

Civilized Music: Postsecularism and the Humoured Body in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*,  
Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the way in which the representation of laughter, or the represented experience of humour, is postsecular in the contemporary American fiction of Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Don DeLillo. Laughter dramatizes a paradoxical desire for control that is prayer-like in Pynchon's *Vineland*. In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, the humoured body signifies the transcendence of the self out of solipsistic imprisonment. And finally, Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, describes laughter as wondrous, powerful, and numinous experience, and the humoured body forges a connection between human beings. Ultimately, the literary analysis attempts to validate the philosophical axioms that the human need for humour is religious and that the topic of humour ought to be included in the discourse of postsecularism.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Per his famous dictum, “[a]gainst the assault of laughter, nothing can stand” (*A Mysterious Stranger* 166), Mark Twain saw humour as a weapon against the tyrannies of racism, sexism, imperialism, and religious fundamentalism in his time (Phipps 364-365). Twain was troubled by the confliction he experienced between his disdain for the faults of institutional religion (corruption, dogmatism, exclusivity) and his spiritual proclivities. Even his self-proclaimed atheism is widely debated due to his extensive writings on theology. William E. Phipps writes, in his book, *Mark Twain’s Religion*, that Twain recognized a potential for religion to expand beyond the narrow scope of what it was in his day (3), and that he certainly was religious if we define the word broadly enough (Moss 27). But while Christianity often disappointed him spiritually, his faith in humour never faltered. In fact, humour became a kind of religion to Twain, and it has been said that he could “never quite decide whether laughter was divine or merely human” (Gibson 26).

I introduce this thesis with Twain, whom some consider to be America’s greatest literary comedian, because I believe his ideas were vastly ahead of his time. His thoughts on laughter’s ontological obscurity are significant when considered in the present-day theo-historical context. According to scholars of what is being called “Post-secularism,” our existence in an increasingly secular world, wherein we are critical of religious hegemony, has caused us to, like Twain, search for a spirituality that is not dogmatic, corrupt, or exclusive yet allows for belief in “enchantment”, to use Max Weber’s famous term. This movement has been very loosely defined as “a reawakened interest in the role of religion in world society and politics” (Huggan 753). “The postsecular condition” is

one that wants to incorporate the wonder of religious belief into the reason of secular humanism; it searches, if you will, for a cosmology of enchanted reason. And though Twain never overtly professed the capacity for humour to be taken as a religion due to the rigidity of the socio-political structures at play during his time, the openness of the postsecular period allows it to embrace a theology of humour.

Thus, in continuation of the ideas put forth by Twain, this thesis proposes an examination of humour as a theological answer to the discomfort of our times. It will look to some of Twain's contemporary successors, namely David Foster Wallace, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo, whose books have been called postsecular, theologically experimental, and most importantly, humorous, and it will examine the modes in which humour is used as a tool of navigation through the murkiness of postsecularity. Postsecular fiction can be loosely defined as a body of literature that explores religious tropes, forms of enchantment, or sacredness within a secular framework. My thesis is an exploration of how this manifests itself in the novels of writers who are attempting to experiment theologically and are using humour as an important fictional element within the narrative. These novels suggest that for Wallace, DeLillo, and Pynchon, humour is integral (and, at times, tantamount) to postsecular theosophy.

Although I have chosen these writers because of their reputations as literary comedians, my aim is not to inspect why the writing in their novels is funny, nor is it to interpret a potential reader's laughter. My focus is instead on the representation of humour in these novels, or instances of characters laughing. My study centers on "the

humoured body,” a term borrowed from Dianna Niebylski,<sup>1</sup> as a signifier of the dramatized experience of humour. The representation of the humoured body in each novel is postsecular in different ways. I will not be focusing on what makes characters laugh or why they laugh, but how this laughter is treated as a religious narrative event. Specifically, I argue that in Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* scenes of laughter dramatize postsecular themes in a manner that implicates a new definition, or location, of ‘the sacred’. Put differently, the humoured body in these novels accesses the realm of the sacred; the humoured body enchants the world.

This idea is echoed in title of my study, which is a quote from well-loved English comedian Peter Ustinov, who famously stated that laughter is “civilized music”. I have appropriated this epithet for the purpose of highlighting the idea that laughter is inherently sacred in a postsecular sense, insofar as it is ontologically oxymoronic (something that is both magical yet reasonable), in the same way that this negotiation between reason and enchantment is what the discourse hopes to resolve.

