SUNY College Cortland

Digital Commons @ Cortland

Master's Theses

Theses and Final Projects

2023

Finding the Middle Zone; Redefining Spirituality Through Contemporary American Literature

Mickey McPoland

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/theses

Part of the Education Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Finding the Middle Zone; Redefining Spirituality Through Contemporary American Literature

by

Mickey McPoland

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of Arts in English

Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

COLLEGE AT CORTLAND

May 2023

Master of Arts Thesis, English Department

SUNY Cortland

Student Signature:

Thesis Title: Finding the Middle Zone; Redifining Spirituality Through Contemporary American Literature

Thesis Advisor's Signature:

MA Coordinator's Signature:

During his commencement address at Kenyon College (2005), [1]David Foster Wallace opines, “in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship” (Wallace 97-101). What Wallace is doing here is not only providing a snapshot of “adult life” for soon-to-be graduates but also providing commentary on the shift of contemporary notions of spirituality. Wallace grounds this snapshot in the term worship in order heighten the significance of daily practices which normally feel banal. By doing so, he illuminates the shift in contemporary culture away from traditional religious ideologies towards a much more complex, hyper-individualized orientation towards the world spurned by secularization. This concern regarding the secularization of society is not reserved to the literary space that Wallace once occupied, but one which has long been a pressing point of conversation for sociologists. For example, Max Weber traced the journey away from traditional religious maxims into “disenchantment” or “entzauberung” as early as The Enlightenment. Weber’s work documents the “epochal shift” of post-enlightenment society to the secularized world that Wallace’s characters inhabit. Because of this shift, these characters struggle to navigate spirituality internally and externally, which sends them in search of alternative objects for worship

In this essay, I investigate the intersection of post-postmodern literature and post-secular thought. I examine Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Crossroads* (2022) as a means to examine a religious conception of goodness and how goodness becomes rooted in what

[1] Later published as *This is Water* (2009)

we worship. I also look to *Infinite Jest* and "Good People" by David Foster Wallace. The latter illuminates the conflict between traditional forms of worship and contemporary calls to worship one's own desires, which results in stagnation, frigidity, and indecisiveness. Characters follow their internal compass, which leads them only further away from a sense of stability. Franzen's work shows what replaces traditional religious worship – specifically, the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure and immediate gratification through entertainment all under the guise of Freedom. Indeed, as Wallace's writing suggests, freedom is a term so prevalent in the American vernacular that it's become synonymous with the concept of America itself. In worshipping individual freedom, Wallace demonstrates that freedom becomes the inverse of itself, an excess that constricts one's agency.

Finally, I turn to the work of philosopher Pierre Hadot who provides the beginning of a remedy for the secular condition. Hadot urges us to turn towards the work of ancient philosophies, such as stoicism and epicureanism, in order to find guidance for "how to live." Heeding Hadot's remedy, I consider the complexity and nuance of navigating a postmodern world in which traditional religion has largely taken a backseat to the hyper-individualized subjectivity established by postmodernism. In doing so, I position my argument in relation to what literary theorist John McClure deems a "partial faith" by redefining spirituality so as to point towards a pathway for individuals to develop a more secure sense of self. Such a self, I conclude, affords a more genuine sense of true freedom.

Disenchantment, Reenchantment, and *Partial Faith*

First, it's important that we contextualize and put boundaries around the term secularization/secularism which has dominated most sociological discussions around modernity and its relationship with religion. While other sociologists like could provide commentary here, we'll turn to Max Weber for whom "modernity marks a rupture in time, an epochal shift, which crucially entails the steady demise of religion and concomitant rise of science" (Watts and Houtman 263). This "rupture in time" and "epochal shift" is encapsulated in his use of the term, "Entzauburung" or "Disenchantment" to describe the sociological state of the modern world and its orientation towards traditional religious practice—disenchantment for Weber "lay right at the heart of modernity" (Jenkins 12). By this, Weber is pointing towards rationality as the compass by which modern society now guides itself. Modernity demystifies that which previously could only be addressed by religion through empirical data, which is both quantifiable and qualifiable. Modern science makes knowable that which previously was not. According to Richard Jenkins, "In a disenchanted world everything becomes understandable and tameable, even if not, for the moment, understood and tamed" (Jenkins 13). Instead of the world being "a great enchanted garden," as it is when grounded in traditional religious ideologies, it is knowable, testable, and verifiable (Weber 270).

