *Tractatus*, then, sets out a theory of language and human cognition that leads, when pushed to its logical conclusion, to solipsism, meaning that it endlessly construes the world from language and the human consciousness that wields it. Although the simples do name objects, it is only within the mind of the thinking and perceiving subject that this relationship becomes secure, that objects become translated into the “facts” that constitute but do not coalesce into the “world” of the subject's perceptions and logical deductions (and here we might just as easily use Wittgenstein's later phrase and refer to this ‘subject’ as the PLU). The world becomes less a logical system than a list of irreconcilably discrete postulates.

For Wallace, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* takes the form of a very long thought experiment demonstrating what it might look like if “somebody really had to live in a *Tractatus* sized world” (EP 219). A literary envisioning of the ‘state of affairs’ Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument sketched in order to repudiate, Markson’s novel implicitly criticizes the solipsism entailed by the premises of logical atomism (basically meaning those reproduced from the *Tractatus supra*). Structurally, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is an unbroken, 240-page series of Wittgensteinian aphoristic observations, “free and unfree associations,” and deadpan musings on the nature of the relationship between language, thought, and the reality they want to document but actually conjure. On the level of narrative (but still sort of on that of form—the two are intimately related), it is also self-consciously written, though not in what Wallace calls the standard “Barthian/post-Derridean” manner of a “*texte*” whose central drama revolves around its own compositional artifice (EP 221). Here we have the typewritten transcript of one Kate, a woman who either is or delusionally believes herself to be the last human being alive on Earth, the lone survivor of some much-alluded-to-but-never-named apocalypse.

Wallace’s assessment of Kate’s narrative position will be useful for our inquiry into just how *Infinite Jest* renders Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy into existential drama:

The beginning of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* has Kate painting messages on empty roads: ‘Somebody is living in the Louvre,’ etc. The messages are for anyone who might come along to see. ‘Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages.’ The novel’s end involves the use, not the mention, of such a

message: ‘Somebody is living on this beach.’ Except use on what &/or whom?

It’s probably not right, as I think I did *supra*, to call this novel’s form a monologue [FN for “monologue”: “Unless you can empty your head of connotation and translate the word literally from the Attic Greek—then it probably has a Marksonian poignancy no other term’d have...”]. Kate is typing it. [...] Kate is not a ‘writer.’ By vocation a painter, her time at the typewriter is thoroughly and terribly avocational. She is shouting into her typing paper’s blankness. Her missive is a function of need (EP 221).

Wallace also makes a point of differentiating Kate’s typewritten shouts from “the humanistic syrup of *Howard’s End*’s ‘Only connect’” by locating Kate’s problem on philosophical ground deeper and more fundamental than that of empathy or social intercourse (EP 225). Hers are instead attempts to compile and infuse meaning into the totality of logically atomistic cultural, historical, and even meteorological data into which her world “falls apart” (*Tractatus* 1.2). Her condition is not simple loneliness but rather the metaphysical solipsism that underpins it. More urgent than a wish for human company, Kate languishes in a kind of crisis of existential faith—typing her surreal chronicle is the only way she feels she can forge any logical connections at all, be they between irreconcilable facts or between her own mind and the external world supposedly mapped by the mathematical picture-language of the *Tractatus*.

But of course, since she inhabits a world in which all meaning depends upon a logical subject’s “impressing upon herself” the affinity of word and fact, she cannot appeal to an independent “criterion of correctness” to validate this affinity. Her connections can thus never be more than tenuous ones. Her “monologue,” far from

transfiguring the boundary between Self and World, only ends up reinforcing her Self's unmortared walls, deepening the nonsensicality of an intracranial chaosmos. If the world of this private language "falls apart into but does *not* comprise" facts—i.e. "everything that is the case"—and if there exist no public criteria for assessing the communicative sense of the language by which we access these facts, then Kate, who exists only insofar as the statement 'Kate exists' makes sense (the later Wittgenstein would say functions in a language-game), cannot be certain that she in fact exists (EP 225). In a manner similar to Descartes's "*Cogito*-tautology," which begs the questions of the thinking subject's existence and thus "proves only the existence of thinking," Kate's writing "yields only the existence of text," and this problem endlessly preoccupies her (EP 222-223).

This recursivity, logically entailed by the nature of the private language, animates the utterance that becomes a kind of ironically deadpan refrain: "There goes my head again in that way it sometimes does, doubtless being the only explanation here as usual" (Markson 186). She is and can never be any more articulate about this "thing," her silence recalling that of her master at the end of the *Tractatus*, where he writes, "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said" (i.e. what the closed system of the positivistic private language provides for), and "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (*Tractatus* 6.53, 7). As a language, *Tractatus*-speak does not allow for any degree of meta-linguistic self-consciousness. Such a statement—an attempt to describe, in a given language, the parameters by which the sense of that utterance is governed—would be the "inarticulate sound" of *PI* 261, a kind of exasperated groan before the problem of a logic-based private

language. “But such a sound,” the later Wittgenstein gently chides, “is an expression only as it occurs in a particular language-game” (*PI* 261).

In *Infinite Jest*, following the Markson essay’s introduction of the Wittgensteinian PLU as a literary archetype, Wallace’s semi-autobiographical agonist Hal Incandenza most literally instantiates this maddening contradiction. Hal, a 17-year-old eidetic lexical prodigy and late-blooming junior tennis star in his final year of residence at the Enfield Tennis Academy, dominates the novel’s opening sequence. The first chapter narrates a scene that is, chronologically speaking, the latest in the book, the only scene to take place in the diegetic Year of Glad (in the world of *Infinite Jest*, the government of the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N., has made a policy of selling the rights to each year’s name to the highest corporate bidder—much of the narrative action occurs in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, for instance). The scene opens with Hal being interviewed by a committee of deans at the University of Arizona, where he is seeking a tennis scholarship, “re potential problems” with his application (*IJ* 6). Even in the opening paragraph, the metonymic nature of Hal’s perceptions tell us we are on logical atomism’s philosophical turf: “I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies. [...] Three faces have resolved into place above summer-weight sportcoats and half-Windsors. [...] These are three Deans—of Admissions, Academic Affairs, Athletic Affairs. I do not know which face belongs to whom” (*IJ* 3). These figures are less coherent subjects than discrete coincidences of facts that are themselves discrete.

The staid, innocuous dialogue and academic setting become increasingly tense as it emerges that Hal cannot make himself understood via either speech or gesture. Although we do not yet realize it, the fact that Hal narrates this section in the first-person

is itself both odd and thematically significant. Through most of the novel, Hal's sections, like the others, are narrated in third-person. The shift to first here mirrors formally Hal's loss of control over his speech and facial affect. Hal thinks, facing the deans, "I believe I appear neutral, even pleasant, though I've been coached to err on the side of neutrality and not attempt what would feel to me like a pleasant expression or smile" (*IJ* 3).

Wittgensteinian allusions abound. Recall from *PI* 258 that, since the PLU has no criterion for determining whether he or she is using signs correctly (i.e. consistently), he or she can only ever at best "believe" his or her utterances to be sensical. Hal's loss of physical control over his expressive faculties literalizes the PLU's lack of logical control over the private language, or of the way the private language conflicts with the public world within which it is inescapably bound. The same is true of the fundamental irony of Hal's situation: his only effective communicative expression is a kind of composed blankness, a willed absence of affect and expressivity that invites one of the deans to narrate Hal's vital circumstances to him. "The Dean at left," we read, "is a personality-type I've come lately to appreciate, the type who delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me" (*IJ* 3). In this language-game, Hal can only function as long as he intentionally refrains from any attempt at positive functioning.

When, under the gaze of the aptly named "Director of Composition," Hal tries to "compose what I project will be seen as a smile," the academic committee perceives the expression as an ambiguous wince or grimace (*IJ* 5). As he responds to their direct request for an explanation of the discrepancy between his stellar transcript and decidedly tellurian SAT scores, his answer seems to us coherent only insofar as he is, like Kate to her blank typing paper, "calling into the darkness of the red cave that opens out before

closed eyes” (*IJ* 11). Because the narrative camera remains tethered to Hal’s psyche, we, with Hal, only recognize the solipsistic disjunction between speaker and listener when he looks “out” to see the deans’ “horror” (*IJ* 12). Crucially, Hal’s status as PLU is never evident in the text of his own thought and speech, but only becomes salient via Hal’s internal observations of the deans’ physical reactions and efforts to restrain him.

Wallace’s determination to show us the committee’s reaction to Hal’s speech from Hal’s point of view—in other words, to deploy a limited first-person narrator—means that the reader also occupies the position of the PLU. Just like Hal, the reader is denied access to any objective “criterion of correctness” (or of incorrectness) that would tell us whether Hal’s utterances function (or lack function) in a wholly solipsistic manner, or whether they participate in any public language-game.