It is fitting that such a disquisition take place within the field of literary studies because, as scholars of postsecular fiction like Kathryn Ludwig and John McClure assert, literature is the ideal space where the conundrums and negotiations of postsecularism can be worked out. This is perhaps because of the ontological and epistemological openness of fiction, which allows it to accommodate a renegotiation of otherwise fixed terms like ‘secular’ and ‘religious’. As McClure points out, we have seen this type of thinking as far

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<sup>1</sup> Niebylski uses this term in her exploration of laughter’s political and revolutionary qualities in feminist Latin American fiction. Her essay is called “Humouring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women’s Fiction.”

back as the Romantics, and in American history, the Transcendentalists and Modernists explored similar themes as well (3). Yet American writers like Tony Kushner, Leslie Marmon Silko, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Tony Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara (and even some Canadian authors like Michael Ondaatje) are writing fiction that is deeply concerned with the resurgence of religious ideology into a bored secular world. Both Ludwig and McClure, whose studies consider DeLillo's and Pynchon's fiction among other contemporary American writers, note that, although postsecular works can range from "cautious probing" (3) to "dramatic" "conversions" or "ontological openings" (4), frequently there is no attempt from the author to create a clear and utopian resolution of theological dissonance. Instead, many of these writers are treating their works as experiments in thought or belief. The novels in this study are no exception, though some, as we will see, seem more certain than others in their theosophy.

My methodology is foregrounded by the popular critical opinion that the birthplace and breeding grounds of postsecularism has been, and is, in fiction. If literature is the place wherein the postsecular can be figured out, then, by this logic, literary comedy is the place wherein an investigation into the postsecularity of humour is best undertaken as well. Wallace, DeLillo, and Pynchon are all novelists whose senses of humour saturate their tones and guide their styles. As literary comedians, humour is a part of their project, and their books have been called funny. But, as I stated earlier, the focus of this study assumes that the ultimate objectives are not simply to make their reader laugh, but to offer the reader a set of considerations for the postsecular mindscape. It is for this reason, my study undertakes, that humour affects their characters so strongly and so pervasively. These novelists are dramatizing the postsecularity of humour through the

bodies of their characters, and by executing this project through representation, these writers can better control the religious subtext behind these scenes. The manner in which scenes of laughter are treated in these books suggests that the consideration of humour is important in these writers' explorations and visualizations of a postsecular America.

In the next two sections, I will give a brief introduction to the theoretical bodies-- theological humour theory and postsecular theory-- that formulate the nexus with which I will be dealing in the novels.

### **1.1 Postsecularism and Contemporary American Fiction**

The difficulty in defining "postsecularism", a term first mentioned by Charles Taylor in his 2007 theoretic tome, *A Secular Age*, in reference to "a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged" (534), lies, of course, in its prefix. In his 2010 essay, "Is the 'Post' in 'Postsecular' the 'Post' in 'Postcolonial'?" Graham Huggan borrows Anthony Appiah's ideological framework to express how the 'post' here may not necessarily be a temporal signifier, but perhaps, might instead be, in Appiah's words, "a space clearing gesture" which "signals a challenge to the root word" while remaining "inextricably linked to it" (Huggan 755). In other words, the movement in thinking may not necessarily be temporally 'after secularism,' but instead calls for an interrogation of secularism. Regardless of whether there was or was not a time when Western society was purely secular, critics feel that the contemporary mindscape senses a dissatisfaction with both secular humanism and religious dogmatism, and, therefore, wants merely to have the space to imagine a tertiary theology wherein the positives of both might be extracted,

negotiated, and combined.

According to what has been called the “Secularization Thesis”, many scholars believe that modernity is a secular trajectory whose imperative for rationality makes us skeptical and intolerant of the dogmatism and fideism that characterizes traditional religion. But one such theologian, Peter Berger, who claimed that “modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals” (2), retracted his prediction in 1999 in his book *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, by stating that “‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” and that the world “is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (2). Critics are finding that Western society seems to need some kind of combination of epistemological fideism and rationalism, cosmological humanism and enchantment.