This shift certainly has its benefits, including more objectivity surrounding pressing social issues, verifiable objective truths, and the introduction of modern medicine and medical practices. Yet secularism leaves much to be desired on the individualistic and philosophical fronts. For Weber, if we "remain true to ourselves" it is impossible to not turn towards some guiding agent outside of science (Weber 152). This is because, science,

"while instrumentally useful as a means to achieving technical mastery or 'self-clarification', cannot inform ethical positions" (Watts and Houtman 266). In this formulation, while science can help make objective that which is capable of being objective, it struggles to encapsulate areas of subjectivity, such as ethical positions and moral stances. In these moments, Weber suggests that we will inevitably look beyond the scientific rationality that dominates modernity and turn back towards the "enchanted garden" that religion, or other philosophical traditions provide. This turn could be classified as "re-enchantment" which asserts "there are more things in the universe than are dreamed of by the rationalist epistemologies and ontologies of science" (Jenkins 14). While it would be safe to assume that modernity, with its clear entrenchment in scientific and rational value systems, would be completely divorced from the idea of "re-enchantment," Jenkins argues that this "re-enchantment" can and is already being facilitated "across a wide range of cultural and intellectual fields" through movements towards Romantic values (Jenkins 19). According to Jenkins, the same Romanticism which was a direct response to the rationalism imposed by the Enlightenment—a rationalism that can be argued as the starting point for the secularization of modern society—demonstrates a yearning for "a mythical pre-modern, un-rationalized past perfect" (Jenkins 19). This turn is one grounded not necessarily in a purely religious sense as "the secularization of 'Western civilization' seems to be well-advanced and advancing" but rather through what literary theorist John McClure considers "partial faith" (Jenkins 19).

McClure's text *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* examines the work of contemporary, postmodern authors like Thomas Pynchon,

Don DeLillo and Toni Morrison with an emphasis on the "representation of a secular minded character's partial and painful conversion toward the religious, its dramatic disruptions of secular structures of reality, its repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being, and its insistence on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects" (McClure 3). Counter to Weber's articulation of modern society as inherently secular, McClure argues that contemporary postmodern literature has a vested interest in reclaiming religious thought as a means of guidance in an increasingly complex social world. This reclamation however is not dissimilar from "re-enchantment" in that it rests on McClure's term "partial faith," a faith located within the liminal space between full-on secularization and dogmatic religious practice. Interestingly, McClure, like Weber, uses the term "disenchantment" but does so in a way that positions said "disenchantment" as a movement towards post-secularism—a return to faith—instead of a movement towards secularism—a move away from faith. McClure writes,

> Thus, while it may be accurate to speak of the project of these texts as one of reenchantment, this process also must be seen as fraught with risk and uncertainty . . . These movements . . . all reflect a strong but selective disenchantment with secular values and modes of being and a determination to invent alternatives. The novelists whose work I explore share this disenchantment and determination. (McClure 6-7)

The "disenchantment" discussed here is similar to Weber's but different in that in manifests itself not on one side or the other (secular and postsecular values) but in both. Resulting from a "similar distrust of permanent structures and fixed locations," it demystifies secular values while at the same mitigating the dogmatism of traditional

religious values that, parallel to the rise of scientific and rational thought, motivated modernity's move towards secularism (McClure 5).

McClure's argument suggests that the social world which the characters of postmodern fiction inhabit are far too complex to allow them to stand firmly on one side or the other. The result of "disenchantment" is not a complete conversion from secular values to postsecular values, but rather manifests itself in a much more nuanced, complex, and nebulous way. McClure labels them as "partial conversions," in which characters are not delivered from one stable belief and value system to another but rather, "tend to strand those who experience them in the ideological mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative, zones through which the conventional protagonist passes with all possible haste, on his way to a domain of secure religious dwelling" (McClure 4).

This "secure religious dwelling" however looks much different, and far less "secure," than your stain-glass windowed church. This "dwelling" is not just a physical structure or ideologically homogenous community but a sense of internal security and assuredness in one's core values. The interiority of this kind of dwelling reflects a postmodern sentiment in that it becomes highly subjective. It is not much at all about the world around the character, but rather a character's internal, subjective experience of that external world. By moving away from the physical dwellings offered by, say, a church, this "dwelling" becomes hyper-individualistic, using only the physical dwelling and the ideologies associated with those dwellings as a means to achieve an alternative, internal compass.

As we'll see within the fiction of Franzen and Wallace, the security of an internal dwelling is never truly reached. Instead, the "confusing middle zones" are what truly dominate the narratives of postmodernism. As McClure asserts, "the communities founded or discovered by postsecular pilgrims are dramatically small, fragile and transitory" (McClure 4). They are characteristically *insecure* and leave the characters, at least of Franzen's and Wallace's fiction, ideologically confused and abound with freedom so as to make the word freedom almost meaningless.