This ambiguity also informs the occasionally confusing syntactical likeness between Hal’s actual utterances (phrased as only he and we hear them—that is, in plain English) and his inner thoughts. Two pages before he shocks the deans with what manifests to them as a series of inhuman noises and gesticulations, Hal thinks, “The essays are old ones, yes, but they are mine; *de moi*. But they are, yes, old, not quite on the application’s instructed subject of Most Meaningful Educational Experience Ever. If I’d have done you one from the last year, it would look to you like some sort of infant’s random stabs at a keyboard, and to you, who use *whomsoever* as a subject” (*IJ* 9). His verbal response takes the same measured-yet-defensive stance as these thoughts, especially with respect to his “instincts concerning syntax and mechanics,” which seems to be a direct allusion to the mentalism of the *Tractatus* (*IJ* 10). This slippage in the

distinction between private thought and (failed) communicative language aligns Hal symptomatically with both Markson's Kate and the classic Wittgensteinian PLU.

All this characterization, though, simply clarifies Hal's central philosophical problem. The problem in this scene is that Hal has lost the ability to function in certain language-games. One of the deans complains to E.T.A. instructor Aubrey DeLint, "I'd only seen him play. On court he's gorgeous, possibly a genius. We had no idea. The brother's in the bloody NFL for God's sake. [...] We watched him through the whole Whataburger last fall. Not a waggle or a noise. We were watching ballet out there, a mate remarked after," to which DeLint responds, "Damn right you were watching ballet out there, White. This boy is a balletic athlete, a player" (*IJ* 14-15). These remarks anticipate E.T.A. head coach Gerhardt Schtitt's description of tennis—one of the novel's two main public language-games, along with Alcoholics Anonymous (see Chapter Three)—in terms of the trope of the dance. As will hopefully become clear when we examine the Wittgensteinian implications of Schtitt's theory of tennis, the description of Hal as "balletic" here is not simply an assessment of his agility or his geometrically manipulative style of play. More abstractly, the comparison to ballet connotes Hal's ability, while playing, to function as part of a system, to conceive of his subjectivity in terms of its profound contingency on its involvement in a system that permits the interplay of self and other.

The problem in this scene, though, is that Hal is unable to move from the language-game of tennis to that by and in which tennis is administered at the university level. DeLint is not wrong when he argues that "Hal here *functions*, you ass. Given a supportive situation. He's fine when he's by himself" (*IJ* 15). He is just referring to the

wrong language-game. Both Hal's and DeLint's protestations use the vocabulary of the *Investigations* to claim that Hal is not entirely one-dimensional. Hal pleads, "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. [...] I'm not just a creature, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function" (IJ 12). Hal's argument is simple: 'I have an inner life and would allow you access to it if you so desired.' Wittgenstein, of course, does not deny the PLU the capacity to have private sensations and beliefs. The upshot of the Private Language Argument, however, is that, without the conventions and assumptions of a public language-game, the PLU could neither name those private sensation and beliefs nor formulate them in communicative language. In other words, private sensations and beliefs are only communicable *as private* via the mechanisms of the public language-game, using the language-game's conventional 'functions' for the terms 'private,' 'sensation,' and 'belief.' Hal's interiority may not be "numerically identical" to the respective deans', for instance, but each can only be rendered by the public sign 'interiority' (Malcolm 105). Hal, however, can make neither his spoken language nor his facial affect function meaningfully in this situation, though he assures the deans that "I am not what you see and hear," that the crucial elements of his identity cannot be mapped in this sort of immanent system of linguistic relations. Hal's reiteration (incomprehensible to us, since we occupy the position of voyeurs in the mind of the PLU) that "I'm not" is therefore highly ironic. Not only is there no way to verify the public question of Hal's interior existence, but Hal's inability to phrase his protest in a way that makes sense to his audience seems an implicit confirmation that, in a manner of speaking, he 'is not.'

While Wallace does hint at certain possible literal causes for Hal's solipsism—marijuana withdrawal, his childhood ingestion of basement-mold, his adolescent ingestion of a certain extremely potent hallucinogen—these explanations remain partial and inconclusive. For our purposes, though, Hal's descent into solipsism is more interesting as a philosophical rather than a pharmacological drama. In one late editorial chapter, the narrator (in a reconfiguration of Hamlet's antic disposition) diagnoses Hal with "anhedonia," a pathological aversion to being seen or interpreted as sentimental that eventually metastasizes into a pathological inability to feel or (and this, for us, is the indispensable part) communicate anything positive at all. For Wallace, this mask of "ennui and jaded irony" is part of our cultural inheritance from a "U.S. arts" now dominated by the sort of self-conscious irony once deployed to critical effect by the writers of postmodern fiction (*IJ* 694). No longer a rarefied literary technique, however, ironic self-reference has (ironically) become the dominant social prophylactic against loneliness, a tenaciously adhesive mask Hal initially puts on "to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone" (*IJ* 694). Hal's eventual communicative engagement, then, corresponds to the moment at which his anhedonic mask becomes inseparable from the face underneath. Because it confronts the aesthetic conventions of classic postmodernism, this is a central passage for the "postironic" or "meta-ironic" readings of *Infinite Jest*. My concern, however, overlaps with these only insofar as it elucidates the Wittgensteinian elements of some of the novel's meta-ironic passages, as will become clear in Chapter Two.

In the meantime, I would like to examine one way Hal's anhedonic tendencies manifest themselves before his solipsism becomes wholly literal, and to interpret an

earlier chapter in terms of the narrator's diagnostic claim that Hal is manipulative "enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being" (*IJ* 694). During one episode that takes the form of a transcription of a phone conversation between Hal and his older brother Orin, Hal recounts his experience with the intensive grief-therapy schedule his mother arranged for him after he discovered the body of his formerly suicidal father. More specifically, he details his attempt to learn and evince what would appear to the therapist as real grief, so that he might get out of the therapy schedule before his tennis ranking sustained further damage. As he tells Orin, he read things like Elizabeth Harper Neeld's *Seven Choices: Taking the Steps to New Life After Losing Someone You Love*, which was 352 pages of sheer goo. I went in and presented with textbook-perfect symptoms of denial, bargaining, anger, still more denial, depression. I listed my seven textbook choices and vacillated plausibly between and among them. I provided etymological data on *acceptance* going all the way back to Wyclif and 14th-century *langue d'oc* French. The grief therapist was having none of it. [...] He made it manifestly clear I wasn't delivering the goods. I'd never failed to deliver the goods before. [...] Who sat there and refused even to define what the goods here would be (*IJ* 253).

Here we see the Tractarian worldview put into social practice. Hal becomes obsessed with the terminology and definitions involved in the "textbook" grieving process, his angst arising chiefly not from his father's suicide but from the grief-therapist's refusal to "define" what the term "grief" is supposed to mean. The conflict here, then, involves Hal's inability to insinuate himself into the grief-therapy language-game, to understand that the definition of "grief" depends entirely on the conventions according to which the

therapist is “professionally required” to use it. Nor does Hal realize that, under the language-game model of use-based meaning, his own attempt to evade the genuine expression of guilt, anger, denial, etc. is itself a natural defense mechanism countenanced in the grief-therapy language-game’s working definition of “grief.” Realizing that he needs to “empathize with the grief therapist” in order to convince him of his grief’s authenticity, Hal spends all night with a stack of “professional grief- and trauma-therapy” literature (*IJ* 255). At the next day’s session, he stages a “paroxysmic” fit of anger intended to function, according to the terms of the language-game at hand, as an expression of legitimate grieving-process feelings. As he tells his brother, “Notice I was subtly inserting certain loaded professional-grief-therapy terms like *validate*, *process* as a transitive verb, and *toxic guilt*. These were library-derived” (*IJ* 255).

Despite the fact that Hal “grieved to everybody’s satisfaction” by learning the rules of the therapeutic language-game, his story nonetheless contradicts the upshot of the *Investigations*: that coherent discourse depends on human community, and not the other way around. Hal only learns the language-game in order to escape its implications, construing the grief-therapist as an opponent to be held at a distance with language, rather than be engaged as an other to Hal’s self. Hal, of course, never does grieve, or at least he never communicates his grief even to the reader. His conversation with Orin, although an effective parody of the trite terms and assumptions undergirding the discourse of professional grief-therapy, nevertheless takes the same negative rhetorical form as the climactic therapy session itself: it is one long expression of the way Hal does *not* feel. The catastrophic interview with the University of Arizona deans is the result of Hal’s becoming too intensely private even to learn the rules of a new language-game for

manipulative purposes. His dramatic trajectory is therefore entropic, culminating in “an Emergency Room of some kind, where I will be detained as long as I do not answer questions, and then, when I do respond to questions, I will be sedated” (*IJ* 16). At his chronologically latest point, he becomes the inverse of the intubated post-op Don Gately (see Chapter Three), a negative-exposure version of the so-called “catatonic hero” (*IJ* 142). He is the perfect embodiment of Wallace’s variation on Markson’s theme. Unlike Kate, whose private language is so literal that it erases the external human world, Hal finds himself deprived of subjective agency because lacking public discursive function.

