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AMERICAN *HAMLET*: SHAKESPEAREAN EPISTEMOLOGY IN DAVID FOSTER  
WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

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BACHELOR OF ARTS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

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at

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August 2014

**We hereby approve this thesis**

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**Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English**

**For the department of**

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**And**

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Student's Date of Defense: 21 August 2014

## DEDICATION

To MKT for introducing me to DFW

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to all of my family and friends who endured infinitely long conversations on David Foster Wallace. A special thanks to my Mother, Amy, for instilling in me a deep sense of sincerity, devotion, and kindness to all forms of life.

AMERICAN *HAMLET*: SHAKESPEAREAN EPISTEMOLOGY IN DAVID  
FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

JAMES JASON WALSH JR.

**ABSTRACT**

*Infinite Jest* has been viewed by champions of its cause as a solution to the defeatist irony of postmodernism and by critics as a postmodern gag in which the reader falls victim to intellectual “jest.” Exploring the text’s initial affiliations with *Hamlet* is a fundamental move toward stabilizing *Infinite Jest*’s status as a sincere and authentic representation of American life at the turn of the twenty-first century. The shattered nature of reality and the “stinking thinking” inherent in addiction are depicted through the narrative structure, in which the time is literally “out of joint,” and the “antic disposition” of various characters who are evocative of both the melancholic and heroic sides of the play’s lead. *Hamlet* operates as a primary textual constraint in which the matrix of plot, device, methodology, and motif intersect and envision one of the Western world’s most recognizable stories transposed on 1990s America. *Infinite Jest* is a closed system in which geometry and literature converge by way of a customized Oulipo method that uses constraint as an improvisatory means to inhabit the space where things “fragment into beauty” (*Infinite Jest* 81): the glory of infinity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“[A]s ‘twere, *the mirror up to nature* [emphasis added]; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of time his form and pressure”—  
Hamlet, *Hamlet* 3.2, 23-25

“He’ll say it’s how to learn to be a good American during a time, boys, when America isn’t good to its own self.”—Ortho Stice, *Infinite Jest*, pg. 120

Buried deep in the endnotes of *Infinite Jest* is a small hint that reveals the truth about David Foster Wallace’s creative process. On page 785 when Hal tells Mario that Michael Pemulis is “fully alert and functional” while on the illicit psychedelic DMZ, the text skips to an endnote in which Pemulis teaches Hal trigonometry. Amidst the “rise over run” conversation, Pemulis states, “You use your goddamn *imagination*, Inc, plus a couple prescribed limits” (1063). The following pages venture to exhibit the manner in which *Hamlet* serves as one of the “prescribed limits” for *Infinite Jest*.

In a February 1996 radio interview about *Infinite Jest* with Boston’s WBUR, David Foster Wallace declared that, “I wanted to do something about America that was sad (20:50).” Shortly thereafter, when asked if the ode to *Hamlet* in the title had any significance, he replied “there are about 170 different dimensions for me (28:45),” and

“There’s a fair amount of *Hamlet* stuff” (28:55). Perhaps most importantly he proclaimed, “...to the extent that we’re a generation I think we’re a bit of a *Hamletish* one” (29:00). Finally, when asked how many different *Hamlet* references are in *IJ*, Wallace snapped back that, “when you’re doing something long you sort of have a whole tapestry of other stuff in your head...and *Hamlet* was one because I’d read it in high school and... the language is hard and I’d re-read it when I was 26 or 27...and of course if it’s a time when you yourself are confused and full of self-loathing for your inability to act it sort of punches you in the stomach” (29:30). With that in mind, and to borrow a Wallace metaphor, *Hamlet* is the star that *Infinite Jest* steers by, both as a creative inspiration and a cultural and spiritual aesthetic. Modeling his text after Georges Perec’s “story-making machine,” known as the Oulipo method (Consenstein 3), Wallace used *Hamlet* as the constraint within which he created an infinitely complex and modern story. The technique used by Wallace to adapt the *Hamlet* narrative is chronicled in the “ghostwords” that are uttered to Don Gately by the deceased wraith of James O. Incandenza (also known as “Himself”) who is the father of Hal, headmaster of the Enfield Tennis Academy, and creator of the film “Infinite Jest.” In Wallace’s estimation, we may read *Hamlet* as the synthesis between what was “rotten” in America at the turn of the century, and how one can deal with this “rotten [ness]” through narrative psychology and spirituality.

Since its publication in 1996, scholars have praised *IJ* for its intricate witticisms, exaggerated self-reflexivity, and dazzlingly entertaining style, however none have devoted a unified study towards the subterranean conversation the text has with *Hamlet*. By acclimatizing the *Hamlet* saga to some conventions of postmodernism, *IJ* satirizes the

play's synecdochal dexterity and reference in contemporary literary epistemology; not the play itself, per se, but the way it's been referenced in the canon. *IJ* methodically challenges what has become a simulated version of the *Hamlet* story by miming its narratological evolution in the cultural conscience. *Hamlet* is a play and storyline so familiar to Western culture that the entertainment-value, and associated irony, has been exhausted *ad nauseam*. *IJ* adopts *Hamlet* as the archetypal ironic narrative in order to articulate the emptiness and unfulfilled gratification marketed by the U.S. culture industry. In one sense, it portrays an entire generation of "Hamlets" who are addicted to thinking, saturated with fear, and overwhelmed, like Hamlet with revenge, by the burden of an isolated and unequivocal pursuit (i.e. drug addiction, recovery, tennis, politics, film-theory, espionage, and many more). But reading *Hamlet*, in a different light, as a character who is not only out for revenge, but who is also trying to remember his story, casts a different shade on *IJ*: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity a while, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (5.2, 344-347). This statement, juxtaposed with the final line in *IJ*'s chronological narrative, which occurs when Hal is restrained in an ambulance during a psychological meltdown, draws a distinct parallel between these two texts: "So yo then man what's *your* story?" (17). *IJ* proceeds to tell *Hamlet*'s story in a manner that mirrors the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

Integrating these two texts offers a unique interpretation of *IJ*'s ultimate purpose, or eschatology. As Stephen Burn declares in his *Reader's Guide*, which may in turn be related to this thesis, "my purpose has been to demonstrate in academic fashion that Wallace's fiction is the product of a layered aesthetic that reaches toward a richer, more

polyphonic, register than many earlier readings have recognized” (21). We may read Wallace’s retelling of *Hamlet* as a single but significant note on Burn’s polyphonic register because of the play’s historical and literary trajectory especially as it relates to twentieth century America. In *Hamlet*’s crossroads meet spectation, narcissism, obsessive thinking, the Oedipus complex, the Mirror stage, entertainment and tragedy, the same motifs that permeate *IJ*. But why prioritize *Hamlet* over other texts that *IJ* is modeled after?

*IJ* is a concordance of world literature that frames and shapes itself by way of mimesis: it invokes a startling amount of classical tropes and schemata from a wide range of traditions. As Burn contends, “The learning and scale of *Infinite Jest* offers an encyclopedic distillation of the twentieth century, but the book strives to use its erudite allusions to span outward from the novel- to trace Wallace’s genealogy as a writer, to remind the reader of human connection, and to dramatize the way reading shapes behavior” ( *Guide* 75). It is obvious to the Wallace community that *Hamlet* plays a distinct role in both *IJ*’s schematics and in Wallace’s authorial genealogy, but it is necessary to tease out the minute textual similarities between these works to reveal more about Wallace’s artistic strategy. Two examples are self-evident in Burn’s *Reader’s Guide*, but he does not choose to link them to *Hamlet*. The first relates to Burn’s review of Don Gately in which he references the type of precise textual detail that confounds most first-time readers:

The key scene to cross-reference here is from the long night at the end of April that Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply spend above Tucson. As dawn approaches, Marathe describes the night sky: “The legs of the constellation of Perseus were

amputated by the earth's horizon. Perseus, he wore the hat of a jongleur or pantalone. Hercules' head, this head was square" (507). As the reader has been informed more than 200 pages earlier, Gately is also distinguished by a "massive square head" (277), and the parallels between Heracles and Gately are most compelling (60).

Firstly, to avoid confusion, Hercules is the Roman name for the Greek divine hero Heracles. Secondly, Burn remarks that, "Heracles, famously, is given twelve tasks to perform before he can go to Thebes to marry, while AA also denies Gately relationships and imposes an identical number of duties upon him: the twelve steps of its rehabilitation program" (61). Burn makes a pithy comparison, but another dimension is added when it is linked to the use of "Hercules" in *Hamlet*. In 1.2, 150-156, Hamlet proclaims, "Why she, even she- / O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer!—married with my / uncle, / My father's brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules." By juxtaposing himself with Hercules in order to express the disparity between his uncle and father, Hamlet evinces the same chasm Wallace sketches between Hal and Gately. These two characters could not be more divergent, but they can be read as opposite sides of the same coin. If Hal, the main protagonist, is the preferred stand-in for Hamlet, then this passage explains why Wallace modeled his idealized hero, Gately, after Hercules.

But this comparison can be taken one step further. In the graveyard scene, which is of primary importance to any discussion of *IJ*'s affinity with the play, the last lines uttered by Hamlet are, "Let Hercules himself do what he may, / The cat will mew, and dog will have his day" (5.1, 287-288). Despite the fact that "dog" has his day twice in *IJ*,

both when S. Johnson, Avril's dog, is mutilated by Orin, and when Randy Lenz kills the Antitoni brothers' dog, which leads to Gately getting shot, the textual implications of the word "Hercules" in this passage support the notion that *IJ* operates within the constraints of *Hamlet*. Burn's second observation that can be related to *Hamlet* involves the date of a specific conversation in the text.

Marathe and Steeply talk through the night of April 30 and into the morning of May 1. This, of course, is May Day, whose origins lie in a festive holy day for the ancient Celts and Saxons who celebrated the first spring planting, and Wallace seems to have drawn on James Frazer's massive anthropological study, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1922) to elaborate its significance here. According to Frazer, the Celts marked this celebration by lighting bonfires on hills. (64)

Burn continues on to note that in the early morning hours of May Day, Marathe and Steeply, "see the flickers of a 'celebratory fire' (422) on the desert floor below." What Burn fails to include is that *May Day* is also a 1611 drama written by George Chapman that parodied *Hamlet* in a well-known soliloquy. Furthermore, Chapman, whose works are chronicled in the *Encyclopedia of British Humorists*, wrote a play called *All Fools* that "involves the schemes of a master intriguer who manipulates everyone in the drama, but who...is eventually exposed as a fool as well" (Gale 225). All Fools Day, known in modern America as April Fool's Day, is also of paramount importance to *IJ*'s chronology, and the aforementioned quote seems to describe James O. Incandenza, who operates similarly to Chapman's "master intriguer" as an après-garde filmmaker. It seems Wallace drew inspiration not only from *Hamlet* but also from works that parodied, satirized, and adapted *Hamlet*. As he revealed in a 1993 interview, "I perform certain

standard literary moves. I pile in a lot of metaphors, I try to make the writing as pretty as I can, swinging for the fence on every single one. I load it with standard Hamlet-esque constructions of double binds” (*Interviews* 43). Wallace seems interested in texts that have gone through several editions, drafts, and adaptations by other authors, and *Hamlet* is a text that has been referenced perhaps more than any other.