David Foster Wallace *Good People*: Internally Competing Value Systems

Lane A. Dean Jr. and his girlfriend Sherri are sat still atop a park bench throughout the entirety of chapter six of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King.* The chapter was originally published as an article in *The New Yorker* under the title "Good People." While this title may seem inconsequential, it is reveals Wallace's most important concern. In what could be characterized as a postmodern rewriting of Hemmingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," the young Christian couple are discussing, or rather, purposefully avoiding a discussion concerning the abortion that is scheduled for later that same afternoon. The scene is largely characterized through the frigidity or frozenness which is repeatedly mentioned at various points of importance and the clear binary which is established between Lane and Sherri, the only two characters to feature in the scene in any meaningful fashion. For Lane, "The worse he felt, the stiller he sat. The whole thing felt balanced on a knife or wire; if he moved to put his arm up or touch her the whole thing could tip over" (Wallace 39). The only character we are shown with any detail outside of the young couple is an old man, who "appeared to be looking across the lake" (Wallace

39). The narration notes that "if he moved, Lane didn't see it. He looked more like a picture than a man" (Wallace 39).

While this frigidity is meant to provide a sense of the externalized tension between the couple, it doubles as a means to express Lane's internal struggle for direction and personal truth. Lane is conflicted between his internal desire for Sherri to follow through with the operation and his external inability to express this desire because abortion directly contrasts the values which are foundational to both Lane's ontological orientation and his relationship with Sherri. These competing values are the root of Lane's frigidity. The narration consistently refers to a "tree in the shallows and its ball of exposed roots going all directions and the tree's cloud of branch all half in the water" (Wallace 38). Later, Lane is "looking past her at the tree in the water" (Wallace 42). This image can simply be reduced to the thousand-mile stare customary to a difficult conversation, but it appears more significant. The tree and it's gnarled, frantically growing branches seem to mirror Lane's internal conflict, his lack of direction and conviction. and while Lane often attempts to reassure Sherri, telling her that "he knew if he was the salesman of it and forced it upon her that was awful and wrong" and "That if they needed to pray on it more and talk it through, why then he was here, he was ready" Lane's not looking at Sherri directly but rather looking off into the water behind her makes this consolation not necessarily superficial but certainly secondary to Lane's internal conflict (Wallace 41).

The real concern here is not making Sherri feel comfortable for her own sake, but making her feel comfortable in making the decision that Lane so clearly wants her to make. He even says, "the appointment could be moved back; if she just said the word they could call and push it back to take more time to be sure in the decision" (Wallace 41).

Here, it's not a consideration of whether the decision should or should not be made but rather having the time to feel comfortable in making the decision that Lane wants them to make. Lane recognizes this, creating the internal struggle that leaves him so frigid, this conflict between the Christian values represented though his relationship with Sherri and the self-serving values which Lane clearly holds as more important.

These values are self-serving in that they are only focused on what Lane wants out of the situation without any emphasis on Sherri's desires or values. The frigidity that characterizes this scene emphasizes this fact by stagnating the relationship between the two, removing any real dialogue between them in the immediate action and making them appear as strangers. This only serves to exaggerate the rift which has been created between Lane and the traditional Christian values that are depicted within the narrative. While traditional Christian values would generally emphasize diverting one's own desires so as to accommodate someone else's—being *serving* not *self-serving*—even if that someone is a complete stranger, Lane can't even do so with someone who he has a preexisting, serious relationship. According to the depiction of Christianity that is established here, Lane is a "bad" Christian and subsequently "bad" people. Focalizing Lane throughout the narrative allows for this relationship to manifest but also to highlight Sherri's "good" Christian values. While it may be difficult to make this assumption, Sherri's lack of any focalization points to her being *serving*, not *self-serving*. While both are positioned identically within the physical setting of the story—both stagnant and unmoving—it is only Lane's values that we are given directly while Sherri appears as a distant listener, not asserting her own values into the situation and allowing Lane to express his. To reverse the formula, which was mentioned earlier, Sherri's avoidance of

inserting her values—being *serving* instead of *self-serving*—positions her as a "good" Christian and subsequently "good" people.

This binary continues to be established between Lane and Sherri throughout the narrative, emphasizing both Sherri's "goodness" and Lane's "badness." While Lane is characterized through his indecision and conflicting desires, Sherri is considered "*down to earth*" and "good people" and is "someone you could trust and deeply care about even if you weren't in love" (Wallace 39). Her being a good person is conflated with her being "serious in her faith and values in a way that Lane had liked" and the fact that "she *knew what it was she wanted*" (Wallace 40). Lane on the other hand is entirely unsure of what he wants, not in the immediate situation but at the macro-level of his values—"He was starting to believe he might not be serious in his faith" and has been struggling to even discuss certain issues he is having during prayer. In this, we see Lane growing away from his faith in that his relationship with God is one which isn't as trusting as Lane believes that it should be for him to be considered "good people." Lane is struggling with his true desires and his desperation "to be good people, to still be able to feel he was good" (Wallace 41).