CHAPTER TWO: ADDICTS AS PLUs, AS WELL AS A DISCUSSION OF WALLACE'S USE OF IRONY IN HIS CHARACTERIZATION OF THEM AS SUCH

I will now try to show how, throughout *Infinite Jest*, addiction-think dramatizes many of the same logical crevasses that Wallace describes more explicitly in his essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress* as being distinctive of the PLU. Like Hal Incandenza, the novel's drug addicts suffer first and foremost from an inability to function meaningfully in public discourse. They are, in other words, solipsists, whether by conscious intent or tragic inadvertence. On a conceptual level, their recovery thus mirrors the therapy the later Wittgenstein wished to administer to the Tractarian model of language. A preliminary note of caution, though: I neither wish to imply nor detect any textual evidence that Wallace implies drug addiction to be the cause of these characters' discursive problems. For them, drug use rather seems—to use the lexicon of Recoveryspeak—a complex sort of enabler, a dubious anesthetic that temporarily dulls but ultimately exacerbates the existential problem of solipsism. In this way, the drug addict is the ideal case study in the concrete behavioral ramifications of Wittgenstein's contrary theses. But now to the text.

Ken Erdedy, a neurasthenic and supercilious advertising executive, first appears in the novel's second chapter, where (as we learn during his 10 dedicated pages of monologic free indirect discourse) he anxiously awaits the delivery of “a fifth of a kilogram of marijuana, 200 grams of unusually good marijuana, for \$1250 U.S.” (*IJ* 18). Though narrated in the third person, this section's voice is characterized by the breathless neuroticism that will, by book's end, become associated with compulsive, “addictive-type thinking” (*IJ* 203). In order to get a sense of Erdedy's character, we might start by looking at the unusual syntax of his section's opening sentence, a grammatical

interrogative punctuated declaratively: “Where was the woman who said she would come. She said she would come. Erdedy thought she’d have come by now. He sat and thought” (*JJ* 17). The question here is indistinguishable as a question within the avalanche of nervous declarations it unleashes. It is part of Erdedy’s private language, the dialect referred to in the conventions of the language-game of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Chapter Three *sub*) as Denial, and thus makes sense only as a statement sans question mark. The way we normally use it, the interrogative mood, in order to make any sense, requires and presupposes that language be essentially public. It can only function within a language-game as an expression of need, lack, desire, etc. communicated by one human being to another. Even a rhetorical question needs an audience. The solecism here also functions to alienate the reader. A punctuated question (meaning one with a ‘?’) would invite us to wonder, with Erdedy, where indeed this woman could have gotten to. As it is, the tension between grammar and punctuation here reflects Erdedy’s linguo-cognitive solipsism. He wonders where the (conspicuously nameless) woman is only insofar as he does not yet have the 200 grams of quality dope in his possession.

Much like inability of Markson’s Kate to enunciate any sort of statement about the nature of her solipsism, the idea that Erdedy’s private Denial speak disallows questions about itself pervades the rest of the section. Cf. the early Wittgenstein’s claim that “a sign-language that is governed by *logical* grammar” would entail the prohibition that “No proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself” (*Tractatus* 3.325, 3.332). In a world constituted by and as “everything that is the case,” and by its status as “the totality of *facts*, not of things” (my emphasis), there can be no sensible statement about the mechanism by which those facts

become facts in the mind of the PLU. Similarly, Erdedy cannot examine linguistically the philosophical structure of his ‘factual’ perceptions.

One way this problem is made manifest is in Wallace’s suppression of any explicit comparison between Erdedy and anyone or anything external to his own subjectivity. In the vocabulary of AA’s “Recoveryspeak” (*IJ* 223), Erdedy is unable to Identify (which just means ‘empathize’—see Chapter Three *sub*). Throughout the chapter, the narrator observes “an insect on one of the steel shelves that held his audio equipment” (*IJ* 17). This detail appears in the chapter’s first paragraph, just as we are beginning to develop an impression of the extent of Erdedy’s neurosis. He then becomes fascinated with the bug: “The insect was dark and had a shiny case. He kept looking over at it. Once or twice he started to get up to go closer to look at it, but he was afraid that if he came closer and saw it he would kill it, and he was afraid to kill it” (*IJ* 17). A short time later, after Erdedy recriminates over the possibility that he may have used the word “whatever” with the woman who said she would come and thus appeared more nonchalant than he intended with respect to her punctuality, we learn that “He felt similar to the insect inside the girder his shelf was connected to, but was not sure just how he was similar” (*IJ* 19). In the text’s simultaneous acknowledgment and repression of the essential sameness of Erdedy and the bug, Wallace makes existential what for Wittgenstein had been a logico-grammatical problem (though he of course does it via language): namely, the solipsist’s or PLU’s inability to conceive of himself or herself as having a function within a public language-game, as a sign among other signs whose meanings are all contingent on their being parts of the same system. Just as mathematical logic compels the language of the *Tractatus* to construe the world as the totality of

discrete, unrelated facts, the language of addiction can only construe the world as abstractly—rather than objectively—different from the Denial-ridden mind that births it.

The brand of solipsism governing the chapter's end, then, is not simply a psycho-social mood but a structural property of Erdedy's variation on the early-Wittgensteinian paradigm of language and thought. As Erdedy continues to try and resign himself to waiting for the delivery, we read,

He considered masturbating but did not. He didn't reject the idea so much as not react to it and watch as it floated away. He thought very broadly of desires and ideas being watched but not acted upon, he thought of impulses being starved of expression and drying out and floating dryly away, and felt on some level that this had something to do with him and his circumstances and what, if this grueling debauch he'd committed himself to didn't somehow resolve the problem, would surely have to be called his problem, but he could not even begin to try to see how the image of desiccated impulses floating dryly related to either him or the insect (*IJ* 26-27).

Though not terribly logical, Erdedy's musings here are definitely atomized, conceiving of everything external and even his own thoughts as not only unrelated to each other, but also only related to him insofar as they either facilitate or impede his getting high.

The chapter's long last sentence dramatizes this reasoning at its logical end.

Erdedy's thought-stream is interrupted when

his telephone and his intercom to the front door's buzzer both sounded at the same time [...], and he moved first toward the telephone console, then over toward his intercom module, then convulsively back toward the sounding phone, and then

tried somehow to move toward both at once, finally, so that he stood splay-legged, arms wildly out as if something's been flung, splayed, entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head (*IJ* 27).

He is caught mid-self-contradiction, becoming a dramatic embodiment of the *reductio ad absurdum* latent in the *Tractatus* model of language and thought. Applying the logic of *Tractatus* 1.21, the narrative situation here involves two discrete propositions. The statements 'The woman is at the door' and 'The woman is on the phone' can each be either "the case or not the case" without affecting the truth-value of the other. This seems to be the extent to which Erdedy, native speaker of Tractatusese, thinks the situation through. His "addictive-type thinking" requires that he acknowledge only the possibility of *each one's* truth—i.e. view the propositions atomistically—rather than synthesize them in light of the practical qualification that the woman cannot physically be (the novel takes place before the advent of cell phones) ringing both bells simultaneously. He instantiates but cannot see the internal contradiction of this double-bind.

The fact that we do see it, though, is the effect of one of Wallace's most subtle Wittgensteinian flourishes. In the preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes the book's aim as follows:

The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought). It will therefore only be

in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense (*Tractatus*, “Preface” 3).

By simply showing us Erdedy’s self-contradictory maneuver—as opposed to analyzing the public-private conflict in which lies its origin—Wallace brings us to the limit of addictive thought. In its deadpan, purely descriptive restraint, the language of the final scene is, like much of the rest of the chapter, highly ironic. As with earlier accounts of Erdedy’s inability to see connections between himself and external objects, the paradox here is palpable precisely because of its conspicuous absence from the text. This ironic silence thus, without carrying us across the limit that for Erdedy remains unbridgeable, points beyond his private language in its own terms, from within it.

This use of irony has not yet been parsed by Wallace scholarship, most of which focuses on the author’s engagement with the aesthetic conventions of metafiction. The canonical account of Wallace’s relationship with irony comes from A.O. Scott’s February 2000 essay for the *New York Review of Books*, in which he tries to elaborate the stance outlined in Wallace’s own “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” calling Wallace’s fiction “meta-ironic. That is [...] to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth” (Scott 40). This provides the foundation for many of the subsequent, more academic “post-ironic” readings, a couple of the most prominent among which are Marshall Boswell’s and Adam Kelly’s. While the formula does seem applicable to pieces like the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” and the short sequence “Octet”—self-conscious pieces ironizing metafiction in a metafictional way—it does not countenance the

Wittgensteinian irony Wallace deploys in these sections of *Infinite Jest*. The logical tension inherent in the Tractarian mode of thought undergirds the characterization of the novel's drug addicts in a more positive philosophical way.

This contradiction, however, only becomes salient when set in relief against the backdrop of a public language-game. In other words, the PLU only reduces himself or herself *ad absurdum* when he or she attempts to function in some sort of public discourse. Actually, the whole thrust of the Private Language Argument is that it makes no sense (with 'sense' itself being already a sign taken from our public language-game) to speak of a private language in conjunction with the public concept of function. In other words, it depends on the premise that language is essentially communal and communicative, and that the PLU's reliance on an internal logic is precisely what renders it illogical.