Aside from Burn’s *Reader’s Guide*, the most seminal work written about *Infinite Jest* is Marshall Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. Boswell’s text is a comprehensive, polished, and exhaustive summary of Wallace’s major works. The section on *IJ* is well-over seventy-five pages long and details many of the textual problems the reader may inherit upon their first trip through the text. However, since this text is in the “reader’s guide” category, it mainly recognizes overarching patterns and motifs and fails to posit definitive interpretations and implications for these patterns and motifs. That being said, Boswell’s text is acutely useful for readers unfamiliar with Wallace making a summary of its reasoning necessary for any adequate introduction.

To begin, Boswell determines that, “the novel’s tremendous length, its numerous syntactical and structural difficulties, its metafictional devices, its circular plot structure, and even its anticlimactic conclusion create a funhouse in which there is ‘the illusion [sic] of both the dreamer’s unmoving spirit and the disco moonwalker’s backward glide’” (119). There is no doubt that the text is inexorably difficult, but we may read the fragmentation and enigmatic nature of the text as a psychedelic effect which parlays the joint distortion of relative historicity and contemporary innovation [the rewriting of *Hamlet*]; hence a major reason why dreams, memories, psychedelics, and their rational inexplicability are a constitutional part of *IJ*’s semiotics. Even though the world Wallace

inherited is a far cry from the feudal dregs of Elsinore, the *Hamlet* narrative still speaks to *IJ*'s primary issues; it's a "the more things change, the more they stay the same" scenario.

Boswell argues that, "[*IJ*'s] primary symbol is in fact an absent center" (126). In opposition, we may read *Hamlet* as the book's center, particularly the skull symbol, the word "skull" being mentioned far more, and in widely disparate sections, than any other word in the text (though I haven't had the levity to count). An entire thesis could be written on the skull metaphor in the text, but one example that is of particular interest is Remy Marathe's wife who is born without a skull which actually sustains her husband's love for her. After one is more familiar with Boswell's study, it becomes apparent that reading the book with "no recognizable center" gives way to all types of interpretive paradoxes and contradictions. Boswell argues that, "the film conflates two of the book's principal concerns: the mounting centrality of popular culture and our culture's increasing susceptibility to addictive drugs" (127). Although this claim carries some truth, the film does not fit neatly into Boswell's definition. First of all, the film is not popular culture because a wide audience has never seen it [at least during J.O.'s lifetime]. If it had, the central plot of the text would lack the immediacy it so fervently communicates. Secondly, our culture's "increasing susceptibility to addictive drugs" is only an ancillary conclusion drawn from the film's symbolism. Boswell's more astute observation is that, "the film itself is Wallace's most visible emblem of his Lacanian program, for it both embodies and parodies Lacan's ideas" (130).

Two major problems of interpretation arise here. The idea that *IJ* both "embodies and parodies" certain ideas is a usual suspect in Wallace criticism. However, upon closer review, when one examines the artistic evolution of James O. Incandenza, Wallace's text



takes clear-cut sides on the matter. If one applies the criticisms of the elder Incandenza's work in the text to *IJ* a definitive pathway is given which allows the reader to delineate between story and reality. Late in the chronological narrative, immediately before a flashback to the scene where she meets the Incandenza family for the first time, Joelle, in a cocaine fueled compulsion, rigorously cleans her living space as the narrator chronicles her view of "The Mad Stork" [another of J.O.'s pseudonyms]:

Here, then, after studious (and admittedly kind of boring) review, was an unironic, almost *moral* thesis to the campy abstract mordant cartridge: the film's cinematic statue's stasis presented the theoretical subject as the emotional effect- self-forgetting as the Grail- and- in a covert gesture almost moralistic, Joelle thought as she glanced at the room-lit screen, very high, mouth writhing as she cleaned-presented the self-forgetting of alcohol as inferior to that of religion/art (742)

*IJ* is a moral text, plain and simple. If *IJ* is viewed as a "campy abstract mordant cartridge," which, admittedly, it *is* on the surface, then the casual observer misses its didactic abundance. One scholar argues that Wallace is just an, "old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise" (*Legacy* 37). But *IJ* is not moral in the traditional sense. Wallace was not proselytizing about the American people's lack of morals, he was exploring his own personal moral fiber. In his article on Wallace's "literary journalism," Josh Roiland describes the author's hyper self-consciousness that prevented him from achieving Nietzsche's concept of oblivion:

Some critics, however, have argued that the numerous footnotes were arrogant and evidence that Wallace needed a better editor. The point that these critics miss, however, is that Wallace could have easily integrated many of the footnotes into the body of his main text. By designating them as notes, he not only complicates the narrative structure but also indicates that they are pieces of information that are important but not integral. In short, they are remnants of his consciousness that he cannot part with. (*Legacy* 34)

In *Infinite Jest* many of the endnotes are both “important” and “integral.” Nevertheless, the fourth step of the recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous reads, “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory *of ourselves* [emphasis added]” (BB 61). The fourth step is a written inventory in which the recovering alcoholic composes a vast personal narrative of all their wrongdoings and shortcomings. The step is viewed as a purgative exercise, a necessary part of the curative process for those stricken with the disease of addiction. The emphasis on the “of ourselves” portion of the step is to illustrate that the recovering person is supposed to focus *only* on their own inventory. Critiquing and commenting on the behavior or life choices of another is known as “taking someone else’s inventory.” Irrespective of the fact that this practice is diametrically opposed to the process of criticism and inquiry in the scholarly world, we may observe that Wallace, being aware of the practice of the fourth step, composed *IJ* as part of his own moral inventory. In fact, it’s probably the longest fourth step ever written. This is made evident through his many interviews in which Wallace expresses concern over the role of technology, satire, irony, and apathy in his own personal consciousness, not in that of the reader. The fourth step is performed so the addict may rid himself of “the remnants of his consciousness that he cannot part with.” Wallace would have been imperviously aware that addiction is viewed as a “thinking disease”: the tension between logical thought and spiritual belief covering the main fissure in the text. In short, we may read *IJ* as Wallace’s personal inventory, not one in which he is preaching to the audience, but in which he is searching for afflictions inside himself:

It seems to me that the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country is one of the things that’s gutted our generation. All the

things that my parents said to me, like “It’s really important not to lie.” OK, check, got it. I nod at that but I really don’t feel it. Until I get to be about thirty and I realize that if I lie to you, I also can’t trust you. I feel that I’m in pain, I’m nervous, I’m lonely, and I can’t figure out why. Then I realize, “Oh, perhaps the way to deal with this is really not to lie.” The idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting-- which for me meant you pass over it for the interesting, complex stuff-- can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic, pomo stuff can’t, that seems to me to be important. That seems to me like something our generation needs to feel-- David Foster Wallace, “The Salon Interview” (*Conversations* 60)

Earlier in the aforementioned section of *IJ*, it is revealed that Joelle believes “satires [are] usually the work of people with nothing new themselves to say” (740). Wallace struggled with the idea of being an author who had nothing new to say, so rather than merely satirizing the hopelessness and apathy of the late twentieth century, he ventured to say banal and unimpressive things in a fresh way, and he did so underneath flashy superstructures of postmodern intrigue like championship level tennis, the narcotics underworld, international espionage, secret societies, and futuristic political cabaret. Saying the same things in an original way encompassed the literary tradition until the rise of the novel. Throughout medieval times, and up until Jacobean theatre, narratives and tropes were recycled and reused gratuitously, especially *Hamlet*, which can be traced to Saxo Grammaticus and Middle Ages Scandinavia, somewhere around 1200 A.D.. During this period, the invention of new tropes and literary movements was considered a ludicrous enterprise. The most accomplished playwrights and poets distinguished themselves by their ability to rejuvenate antiquity [which Wallace did with *Hamlet*]. Many impressive texts have since come out of literary innovation, but *IJ* is a text that hankers for the lost tradition that requires invention within a closed system, a major focus of its critique of postmodernism’s emptiness:

The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back- I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually *need*? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that the parents in fact aren't ever coming back- which means we're going to have to be the parents. (*Conversations* 52).

Reading *IJ* in light of *Hamlet* allows the reader to connect several dots which link Wallace's literary aesthetic, his views on the literary tradition, his personal experience and how literature relates to popular culture and mass artistic movements. In short, it buttresses many of the constructs that seem both "embodie[d] and parodie[d]" and sheds light on the true purpose of *IJ*, not as a mangled and fragmentary mess, but as a "very careful mess" (*Conversations* 70) that is "a very pretty pane of glass... dropped off the 20th story of a building" (*Conversations* 57). Roiland's discussion of Wallace's aesthetic for "literary journalism" parallels closely to what we may read as his aesthetic in *IJ*:

It is perhaps ironic that Wallace argues so vehemently against irony, because many critics felt that it was the defining feature of his literary aesthetic. And while his short stories and novels do exhibit a fractured style and an arch self-knowing tone, such an overarching label is an easy caricature. Critics who label Wallace an ironist privilege his writing style and ignore his ideology. Moreover, Wallace's nonfiction is decidedly not postmodern, ironic, or avant-garde. Although it does share the same maximalist writing style as his fiction, and utilizes rhetorical techniques like parody and pastiche, the narratives are also linear, realistic, and most important, earnest. (*Legacy* 36).

The three narrative strands in *IJ* can be separated to cohere with the above statement: The Ennet House narrative is actually "linear, realistic, and earnest," while the Enfield Tennis Academy narrative is "postmodern, ironic, or avant-garde." The Marathe/Steeply

narrative mediates between the realistic and ironic narratives to give the story structural cohesiveness. But we'll save the discussion on *IJ*'s narratology for another occasion.

In the seminal article entitled "Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*," John Russell Brown traces the lineage of the play's tragic mystique: "the individual was separated from his or her fellows, endured loss and escalation of pain, and was exposed to intense scrutiny. The audience was invited to judge the hero's response and ultimate resource. Perhaps these tragedies were so popular because they offered audiences an opportunity to assume the role of God" (1). The audience assuming "the role of God" is a concept that pulls at the heartstrings of *IJ*, and part of the reason Burn declares the possibility that, "*Infinite Jest* may basically be a religious book" (63). Although he maintains that it is only a possibility, we may read *IJ* as a spiritual book, not a religious one. The distinction between religion and spirituality is a celebrated detail in the folk wisdom surrounding Alcoholics Anonymous. It is established that religion is for people who do not want to go to hell and spirituality is for people who have been there. *Infinite Jest* communicates with *Hamlet* to deploy ideas about Alcoholics Anonymous, postmodern irony, individual melancholy, and late century American life.