In this moment, we see the previous conversation of internal and external dwelling return, and we see the two compete with one another. Lane's understanding of what it means to be good is reflective of an external dwelling—the church and the ideologies which it espouses—but that external dwelling is having a clear effect on his internal security in that the ideologies imposed on him by the external dwelling are making him "feel"—internal—no "good." Rather, it is that external dwelling that inherently motivates Lane's internal compass. How can Lane be a good person when his desires so directly

conflict with the core religious principles that traditionally have been the characteristics and values which define a good person? Lane describes this feeling as his personal understanding of what hell is:

> It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent. There would be no victor. Or never a battle—the armies would stay like that, motionless, looking across at each other and seeing therein something so different and alien from themselves that they could not understand, they could not hear each other's speech as even words or read anything from what their faces looked like, frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. (Wallace 43)

It is only during what could be considered the resolution of the conflict that Lane comes to terms with his position. It seems to be the only moment where Lane initially seems sure of himself and his faith and his relationship with Sherri, but in actuality Lane ends this moment just as unsure of himself as he begins it.

On first glance, it seems as if the couple become unfrozen and begin to say what they've wanted to all along, but this is only a projection of what Lane *wants* to happen. Additionally, all the action which contributes to the resolution is performed by a projection of Sherri that Lane is imagining/seeing. After Lane deduces that the frozenness he's been experiencing is actually him being lost in prayer, he is "made therein to know what would occur here"—the emphasis here is on the word would (Wallace 44). The narration continues: "This down to earth girl who smelled good and wanted to be nurse would take and hold one of his hands . . . and she would say she cannot do this." This projection results in Lane being relieved of all responsibility in the matter and confirming

his desires in a way which, through Lane not having to say anything to Sherri, maintains the possibility in his own mind that he is still a good person. This *perfect* resolution comes not through Lane the "*moment of grace*" which he claims to have had, but through Sherri and her being "good people," being aware of "*what is was she wanted.*" Lane is only using this projection as a means to justify the conflicting values which interrupt his characters self of self, not actually coming to terms with them. The final moment of the text leaves both us as readers and Lane with, quite literally, more questions than answers, "why is he so sure he doesn't love her? Why is on kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do? . . . What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it and trust his heart?" (Wallace 45).

Ending the story on a list of questions seems to be a reflection of Wallace's orientation towards postmodern or contemporary spirituality. Like McClure suggests, Wallace views postmodern spirituality as insecure, complicated and partial. The conflict between traditional religious sentiments—one's which are largely housed within an external dwelling, and therefore objective—and the contemporary calls for individualism and subjectivity leave Lane in a flurry of confusion. Beyond just the questions to end the story, the aforementioned sense of frigidity that characterizes the story reflects a similar sentiment. Lane is both frozen internally as expressed earlier, but additionally, frozen externally. The lack of movement throughout the scene makes it feel as if Lane is entirely alone and isolated, highlighting the subjective and individualized experience of Wallace's understanding of contemporary spirituality. Lane's experience is hyper-individualized, he is—though surrounded by external factors—entirely alone in this moment.

Jonathan Franzen's *Crossroads*: Defining Goodness

Jonathan Franzen's most recent novel *Crossroads* deals quite intimately with an American cultural shift away from traditional religious practices through its documentation of the Hildebrandt's. The novel doesn't sway too far away from a typical Franzen novel—a midwestern family with conflicting value systems that seems to be balancing on a knife edge waiting for one fatal blow that seems to be always looming in the periphery. In the Hildebrandt's case, the conflict surrounds Reverend Russel Hildebrandt, the father of the family and co-leader of a youth church group which shares its name with the novels title. The group, "Crossroads," is focused on reinvigorating religious spirit within young teens during a time of American political and cultural unrest that has seemingly led them away from traditional ideologies and values. Russ' participation in the group was initially positive but upon the introduction of Reverend Rick Ambrose—a younger, less traditional leader whose values seems to lie between the traditional religious values that Russ abides by and the cultural values that "Crossroads" is trying to lead its member away from—Russ' popularity with the group goes drastically down to his own disgruntlement. As Ambrose gains traction, the group gets more and more popular but begins to shift away from the traditional religious pedagogical approach that was initially the group's foundation. This leads to Russ eventually being kicked out of the group after a climactic blow-up when some of the group's members not-so-politely voiced their grievances about Russ' approach and the religious values which underpinned them.

Caught in the middle is Russ' family. Of particular interest is Perry, Russell's high school age savant-like son, whose values clearly contrast with his father's. Perry's reasons for joining "Crossroads" are certainly questionable, but this inherent concern with locating the motivation for goodness, or for being a better person is central to Perry's character. It comes into full fruition during an annual parsonage Christmas party when Perry, going in place of his father, begins asking these same questions that he often asks himself to a Reverend and Rabbi who are attending the party. This chapter opens with a monologue focalized through Perry that gets to the heart of this issue and clearly displays the purpose of the coming pages:

> *Let's begin by positing that the essence of goodness is unselfishness: loving others as one loves oneself, performing costly acts of charity, denying oneself pleasures that harm others, and so forth. And then let's imagine an act of spontaneous kindness to a previously hostile party . . . If the actor lacks intelligence, we need inquire no further: this person is good. But suppose that the actor is helpless not to calculate the ancillary selfish advantages accruing from his charitable act. Suppose that his mind works so quickly that, even as he's performing the act, he's fully aware of these advantages. Is his goodness not thereby fully compromised? Can we designate as "good" an act that he might also have performed through the sheerly selfish calculations of his intellect?* (Franzen 243 original emphasis)

Perry's orientation towards the relationship of goodness and intelligence plays a key role in the above logical formulation, but it seems more to serve as a means to confirm his vanity; Perry is the "actor" in the scene. But what is more important is the concern expressed around the subconscious motivations behind an act of goodness, whether that

motivation is always present, and whether it compromises the value of an act of goodness. This formulation relies on a particular definition of goodness, one which aligns itself relatively closely with religious—specifically Christian—formulation of goodness: selflessness, charity and asceticism. When Perry eventually asks both the Rabbi and Reverend the questions stated above, he receives a response that "there is really one measure of righteousness: Do you celebrate God and obey His commandments?" (Franzen 253). Additionally, the reverend claims that, "In Christian faith, only one man has ever exemplified perfect goodness, and he was the Son of God. The rest of us can hope for glimmers of what it's like to be truly good" (Franzen 254). The reverend's claim suggest a religious ideological understanding of goodness which claims that goodness is found through both a worshipping relationship with God and a reflection of God within yourself—how close are you to God in worship and in image? For a religious person, this is an astute metric as—though someone's individual interpretation of what God is, or what Godliness looks like—it provides a clear-cut image or language to judge one's own goodness. However, there is emphasis placed on how we are only able to see "glimmers" of that goodness in their own life since no one could obtain the perfection that God represents. As Reverend Walsh states,

> The reason why we need faith—in our case, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—is that it gives us a rock-solid basis for evaluating our actions. Only through faith in the perfection of our Savior, only by comparing our actions to his example . . . can we hope to be forgiven for the more selfish thoughts we have. (Franzen 255)

Without faith, according to Reverend Walsh, we are left to fend in an ideological middle ground, being pulled towards not a secure sense of self-guided by firm imperatives, but

rather pulled between moments of our own subjectivity Wallace highlighted in *Good People*.

For Perry, this conversation—like the consideration of intelligence in relationship with one's ability to be good—was very much about his own vanity: "Perry was enjoying his ability to converse on the level of men three times his age, enjoying how well he'd calibrated his alcohol intake, enjoying the easy but unslurred flow of his words" (Franzen 255). If were to zoom out and assess the answer that he was receiving, however, he probably wouldn't find it very helpful. Perry, like many of his compatriots in Crossroads, represent a shift in the cultural attitude towards establishment in American youth. In this contemporary moment, an answer embedded in traditional religious approaches of goodness is no longer very useful.

This definition, or form of evaluation, relied on a level of devoutness that was slowly trending its way out of the culture. For Crossroads specifically, the religiosity of the group was purely to form communal bonds between its members—bonds which were initially founded upon religious ideologies and reflections of God/Jesus' image, but which soon grew beyond or away from the image of worship that both the Rabbi and Reverend paint above. When, after a mission trip, Russ starts the groups meeting with a prayer, Sally Perkins—a member of Crossroads—explodes out of her seat and says, "No! . . . I'm sorry, but no. I'm sick of his stupid prayers . . . Is anyone else here as sick of them as I am" (Franzen 113). Many others within the group confirm these feelings resulting not only in Russ', the man who appears to be most traditional in his religious convictions, expulsion from the group but animosity towards Ambrose who tries to defend him. Portions of the group claim that if Russ were not sent out of the group, then they

themselves would leave instead claiming, "I have no interest in a relationship with you [Russ]" (Franzen 114). While this claim from Laura Dobrinsky, a popular member of the Crossroads group, can be reduced to simple animosity towards Russ, given that Russ is the symbol of the traditional religious ideology which initially provided the foundation for Crossroads, a disinterest in a relationship with Russ becomes a disinterest in those ideologies as well. This is a movement away from the traditional goodness which was conceptualized in Perry's conversation at the Christmas party. In this moment, we see a disenchantment. This particular form seems to exist somewhere between Weber and McClure's conception in that it is at once a movement away from traditional religious ideology but towards the insecure dwelling expressed in McClure. The positioning of this ideology is important because it reflects both the subjectivity of postmodernism while also allowing for an ideological objectivity that grants stability, however that stability here seems misguided. The group is moving from the traditional, objective dwelling that the sermons spoken by Russ provide, towards a radically new, more subjective conception of what worship *can* look like. It is not a group adhering to a dogmatic set of expressions but rather a set of values composed by the hodgepodge group themselves.

This initially appears as a positive moment in which the group is achieving a sense of agency surrounding their practices of worship, however the instability and dynamism of that worship creates a dwelling which is antithetical to its original purpose. The group, which was initially established on values of inclusion and acceptance is, through their newfound sense of "partial faith," doing just the opposite. The subjectivity expressed within this moment causes friction and instability within the group which, according to Reverend Walsh, leaves them "lost in a sea of second-guessing motives" (Franzen 255).