The ostensible incompatibility of these two cosmologies, as Craig Calhoun sees it, is a construct of the tendency to conceptualize “religion as a presence and secularism as its absence” (80). Alternatively, he stresses the importance of our duty to recall that “secularisms are themselves intellectual and ideological constructs” (80). The composition of these constructs today is being affected by the contemporary scholastic effort to blur lines that distinguish secularism from religion. Scholars are pushing for an understanding of the two parties of this ‘dialectic’ that acknowledges their mutual construction, their similarities, and the possibility for the incorporation of one into the other.

This project is, as John McClure argues, readable in a lot of contemporary fiction (including those novels to be examined in this study). McClure asserts that we can call

this emerging body of contemporary fiction in America “postsecular”

because the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically “weakened” religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects. (3)

In *Underworld*, *Vineland*, and *Infinite Jest*, manifestations of these kinds present themselves, but, given the nebulous and undeveloped nature of this discourse, these are certainly not the only postsecular narratives (in the novels or otherwise). The concern on which this thesis focuses is the notion of ‘the sacred’ and its postsecular transmutations. I use this term, as it is used in postsecular discourse currently, to demarcate that which is associated with enchantment, holiness, and the numinous. Even though the meaning behind this term remains constant-- it denotes that which is spiritual or ontologically ‘separate’ in some way-- each novel reinvents this term for itself based on the aspects of religion that its characters still need in a secular world.

In the following section I have categorized contemporary theologies of humour into five subsections of such religious aspects. In other words, I explain how humour theoretically fulfills the roles of religion that a postsecular theology might retain. The theory introduced here will then be used to explicate the way in which each novel treats laughter for their respective postsecular projects.

## **1.2 Humour and Postsecularism**

The connection between postsecularism and humour might, at first glance, seem eccentric. Granted, no scholars to date have considered the role of the representation of laughter in these novels, and only one has considered, more theoretically, the role of the comic in postsecular theory. This lacuna is likely a consequence of the popular misconception articulated succinctly by Milan Kundera in 1993: “religion and humour are incompatible” (9). But the popular sentiment underlying this statement, that the comic is profane and therefore adversarial to the sacred, is a Western prejudice that began, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, at the turn of the seventeenth century. Before this, many cultures believed in the spiritual power of laughter and humour, so much so that it influenced their mythology, philosophy, and other belief systems.<sup>2</sup> These ideas became canonized into literature during the renaissance by two particular writers: Erasmus and

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<sup>2</sup> In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin discusses the shift in popular attitudes towards laughter as a philosophical unit in the seventeenth century and thereafter. The previous thinking contended that laughter had “a deep philosophical meaning” and could deal with serious and profound “universal problems” (66), whereas after the renaissance it was generally felt that “that which is important and essential cannot be comical”, and “the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter” (67). Rabelais, Bakhtin affirms, upheld the former and opposing school of thought based on antique sources like Aristototele’s “famous formula: Of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter” (Bakhtin 68) whose popularity engendered the “broader interpretation” that laughter was “man’s highest spiritual privilege” (Bakhtin 68). Other influences on Rabelais’ conception of laughter included the Aristotelian notion that a child becomes human on the first day that he laughs (forty days after his birth) (69), and the contemporaneous Pliny’s “saying” that Zoroaster’s “divine wisdom” could be attributed to his anomalous laughter on the day of his birth (68). The Renaissance affiliation of laughter with creation, Bakhtin reminds us, can be traced to the third century A.D. wherein an Egyptian Alchemist’s papyrus documents how “the creation of the world is attributed to divine laughter ‘...when God laughed seven gods were born to rule the world... when he burst out laughing there was light...he burst out laughing for the second time, the waters were born, at the seventh burst of laughter the soul appeared” (Reinach 112-113, Bakhtin 71) Finally Rabelais’ theory of laughter was also influenced by Lucian’s “image of the laughing menippus” which relates “laughter to the underworld and to earth, to the freedom of the spirit, and to the freedom of speech” (Bakhtin 70).

Francois Rabelais.<sup>3</sup> It is upon such a tradition that contemporary theologians of humour base their theories, which argue that humour is, not profane and therefore sacrilegious, but, a spiritual phenomenon with religious potential.

In this section I have divided the relevant contemporary theories of humour into five theological categories: those that make a case for 1) humour as a code of morality, 2) humour as an antidote to suffering, 3) humour as an assurance of cosmological order and eschatological salvation, 4) humour as a connection to the divine, and 5) humour as a connection to other humans. These principles are roles conventionally filled by traditional religion, but these theologians argue that humour realizes each role more fittingly and more desirably. I will explain how humour theory comes into conversation with the existing postsecular discourse that relates to each principle. This section is designed to give my reader an introduction to the theoretical ideas behind the postsecular treatment of laughter in these novels. Following this survey, I will explain which categories correspond to the postsecularities of each novel and how these theologies foreground the treatment of their laughing characters.