Another ironic bulge on the surface of Erdedy's solipsistic pickle is the way he cannot avoid using the mechanisms of public discourse even in his attempt to pharmacologically withdraw from the world altogether. On the most banal level, he cannot get high without soliciting the help of a third-party procurer. Nor, in his contact with the woman he so wants to conceptually reduce to an instrument of intoxication, can he avoid using signs whose communicative meaning depends *a priori* on their function in a linguistic system. The most obvious of these signs are the telephone and the doorbell, both of whose tones function as signals indicating the presence of another. Erdedy thus has a deeply ambivalent relationship with his telephone. Early on, he "did not use [always a Wittgensteinian buzzword] the phone to call the woman who'd promised to come because if he tied up the line and if it happened to be the time when maybe she was trying to call him he was afraid she would hear the busy signal and think him

disinterested and maybe take what she'd promised him somewhere else" (*IJ* 18). His public and private desires contradict one another. Herein lies the tragically double-bound irony of Erdedy's wish to "shut the whole system [another Wittgensteinism] of his life down" during his pot-binge (*IJ* 26). In order to shut it down, he must understand it as a system and function within it. Hence the fact that this shutdown may only come after "the woman," who never arrives, "had come and gone" (*IJ* 26). He dreams of her 'delivery'—not to say 'deliverance'—as the consummation of his desire for perfect privacy, despite the consummately public nature of the exchange. Again, the narrator's ironic tone apprises us that this internally contradictory state, the illogic of the *wait*, is his solipsism's most Tractarian quality.

Erdedy is not the only who, once inside the Ennet House/AA recovery apparatus, "Denies" that he needs to be there. The "elf-sized" attorney Tiny Ewell, for one, has been court-ordered into a nine-month stay at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, and yet refuses to admit that he is an "alcoholic," citing the insufficient clarity of the program's working definition of the term. The transcript of his interview with house director Pat Montesian begins, "I'm not *denying* anything. I'm simply asking you to define 'alcoholic.' How can you ask me to attribute to myself a given term if you refuse to define the term's meaning?" (*IJ* 177). Wittgenstein might interrupt here to probe Ewell for an explanation of what exactly he might be *using* "meaning" to mean, to inquire into the philosophical structure of his insistence that there must be a more perspicuous definition. A few lines down, Ewell continues,

I am not in *denial* so to speak about anything empirical and objective. Am I having pancreas problems? Yes. Do I have trouble recalling certain intervals in

the Kemp and Limbaugh administrations? No contest. Is there a spot of domestic turbulence surrounding my intake? Why yes there is. Did I experience yes some fornication in detox? I did. I have no problem forthrightly admitting things I can grasp. Fornicate, with an *m*, yes. But what is this you demand I admit? Is it *denial* to delay signature until the vocabulary of the contract is clear to all parties so bound? Yes, yes, you don't follow what I mean here, good! And you're reluctant to proceed without clarification. I rest. I cannot deny what I don't understand (*IJ* 177).

Fellow Ennet House resident Geoffrey Day likewise quibbles over the issue of definition versus description with respect to the vocabulary of Recoveryspeak. Day, a one-time community-college sociologist and veteran Chianti-and-Quaaludes devotee, intellectualizes the semantics of the program's advice in order to avoid examining—Wittgenstein might say investigating—the real-world situations (read language-games) to which the trite-sounding advice applies. In a chapter structured as an aphoristic list (Wittgenstein's form of choice) of “exotic new facts” acquired by any new halfway-house resident, we read

that over 75% of the veteran Boston AAs who want to convince you that [addiction] is a disease will make you sit down and watch them write *DISEASE* on a piece of paper and then divide and hyphenate the word so that it becomes *DIS-EASE*, then will stare at you as if expecting you to undergo some kind of blinding epiphanic realization, when really (as G. Day points tirelessly out to his counselors) changing *DISEASE* to *DIS-EASE* reduces a definition and explanation down to a simple description, and rather a whiny and insipid one at that (*IJ* 203).

With these complaints, both Ewell and Day place themselves well within Wittgenstein's conceptuo-linguistic territory. At *PI* 109, Wittgenstein declaims the need for philosophy to "do away with all explanation—description alone must take its place" (*PI* 109). Whether we agree that Wittgenstein actually carries out this anti-theoreticism, the stance serves as the methodological analogue to the anti-Tractarian Use Argument that is the most important component of the *Investigations*' conceptual agenda. Wittgenstein scholar Brendan Wilson describes "the Use theory" as being "not intended as a theory in any constructive sense but as a *corrective*, specifically, a corrective to referential and mentalistic theories," with the Tractarian worldview being foremost among these (Wilson 45-46). It makes no sense, according to the later Wittgenstein, to speak of a given word's meaning apart from a description of the rules of the particular language-game in which it serves a meaningful communicative function. Although Marie McGinn, another Wittgensteinian, claims in opposition to Wilson that the *Tractatus* already aims not at the theorization but the clarification of language's function, she nonetheless concedes that his early thought still depends on the crucial assumptions that "sense must be determinate, that there is a common essence to all forms of representation, and that the meaning of a word is something correlated with it" (McGinn 12).

Though Wallace renders them less abstractly, these are exactly the preconceptions undergirding Ewell's and Day's addictive-type thinking. Ewell claims to have no trouble admitting the "empirical and objective," external manifestations of his alcoholism, but his denial consists in his refusal or inability to incorporate these events into a logical definition of 'alcoholic.' His reasoning, too, lampoons the attorney's positivistic stance

and method. Perhaps no profession lends itself so readily to an ironic critique of the Tractarian mode of thought. I say ironic because, even as he argues for a deductive definition, Ewell in fact ends up offering a cogent and exhaustive description of what Pat Montesian is using the word ‘alcoholic’ to mean in his particular case, which is tantamount to a definition for the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*. ‘Alcoholic’ here describes precisely the circumstances surrounding Ewell’s committal to Ennet House and recovery. Again, as with Erdedy, Wallace himself uses pure description, in the form of a kind of deadpan tone, to present Ewell as a PLU coming into conflict with another player in a public language-game. Formally speaking, the unique thing about this passage, though, is that it is a one-sided dialogue (with that paradoxical phrase hopefully capturing the Wittgensteinian irony), the transcript of the interviewee’s speech only. It is a conversation whose other participant—as well as her affect, demeanor, objections, reactions, etc.—we can only infer from the way Ewell’s text perceives and responds to her. Wallace positions the narrative camera just close enough to the limit of addictive/Tractarian thought to indicate to the reader that there is in fact another speaker present.

The same ironic principle governs the presentation of Geoffrey Day as another positivistic logic-haggler. His demand for “a definition and explanation” rather than a “whiny insipid” description of the concept of addiction as “*DISEASE*” can have no force against an interlocutor (i.e. “his counselors”—again, we get only the PLU’s side of the dialogue) for whom the meaning of “*DISEASE*” quite literally equates to its use as “*DIS-EASE*.” The use-based meaning resists logical fixation. The veteran AAs use it to mean variously “That addiction is either a disease or a mental illness or a spiritual condition (as

in ‘poor of spirit’) or an O.C.D.-like disorder or an affective or character disorder” (*IJ* 203). The examples of Ewell and Day imply what will only later become clear: that Alcoholics Anonymous functions in *Infinite Jest* as a use-based public language-game, a system of discourse where one level of the novel’s drama involves the addicted PLUs’ (sometimes unwitting, often reluctant) attempts to move from a Tractarian to an Investigational manner of thinking and speaking.

This same tension between solipsism and dialogue also characterizes Hal’s relationship with his father. Some quick background information might be helpful. Hal’s father, James O. Incandenza, is a genius physicist turned avant-garde (or, rather, self-consciously après-garde) filmmaker who committed suicide in the diegetic Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar. An optics specialist from his days at M.I.T., he began his film career as a postmodernist, using experimental lens and lighting arrangements in movies that were mostly about the process of making and/or watching movies, plus parodies whose comic value lay in their ironic exaggeration of certain commercial genres’ conventions. Only Joelle van Dyne (Ennet House resident and a.k.a. former radio personality Madame Psychosis) knows that James Incandenza’s metacinematic aesthetic was unintentional. He was, on a personal level, simply too self-conscious for his movies to be the earnest communiques he so desperately wanted them to be. They became ironically self-referential almost by accident or default. What he really wanted was to entertain, and his final and most perversely effective entertainment—the lethally addictive and entertaining *Infinite Jest*—was intended as something complex and compelling enough that his precocious youngest son could not just consume it and move on. Obsessed by the tragic power of the film and nearly insane from alcohol-withdrawal,

Incandenza “put his head in a specially-dickied microwave in the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar,” his head exploding due to the appliance’s internal pressure gradient and thus symbolically granting him the escape from solipsism he had hoped the communicative efficacy of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge would provide (*IJ* 694).

James Incandenza, whom Hal refers to with the family moniker “Himself,” thus evinces the two main traits of the novel’s model PLU: virulent addiction and a penchant for self-referential communication (insofar as that latter phrase is not an example of the very sort of Wittgensteinian paradox I have thus far tried to elucidate). One early scene, a flashback to the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad, takes the form of a dialogue—this time a more or less two-sided one—between 11-year-old Hal and his father, who wears a disguise and has fooled Hal into thinking he’s come to speak with a “professional conversationalist” (*IJ* 28). This is the only scene in which Hal and his father speak to one another, but even that description needs qualification: Himself, we learn, has for some time been unable to hear Hal when he speaks. Whether Hal is right in calling this a “hallucination” is both unclear and beside the conceptual point (except that it helps characterize Hal himself as a PLU). As the novel’s most literal PLU, Himself construes his son *a priori* from the self-conscious assumption that the two cannot communicate. They cannot open a language-game because their respective Tractarian mental pictures of the world always already deny the other the capacity for linguistic communication.