The image of a sea here is apt not only because it implies a sense of directionless-ness and lack of control, but it furthermore alludes to the vastness presented by the complex postmodern world that these characters inhabit.

David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Freedom

Between the two narratives discussed thus far we can see the complications which arise in a world in which, to return to the Wallace's opening speech, we as individuals are tasked with determining "what to worship." According to Wallace, people like Perry or the members of Crossroads who are absent of traditional forms of worship don't simply *not worship*. Instead, their worship is refracted through the filter of their own lives and culture in a way that seems to allow them to dictate "… what has meaning and what doesn't" (Wallace). A cursory interpretation would suggest that form of worship has only positive outcomes since it denotes a sense of agency surrounding our practices of worship, but a quick survey of Wallace's fiction would suggest otherwise and that instead we can become "birds who've come to like their cage" (Wallace). Wallace's use of "worship" here is important because it firstly grounds his language in understandably religious terms, but it also externalizes the practice. Worship is something which is inherently external in that it is a practice meant to be done onto something else. However, as we'll see throughout Wallace's fiction, when this worship becomes inverted in that it becomes self-serving instead of externalized, something which is meant to be productive and beneficial instead becomes dangerous and destructive.

The harsh reality is that we are far more susceptible to social and cultural messages than we may recognize, and that those social and cultural messages have supreme control over our *decision* of what to worship. The American ethos historically, but more dramatically from the latter end of the 20th century to present, is one that praises capitalism, consumerism, and most importantly the pursuit of pleasure. These are all promulgated under the guise of "Freedom," a word so central to the American vernacular that it has become almost banal. The term has now transcended its original political intention to come to mean essentially that you can do whatever you'd like and that you can consume—actual material or entertainment—to your heart's content. In fact, this consumeristic relationship is not only possible, but encouraged—consumption is a core component of being a good citizen in a capitalistic economy. This orientation towards freedom and consumption is one that becomes an addiction like any other. It leaves us always wanting more, always waiting for the next best available option which years, months, even days down the line will no longer hold value, be obsolete, be yesterday's news. It can be seen in our relationship with technology, in the endless scrolling that characterizes a significant portion of many people's time, leaving them in a near catatonic state while the world is moving around them.

Pleasure and desire have long been touching points of conversation for scholars concerned with Wallace's work. For instance, Wan examines how that desire is mapped onto and performed through the body of the characters, redefining "insatiable" corporeal desire as an addiction like any other. Similarly, Holl examines the narrative structure of the text, suggesting that its complexity turns the text into a sort of game and thus satisfies a different kind of desire for readers. While my analysis deals intimately with the desire

expressed within Wallace's work, it does so by looking at how that desire is an expression of and commentary on contemporary notions of spirituality. Wallace's mega-novel *Infinite Jest* deals quite closely with the above point. The novel centralizes itself around a particular "TP viewer cartridge"—effectively a DVD—which shares its name with the novels title and which, when viewed, has a medusa-esque effect on its viewer. This film becomes the terroristic weapon of a Canadian separatist group and is disseminated at random throughout O.N.A.N., a new nation composed of parts of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. When viewed, the viewer is so overcome with the entertainment that they quite literally cannot pull themselves away from it, sitting or standing in catatonic bliss until they eventually die. When left alone at home, a medical attaché to the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment he finds an unlabeled cartridge on a sideboard in his living room. This unlabeled cartridge is a copy of "Infinite Jest" and after placing it in his cartridge viewer leaves not only the attaché is a state of catatonia, but also,

> his devout wife; the Saudi Prince Q-----'s personal physician's personal assistant . . . the personal physician himself . . . two Embassy security guards w/ sidearms . . . and the two neatly groomed Seventh Day Adventist pamphleteers who'd seen human heads through the living room window and found the door unlocked and come in with all good spiritual intentions. (Wallace 87)

This instance appears to be the first of the attacks by one of the Quebecois separatist groups represented by Remy Marathe whose dialogue with Hugh Steeply, an O.U.S. operative tasked with finding some sort of solution to the dissemination of the terroristic film, that unfolds over a large portion of the novel in individual chunks reveals

much of the underlying political motivations and tactical strategy behind the film's dissemination. When questioned about the intentions of the cartridge Marathe states,

> Look: the facts of the situation speak loudly. What is known. This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for appeal of it: this also is U.S.A. The U.S.A. drive for spectation, which your culture teaches . . . now is what has happened when a people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die—and let its children die, each one—for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving: Hugh Steeply, in complete seriousness as a citizen of your neighbor I say to you: forget for a moment the entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible enough for your Office to fear: can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? To survive as a nation of peoples? (Wallace 318)

The use of the word "appetite" to define the appeal of the cartridge is important as it draws a parallel between the consumerism that enables the cartridge to exist and consumerism's most basic and natural appeal. It conflates the two and makes the former just as natural and necessary as the need to feed ourselves. This language continues throughout through the image of being fed the entertainment with "spoons" and feeding our children the same entertainment. For Marathe, "The U.S.A." becomes a people whose need for entertainment is just as important to them, if not more important, than their needs for basic survival—in fact it is so strong that in this specific instance, it directly overrides

the need to survive, “this appetite to choose death” (Wallace 319). In this instance, “Freedom” or “choice” becomes its inverse.