That being said, Wallace scholarship has done a superb job of covering a wide array of bases. From film theory to postmodern irony, athletics, and American pragmatism, critics have interpreted a theoretical framework that is both multivalent and fascinating. Nevertheless, it seems that that framework is all traceable to *Hamlet*, albeit indistinctly and obliquely. The earliest recognizable allusions to *Hamlet* in *IJ* are that the first line of the play is "Who's there?" and the first line of *IJ* is "I am" and that "the time is out of joint" (1.5.190); namely, the text begins with its last chronological scene, which

shrouds the interweaving narratives from the beginning and continues throughout the text, and is fragmented both by the ridiculous corporate naming of calendar years, and the opaque narrative layering of various characters' stories, dreams, and memories.

Nevertheless, the most recognizable allusion to *Hamlet* comes toward the end of the text when Hal ponders the existence of supernatural phenomenon:

The original sense of *addiction* involved being bound over, dedicated, either legally or spiritually. To devote one's life, plunge in. I had researched this. Stice had asked whether I believed in ghosts. It's always seemed a little preposterous that Hamlet, for all his paralyzing doubt about everything, never once doubts the reality of the ghost. Never questions whether his own madness might not in fact be unfeigned. Stice had promised something boggling to look at. That is, whether *Hamlet* might be only *feigning* feigning. I kept thinking of the Film and Cartridge Studies professor's final soliloquy in Himself's unfinished *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms that Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space with Mind-Boggling Efficiency*, the sour parody of academia... (900)

Four things are discussed in the above passage that are of primary importance to *IJ*:

addiction, ghosts, film production, and academia; all of which can be traced, in the text, to *Hamlet*. We may read the "ghostwords" (884), which are revealed to a hospitalized Don Gately by the deceased wraith of James O. Incandenza, as being symbolic of Wallace's treatment and adaptation of the *Hamlet* narrative. A significant portion of this thesis involves disentangling the theoretical underpinnings of the various "ghostwords" revealed to Don Gately by the wraith, and relating these words to Wallace's rewriting of *Hamlet*. What other purpose could the "ghostwords" serve? Could there be a more overt insinuation as to how the text is modeled after *Hamlet* then to reveal the various compositional techniques in "ghostwords"? *Hamlet* is the ghost in this machine.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Why American Hamlet? : “In the recursive process of annulation, toxicity and waste become synonymous with fertility and replenishment. Waste land is transformed, through the fact of its own toxicity, into supremely fertile and luscious terrain. Wallace’s dump testifies to the pesky resilience of that which we wish to discard” (Benzon 105). Wallace’s aesthetic was to restore literature’s allure from the anhedonia of postmodern irony, empty signification/simulation, and psychoanalysis. After all, there are amazing things that grow on shit, a reference to psychedelics, Bakhtinian scatology, and Wallace’s view of the state of literature at the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> Wallace believed in the literary tradition that extends back to *Gilgamesh*, and he believed in knowing the rules of the game in order to play it well. Restoring the literary tradition from the dissidence and indifference of the postmodernists meant a hybridization of many of the more infamous and exasperated literary tropes from across the ages. A major feature of this process is the redrafting of *Hamlet*, which has influenced countless authors, poets, playwrights,

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<sup>1</sup> Which are all featured prominently in *Infinite Jest*.

Philosophers, cultural theorists, and psychoanalysts, and by the end of the twentieth century had become theoretical waste as a consequence of centuries of over analysis and scholarly deliberation. Nevertheless, “why do we need a re-critiquing of the canon in light of *Infinite Jest*, or what makes sense in *Infinite Jest* if we see it as a revisiting of a *Hamlet*-centric canon, which wouldn’t have made sense otherwise?” (Sonstegard 6/13). To answer these questions, we must first refer to Greg Carlisle’s introduction to *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*.

Firstly, Carlisle expresses what many Wallace devotees earnestly feel, that “what is extraordinary about David Foster Wallace is that his commitment to his readers exceeded even his incomparable intellectual gifts” (12). From Wallace’s interviews and biographical materials, including one that was conducted by *Whiskey Island*, Cleveland State’s own literary journal, it is evident that he was deeply concerned with the effect his work had on the reader.<sup>2</sup> Carlisle has a knack for simplifying the complex and virtuous moves Wallace makes to allow his reader to feel at ease:

This is his value: he creates work for the reader that is fun and challenging, and he makes you want to research and to explore. His work is both self-conscious and other-oriented, so detailed and so clearly like a conversation he’s initiating with the reader—an invitation to collaboration—that when you read his fiction, you identify with the characters so much that it often seems like you’re an actor playing the roles that you’re reading. (16)

Carlisle makes an interesting suggestion that Wallace’s fictional characters read more like characters in a play than a traditional novel. He also notices that, “Wallace’s philosophy and writing style prompt serious literary criticism and regular conversation” (17), perhaps the reason why both high and low vernacular find their way into essays about Wallace. Carlisle identifies a definitive problem in writing about Wallace when he

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<sup>2</sup> From the 1993 issue



states that, “the biggest obstacle to teaching Wallace is that his work is shifting the way we think about reading and writing fiction so much that we don’t know how to talk about it yet” (16). Like it or not, Wallace is a game changer, and even though we may view his aesthetic, in a positive light, as more backward than forward looking, it still creates a difficult task for the critic who hopes to prove claims in the conventional sense.

Perhaps the most difficult question to answer is why did Wallace choose *Hamlet*, and why write a comprehensive thesis mapping *Hamlet’s* influence on *IJ*? Perhaps Wallace’s simple description of *IJ* will suffice: “It’s not really a novel; it’s not supposed to be a novel. The definition of novel is...I never thought of this as a novel, I thought of it as a long story” (Lipsky 78). The first problem we may identify in Wallace criticism is reading the text as though it were like any other work in the canon. The fact that the text takes a different approach from any other known text *does, in fact*, require critics to nuance their arguments to fit the complexity of the primary text. As Carlisle argues, “In tragedy, someone makes the impossible choice and nobly suffers the consequences. In Wallace’s fiction, self-conscious characters are often frozen with indecision, suffering before a choice is even made” (17). This particular observation reeks of *Hamlet*; but it is not enough to merely notice these allusions, it is necessary to confront their importance in the text. Why have critics noticed allusions to *Hamlet* but failed to effectuate their meaning? As Carlisle observes, “I believe Wallace was still a little distracted with the problem of breathing new life into tired conventions without compromising the truth and immediacy of what he wanted to express” (17). In direct opposition to this claim, we can understand Wallace’s “breathing new life into tired conventions” as the *means* of communicating “the immediacy of what he wanted to express.” In *Hamlet* Wallace

encountered a text that had surveyed the motifs of melancholy, familial conflict, obsessive-compulsive thinking, and tragedy; what he identified as the ethos of the United States at the turn of the century. That being said, Carlisle is correct in claiming that, “a world in which Wallace is a household name would be a more mindful, passionate, and compassionate world. It’s up to us now to continue the conversation he started” (22). Rarely do we think of *Hamlet* as a text that is “mindful, passionate, and compassionate,” but, as will be displayed later, Wallace molded many of the play’s more merciless projections to benevolent ends.

To legitimize the claims made about *Infinite Jest* and *Hamlet*, an extensive review of Wallace scholarship is necessary. Since the text was published less than twenty years ago there is not yet a significant body of scholarship accompanying the primary source. Furthermore, the encyclopedic density and intricate complexity of the text has required a great deal of the initial scholarship to be of the “reader’s guide” variety. Scholars are still in the embryonic stages of understanding *IJ*, which gives the Wallace critic ample opportunity to both identify and address inimitable problems of interpretation. There is not yet an immediately visible framework of accepted interpretations for the text. When one searches “Infinite Jest,” there are less than 50 entries in the Modern Language Association’s database. Much of the existing scholarship is composed of heterogeneous efforts to unload the text’s many reciprocal complications, including entertainment, addiction, depression, irony, narcissism, parent/child relationships and the lack of a concrete postmodern identity. In fact, the three seminal works in the scholarly canon, which seem to be cited by a majority of Wallace scholars, are Marshall Boswell’s *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Stephen Burn’s *Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*,

and Greg Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity*, all of which can be classified under this categorization.

Nevertheless, the main reason we may focus on a *Hamlet*-centric reading of *IJ* is because of scholarship that *has* already materialized: namely, Toon Theuwis's dissertation, "The Quest for *Infinite Jest*: An Inquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," which is the only text that takes a definitive stance on the *Hamlet* problem in *IJ*; Timothy Jacobs' article, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," which focuses on the affinity of the Incandenza brothers and the "Brothers K"; Iannis Goerlandt's, "'Put the book down and slowly walk away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," which stresses Wallace's critique of postmodern irony; Mary K. Holland's, "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," which prioritizes the text's treatment of narcissism and postmodern identity; Burn's "'The Machine Language of the Muscles': Reading, Sport, and the Self in *Infinite Jest*," which favors the parallels between athletics and scholarship in the text; Catherine Nichols' "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," which evaluates Wallace's association with Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic imagination"; and, finally, David Evans's article, "'The Chains of Not Choosing': Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace," which recognizes Wallace's tribute to spirituality and American pragmatism.

The above list of scholarship is wide reaching in its aims, but is by no means a comprehensive reflection of the multiplicities inherent in *IJ*; however, the *Hamlet*-centric

reading provides synthesis for Wallace's appraisal of problems in literature, scholarship, and society, and his philosophies on composition. Many critics argue that no such synthesis exists and that *IJ* was deliberately written in an encyclopedic manner to ensure that critics would never find their way out of the maze. Although it may appear that way on the surface, after extensive review it is apparent that *Hamlet* is the canvas on which this masterpiece is painted. Picture *IJ* as a literary collage; underneath the chaos is subsurface order that restores literature to its pre-Enlightenment mystification. Many scholars agree that Wallace rebelled against postmodernism, but there should be equal weight given to his rebellion against modernism, and every other literary movement that manifested by maligning established tradition. In actuality, *IJ* is a backward looking rebellion, think Magna Carta, in that it did not attempt to overthrow modernism and postmodernism for an altogether new literature, but rather to reinstate the positive attributes of the body of work that those movements had destroyed:

The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. (*Conversations* 60)

We may read *Hamlet*, then, as the source code for *IJ*, and although the narrative has been altered and rewired gratuitously, it still speaks to Wallace's core aesthetic: desire and the interpretation of desire in America. Reading the text through a Shakespearean lens opens many of *IJ*'s theoretical doors, but it also exemplifies the equanimity of human consciousness from 1600 to today. Perhaps most importantly it places *IJ* in the category of world literature. By doing something "uniquely American," and modeling it after

*Hamlet*, Wallace stationed American experience in a literary tradition that far outspans the lifeblood of the nation.