The conversation thus devolves into a kind of metaconversation. Himself, disguised as the conversationalist, implores Hal to speak about formal topics, including “Byzantine erotica” (Hal’s hobby) and the definition of “implore” (*IJ* 28). For his part, Hal remains too confused by the whole situation to do any more than ask about the reason

for and parameters of the conversation he has supposedly been scheduled to have. They argue about the precise definition of “conversationalist”—Hal, a self-proclaimed “*O.E.D.* man,” defines it as “just one who converses much,” while Himself adds that he “excels in conversation” (*IJ* 28-29). Father and son cannot agree on the terms and rules of the language-game in which a genuine conversation would take place. Hal clings to the belief that his dad is either insane or suffering the effects of yet another Wild Turkey binge, while Himself continues to interpret Hal’s metaconversational queries as a form of silence. The latter then launches into a drunken rant that takes the form of a series of questions unseparated by any space in which Hal might answer and ends in the admission that he “requires only daily evidence that you *speak*.” He then confesses how, as a child, he “used to pray daily for the day his own dear late father would sit, cough, open that bloody issue of the *Tucson Citizen*, and not turn that newspaper into the room’s fifth wall” (*IJ* 29).

In cinematic terms, Himself’s rhetorical move constitutes a uniquely complex breach of the conversational fourth wall: he addresses Hal directly for the purpose of calling attention to his reason for initially addressing Hal in the guise of the conversationalist. However, since his reason for contriving the meeting is itself a solipsistic delusion (namely that Hal refuses to speak), the metaconversational breach exacerbates the very problem Himself had intended it to fix. He erects a kind of fifth wall even in his attempt to puncture the fourth. As a literary moment, it is an adroit and ironic critique of the rhetoric of metafiction, and, most importantly for our purposes, one leveled entirely via the language of Wittgenstein. Himself’s particular instantiation of Tractarian solipsism both invalidates and compels this level of self-consciousness.

Crucially, though, this self-consciousness never takes the form of self-assessment or criticism, and is thus aligned with the Denial-ridden addicts' variations on the PLU model. Without the most basic assumption of the Wittgensteinian language-game—that all language is dependent on the presence of other human subjects capable of listening and response—all this rhetorical complexity only reinforces the *a priori* illogic of the PLU's attempt to engage in the public discourse he desires. This leads to precisely the sort of vicious infinite regress that was the result of Wittgenstein's *reductio* in the Private Language Argument. It is the narrative equivalent of the PLU's attempt to convince himself of the factual accuracy of the morning paper by reading the same stories in more than one copy.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NOVEL'S TWO BIG PUBLIC LANGUAGE-GAMES:
TENNIS AT THE ENFIELD ACADEMY AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN
METRO BOSTON AA

Tennis

In Wittgensteinian counterpoint to the intracranial worlds of the PLUs surveyed thus far, *Infinite Jest* depicts two main public language-games: that of the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and, just down the hill, Ennet House and Boston's various chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous. As with the PLUs themselves, Wallace does not merely illustrate Wittgenstein's linguistic and philosophical positions, but rather incorporates them into his treatment of the problem of what E.T.A.'s 14-year-old Idris Arslanian calls "Alienation [...] Existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism" (*IJ* 113).

One scene at E.T.A. shows each of the male 18s (i.e. members of the males 18-and-under squad) conversing with his designated group of mentees, or "Little Buddies," during the 3 November Y.D.A.U. Big Buddy meetings. The discussion in Hal's Big Buddy meeting involves just this Wittgensteinian question. Ten-year-old Kent Blott wants to know, after hearing the 18s vilify the E.T.A. instructors and administrators during post-match shower-time, why they all have not simply dropped out, if they hate the program so much. He worries that the linear narrative trajectory he has always envisioned his future life following may not, in the end, actualize or validate his efforts, or, worse, that the 'pursuit of happiness' may never culminate at all:

I see seven or eight years of unhappiness every day and day after day of tiredness and stress and suffering ahead, and for what, for a chance at a like a pro career that I'm starting to get this dready feeling a career in the Show means even *more*

suffering, if I'm skeletally stressed from all the grueling here by the time I get there (*IJ* 109-110).

Like the rest of his age-group, Blott treats the Academy's draconian practice- and drill-schedule as personally directed and thus cruel and sadistic. Hal responds by emphasizing the public nature of the E.T.A. training regimen, contextualizing Blott's personal complaint. The point of the locker-room carping, he informs them, "is that we'd all just spent three hours playing challenges against each other in scrotum-tightening cold, assailing each other, trying to take away each other's spots" (*IJ* 112). The unstructured time in the showers is an intentional allowance by the coaching staff, an attempt to improve the players' morale by supplying them with a common enemy.

In Wittgensteinian terms, the Big Buddy meeting functions as a microcosm of the E.T.A. language-game, a public space where conversation centers on the dissemination of information about the rules of the broader game. Hal's advice to Blott is to internalize the fact that every component of this language-game's structure is in fact the result of the coaching staff's careful planning, and is intended to further the players' own best interests. Kent Blott's personal complaint about the difficulty of reaching the Show is the reaction of a Wallacesque PLU to this public structure. Blott—like Erdedy, Tiny Ewell, and even Hal—construes the world according to the atomistic impressions of it in his own mind. He remains, at the glabrous age of 10, unable to conceive of Coach Gerhardt Schtitt's martinetism as having any function other than to inflict pain. At *PI* 301, Wittgenstein discusses the PLU's theoretical inability to "imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own" (*PI* 302). A PLU hypothetically involved in this form of public discourse would have to "transfer the idea of [pain] to objects outside" himself or herself

after first mentally establishing the connection between a personal sensation and the word ‘pain’ (Malcolm 105). In the classic formulation of the Private Language Argument, of course, this transference would be impossible: to the PLU, the word ‘pain’ would mean something like “this unpleasant sensation of *mine*,” and thus “it will be a *contradiction* to speak of *another’s* pain” (Malcolm 106). While the Little Buddies do not seem to be so literally solipsistic, they do exhibit qualities integral to this Tractarian worldview. Blott’s problem is not so much that he cannot perceive others’ pain as that he cannot conceptualize his E.T.A. classmates’ respective pains as all having the same function as signs within a system of discourse.

Coach Gerhardt Schtitt, authoritative GDR-era Bavarian import, conceives of this system as both antithesis and preemptive remedy for what he sees as the adverse and tragic effects of the American myth of teleological personal achievement, also known as the pursuit of happiness. In one scene, Schtitt expresses his reservations about this cultural narrative in the vocabulary of Euclid’s *Elements*: “The story that the shortest way between two places is the straight line.” For Schtitt, this teleology entails a definition of the subject as a premade, objectively present agent, one that confronts none of the self-other complexity of his own favorite aphorism, “We Are What We Walk Between” (*IJ* 80-81). E.T.A. founder James O. (“Himself”) Incandenza alludes more clearly to this theory’s Wittgensteinian resonances. Hal’s father had apparently hired Schtitt because the two men shared the same philosophical outlook on the nature of tennis. Each of them “approached competitive tennis more like a pure mathematician than a technician” (*IJ* 81). Incandenza’s take on the game’s essence is heady and mathematical but entirely pertinent, as it involves “what Incandenza would articulate to anyone who shared both his

backgrounds as a Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response, Cantorian and beautiful because *infoliating*, *contained*, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of self” (*IJ* 82).

The distinction here between the “technician” and the “pure mathematician” corresponds to the Wittgensteinian one between private and systemic notions of language and thought. Against the Tractarian concept of the utterance as rooted within the expansive mind of the isolated PLU, Incandenza’s theory of tennis situates the potential expansion of “move and response” in the discursive space that both separates and unites the game’s two participants. This expansion remains only potential because the human players possess only a finite variety of skill and ingenuity. The parameters of the match (a category that includes the match’s personnel) dictate, as in a language-game, the range and variety of possible valid moves. Wittgenstein posits much the same idea with respect to language in *PI* 3, where he criticizes the Augustinian account of linguistic meaning as something logically “correlated with the word” (*PI* 3). Wittgenstein writes,

Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises ‘Is this an appropriate description [of language] or not?’ the answer is, ‘Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe’ (*PI* 3).

Like Incandenza's tennis, the language-game operates somewhat paradoxically, making available a gamut of public utterance and response while limiting its participants (public language users) to only those utterances whose use will be sensible given the circumstances at hand.

Schtitt elaborates this theory of the game as a union of theoretical expansion and practical limitation during dawn drills on the morning of 9 November Y.D.A.U. In response to 15-year-old Lamont Chu's promise to stop complaining about the cold and "adjust to conditions," the coach waxes stern and philosophical re the nature of the "second world" opened and encapsulated by the boundaries of play in an ideal tennis match. He tells the players,

You have a chance to *occur*, playing. No? To make for you this second world that is always the same: there is in this world you, and in the hand a tool, and always only two of you, you and this other, inside the lines, with always a purpose to keep this world alive, yes? [...] Not 'adjust to conditions.' Make this second world inside the world: here there *are* no conditions (*IJ* 459).