The ability to choose is stripped away by something which *should* be a *choice* but has become an appetite just as necessary to us as our need to eat. For Marathe, “This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose—this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death” (Wallace 319). These appetites, this worship of personal freedom, pleasure, and desire, leave people unable to truly *choose* but rather only to follow their immediate intuition, to satiate their immediate desires. This approach to worship, for Marathe, replaces traditional forms of guidance, drawing a direct relation between this contemporary form of worship and forms of worship of the past:

> Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter. And no map for finding the shelter of a temple. And you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of permissions. The without-end pursuit of happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible. (Wallace 319-310)

Without the central figure of the temple—traditional religious ideology for our purposes here—people are left to their own devices, following their own compass which points them not in the right direction but towards that which is most gratifying. Ingrained within this logic is a desire for a sense of immediacy and a thought process which is very much focused on the current moment, removing the future implications or consequences for such a decision. What is important for the viewers of the TP cartridge, “Infinite Jest,” is simply the immediate experience of its pleasures without any projection as to what the future consequences are.

Freedom, the guiding compass in these decisions Marathe alludes to, is not only a poor evaluative tool for decision making, but again, becomes its inverse. The Freedom to *choose* immediate gratification removes the Freedom to make future choices. Marathe states, "'Freedom! Freedom!' as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean, this word . . . Your freedom is the freedom-*from*: no one tells your precious individual U.S.A. selves what they must do. It is this meaning only, this freedom from constraint and forced duress" (Wallace 320). Freedom here does not boil down to something which is inherently positive as our cultural and political language always frames it to be, but rather something which is in place merely to avoid the negative, to avoid constraint.

With this definition in place, we're subject to no one or nothing but our own desires. However, this individualistic outlook becomes a hinderance as Marathe questions, "How to choose any but a child's greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose? How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose" (Wallace 320). The choice of the term "father" here, while containing patriarchal undertones, continues the conversation/thought process in religious terms. There are striking similarities being drawn between Marathe's speech here and the speech of Reverend Walsh in the discussion of *Crossroads*. Like Marathe's claim that without a guiding "father" we "stumble in the dark", Walsh claims "Without him [Jesus/God], we're lost in the sea of second-guessing motives" (Franzen 255). For both, our internal compass that allows us to make or not make decisions is not strong enough or faithful enough to guide us in the right direction, and without a centralizing figure, the "father" or "him", we become directionless. Without this figure we turn to what is most immediately gratifying, what most immediately addresses the issue that we're facing or

provides and answer to the question we're asking. Without this figure we're relegated to children says Marathe, "children, not human adults like the noble Quebecers, we are children, bullies but still children inside, and will kill ourselves for you if you put the candy within the arms' reach" (Wallace 321).

Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, Religion without Religion

To remedy this fact, we can turn to the work of Pierre Hadot, a philosopher keenly interested in the shifts in the modern orientation towards religion, who suggests that by orienting our lives around philosophy, specifically particular ancient philosophies like stoicism and epicureanism, in place of religion, we can reap the benefits of the guidance it provides while avoiding the dogmatism that is so closely associated with traditional religious practices. In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Hadot asserts that philosophy and theology are actually not as far apart as we may assume. In fact, that the "spiritual exercises" that we associate with religion are just as philosophical as they are theological. He writes, "many a philosophical demonstration derives its evidence force not so much from abstract reasoning as from an experience which is at the same time a spiritual exercise" (Hadot 107). It's actually not until the Middle Ages, when philosophy was considered "a purely abstract-theoretical activity", that a firm line is drawn between the two. Hadot reasons that philosophical ideologies dating back to antiquity, like theology, served not simply as methods through which to articulate abstract thought and theory. They were also "a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way" (Hadot 107). While it would be ignorant to say that certain philosophical frameworks are completely void of dogmatism, the distance that

has been drawn between philosophy and theology culturally enables us to participate in restorative spiritual exercises without them feeling traditionally dogmatic.