The only text that takes a definitive stance on the *Hamlet* problem in *IJ* is Toon Theuwis's dissertation, in which he argues that, "the affinity of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is problematic, to say the least" and "since everybody in *IJ* has outspoken physical defects...Hamlet has been made unrecognizable" (2.1.3.2). It is an oversimplification to say that "Hamlet has been made unrecognizable." In many respects, *Infinite Jest* is a puzzle that requires a great deal of effort to put together, and Theuwis's claim that, "'everything is connected' but more or less in a meaningless way (2.2.2)," in effect, misses the point of the text, which is a recognition of the infinite possibilities within finite space; "the place where things [break] down, [and] fragment [...] into beauty" (81). *Hamlet*, complete with the skull metaphor, which is itself a symbol of the infinite possibilities of the human brain within the confines of the cranium, is the closed narratological system in which Wallace created his infinitely complex maximalist text. Theuwis goes on to claim that, "what Wallace tries to do here is nothing else but to deconstruct this very thesis in front of you" (2.2.2); but, *IJ* was described by the author as a "very careful mess" and a "pretty plane of glass that was dropped off the twentieth story of a building" (see earlier citation). There is a fractal structure in *IJ* that requires the reader to construct many pieces of an elusive puzzle; it is much more than a simple lesson in Derridean deconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Wallace employed *Hamlet* as his narrative framework both for its powers of creative generativity and for its seamless edge that mirrors the desires of the audience: it is no surprise that Himself's film, *The Joke*, is

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<sup>3</sup> See "Infinite Jest: Triangle, Cycles, Choices, and Chases"—David Hering

really just a mirror of the audience looped to the screen in the theater. This is yet another backhanded allusion to *Hamlet*, which was chosen more for its artistic *raison d'être* than its plot devices, although these are also included, rather sinistrally, in *IJ*. Peter McNamara's 1973 article about *Hamlet*'s unique artistic function explains the technique employed in *Infinite Jest*:

*Hamlet* explores, in a singularly complex way, microcosmic and macrocosmic implications of "mirroring"—the communication, reception and reflection of situation, character and point of view – for Hamlet as the emblematic center of his world, for other characters as offsetting foils, and for the relation of character to onstage and offstage audience. The play's focus on Hamlet's interior world dictates that mirroring occur explicitly between characters... Though at crucial moments the mirror of the play-world is turned to the audience-world, for the most part this relation is merely assumed. The audience is drawn into Hamlet's view of the world, and sees through his eyes. (3-4)

Don Gately and Hal Incandenza are both stand-ins for Hamlet, albeit through different interpretations; but they are also foils and mirrors of one another. Hal is the melancholic Hamlet and Gately is the tragic hero that endures immense pain in the service of others:

How many sub-rosa twins are there, out there, really? What if heredity, instead of linear, is branching? What if it's not arousal that's so finitely circumscribed? What if in fact there were ever only like two really distinct individual people walking around back there in history's mist? That all difference descends from this difference? The whole and the partial. The damaged and the intact. The deformed and the paralyzingly beautiful. The insane and the attendant. The hidden and the blindingly open. The performer and the audience. No Zen-type One, always rather Two, one upside-down in a convex lens. (*IJ* 220)

The above quote, which follows Joelle van Dyne and Molly Notkin's dual description as "sororal twins," alludes to *IJ*'s treatment of literature's inability to say anything new; it can only say the same things in a new way. This process of creating a new *Hamlet* involves expanding the spectrum of character interactions. In his interviews, Wallace made it clear that a supreme goal of the text was to do something with a lot of characters. Further instances of mirror/foil relationships are between Orin and John Wayne, Himself

and Lyle, and Avril and Joelle, but this idea is for another conversation. Nevertheless, mirroring is vitally important to understanding *IJ*'s leitmotifs because the text does not merely hold a mirror up to society's decay, it offers a "way out" (981); effectively categorized by Nicoline Timmer in her book *Do You Feel It Too?* as narrative psychology, a primary feature of Alcoholics Anonymous, and an answer to Hamlet's plea to "tell [his] story."<sup>4</sup>

Many critics believe Wallace constructed *IJ* in a deliberately frustrating and effusive manner in order to confuse the reader and repel theoretical maneuverings. However, just because the leitmotifs do not have a teleological end in the text does not mean it is unimportant to examine their function. Examining a particular leitmotiv in *IJ* requires an investigation of that leitmotiv in relationship with the others. Like language, and recovery from addiction, *IJ*'s collusive leitmotifs work only in communion with one another, not in isolation. We may read *Hamlet* as *IJ*'s theoretical beginning, its synthesis; the symbolic center from which all fragmentation begins. This idea is in direct opposition to Marshall Boswell's claim that, "*IJ*'s most distinct feature is, in fact, the lack of a symbolic center." By reading *Hamlet* at the center of *IJ* it becomes apparent why so many loose ends remain undone, the original play being notorious for begging more questions than it answers. If we are ever to understand *IJ*'s ambiguous plot structure, the answers will come from an understanding of the way *Hamlet* is referenced in the text. The one task this thesis assumes is the reading of *Infinite Jest* with *Hamlet* at the center; both the way *Hamlet* is used in the text, and the rhetorical and stylistic strategy the author

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<sup>4</sup> Timmer asserts that, "Wallace creates what could be called 'critical fiction', in that his work shows a heightened awareness of the twists and turns of critical theory of the last few decades, and very 'knowingly' in his texts works his way through some of the most arresting contradictions and paradoxes of postmodern thought" (23)

employed. For example, in Burn's "The Machine Language of the Muscles: Reading, Sport, and the Self in *Infinite Jest*," the act of reading *Hamlet* is depicted as being of utmost importance to Hal's character after he discovers it on November 4 Y.D.A.U:

For all its expertise in philosophy and tennis, Wallace's excavation of sport and "the soul's core systems" (692) effectively finds its boundaries in a reading of *Hamlet*. The play's opening line, "Who's there?" introduces the search for identity that preoccupies Hal throughout the novel, while the dying words of Hamlet underscore his inability to communicate in the latest sections: "[T]he rest is silence." (47)

As Burn notices, "like most readers, characters in the novel are swayed and influenced by their reading and react according to those readings and misreadings" (43). Furthermore, Wallace claimed that *IJ* didn't "work the way novels normally work" and was "really designed more like a piece of music than a book" (*Conversations* 72). The section on *ghostwords* reveals a great deal about the manner in which Wallace rewrote the *Hamlet* narrative and Burn's observation dovetails with the claim that Wallace used *Hamlet* as if it were a melody in a piece of music; everything else is merely an improvisatory ornamentation known as *acciaccatura*, which is the second "ghostword" after *pirouette*. *Hamlet* does not necessarily unlock all of the plot structures, but it is the harmonic note from which all narrative-play begins; it is no coincidence that Ryle's Jazz Club, a fictional Boston venue referenced in the text, is named after the British behavioral philosopher who denied Cartesian dualism and, by way of Himself's father and Gerard Schtitt, was a major influence on the academy's athletic development: "In fact, the academy's head coach and athletic director, Gerhardt Schtitt, was specifically hired because he perceived real tennis was not 'reducible to delimited factors' but instead thrived on a more complex 'not-order...the place where things broke down, fragmented into beauty' (*IJ* 81)" ( Burn 42). This infinite space where tennis turns into beauty within



a closed-system of court and net is the same philosophy behind jazz music; improvisation within loose guidelines. *Hamlet* is the loose guideline for Wallace's narratological improvisation; the result: *Infinite Jest*.

## CHAPTER III

### SET AND SETTING

Stephen Burn's research on Enfield, Massachusetts, the location of both the Enfield Tennis Academy and the Ennet Recovery House, is an ideal gateway to begin the study of *Hamlet* in *IJ*. The study of setting and space exemplifies Burn's statement that the text, "is not an independent entity but a node in a cultural network—a site of communicative energy not only drawing from the complex cultural matrix around it, but also pointing beyond itself" (6). The text seizes *Hamlet* as a central "node" in this "cultural network" in order to address problems of literary interpretation and production that echo larger social issues of narcissism, obsession, pleasure, and entertainment.

Burn discovered that Enfield was an actual town (a hamlet, if you will) until, "August 1939 when the Swift River was dammed to create the 40 square miles of the Quabbin reservoir and provide the Greater Boston area with water" (59). Being an alumnus of Amherst College in Central Massachusetts, Wallace may have been aware that "Amherst has special collections of Quabbin Towns Materials (59)," and although it is impossible to confirm or deny, he may have accessed these materials while researching

the appropriate setting for *IJ*. Wallace was known to be a ruthless and enthusiastic researcher of obscure facts and errata, hence the one hundred pages of footnotes in *IJ*.

But the most significant fact that Burn reveals about Enfield is, “in preparing to flood the area all the town’s lost dead had to be excavated and reburied, a fact that seems darkly appropriate for a novel that is partly about the returning dead” (59). The text is named after a line in *Hamlet*’s famous graveyard scene and also occupies a primary setting that was the site of a most unusual grave digging. Furthermore, one of the more ambiguous plot devices occurs when Don Gately is suffering in a hospital bed from a gunshot wound and dreams that, “he’s with a very sad kid and they’re in a graveyard digging some dead guy’s head up and it’s really important, like Continental-Emergency important [and]...the sad kid holds something terrible up by the hair and makes the face of somebody shouting in panic: *Too Late* [sic]” (934). Another view of this scene is described by Hal early in the text during his own ambiguous psychosomatic episode: “I think of John N.R. [Not Related] Wayne, who would have won this year’s Whataburger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head” (16-17). The plot implications and ambiguity of this scene, since it presumably takes place “off-stage,” are of particular importance to the progression of the story a la the film and the AFR; yet, grave digging serves a reflexive role as an homage to *Hamlet*, as well as the authorial function. As Mary K. Holland argues, which we may in turn relate to Hamlet’s infamous reluctance, the text follows a tempo of dazzling linguistic panache overtop deathly slow action.