In the language-game of Schtitt-style tennis, the players do not simply act as though there were no wind and cold. Rather, the words 'wind' and 'cold' have no meaningful use here, as they evoke things external to the court's 24-by-eight-meter perimeter and the vocabulary of "move and response" contained therein. For Wallace, this "infoliation" of the language-game is integral to the process of the becoming-self of the human subject. The hyperbolic quality of Schtitt's oration does nothing to downplay the importance of the repeated emphasis he lays on the idea that his mentees do not merely approach tennis as a competitive engagement between two prefabricated individuals. It is only within the

systemic encounter with “this other”—an encounter couched inextricably in the mutual terms of a public (language-)game—that any given player “occurs,” or comes into being *as a player*. Though somewhat counterintuitive, this idea is nevertheless the logical metaphysical extension of the later Wittgenstein’s remarks about the public nature of language. If all meaning is determined systemically rather than denotatively, then the sense of words like ‘subject,’ ‘other,’ and ‘self’ should be no different. To put it another way, it makes no sense to speak of a ‘self’ unless the language-game I am referring to provides the conceptual and linguistic tools for discussing the self-other relation.

This complexity also illuminates another of Wallace’s cleverer linguistic flourishes. In his Big Buddy meeting, Hal reminds his charges that the E.T.A. intramural ranking “system’s got inequality as an axiom. We know where we stand entirely in relation to one another” (*IJ* 112). The younger kids, however, like the addicted PLUs, seem to miss his meaning, internalizing only the portion of the remark concerning their collective awareness of individual standing. We later learn that many of them more or less equate their standings with their identities: “Listen to any sub-16 exchange you hear in the bathroom or food line: ‘Hey there, how are you?’ ‘Number eight this week is how I am.’ They all still worship the carrot” (*IJ* 693). They have not yet grasped the rather knottier existential implications of Hal’s appended “entirely in relation to one another.” As PLUs, the younger players construe the signs of their respective rankings as denoting something essential about themselves in a logically correlative (i.e. Augustinian and/or Tractarian) fashion. They pay no attention to the way the ranking and the self it denotes only obtain their meanings as a result of their occurrence within a system.

The fact that this paradoxical interplay between self and system characterizes both of a given match's players equally is what distinguishes Schitt's and Incandenza's theory of tennis. As the coach phrases it to Hal's older brother Mario, "The true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. [...] The competing boy on the net's other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is the what is the word *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self. As you are his occasion" (IJ 84). This passage's major conceptual elements are diametrically opposed to a type of subjectivity thought according to the logic of the *Tractatus*. The Tractarian solipsist literally cannot possess the vocabulary for talking about the self not as an *a priori* objectively present agent but as something that must perpetually be met in an encounter that is itself only occasioned by the prospective individual's engagement in a public language-game. Due to its competitive nature, the novel's tennis language-game features the tragic repetition of this self-meeting or self-transcendence as part of its "infinity of choice and execution." The self-other interplay by which "You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits make the game possible in the first place" functions as a rule of the game (IJ 84). The meanings of the game's "two heads" and "one world" are thus mutually contingent (IJ 461).

Alcoholics Anonymous

Boston AA, and especially Don Gately's White Flag group, functions as the novel's other major public language-game. If, in this Wittgensteinian reading, addicts like Erdedy, Day, and Ewell embody the Tractarian Private Language User, then AA provides a discursive space where such characters are forced (or rather, since nothing about AA is mandatory, strongly encouraged) to communicate in language whose

meaning is transpersonal as opposed to positivistic. As with the Enfield Tennis Academy language-game, AA's communality becomes implicated in the fundamental structure of each of its members' subjectivities. On this thematic level, the Program's rehabilitative efficacy involves its members' ability to conceive of themselves as "occurring" as functions within a system of discourse and mutual relation.

Some of the most notably use-based and Wittgensteinian elements of AA's language-game are its aphorisms. Derided as insipid by the Denial-ridden Ennet House newcomers, these are terse and ostensibly digestible pieces of sobriety advice, and as such are used by sponsors who wish to remind their sponsees what sorts of behavior AA does and does not strongly encourage. Examples include "Take It One Day at a Time," the notoriously cryptic trio of "Keep Coming," "Hang in There," and "You're Right Where You Need to Be," plus the admission that "My Best Thinking Got Me Here," with the latter being especially relevant to our discussion of the addicted PLUs' compulsive thinking. Just as Tiny Ewell quibbles over the meaning (as opposed to the use) of the term "alcoholic," Joelle van Dyne expresses a similar skepticism with respect to the way one of the 8 November Y.D.A.U.'s White Flag Group meeting's speakers concludes his monologue by declaring that he is there, in AA, "But For the Grace of God." Unlike most agnostic newcomers, Joelle's problem is not with the phrase's unabashed religiosity but with its grammatical construction. In Tractarian terms, it is not a well-formed proposition. She explains that

her trouble with it is that 'But For the Grace of God' is a subjunctive, a counterfactual, she says, and can make sense only when introducing a conditional clause, like e.g. 'But For the Grace of God I *would* have died on Molly Notkin's

bathroom floor [after overdosing on freebase cocaine],’ so that an indicative transposition like ‘I’m here But For the Grace of God’ is, she says, literally senseless, and regardless of whether she *hears* it or not it’s meaningless, and that the foamy enthusiasm with which these folks can say what in fact means nothing at all makes her want to put her head in a Radarange [reference to Himself’s prenominate suicide-by-microwave all too significant] at the thought that Substances have brought her to the sort of pass where this is the sort of language she has to have Blind Faith in (*IJ* 366).

Ennet House live-in staffer Don Gately, Joelle’s chaperone for the evening, has no idea what she means by this, and not merely because he dropped out of high school before reaching Prescriptive Grammar. Having internalized the use-based meaning of Recoveryspeak’s various adages and clichés, Gately hears Joelle’s positivistic reasoning as a kind of foreign language. Even though Joelle cannot, we know by this point in the narrative that Gately’s own recovery experience has all but forced him to understand “But For the Grace of God” in the way it is used in the AA language-game. About 150 pages earlier, we read about how, early in his stay at Ennet House, Gately “almost got discharged for teaming up with a bad-news methedrine addict from New Bedford and sneaking out after curfew” (*IJ* 194), and how this bad-news addict eventually did get discharged and then quickly arrested on an outstanding warrant, and how, after she had been found brutally murdered on her prison-cot, “Gately’s individual counselor Gene M. brought Gately the news and invited him to see the methedrine addict’s demise as a clear case of There But For the Grace of God Goeth D.W. Gately” (*IJ* 196). By insisting on a model of language as fundamentally logical and referential, Joelle enables herself to

avoid confronting the way “But For the Grace of God” actually functions as an expression of gratitude in the language-game of Recoveryspeak. The irony that the speaker in this scene expresses gratitude for being able, “But For the Grace of God,” for the very opportunity to Share (another AA term) his experience via a non-private language may escape Joelle, but it is not lost on the reader. Wallace thus again uses irony to point beyond the limits of the PLU’s conceptual purview. This instance, though, is the inverse of the ironic scenes mentioned in Chapter Two above: Wallace ironizes Joelle’s unwillingness to listen, not the What Flag speaker’s ability to speak.

Don Gately struggles with this tension between the referentiality and functionality of Recoveryspeak, too, though, especially with respect to AA’s Step Three, the suggestion that members formulate some idea of a “Higher Power” to thank and pray to for help staying sober. Specifically, Gately is concerned that he has failed the Third Step’s mandate, as sobriety has left him with even less of an understanding of a Higher Power than he had during his oral-narcotics heyday. Speaking at a meeting of Braintree’s “Tough Shit But You Still Can’t Drink Group,” Gately reveals how

His sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA’s very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he’s talking to Anything/-body or not, and he somehow gets through that day clean. [...] Gately still feels like he has no access to the Big Spiritual Picture (*IJ* 443).

Regarding this last sentence, recall that, in the Tractarian scheme, words are supposed to be pictures of possible states of affairs. According to the logic of the *Tractatus*, “God” and “Higher Power” would be meaningful only insofar as they corresponded to fixed and

discrete signifieds. Under the anti-paradigm described in the *Investigations*, however, we can parse these terms' meanings only in relation to how they function in the AA language-game. Gately's internal struggle is thus between his desire to fix the term "God" with a referential meaning and his surprise at the undeniable fact that, even in the absence of this referential fixity, Boston AA's use of the term does seem to accomplish its purpose. Gately also mentions how some members he knows have come to AA from language-games operating on the basis of a more referential meaning for the term "God." Certain "Catholics and Fundamentalists," for instance, have been glad to exchange the "Stern and Punishing-type God" of their childhoods for "a Loving, Forgiving, Nurturing-type God" (*IJ* 443). AA's emphasis, however, remains on the importance of its members' simply using "God" and "Higher Power" in a meaningful way rather than on the terms' specific referents. For his own part, Gately cannot imagine his "God" referring to anyone or anything at all—or rather, he can only imagine it referring to "*Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he came in with" (*IJ* 443).