To combat the hedonistic values espoused in the latter portion of the discussion of Wallace, Hadot argues that “In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions” (Hadot 83). The role of philosophy here is not dissimilar to the role of religion in many circumstances. Philosophy allows the individual to avoid the temptations of the self, the passions, the pleasures. This is not to suggest that pleasure and passion are inherently bad, but rather that it is most important to focus on the pleasures which are “natural and necessary”. In considering the spiritual exercises of Epicureanism, a philosophy often considered a philosophy of pleasure, Hadot recognizes the inherent paradox and states that, like for Stoicism, “By ignoring unnatural and unnecessary desires, we can return to our original nucleus of freedom and independence, which may be defined by the satisfaction of natural and necessary desires” (Hadot 103).

In recognizing this, philosophy itself becomes a spiritual exercise for Hadot. The nature of that spiritual exercise is to move beyond the self and the passions associated with it so as to practice “how to ‘live’” and “recognize ourselves as a part of the reason-animated *cosmos*” (Hadot 86). This applies to the previous readings as a means to escape the hedonistic value systems that proliferate when traditional religious practices are no longer in view. This isn’t to suggest that religious values are inherently correct but rather to state that having some sort of outside force, some sense of ideological guidance would

benefit those navigating their independent narratives. While the use of the term "spiritual" may superimpose religious connotations onto these practices/exercises, Hadot claims that the use of this word is imperative in that it,

> reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he replaces himself within the perspective of the whole . . . rais[ing] the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom. (Hadot 97 and 83)

Additionally, by using the word spiritual, it is recognizing any act as a potentially spiritual act, not simply acts which align with traditional religious definitions of spirituality. This offers the ability to view these acts within a different context, providing them a level of importance which otherwise would be ignored and subsequently allowing the individual to evaluate those acts with more depth. In this, Hadot echoes Wallace claim that, "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships" in that it recognizes that which conventionally would not be considered spiritual or capable of being worshiped as exactly that. Both seem to suggest that a shift in orientation towards our definitions of words like "spiritual," "worship," or "religion" alone can have a drastic impact on our approach towards not only those acts but our entire ontological worldview. It allows us to achieve a proximity towards and intimacy with our decisions that wouldn't otherwise be available.

Conclusion

Both Wallace and Franzen provide striking insight into the difficulties of navigating a world that seems to be between post-secular and secular thought. This insight is not limited to these two authors and is in fact a sweeping on concern of contemporary or postmodern authors. While Franzen's *Crossroads* offers a more direct avenue through which to investigate this issue—being that the primary narrative runs through a church group—Wallace's attention to specifically American relationships with entertainment and consumption reveals a unique caveat. Wallace takes the concerns expressed within Franzen and interpolates them through the hyper-individualistic call of American culture revealing a form of worship that is highly internal and subjective—a worship of the self and the pursuit of one's own pleasure beyond a reasonable degree.

Hadot's theory of philosophy as a "way of life" and "spiritual exercise" appears to provide a remedy to these concerns—one not dissimilar to McClure's suggestion of "partial faith". Philosophy exists as a middle-ground between the dogmatic ideologies of traditional religious practices and disenchanted secularism and can make that "middle zone" far less difficult to navigate. Hadot begins to provide some sense of a way to move beyond the troubles presented within the individual narratives. His "spiritual exercises" begin to remedy both the ideological frigidity and hedonistic pleasure seeking within Wallace's narratives by presenting an outside alternative. Spiritual exercises offer an escape from the self so as to reclaim the sense of freedom that the characters are so emphatically searching for.

Let me emphasize here that the purpose of my argument is not to proselytize, nor is it to say that people must reject any form of pleasure within their lives. Rather, I want to

argue for the freedom to pursue a more analytical relationship with our pleasures. Wallace, Franzen, and Hadot redefine these pleasures as not merely habits or hobbies but as forms of spirituality and worship. In a culture dominated by screens and blue light, these concerns are perhaps more pressing than they've ever been. The availability of superficial pleasures has never been greater. By recognizing this and actively trying to seek a middle-ground between the dogmatism expressed by religion and the hedonism which Wallace critiques, we can establish forms of worship and spirituality that provide stability in an ever-complex, post-modern world.

Works Cited

Franzen, Jonathan. *Crossroads: A Novel*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021

Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999.

Holl, Rainer. *The Narrative Game the Reading of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest as Play*. Anchor Academic Pub., 2013.

Jenkins, Richard. "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium." *Max Weber Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 11–32. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24579711.

McClure, John A. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest : a Novel*. Back Bay 10th anniversary pbk. ed., Back Bay Books, 2006.

Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King : an Unfinished Novel*. 1st ed., Little, Brown and Co., 2011.

Wallace, David Foster. *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life.* Little, Brown and Co., 2009.

Wan, Xiaomeng. "Corporeal Narrative of Insatiable Desire in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2022, pp. 193–206, https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2021-0011.

Watts, Galen, and Dick Houtman. "The Spiritual Turn and the Disenchantment of the World: Max Weber, Peter Berger and the Religion–science Conflict." *The Sociological Review (Keele)*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2023, pp. 261–79, https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221096387.

Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*. 4th ed., Beacon Press, 1963