The Joke of this novel, then, lies in the fact that, from the moment we meet Hal, we know that he is doomed to the solipsistic death of his pathological society, yet the novel defers for as long as possible our understanding of this culture and this

moment, parsing out seemingly infinite repeating examples of its recursive loop over more than a thousand and one pages of Hal's "story," a story told, in essence, to postpone his own certain death. (234)

*Hamlet* is a model for *Infinite Jest* in the literary sense, but it is also a piece of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital," meaning it has been used by Freud, Lacan, Joyce, Goethe, and dozens of other authors and philosophers to authenticate and popularize various tropes and theories, seemingly at the expense of Hamlet's story and message. Wallace is not opposed to theory, but he is concerned with the tension between theory and storytelling in *Hamlet*; theory representing the skeleton or the skull and storytelling representing the fleshed-out human being. One of Wallace's more well-known quotes is, "in dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery). In comparison, as quoted in Paul A. Jorgenson's essay "Hamlet," "'It is we,' wrote William Hazlitt, 'who are Hamlet.' And Coleridge acknowledged, 'I have smack of Hamlet, if I may say so.' Few of us cannot identify with the hero, and many are the warm discussions about what is his 'mystery'" (Jorgenson). Being aware of each individual's ability to relate to the tragic hero and staying true to the Alcoholics Anonymous practice of relating rather than comparing, Wallace revived *Hamlet's* story in modern terms for a society that, as a result of postmodern irony, had lost much of its dramatic intrigue and humanistic wisdom; similar to what Shakespeare did with Plautus, which will be discussed later.

Grave digging is at the heart of *IJ's* semiotics and aesthetics and is an indispensable link between the several narrative strands (including the only venue where the text's two protagonists, Hal and Gately, perhaps meet [although it may just be a

dream]). In this spirit, we may read AA in the text not as a panacea to Hamlet's dilemma, but as a way *to deal* with destructive thinking; a release from the cage of the self. In AA, the nature of addiction has been described as "digging one's own grave" and the twelve steps have been compared to twelve rungs on a ladder; when taken one step at a time, the addict can get out of the grave they dug for themselves. Furthermore, an addict is only ready to embark on the twelve steps when they have hit their "bottom." Older members of the group, whom Wallace refers to as "crocodiles (209)" because of their "geologic amounts of sobriety time (209)," have been known to say things like, "if you want to hit your bottom then stop digging!"

Perhaps the allusions to grave digging and AA are mere happenstance, an unsubstantiated claim without proof or defined referentiality; but when an alcoholic or drug addict begins to sober up, they often recognize signs that they are on the right path. Wallace, as a recovering member of AA, would have been aware of what is called synchronicity (a term defined by Carl Jung, who also influenced the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*), and he may have used *Hamlet*, which is renowned for its loose-ends, as a vehicle for describing the plight of the struggling drug addict. However, in this configuration, Hamlet himself is not the addict: it is the ghost and his determination for revenge and Claudius that cast light on the vicious cycle of alcoholic addiction.

It may be an even further stretch to say that in writing *IJ* Wallace assumed the role of "scourge and minister" (3.4.178) for late twentieth century America. But considering the succession of quotes that begin this thesis, drawing out all the references to *Hamlet* requires an analysis of the author's individual relationship to the namesake character. To quote Samuel Cohen, co-editor of *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, "In

spite of my wariness about using Wallace's life to read his work, I don't think it's possible to fully understand *Infinite Jest* without reckoning in what Wallace was feeling and thinking about writing and about himself as a writer at the time he wrote it. The novel...is as much about them as it is about any of the many other things" (59). Wallace was able to draw many individual parallels with Hamlet, most notably the profound melancholy of his depression, the complicated relationship with his mother, and the sense of duty he felt to teach his society about its moral and spiritual corruption.

In the aforementioned interview with Larry McCaffery, which was referred to by Wallace biographer D.T. Max as the "Freebird" of Wallace criticism at the First Annual DFW Conference, the author responds to a question that specifically informs Wallace's role as "scourge and minister": "LM: Near the end of 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,' there's a line about Mark that 'It would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetuate the special cruelty only real lovers can inflict.' Is this the kind of cruelty you feel is missing in the work of somebody like Mark Leyner?" (McCaffery). In typical Wallace fashion, after skirting around the question for several paragraphs and drawing several sub-questions, he finally answered, "I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader" (McCaffery). Wallace is the "architect" from his story "Westward," and we can see many of the ideas in the above description played out in *IJ*, which is also similar to what Jorgensen observed as Hamlet's role. The immense pain that comes from being a herald or soothsayer encompasses Hamlet's melancholy and reluctance. By killing Claudius, his hope is to restore natural order to Elsinore, which in peacetime has fallen ill to many forms of moral

and spiritual decadence. But Hamlet's task is more than just killing Claudius, as Jorgensen contends, "His...is the most profound kind of revenge...his task is to set the times right, to purge the court of Elsinore" (Jorgensen). Wallace and Hamlet are both "architects" who "hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetuate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict."

Even though Wallace modeled some of his characters after the drama, he may have viewed his authorial role as being similar to Hamlet's in the play. Jorgensen argues that Hamlet is "scourge and minister" because he forces his victims to suffer, but in so doing requires them to confront their own consciences. Jorgensen is able to successfully demonstrate how Claudius, Polonius, Laertes, and most significantly, Gertrude, as noted below, are overcome with grief over Hamlet's words: "'O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain' (3.4,157). In so confessing, she becomes the last and certainly most important sinner whose heart Hamlet has opened" (Jorgensen). Now that it's settled that *IJ*'s primary setting directly corresponds to grave digging, that the mindset of the author was that of "scourge and minister," and that the title is a direct allusion to *Hamlet*, we can commence a close-reading of the text to scan for intertextual comparisons.

*Close-Reading.* One aspect of Toon Theuwis's dissertation that gainfully accompanies this study is his recognition of various *Hamlet* references in *IJ*. Theuwis notices the title, grave digging, and many of the more obvious references to *Hamlet*, like Avril being romantically involved with her half-brother Charles Tavis (who also becomes headmaster of the academy after Himself dies), which is, in many respects, the inverse of the levirate marriage depicted in *Hamlet*; but he also includes more obscure allusions like the one listed below:

[Theuwis begins with a quote] “James Incandenza, besides being headmaster of Enfield Tennis Academy, and the founder of ‘annular fusion’ (a certain closed system reaction that creates perpetual energy) is also an avant-garde filmmaker. His output comprises industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic noncommercial, nondramatic (anticonfluent) noncommercial, nondramatic commercial, and dramatic commercial works” (985). A similar parody on genres we find in Hamlet’s conversation with Polonius as the actors arrive at the Danish court. *Polonius*: “The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited” (2.2, 379-382). (2.1.3.2)

Theuwis notices that “Hamlet’s ‘antic disposition’ in a way resembles Hal’s communicative problems, his solipsism and eventual muteness. And by letting a bird fall out of the air on page 44 for apparently no particular reason, Wallace literally lets... the world of the ONAN collide with the world of the Danish Hamlet where there is “a special Providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2, 157-158) (2.1.3.2); also that “the war that Norwegian Fortinbras in *Hamlet* is fighting is a war over an insignificantly small piece of land that causes Hamlet to plunge into one of his soliloquies... a similar war over a futile piece of land is fought between the ONAN and the Anti-ONAN separatists of Quebec whose opposition to the reconfiguration... is of central importance”; and that, in the opening scene of *IJ*, “Hal tries to say: ‘I’d tell you all you want to know and more, if the sounds I made could be what you hear’ (9). Hamlet, when at the end is slain by Laertes, also begins an explanation—‘Oh I could tell you’ (5.2, 272) but is cut short by death. Keeping in mind that the opening scene in *Infinite Jest* is chronologically the last event in the novel, it is obvious that both *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest* end in comparable scenes”; and that “many other compatible leitmotifs like sleep, death, maggots, Oedipus complex, isolation, confusion, mixture of tragedy and humour/wit abound in both texts”; and, finally, that “the name ‘Hal’ however can also be an allusion to Shakespeare’s character Prince Hal in the first and second part of *Henry IV* where, similar to *Infinite Jest*, one of



the central themes is a problematic father-son relationship...*Infinite Jest* is not just a rewriting of the Hamlet story. The many possible intricate allusions attached to just this one name 'Hal' contribute to the novel's complexity" (2.1.3.2).

Theuwis does a fine job identifying allusions to *Hamlet* in the text, but there are a great deal more that are of significance. Nevertheless, before delving into a comprehensive close-reading, it is important to note that these surface-level allusions to *Hamlet* are only an accompanying conclusion to be drawn from the text's meaning. The plot of *IJ* is not a direct analog of the *Hamlet* narrative; rather, the *Hamlet* narrative, and certain literary devices disposed in *IJ*, reconcile the ambiguous plot, distorted structure, and ambivalent intertextuality. Reading *Hamlet* in *IJ* is a road-map through Wallace's creative process; the means by which he arrived at such a maximalist and complicated text. The allusions are clues that allow the reader make connections and to take something away from the text. The fact that *IJ* is so difficult while operating within the constraints of *Hamlet* is proof positive of Wallace's Oulipo technique at work.

That being said, there are several important allusions that Theuwis does not include in his dissertation. At face value, the two most visible motifs of *IJ* are tennis and addiction. Normally, critics do not think of *Hamlet* as being concerned with either of these, but they are both mentioned tangentially in the play: the former on several different occasions. Act 1.4 is of particular importance to this discussion, especially after Hamlet hears a flourish of trumpets, which immediately precedes his first discussion with the ghost: "Horatio: 'What does this mean, my lord?' Hamlet: 'The King doth wake to-night and takes his rouse / Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring upspring reels, / And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,'" (8-11). The King draining "his draughts of

Rhenish” is similar to James O. Incandenza’s habit of drinking Wild Turkey whiskey. And to take it a step further, the other mention of Rhenish occurs in 5.1, the most important scene to *IJ*, when the gravedigger remembers Yorick, the jester, dumping a glass of Rhenish over his head [Poor Yorick Entertainment is also the final name of Himself’s film production company]: “A pestilence on him mad rogue! A pour’d a / flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was / Yorick’s skull, the King’s jester” (5.1, 196-198). Drinking alcohol, as it relates to both the dead King, Claudius, and the cultural climate in Denmark, plays an important role in *Hamlet’s* embedded semiotics. Wallace was interested in the embedded nature of texts, having embedded a great deal in his own fiction, and referring to *Hamlet’s* more tangential associations is an example of the improvisational technique [*acciaccatura*] used in composition. This is perhaps most apparent in the play’s treatment of tennis, which is referenced in 2.1 when Polonius counsels Reynaldo before he goes to Paris to spy on Laertes [spying is yet another of *IJ’s* motifs that has its origins in *Hamlet*]. However, the most important line from this scene occurs much earlier in the conversation when Polonius instructs Reynaldo to say, ““But if’t be he I mean, he’s very wild / *Addicted so and so* [emphasis added]”” (2.1, 17-19). Addiction carried a different meaning in Elizabethan/Jacobean English, but this is of little consequence because Wallace intended to modernize the *Hamlet* narrative. As we are all aware, addiction is the most prominent motif in *IJ*, and its inclusion in *Hamlet* is cause for continued inspection of this line of reasoning.