Marshall Boswell approaches this aspect of the novel in terms of the Kierkegaardian model of religion, in which the religious subject becomes "open" to both the awe and the peculiar sort of despair attendant upon a recognition of God as that which is wholly other. In Kierkegaard, these moods transfigure the "despair" of those who remain willfully ignorant of the possibility of this openness. Boswell also explains, however, that

The crucial difference between Kierkegaard and AA—and this might serve as Wallace's critique of Kierkegaardian thought—is that AA is a *community*,

whereas Kierkegaard focuses always on subjectivity in isolation—or, at any rate, in *private* contact with God. AA refigures Kierkegaard’s dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity as a contrast between being ‘In the Program’ and being ‘Out There, where the Disease is’ (Boswell 145, emphases mine).

But this is as far as he goes. Given both his diction—his opposition of the “communal” and the “private”—and his argument’s focus on the vocabulary of AA itself, it seems reasonable to argue that what Boswell is hinting at with his departure from Kierkegaard is the Wittgensteinian element of AA’s linguistic world. It is a language-game whose function has both existential and religious consequences.

The fact that the Tough Shit But You Still Can’t Drink Group views Gately’s confession not as evidence of Third-Step failure but as a reason to applaud testifies to the public nature of AA’s language-game. Gately thinks it odd that whenever he “publicizes how he’s fucking up in sobriety Boston AAs fall all over themselves to tell him how good it was to hear him and to for God’s sake Keep Coming, for them if not for himself, whatever the fuck that means” (*IJ* 444). The audience’s empathy and enthusiasm here indicate the way the monologue functions in AA. As critic Petrus van Ewijk notes, the monologues in AA serve a radically different purpose from those of the PLUs’ monologues treated in Chapter Two *supra*, which latter seem instead to be based on that of Markson’s Kate (van Ewijk 134). For one thing, the AA monologues are addressed to a diegetic audience and not merely overheard by the voyeuristic reader. In fact, the reader here no longer occupies the position of the voyeur at all, but is aligned instead with the meeting’s crowd of rapt listeners. Wallace’s treatment of these speakers’ monologues, unironic to a point barely but decidedly short of parody, is thus the converse

of the way he ironizes the novel's PLUs. There is a solid Wittgensteinian explanation for this: at their best, the AA meetings do not involve private languages beyond which irony might indirectly point, but are rather constituted by the fact that everyone in attendance is trying equally absurdly to make linguistic and behavioral sense of the same 12-step regimen.

As with tennis at the Enfield Tennis Academy, the AA language-game provides the space for the self-other encounter that manifests the structure of each member's subjectivity. Gately's complaint about the Higher Power-mandate of Step Three exemplifies this mechanism. The AA language-game has granted him a vocabulary for speaking and thinking about his own involvement in the self-other interplay. At least in Gately's case, AA's "God" seems to function as a kind of non-name for that which is irreducibly other than the self, the "Nothing" out into which he imagines his prayers radiating forever "and never hitting Anything" (*IJ* 444). Unlike the "unconsidered atheism" of Gately's addicted past—a lower-case "nothing"—this new use for "God" invokes something entirely outside the subject's mind, or rather it invokes the possibility of exteriority itself. The AA language-game raises this "Nothing" to the status of a proper noun, incorporating the theoretical other as both rule and participant. As it communicates (always publicly) that which is unnamable, a kind of non-state of affairs, this "Nothing" would be incommensurable for a private language whose every statement's meaning depends on its referential fixity inside the mind of the user.

Coming to terms with this referential murkiness and its existential ramifications comprises the special pain of Recovery. The purpose of the AA meeting's public-speech format is to translate each member's own personal experience of this pain into the public,

Shareable terminology of the language-game. Right after Gately's God-monologue, we read how veteran AAs

omit to mention that the way it gets better and you get better is through pain. Not around pain or in spite of it. They leave this out, talking instead about Gratitude and Release from Compulsion. Then [...] these Boston AAs start in on telling you you're right where you're supposed to be and telling you to remember the pointless pain of active addiction and telling you that at least this sober pain now has a purpose. At least this pain means you're going somewhere, instead of the repetitive gerbil-wheel of addictive pain (*IJ* 446).

For "sober" and "addictive" here, we might respectively substitute the Wittgensteinian "public" and "private" pain. Cf., for instance, *PI* 302, where Wittgenstein describes the Private Language User's hypothetical attempt to imagine another person's subjective pain: "I have to imagine a pain I *do not feel* on the model of the pain I *do feel*. That is, what I have to do is not simply to make a transition in imagination from one place of pain to another. As, from pain in the hand to pain in the arm. For I am not to imagine that *I* feel pain in some region of *his* body" (*PI* 302). Following Norman Malcolm, I read this passage as "a sarcasm," as the PLU by logical definition *cannot* construe another's pain on any basis other than his or her own—that he or she experiences it as a private sensation is part of the PLU's definition of "pain" (Malcolm 106). It is only via the sort of expression permitted by AA's public pain-vocabulary that Gately is able to escape the recursivity—a kind of logical "gerbil wheel"—of addiction's private language.

Having thus internalized the mechanism of AA's language-game, Gately retains his public linguistic function even after his intubation in the Saint Elizabeth's trauma

ward renders him incapable of speech. To the other Ennet House residents, Gately's hospital bedside seems to become an extension of the staffer's office-hours or a special type of AA meeting. As van Ewijk observes, they "seem to visit him solely for the fact that they can then narrate their life stories to him" (van Ewijk 136). Tiny Ewell, the first compulsive talker to visit the fallen Gately, confesses his involvement in a childhood scheme to defraud his neighbors using a fabricated charity. Against his will, Gately remains physically unable to do anything but lie there and listen, "unresponsive" (or one of its "19 synonyms") à la Hal Incandenza at the end of the novel's opening sequence. Unlike Hal, however, Gately need not verbally respond to participate in this extension of the AA language-game. Just as at a White Flag Group meeting, he occupies the position of an audience whose role is not to en-/discourage the monologue in progress but, in AA parlance, simply to "Be There," to learn to empathize by occasioning the speaker's confession with its mere presence. His powers of agency and expression now suspended, Gately is subsumed within his role as other to the visiting residents' selves. He becomes the novel's second "catatonic hero," one whose catatonia—unlike Hal Incandenza's, which results from his status as a PLU—serves a public, anti-solipsistic function.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUDING REMARKS ON FORM

Gately's fate as a character is thus intimately bound up with the philosophico-aesthetic foundations of the entire novel. Later in his stay at the St. Elizabeth's trauma ward, after the chatty Ennet House residents have gone, Gately is visited by the ghost or "wraith" of Hal's father, James O. "Himself" Incandenza. Their wordless telepathic conversation is dense and multivalent, operating on both narrative and metafictional levels, but is generally concerned with detailing the aesthetic principles undergirding both *Infinite Jest* the novel and *Infinite Jest* the fatally compelling movie.

The aspect of this late encounter with the ghost of Himself most pertinent to Gately's situation is the wraith's explanation of the concept of the "figurant." He asks, does Gately remember the myriad thespian extras on for example his beloved 'Cheers!,' not the center-stage Sam and Carla and Nom, but the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar's crowd, concessions to realism, always relegated to silent conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound; only the name-stars at the bar itself could audibilize. The wraith says these fractional actors, human scenery, could be seen (but not heard) in most pieces of filmed entertainment. And Gately remembers them, the extras in all public scenes, or rather remembers how he doesn't quite remember them, how it never struck his addled mind as in fact surreal that their mouths moved but nothing emerged, and what a miserable bottom-rung job that must be for an actor, to be sort of human furniture, *figurants* the wraith says they're called, these surreally mute background presences whose presence really

revealed that the camera, like any eye, has a perceptual corner, a triage of who's important enough to be seen and heard v. just seen" (*IJ* 834-835).

This is, of course, almost exactly Gately's situation. He remains immobilized and intubated and thus unable to speak or move without horrendous pain. This is integral to our earlier assessment of Gately as the novel's only functional "catatonic hero" (the inverse of Hal Incandenza), and points to the meta-aesthetic ramifications of his role in this scene. Continuing, the wraith describes how, in his "entertainments,"

he goddamn bloody well made sure either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and that it wasn't just the self-conscious overlapping dialogue of a poseur like Schwulst or Altman, i.e. it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble [EN 342: "Or possibly *Babel*."] of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment (*IJ* 835-836).

Gately's is a slight variation on the wraith's description of the figurant: though mute, he remains capable of both listening to the speech of others and communicating intuitively or telepathically with the ghost of Himself. By occupying the most central role in a Wittgensteinian drama whose governing ethos repudiates not only linguistic but now also narrative centrism, Gately embodies the collapse of the hero-figurant binary. His heroism thus consists in his abiding (or, in AA parlance, Abiding) the abdication of the singular verbal agency attributable to both Wittgenstein's Private Language User and the

conventional realist protagonist, the “lone man of action riding lonely herd in paradise” (*IJ* 142).