### 1.2.1 *Humour Contains a Moral Code*

European postsecularist Jürgen Habermas believes that a resurgence of religion is necessary in the West because a secular Western community cannot be trusted to

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<sup>3</sup> It can be said that Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* and Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* are the texts responsible for the canonization of the ideological correlation of humour with religion under what has been called 'The Tradition of Learned Wit'. Both Renaissance humanists popularized a strain of the comic (one bodily, one intellectual) that is connected to the religious. Erasmus' text esteems human folly as the ubiquitous creator of joy and good fortune for all of humanity, and Rabelais' fictional pentalogy, narrating the lives of two giants, uses the crude, scatological, slapstick humour which Mikhail Bakhtin would later deem monumentally important due to its universal properties and redemptive potential. Bakhtin's carnival is based on this grotesque strand of humour, which collapses social order and redeems injustice.

establish their own moral or ethical code (17). But if the movement towards secularism is characterized by a critical perspective toward religious law governing the individual, what, then, might a postsecular code of moral conduct look like? After all, as Hyers suggests, a world without a moral code is subject to chaos; the institution of morality is one that is necessary to retain in a postsecular society.

Konrad Lorenz' theory of humour contends that having a sense of humour deters aggression. He says, "Barking dogs may occasionally bite, but the laughing man hardly ever shoots!" (254). For Lorenz, laughter and the capacity for humour are essential to the survival of humanity because it makes us honest, reasonable, and moral (256). That laughter deters aggression would, however, contradict Freud's thoughts on humour, which assert that jokes express concealed aggression. Yet, as Rod A. Eckhardt points out in his book, *Sitting in the Earth and Laughing*, if this is true, the reception of humour also expresses forgiveness. Eckhardt quotes psychiatrist Martin Grotjahn who states that our laughter at a joke forgives the transgression or aggression innate in the joke or in the act of making the joke (Eckhardt 183). Eckhardt states, "In the depths of authentic humour everyone stands forgiven" (183). This argument can be validated with Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren's "Benign Violation Theory of Humour", which states that a situation can be taken as humorous when a violation occurs but is simultaneously perceived as *benign* (Colorado Leeds). Thus, forgiveness is tantamount to the perception of humour. If, as these theorists suggest, sensing humour allows us to refine human virtues like moral reason, compassion, and forgiveness, it would not be far-fetched to declare that it is a force of good in the world. And unlike religious commandments, broadly, humour is a

heuristic teacher of virtue, as it is self-produced.

### 1.2.2 *Humour Offers a Cosmology and Eschatology*

Religion assures the world of an order to the universe. The religions of the world preach a wide spectrum of cosmologies (some ecocentric, some anthropocentric; some present an eschatology of paradisaal afterlife, while others structure life as cyclically perennial). Religion fulfills the human need to understand one's place and fate in the universe.

We might also consider, however, that this epistemological approach is somewhat imperialistic, insofar as the cosmology ought not come before the cosmos. American Comedian Stanley Myron Handelman thought that our cosmology should be based on what we know about the universe, not what we hope, wish, or hypothesize. In his essay, "From the Sublime to the Ridiculous-- the Religion of Humour," he argues that humour is the best religion for humanity because it exposes the futility of trying to find meaning in a world that is composed of chaos, meaninglessness, nonsense, and nothingness. He says,

Religion to be a religion, must free us from the restraints we impose upon ourselves, as well as those imposed upon us by the particular societies to which we belong. It must sanctify all life, and undermine (with love) any force opposed to life, such as inertia or gravity. It must help us to distinguish between sense and nonsense and to accept both as an integral part of life. It must enable us to find heaven here on earth--now--the way it is. All of this is possible through the sense of humour. Comedy is my religion, and I would like to see it become everyone else's... soon. (23)

For Handelman, the comic not only best represents the universe's true structure, eliminating an imposition of meaning and order for our own delusion, but it also provides us with a sense of freedom and peace in the understanding of our place in the world.