Later in the same conversation, as he continues to instruct Reynaldo on his espionage, Polonius states, ““I know the gentleman. / I saw him yesterday or t’other day, / Or then, or then, with such or such; and, as you say, / There was ‘a gamin; there o’ertook

in's rouse; / *There falling out at tennis*' [emphasis added] (2.1, 56-60). Tennis is the other most prominent motif in *IJ*, and the fact that tennis and addiction are discussed *in the same conversation* in *Hamlet* is further proof that the play is the central note in the text's musical configuration. The fact that this conversation is in the periphery of the original play adds to the allure that Wallace's constraint allowed for maximum creativity; he seems to have preferred to adapt tertiary motifs with as much gusto as those favored by traditional criticism.

According to G.L. Kittredge, earlier in Act 1.2, "Hamlet expresses his dislike of the Danish habit of heavy drinking (148)" when he sarcastically states, "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart" (1.2, 175). Later, in Act 1.4, Hamlet gives one of his classic soliloquies about how other nations view Denmark, which can be interpreted as his own personal disgust for the drinking culture and Claudius's heavy drinking:

They clip us drunkards and with swinish phrase  
Soil our addition; and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though perform'd at height,  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.  
So oft it chances in particular men  
That, for some vicious mole of nature in them,  
As in their birth, -- wherein they are not guilty,  
Since nature cannot choose his origin,--  
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens  
The form of plausive manners, that these men  
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,

Their virtues else- be they as pure as grace,  
*As infinite as man may undergo* [emphasis added]—(1.4, 19-34).

The above quote describes alcoholism as “some habit that too much o’erleavens / The form of plausible manners” and “the stamp of one defect” that has “infinite” consequences for the sufferer. Also, *IJ* depicts a large cross-section of America as “drunkards” and drug addicts. If Hamlet indeed has to atone for the sins of his father, then the dead King’s alcoholism plays a significant role in his psychological distress. After surveying the allusions to alcoholism in *Hamlet*, it is apparent that Wallace read deeply into the play’s embedded semiotics: alcohol was, in fact, called “spirits” during this time period. Ghosts, alcoholism, and melancholy all seem interconnected in both texts, and Wallace, being a student of linguistics and philology, was probably interested in the term “spirit” when used in place of alcohol. Certainly there is more to alcoholism, as we now understand it, than initially meets the eye in *Hamlet*, and *IJ* actualizes this speculation during the wraith scene when Gately and the dead Incandenza discuss the latter’s attendance at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous:

This gets Gately’s attention. Here at last could be some sort of point to the unpleasantness and confusion of the dream. ‘You tried to get sober?’ he thinks, rolling his eyes over to the wraith. ‘More than once, you tried?’ Was it White-Knuckle? Did you ever surrender and Come In?’ The wraith feels along his long jaw and says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse* [emphasis in original] (838)

The alcoholism of the dead father in both *Hamlet* and *IJ* is connected to the psychological distress of the son later in life. Another reference to this that exemplifies both *acciaccatura* and recursive annulation occurs when Hal has a psychological breakdown during his tennis recruiting visit to the University of Arizona. Hal “stare[s] carefully into the Kekulean knot of the middle Dean’s necktie (5),” and in so doing refers to the

mathematician August Kekule, famous for having a dream about a self-devouring snake, which led to the discovery of the benzene ring. The benzene ring is the first reference to annular shapes in the text, and one that represents the *ouroboros*, an ancient serpent that consumes its own tail symbolizing self-reflexivity and the cyclical nature of reality. But later in the scene, Hal retreats to the restroom to gain composure and does something reminiscent of Hamlet: “I am rolled over supine on the geometric tile. I am concentrating docilely on the question of why U.S. restrooms always appear to us as infirmaries for public distress, the place to regain control. My head is cradled in a knelt director’s lap” (13). Famously, in Act 3.2, Hamlet says to Ophelia, “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” (102). This has been interpreted as both a moment of extreme peculiarity and primary evidence of Hamlet’s “antic disposition.” Obviously, this allusion does not conform perfectly to the original play, but it does conform to the musical term *acciaccatura*; Hal placing his head in someone’s lap, which Hamlet does during *The Mouse Trap* scene, has semiotic implications beyond what can be initially discerned. Immediately following Hal placing his head in the Dean’s lap, Uncle Charles Tavis is described as, “a truly unparalleled slinger of shit” (13). Perhaps this scene, like *The Mouse Trap* with Claudius, is meant to reveal something hidden about Hal’s uncle. Certainly, the rat theme is prominent in *IJ* as drug addicts are described as those who “eat cheese (130)” and someone who incriminates others is referred to as an “eater of cheese” (156, 202). But Hal, like Hamlet, does not place his head in the lap of an Ophelia-like character, which raises concerns about Ophelia’s depiction in *IJ*.

Boswell argues that Kate Gompert, the depressed and suicidal marijuana addict, and resident of Ennet House, is the most likely stand-in for Ophelia; however that role

seems more convincingly occupied by Joelle van Dyne. The fact that Orin is Joelle's initial love interest, and that he is also Hal's elder brother, is evidence of the half-step removal from the original play that conforms to *acciaccatura*. Furthermore, Joelle becomes the primary love interest of Don Gately, the other stand-in for Hamlet, though we never see the affair consummated. Nevertheless, Joelle's role as Madame Psychosis, the avant-garde radio personality, is perhaps the strongest evidence of her portrayal of Ophelia because her "monologues seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares" (*IJ* 185). By comparing the above statement with one of Ophelia's more infamous monologues, and in consideration of Orin and Joelle's tumultuous relationship, important parallels can be drawn:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword,  
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
Th' observ'd of all observers- quite, quite down!  
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,  
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,  
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,  
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;  
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth  
Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me  
T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1,132-143)

Madame psychosis's radio show, aired on MIT student radio, is marked by absurdly complex scientific discussions, après garde film theory, and things as innocuous as professional football. However, for all the show's underground success, it is made

imperviously known that the host is often quite sad on the air. All things considered, the reader is unaware that Joelle van Dyne is in fact Madame Psychosis until after the P.G.O.A.T's (prettiest girl of all time, another of her several pseudonyms) appearance at Molly Notkin's cocktail party; the place she plans to commit suicide. The name "Notkin" beckons Hamlet's first words in the play, "A little more than kin, and less than kind (1.2, 65)," and distances the text from the Ph.D student in Film and Cartridge Studies; one of the many insults directed towards academia. The scene that describes Joelle's mental state before her suicide attempt is one of the more gut-wrenching, but it does provide insight into something *Hamlet* scholars desperately desire; namely, background information about Ophelia's ambiguous death. The word "ecstasy" in Ophelia's monologue, when juxtaposed with a line from Joelle's suicide scene in which she freebases cocaine, is the strongest evidence that Joelle is Ophelia's stand-in: "She always sees, after inhaling, right at the apex, at the graph's spike's tip, Bernini's 'Ecstasy of St. Teresa,' behind glass, at the Vittoria, for some reason..." (235). Bernini's statue, in Joelle's frame of reference, is the "form and feature of blown youth / Blasted with ecstasy." This scene embodies a key feature of *IJ*: the expansion of various scenes in *Hamlet* which are alluded to, but are not fully explained in the play i.e. Ophelia's death. Nevertheless, the result is nil, in that there are just as many questions left unanswered following the infinite story than after the authoritative play. Buyers beware; this is exactly what Wallace intended and was probably the reason he chose *Hamlet* as the finite constraint of an "infinite" text.

Other allusions to *Hamlet* that deserve inclusion in this analysis are James O. Incandenza's obsession with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which is the modern analog of the

term “Hamlet,” meaning “a small settlement” (Merriam-Webster); Polonius’s famous tongue-in-cheek monologue comprised entirely of clichés (1.3, 59-65) and the simple truisms of Alcoholics Anonymous that are praised in *IJ*, especially “to thine own self be true (1.3,62)” which is the official motto of AA; the “Paranoid King” poster given to Hal by Michael Pemulis and Ted Schacht, who are stand-in’s for Horatio and Marcellus, respectively; the ghost’s repeated order of, “Speak to me (1.1,129, 132),” and J.O. Incandenza’s fear that Hal cannot speak; the “Extorted treasure in the womb of earth (1.1,137)” and digging up J.O. Incandenza’s head to locate the master copy of the *samizdat*, the cartridge “Infinite Jest”; Claudius’s claim that, “’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, / To give these mourning duties to your father (1.2, 87-88),” and Hal’s fear of failing grief counseling; Hamlet’s admonition, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world” and Hal’s anhedonia, literally “death-in-life”; the line, “Think yourself a baby (1.3,105)” and the “feral infant” image scattered throughout the text; Hal’s first-person description of the winter storm the day of ETA’s exhibition match against the Quebecois team and the beginning of Act 1.4 when Hamlet states, “The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold (1)”<sup>5</sup>; the line in 1.5 when the Ghost states, “My hour is almost come / When I to sulfurous and tormenting flames / Must render up myself (4-5),” and J.O. Incandenza’s suicide by putting his head in a microwave oven; Endnote 337: “Latin blunder for self-defense’s *se defendendo* is *sic*, either a befogged muddling of a professional legal term, or a post-Freudian slip, or (least likely) a very oblique and subtle jab at Gately from a Ewell intimate with the graveyard

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<sup>5</sup> Although, this may also reference the storm from *King Lear*, as there can be convincing arguments made about Wallace’s use of *Lear*, *Macbeth* [“signifying nothing” (888)], *The Comedy of Errors*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* etc.



scene from *Hamlet*- namely V.i 9.” (1076); the quote about the *assassins des fauteuils rollents* from endnote 321: “Oh, I *definitely* I’d suspect some kind of conspiracy or trap (1064),” and the mouse trap, except in this case the mouse trap is meant to incriminate Avril in the Quebecois conspiracy instead of Claudius in the murder of the Ghost; From J.O. Incandenza’s filmography, “*Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed*...Possible Scandinavian-psychodrama parody, a boy helps his alcoholic-delusional father and disassociated mother dismantle their bed to search for rodents, and later he intuits the future feasibility of D.T.-cycle lithiumized annular fusion” (990-991); the list goes on infinitely.

Pemulis’s quote from Endnote 324: “You’re getting ready to say that if you can’t trust the ostensibly loving patriarchal bosom you can’t trust anyone at all, and if you can’t trust people what can you trust” (1070) and Pemulis telling Possalthea, “Never trust the father you can see” (1072) a sideways allusion to the ghost problem; the statement about Orin that, “the little rotter had enough malcathected issues with his mother to keep all of Vienna humming briskly for quite some time” (791).