This convergence of Gately’s characteristic modes—the hero and the figurant—parallels the formal convergence of the novel’s diegetic narrative and meta-aesthetic evocations. After all, the wraith’s main gripe with “party-line entertainment-critics” was that they “always complained that the wraith’s public-area scenes were always incredibly dull and self-conscious and irritating, that they could never hear the really meaningful conversations for all the unfiltered babble of the peripheral crowd, which they assumed the babble (/babel) was some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose, instead of radical realism” (*IJ* 836). Lying there dumb and paralyzed, listening to the AA-style autobiographical monologue of one “Himself” (deceased auteur of the work entitled *Infinite Jest*), Gately becomes a stand-in for both the viewer of the filmic entertainment being described and the reader of the novel. Hence the appropriateness of the unvoiced “telepathic” nature of his interaction with the wraith, and of the wraith’s assurance that the question of whether and to what extent this encounter is fictional (or even metafictional) is less important than the fact that it is intelligible, that it constitutes a viable language-game. In response to Gately’s expansive consideration “that this was the only dream he could recall where even in the dream he knew that it was a dream, much less lay there considering the up-front dream quality of the dream he was dreaming,” Himself “said Gately might as well stop trying to figure it out and just capitalize on its presence in the room or dream, whatever, because Gately, if he’d bothered to notice and appreciate it, at least didn’t have to speak out loud to be able to interface with the wraith-figure” (*IJ* 830). This commentary applies equally to the experience of reading *Infinite*

Jest, the novel that has not so much refuted as internalized and transfigured—in taking the form of a self-conscious Wittgensteinian language-game—the mid-century conundrum of the death of the author. By inserting “Himself” into the narrative as the character of a dead author, to participate as one voice in the novel’s “real agora,” Wallace renders the old Barthesian question of who controls the meaning of a text secondary to that of the conditions for the possibility of meaningful linguistic exchange.

We can better understand Wallace’s heteroglossia by examining one of the film genres pioneered by James Incandenza. Endnote 61 defines “anticonfluentism” as “An après-garde digital movement, a.k.a. ‘Digital Parallelism’ and ‘Cinema of Chaotic Stasis,’ characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence” (*IJ* 996). Himself’s project of “radical realism,” then, involves not only a refusal to silence conventionally peripheral voices, but also a refusal to resolve a plurality of narratives into one conventionally realistic central storyline. The concept of narrative in *Infinite Jest* is thereby inextricably linked to the conditions of its possibility, i.e. to the public language-game in which it is possible for multiple narratives to be Shared and Identified with. This symbiosis, of course, is precisely what distinguishes the structure of not only the novel’s AA meetings and the trauma-ward interface between Gately and the wraith, but also (since Gately occupies a readerly position here) the aesthetic structure of *Infinite Jest* itself (N.B. Himself’s confessional narrative is really a highly condensed version of approximately half of the novel’s plot).

The key to Wallace’s aesthetic, then, as enunciated by the ghost of Himself, is the characterization of fiction itself as a Wittgensteinian language-game, à la Alcoholics

Anonymous and tennis at E.T.A. To this end, the narrator's description of the "pain" Gately feels while interfacing with Himself recalls the AA distinction between addiction's private pain and the publicly communicable pain of recovery (with Gately's experience being, again, abstractable to the novel's reader). When Gately's "shoulder suddenly sends up a flare of pain," the ghost "gasps and almost falls off the monitor as if he can totally empathize;" later, "Gately wonders if the wraith has to endure the same pain as Gately in order to hear his brain-voice and have a conversation with him" (*IJ* 839-840). Elsewhere, Gately speculates that the wraith "could be a sort of epiphanyish visitation from Gately's personally confused understanding of God, a Higher Power or something" (*IJ* 833). One more example will suffice to cement the thematic bridge with AA and all the rich subjective contingency and self-other interplay entailed by Wallace's version of the Program. Musing on his intubated speechlessness, "Gately imagines himself with a piratical hook, unable to speak on Commitments because he can only gurgle and pant, doomed to an AA life of ashtrays and urns" (*IJ* 833). The pain Gately feels at being able only to lie there and listen to the wraith is the same as the pain involved in trying to Identify with an AA speaker's narrative. And, with respect to this last point, we should recall that Identifying in AA means "all of a sudden hearing how fucking similar the way he felt and the way I felt were, Out There, at the Bottom, before we each Came In," meaning that its whole point is to force the listeners not to forget themselves in rapt speculation but to both remember and publicly contextualize their former addictive "private pain" (*IJ* 365). Wallace's project seems to be an attempt to render these affecting fictional narratives so that part of what makes them so affecting is the way they also emphasize the philosophical mechanism by which their arrangement

and representation is made possible in the first place: the profound and necessary communality underpinning all human discourse. In this way, the fictions of *Infinite Jest*, like and including Himself's entertainments, enact the absolute unclosable immanence of language and its manifold games.

The meta-aesthetic nature of this Wittgensteinian mechanism is maybe best exemplified by the way the text represents the interplay between Gately's consciousness and that of the wraith. The latter's story—which is ultimately about how the creation of the *Infinite Jest* cartridge was an attempt to communicate with the increasingly hidden and figurant-like Hal, to bring the PLU out of his privacy and into a system of discourse via the medium of anticonfluent film—has a twofold effect on Gately. First, he suspects the wraith of being a psychological manifestation of his own latent addiction, come to somehow “talk Gately into succumbing to a shot of Demerol.” He then “tries to concentrate on all this instead of remembering what Demerol's warm rush of utter well-being felt like, [...] Or instead of remembering any of his own interchanges with his mother's [abusive] live-in retired M.P.” (*IJ* 840). The Wittgensteinian narrative structure is here counterposed to the obliterating effects of Gately's former narcotic of choice. This analogy also has the implicit secondary effect of casting the conventional figurant- and articulate-protagonist-heavy narratives of television and realist fiction as essentially anesthetic, or, more accurately, an-aesthetic. The exclusionary “perceptual eye” of these genres' narrative cameras corresponds to that of the novel's archetypal PLU. By contrast, the wraith's maundering and difficult story—along with the unrelated narratives he has no choice but to listen to his fellow Ennet House residents deliver—occasions the series of similarly painful and disjointed memories (with this being the novel's most adroit

intertextual resonance with *Hamlet*—time in anitconflential fiction is irrevocably “out of joint,” and it is the chief illusion of commercial realism that it either can or should be “set right”) that dominates Gately’s sections from this narrative point onward (*Hamlet* 1.5.189-190).

The novel’s inconclusive and “possibly intentionally irritating” ending is in fact the only logical terminus for a work structured according to this Wittgensteinian paradigm. The final episode details Gately’s memory of the ghastly fall to what he’s learned in AA to call his Bottom: it shows him participating in a Dilaudid-binge with his late partner in crime Gene Fackelmann, who has obtained a monstrous quantity of the trauma-grade narcotic by accidentally defrauding their mutual employer, North Shore bookkeeper Whitey Sorkin. Both men know that Sorkin has likely already dispatched the sadistic (or ‘saddistic,’ as Gately pronounces it) Bobby C. to exact retribution, but, rather than flee or attempt to rectify the misunderstanding, Fackelmann and, incidentally, Gately retreat into the thoughtlessness and dubious shelter of an opiate-binge. Wary of Gately’s size, Bobby C., on arrival, incapacitates him by administering an intravenous dose of an even more potent narcotic. The scene and novel end with an image of absolute stasis and self-absorption:

The last rotating sight [as Gately falls to the ground in intoxication] was the chinks coming back through the door, holding big shiny squares of the room. As the floor wafted up and C’s grip finally gave, the last thing Gately saw was an Oriental bearing down with the held square and he looked into the square and saw clearly a reflection of his own big square head with its eyes closing as the floor finally pounced. And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach

in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out
(IJ 981).

In conceptual terms, this is Gately's most private moment of Wittgensteinian solipsism. Too high to speak or move, Gately's position here is thus a perversion of that which he occupies in the St. Elizabeth's trauma ward. It is nevertheless intimately related, occasioned as the memory has been by the interfaces with the wraith and the other residents of Ennet House. The mirror that Gately glimpses himself in on the way to his hardwood Bottom, then, functions as a symbol of dual significance. It represents at once the utter self-absorption of the younger Gately and the nature of his response to his quintessentially public exchange with the wraith. Himself's anticonfluent and, for our purposes, Wittgensteinian narrative as it were compels Gately to "reflect" on his own past pain in order to identify with the wraith in the present. Privacy and solipsism are not so much effaced by this narrative language-game as they are transfigured, supplying, in a fundamental philosophical way, the most urgent material for the voiceless conversation.

Being conceptually as well as narratively anticonfluent, then, *Infinite Jest* refuses to dramatize a complete progression from private to public language. This fact may indeed be the most ingenious expression of its debt to Wittgenstein, as such a teleology would, on a formal level, close the very discursive system whose openness this sort of narrative ending would appear to endorse. And it is this, I think, that makes *Infinite Jest* such a monumentally important statement of what a "postpostmodern" fiction might be capable of. In the subtlety of its structure and its anti-trajectory, Wallace's masterpiece posits fiction itself as the only language-game in which these concepts—Wittgensteinian solipsism and its opposite—may be put to communicative use,

to the dual function of constituting both the content of and the conditions of possibility for an exchange between reader and author. As always, though, the language-game of fiction imposes no limit on the number of its participants. With respect to the novel's philosophical stance and grounding, the reader may therefore consider herself hereby advised not to take my word for it.

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