The last example raises a final point that *must be made*, namely that Wallace’s *Hamlet* program is the narrative framework and is a vehicle for the Freudian/Lacanian critique that dominates the text. Remember both Freud and Lacan used *Hamlet* as historical evidence for their models of the human psyche. We may read *IJ* as *Hamlet* “cubed” i.e. to the third power; a hybridization of plot/character model, reader-response and historical criticism, and infused with facts about contemporary human life. Wallace seems to be asserting that critics are forever concerned with what *Hamlet* does and what *Hamlet* means, but we should be concerned with what *Hamlet* does to us. It’s not as if life

has become so much more complex in the twenty-first century; it's that, since postmodernism, the ways of representing life have become more complex.

## CHAPTER IV

### GHOSTWORDS

This section takes several leaps which require a grasp of the information included in the background up until this point. This section intends to show how *IJ* proceeds by “doubling” the *Hamlet* narrative. The “ghostwords” sections of *Infinite Jest*, which begin on page 832 and continue throughout the wraith’s visit to Gately’s bedside, may seem occlusive and unnecessary, but are of supreme interest for critics who hope to unearth the theoretical underpinnings of the text. The wraith communicates with Don Gately through his thoughts and reveals several highly technical and sophisticated terms that appear completely foreign and incomprehensible to the uneducated drug addict. The first problem with this arrangement is that if *IJ* was a surface-level adaptation of *Hamlet*, meaning if it was a wholesale derivative of the original, then the wraith of James O. Incandenza would be visiting Hal, his son, and not Gately. However, as G.L. Kittredge maintains, “a summarizing motto for the play (xx),” may be, “The pass and fell incensed points / Of mighty opposites (5.2, 61-62), which characterizes Hal and Gately’s

Mirror/foil relationship. But since *IJ* treats *Hamlet* more asymmetrically, it begs the question of why the text communicates with *Hamlet* at all? To answer this question it is necessary to define each of the “ghostwords” and postulate the links to *Hamlet*.

The first of the “ghostwords” is *pirouette*, which appears by its lonesome one sentence before the saturated list referenced below. *Pirouette*, in this context, does not refer to the horse dressage or ballet maneuver, but rather to the stock character in the *commedia dell’Arte* that heavily influenced the Shakespearean stage. *Pirouette*, known also as *Pierrot*, is a clown character that, according to Douglas Clayton, “became conflated” with *Hamlet* “into a single persona” in various French works in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Clayton 36). The list below, and more generally the text itself, encompasses a wide range of adaptations of the *Hamlet* narrative, and methods by which it has been worked into the artistic and literary consciousness:

Other words and terms Gately knows he doesn’t know from a divot in the sod now come crashing through his head with the same ghastly intrusive force, e.g. ACCIACCATURA and ALEMBIC, LACTRODECTUS MACTANS and NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT, CHIAROSCURO and PROPRIOCEPTION and TESTUDO and ANNULATE and BRICOLAGE and CATALEPT and GERRYMANDER and SCOPOPHILIA and LAERTES—and all of a sudden it occurs to Gately the aforethought EXTUDING, STRIGIL and LEXICAL themselves—and LORDOSIS and IMPOST and SINISTRAL and MENISCUS and CHRONAXY and POOR YORICK and LUCULUS and CERISE MONTCLAIR and then DE SICA NEO-REAL CRANE DOLLY and CIRCUMAMBIENTFOUNDDRAMALEVIRATEMARRIAGE...(832).

To the casual observer these terms may cause more confusion than harmony. But to the devoted scholar these terms are the keys, or the “Ghost in the Machine,” a concept discussed in the earlier section about Ryle, to unlock the use of *Hamlet* in *IJ*. The first term in the above list was described in previous sections. *Acciaccatura* is a musical term and perhaps the most significant expression of the structural technique used to adapt *Hamlet*. *Acciaccatura* is defined by Merriam-Webster as, “a discordant note sounded with a principal note or chord and immediately released.” As Stephen Burn declares, *Infinite Jest* operates on a “polyphonic register,” and *acciaccatura* is also understood as, “a short grace note one half step below, and struck at the same time as, a principal note,” (Free Dictionary). In an interview, Wallace said that *IJ* was composed like a piece of music, and taking into consideration the text’s preoccupation with *Hamlet*, it is important to understand how the play fits into this musical configuration. Surely, it seems as if all of the *Hamlet* references in the text are “one half step below,” meaning they do not literally correspond, but rather strike a “discordant note” in the mind of the reader; one that is close to the original play, but still a little off the mark. However, upon closer inspection, the *Hamlet* narrative is the “principal note,” the melody/harmony, and everything else is *acciaccatura*, a piece of ornamental improvisation.

This notion may be somewhat hard to grasp, but after a thorough analysis of the other ghostwords it makes sense why Wallace’s *Hamlet* references appear “unrecognizable,” when, in reality, the original narrative has been altered by various musical, architectural, literary, artistic, chemical, mathematical, mechanical and tactical means. The three most obvious references to *Hamlet* in the “ghostwords” are LAERTES, POOR YORICK and CIRCUMAMBIENTLEVIRATEMARRIAGE: the first is Hamlet’s

foil in the play; the second is the dead jester and the name of Himself's film production company; and the last is a reference to the style of marriage in which the younger brother marries his elder brother's widow. Claudius and Gertrude's marriage is a direct analog of levirate marriage, but the arrangement between Avril and Charles Tavis is a little more complicated. Tavis is actually Avril's half-brother, although there is doubt as to whether they are blood-related. But circumambulation, in a large swath of cultural traditions, is the act of moving around a sacred object; and that is exactly what Wallace did; he moved *Hamlet*, a sacred literary object, around to fit the ethos of postmodern America.

The only critic that has tackled the "ghostwords" problem is Jonathan Goodwin in "Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." In his article, Goodwin determines that these words "recapitulate [J.O.] Incandenza's life." He also explains the term "LUCULUS," which is "listed in the Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources as a rare alternate spelling of 'louculus,' a small box or reliquary." Goodwin is also able to demonstrate the extensive semiotic implications that each of these "ghostwords" carries as "the word 'lucus' is derived from 'lux' (light); and the paradox that it means 'grove,' or a small area shaded by trees, was the subject of Quintilian's epigram: *lucus a non lucendo* ('a grove [so-called] from the absence of light') (OED)" (Goodwin). Anyone who has read *Hamlet* is aware that Claudius killed old King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear as he slept in an orchard, another name for a grove and LUCULUS almost certainly refers to this. But Goodwin also concludes that it may refer to the play *The Trial of Luculus* by Bertolt Brecht about the famed Roman General. The University of Chicago sponsors an interactive website on Plutarch's *The Parallel Lives: The Life of Lucullus* which states that, "Lucullus was trained to speak fluently both Latin and Greek, so that Sulla, in

writing his own memoirs, dedicated them to him, as a man who would set in order and duly arrange the history of the times better than himself” (3). Furthermore, Lucullus was a literary man by Plutarch’s proclamation: “Now, as to his love of literature, this also is reported, in addition to what has already been said: when he was a young man, proceeding from jest to earnest in a conversation with Hortensius, the orator, and Sisenna, the historian, he agreed, on their suggestion of a poem and a history, both in Greek and Latin, that he would treat the Marsic war in whichever of these forms the lot should prescribe” (4). Lucullus wanted to chronicle his epoch with many different viewpoints just as Wallace wanted to do with *Infinite Jest*. Without digging deeper into the “LUCULUS” problem, which has proven quite fruitful, it is important to link this Roman term to another of the “ghostwords.”

“STRIGIL” is another roman term for “a hollow curved instrument to cleanse oil” from the skin which was “used by athletes, both before and after exercise or contests” (vroma.org). “STRIGIL” is also important as a literary term because “Plautus includes the strigil among the very few things that a parasite can call his own” (vroma.org). Wallace was probably self-conscious about using *Hamlet* as a wellspring for inspiration and may have viewed his authorial role as synonymous with using a strigil; in short, he may have viewed himself as a parasite attached to *Hamlet*. It may be an unspeakable violation of the mixed metaphor, but Wallace cleansed the skin of the *Hamlet* narrative with a strigil to remove the dead cells that no longer made sense. The inclusion of strigil, in communion with Plautus’s quote, is also important because Shakespeare’s, “*Comedy of Errors* is built out of two plots, both derived from the Roman comic dramatist Plautus (c. 254-184 B. C.), whom schoolboys read in Elizabethan England” (courttheatre.org).

Nearly all schoolchildren in the United States read *Hamlet* at one point or another, and by including this “ghostword” Wallace aligns himself with literary tradition that extends all the way to Plautus by way of Shakespeare.

Goodwin notes that, “Incandenza was a brilliant optical physicist, and many of the other words and phrases in the list refer to lenses and human sensory perception:

“NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT,” “MENISCUS,” “CHRONAXY,” and “PROPRIOCEPTION,” for example (832).” Obviously, *IJ* and *Hamlet* can both be viewed through many lenses, and *IJ* has attempted to display the many ways one can interpret *Hamlet*. But these words more than just relate to “human sensory perception,” when defined and understood they seem to *embody* the means by which Wallace adapted the *Hamlet* narrative, which is difficult to explain without the “ghostwords.” “NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT,” according to Wikipedia, is a type of photographic lens filter that “allows the photographer to select combinations of aperture, exposure time, and sensor sensitivity which would otherwise produce overexposed pictures. This is done to achieve effects such as shallower depth of field and/or motion blur of a subject in a wider range of situations and atmospheric conditions.” It is challenging to put into words, but if one was able to summarize how Wallace adapted the *Hamlet* narrative it would conform closely to the above statement. “MENISCUS,” according to Wikipedia, is a type of ancient “lens with one convex and one concave side.” Concavity and Convexity are important motifs in *IJ*, but they relate to *Hamlet* in that Hamlet’s character has been divided between Hal and Gately so that the *Hamlet* narrative has been magnified in a *Comedy of Errors* style doubling. “CHRONAXY,” according to Merriam-Webster, is “the minimum time required for excitation of a structure by a constant electric current of



twice the threshold voltage.” *IJ* has certainly excited *Hamlet*’s “structure” by “twice the threshold voltage” through its narrative doubling. And, finally, “PROPRICEPTION,” according to Joseph Bennington-Castro, is a “sixth-sense” which is “the master controller of our balance and spatial orientation.” This statement is perhaps the one that most conforms to *IJ*’s affiliation with *Hamlet* because the play is indeed the “sixth-sense” that seems to control every movement of the various narrative strands.

The rest of the “ghostwords” can all be linked to *Hamlet* in some way, but rather than explaining the in’s-and-outs of each term, the reader is advised to postulate the same line of reasoning from the examples included above. “ALEMBIC” is, according to Wikipedia, an “alchemical still consisting of two vessels used for distilling chemicals.” *Hamlet* is the liquid that *Infinite Jest* distills into a more potent and modern derivative. “LACTRODECTUS MACTANS,” according to Wikipedia, is the scientific name for the “black widow” spider, “a highly venomous species...that will occasionally eat her mate after reproduction.” This reference seems to describe Avril Incandenza by way of Gertrude. “CHIAROSCURO” is, according to Wikipedia, in art “the use of strong contrasts between light and dark, usually bold contrasts affecting a whole composition.” Again, this refers to both the doubling of *Hamlet* and the more obvious allusions to the play versus the more obscure. “BRICOLAGE,” according to Wikipedia, “is the construction or creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available, or a work created by such a process.” This quote pretty well sums up what *IJ* in essence *is*, but it also coheres with the idea that Wallace adapted anything and everything that is included in *Hamlet*. The rest of the “ghostwords” have distinct implications, and each could have a singular study devoted to them, but the point is clear: the “ghostwords”

do not only reflect James O. Incandenza's work, they reflect the work of the real author, David Foster Wallace. A final example: "DE SICA NEO-REAL CRANE DOLLY," is a reference to the Italian avant-garde filmmaker Vittorio de Sica, whose film *The Bicycle Thief* is famous for the quote, "Why should I kill myself worrying when I'll end up just as dead?" (IMDB). This is a backhanded allusion to Hamlet's bane of existence, as adapted through Hal: the tragic nature of constant worry.

## CHAPTER V

### NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Not only is the pre-Subsidized/Subsidized time in *Infinite Jest* ‘out of joint’ (2.1.189), it centers around the return of a ghost whose film is the focus of a separatist movement that aims to narcotize the populous of the United States with the film’s destructive contents. The dispute with the Quebecois separatist movement is over a piece of land along the U.S. Canadian Border known in the U.S. as “the Great Concavity,” and in Canada as “the Great Convexity.” This slender piece of land is similar to the “little patch of land / That hath in it no profit but the name” (4.4) that old King Hamlet originally killed old King Fortinbras over. Nevertheless, critics of Shakespeare do not seem as concerned with the skeletons in old King Hamlet’s closet as they do the ghost’s condemnation of Claudius and young Hamlet’s orders for revenge. Nevertheless, when reexamining the *whole story* in the play, it is apparent that young Hamlet’s true dilemma is spiritual, requiring him to atone for the sins of his father. The story finds resolution when Hamlet dies and is ordered a soldier’s burial by young Fortinbras.

*Hamlet* is a play about desire, but not about desire for revenge or Oedipal fantasy, but the desire to remember his father's story, and to have his own told. In light of Fortinbras's proclamation in 5.2, "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me," we may read the play as a narrative of amnesia, where the inability to remember the past produces confusion and despair.

If *Hamlet* is a play about a man who has lost the way of his desire, as Lacan claims, then *Infinite Jest* is a story about a nation that has lost the way of its desire. Because of his affiliations with psychoanalysis, linguistics, and modern film theory, we may read *Infinite Jest* through a Lacanian lens, specifically through the seminal essay, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*." Although Wallace seems to agree that Lacan's views on human consciousness are more or less applicable to subjects in the late twentieth century, the defeatist consternation that the Real is inaccessible can be remedied, for Wallace, through narrative psychology: most notably, via the recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous in which members share their stories with one another in hopes of relating, as opposed to comparing and, thus, remaining stuck in the fugue state of postmodern self-consciousness and solipsism. In Jacobean theatre the tragic heroes were members of the royal family, or those close to the inner workings of state. In America there are no Kings or Princes: in theory, we are all masters of our individual domain. The enlightenment, participatory democracy, film, and countless other variables remodeled the circumstances and portraiture of the tragic hero, and because of this notion, Wallace portrays an America where each individual is faced with Hamlet's dilemma; desire that is destructive, constant, and content with obliterating the desiring

object. For Wallace, and perhaps for Lacan, spirituality is the only refuge from this bleak and intransigent view of the human psyche.

In the essay collection *Spiritual Shakespeares*, both Richard Kearney and Ewan Fernie devote their studies to a spiritual reading of *Hamlet*. To understand Wallace's synthesis of literature, postmodernity, and psychoanalysis, we may use these essays to inform the *Hamlet* reading of *Infinite Jest*. Kearney's essay, "Spectres of *Hamlet*," which takes its name from Jacques Derrida's seminal work *Spectres of Marx* (parts of which are also devoted to *Hamlet*), develops many of the intertextual parallels that make *Hamlet* a suitable preemptory framework for *Infinite Jest*. In light of his startling conclusions, Kearney's work is cited at length in order to establish the necessary links between *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest* which correspond to the idea that the postmodern psyche is in need of a spiritual intervention. In terms of classical literature, *Hamlet* is a supreme example of the oblique and extant ontology Wallace reproduced.

Kearney argues that *Hamlet* is, "a play about a *crisis of narrative memory* [emphasis in original]" (157). Citing psychoanalytic, existential, deconstructionist, and theological criticism, Kearney declares that, "from the very outset of the play, it would appear that religious questions of guilt, sin, repentance, redemption and the afterlife deeply inform Hamlet's dilemma" (158). Since the early language of the play reveals inconsistencies as to his appearance and identity, Kearney is unconvinced that we should take the ghost at his word. He claims that, "If we can't be sure *who* the ghost is, neither can we be sure of *what* he is trying to say" (158). Kearney goes on to cite 1.5, in which the ghost states, "But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul . . . (13-16)." Kearney

interprets this line as meaning, “the very secret the father is bidding his son to *remember* is a ‘tale’ that the father is actually *forbidden* to tell! No wonder the young Prince is going to experience- like most other characters in the play- a crisis of narrative memory” (159). Since the ghost tells Hamlet to prevent the royal bed of Denmark from being a place of incest but also tells him to leave his mother unharmed, he is faced with dual contradictions that Kearney reads as “*a tragedy of narrative memory*” (159). Kearney summarizes his argument by stating that the play “is. . . (an enacted story) about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of stories” (159). Citing Ophelia’s, Claudius’s, Gertrude’s, Polonius’s, Rosencrantz’s, Guildenstern’s, Osric’s, and of course Prince Hamlet’s stories, Kearney determines that, “this is a play where no one actually tells their story, where no one truly remembers” (160). Juxtaposing this idea with Alcoholics Anonymous where everyone shares their “experience, strength, and hope” with “rigorous honesty,” and where one’s “dark past becomes their greatest asset,” we may read *Hamlet* as the narrative framework that inhabits many of Wallace’s frequencies, in this case the need for humans to share their story with transparency and candor.

Before he delves heavily into theory, Kearney maintains that, “it is because there’s no quick solution to these interlocking puzzles that *Hamlet* the play survives to this day and Hamlet the prince is the most written about person in Western culture after Jesus and Napoleon” (161). *Hamlet* informs *IJ* for a number of reasons, mainly for its narrative mysteries and its cultural capital. The perpetuity of many of the debates in *Hamlet* is what prompted Kearney to state that, “the task of remembrance, staged here by Shakespeare, is deeply paradoxical” (160). Kearney goes on to cite Lacan who, “declares that *Hamlet* is, from first to last, a play about *mourning*. And he relates this in turn to the

fact that the play should be read, at an ontological level, as a ‘tragedy of desire’ - expressing the protagonist’s excessive sense of his ‘lack of being’” (161). According to Lacan, Hamlet’s melancholy, the ghost, and Polonius’s lack of a proper burial are representative of the uncanny inability to properly mourn, which beckons the scene in *IJ* where Hal is afraid he’ll flunk grief therapy after the suicide of his father. But *IJ* is not merely jesting about *Hamlet*; Wallace attempts to have sincere dialogue with the play to extirpate the postmodern irony surrounding it.





## CHAPTER VI

### ENDNOTE

After spending the last year gallivanting through Wallace's giant literary maze, it's fair to say that I've only scratched the surface. Critics with superior skills in textual analysis will someday uncover the precise formulae that underlie Wallace's personalized Oulipo method. It's there for the taking, but being marooned in *IJ*'s countless interconnections has left me unable to see the trees for the forest. The vast forest keeps drawing me in with her siren song. This is not a cry to give up; it's a proclamation to trudge.

By bringing the text back to a *Hamlet*-centric focus, many inconsistencies have shored up: Wallace hoped to save literature from postmodernism and he hoped to prompt the audience into self-examination. In effect, he gave his mind [and his life] to accomplish both. *Hamlet* interacts with mortality and audience perception in a way that permitted him to achieve both. Those who have not spent adequate time on the text may claim this thesis is an endless chain of improvable and unsubstantiated claims. It is to this point that I direct my final analysis of *Infinite Jest*. The crux of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous is belief in a power

greater than one's self; a notion that Wallace wrestled with personally and within the confines of the text. As Michael Pemulis tells Hal in endnote 321, "that shit's not going to work for you because you're too sharp to ever buy the God-Squad shit" (1066). *Infinite Jest*, despite the untimely demise of its author, is a compendium of the pitfalls of being "too sharp." The parody of academia in the text reflects a contemporary society that worships the mind at the expense of the spirit or soul. The fact that one cannot mention the word "soul" in an academic paper without a twinge of the scrutiny they'll receive from their readership is evidence of the conundrum Wallace depicted through Hal in the opening scene: "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything" (12). Trying to "prove" that *Hamlet* is the narratological inspiration for *Infinite Jest* makes it hard to talk about anything. Logic is only one of our faculties of reason, and it is certainly not our "PROPRIOCEPTION."

As an armchair logician, Wallace would have been aware of Bertrand Russell's famous question, "is man what he seems to the astronomer, a tiny lump of impure carbon and water crawling impotently on a small and unimportant planet? Or is he what he appears to Hamlet? Is he perhaps both at once?" (brainyquote.com). If criticism can't discuss what it means to be "a fucking human being" (McCaffery) then what good is it? That is, after all, what Wallace thought fiction was supposed to depict. *Hamlet* is the primordial dust of Western literature, the clay from which our storytelling and culture has been shaped, molded, and settled; the theoretical endgame to so many treatises of the mind, family, and human condition. Where has all this analysis landed us? What good is interpretation if it doesn't allow us to lead better lives?

The “infinite monkey theorem” states that, “a monkey hitting keys at random on a typewriter for an infinite amount of time will almost surely type a given text, such as the complete works of William Shakespeare” (Wikipedia). Wallace began typing about *Hamlet* to fight depression, and we keep typing as an act of contrition. Never beaten Dave, the beat goes on...

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