Tangentially, Paolo Costa-- the first and only postsecular philosopher to propose the consideration of humour in the discourse--compares humour (and laughter) to the experience of wonder, and argues that both are a "mood" from which we adopt a new perspective on the world. He stresses that the complexity of reality is best coped with by using what he calls the "dynamic conceptual constellation" of moods similar to, and classified under, wonder. He says, "[w]hen we yield to wonder, we stop and let ourselves be absorbed for a while into the world's complexity. And this kind of capitulation is the source of broken knowledge: a botched understanding of reality, which is yet respectful of its contradictory richness" (Costa 148). Contrary to Weber's rationalization paradigm, Costa asserts that one need not choose between magic or science, enchantment or disenchantment. Instead our very nature as fluid and capricious beings calls for an amalgamation of the two. Thus, the mood of humour caters to this fluctuational cosmology, which, as in Handelman's theory, informs our understanding of it.

Peter Berger avows that humour also intrinsically contains an eschatology of its own. He writes on the transcendental qualities of humour in his book *Redeeming Laughter*, wherein he asserts that humour engenders two kinds of transcendence. The first is more ephemeral, wherein we escape ordinary reality and are transported into a realm of bliss and destabilized institutions of power.<sup>4</sup> But due to their fleeting nature, these

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<sup>4</sup> These "finite provinces of meaning," as Berger calls them, borrowing Alfred Schutz's seminal phrase, include other things like dreaming, physical pleasure or even pain, or

experiences of the comic are not religiously transcendental insofar as they cannot replace the eschatological promises of religion, which are enduring and reliable. The other form of transcendence, which is religious in nature, he asserts, is far longer lasting and belongs, as German protestant Theologian Helmut Thielicke stated, “under the heading of eschatology,” (*Redeeming Laughter* 215) or the theological study of death and the afterlife. Different from an escape, Berger’s second form of transcendence, he says, involves an act of faith. He uses examples of children’s games, or the primary instances of laughter in a human’s life, like peek-a-boo, wherein, he argues, humour is sensed when we have faith in the idea of redemption, or the mother’s return after she is hidden (211). He sees this experience of the comic as a signal of transcendence for those of us who are not certain (or have no proof) of religion. He says, for those of us who “only have the choice to *believe*” (214), sensing humour is a vow to have hope for (ultimate) resolution.

Thus, the term ‘comic relief’ takes on a broader meaning. For Berger, humour is most religious in its eschatological subtext insofar as it foregrounds hope for salvation.

He says,

comedy, unlike tragedy, bears within it a great secret. This secret is the promise of redemption. For redemption promises in eternity what comedy gives us in a few moments of precarious liberation-- the collapse of the walls of our imprisonment.... By laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humour implies that the imprisonment is not final but will be overcome. (Berger 213-14, Eckhardt 189)

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intense theoretical thinking, and are bracketed by what he calls “‘threshold’ sensations” going in and coming out of them (like the onset and adjournment of laughter) (206).

In a postsecular theology of humour, the assurance of redemption and the maintenance of hope, therefore, remains; *etsi Deus non daretur*, hope for a happy ending can still remain.

### 1.2.3 *Humour is an Antidote for Suffering*

Traditional religion offers an antidote to suffering, and many scholars and laymen alike believe humour has this same curative power. Certainly as ‘the best medicine’ it can defuse quotidian tribulations and disarm the serious. But what about problems on a grander scale? What about the suffering that comes with the knowledge of our immanent and unavoidably demise or that of our loved ones? Can we laugh in the face of death?

Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* features a hybrid human/martian protagonist, Michael Valentine Smith, who, having been raised on Mars, struggles to comprehend humour and why terrestrial human beings laugh. Interestingly, even the human characters in the novel fail to properly explain this earthly phenomenon. When Smith visits the zoo one day, he witnesses monkeys in a cage brutally harming each other and picking on smaller innocent monkeys. His reaction to this is explosive and uncontrollable laughter, about which he explains that he suddenly understood why humans laugh: to endure pain. His epiphanic understanding of humour also elucidates religion to the martian. He says, “All those religions-- they contradict each other on every other point but each one is filled with ways to help people be brave enough to laugh even though they know they are dying” (314). Heinlein’s plotline uncovers the important notion that death is the ultimate incongruity to life, and it is this awareness that leads the human psyche to finding mechanisms for the resolution of this incongruity. The main mechanisms that resolve this incongruity are humour and faith; both of these phenomena are born of the same cosmological conundrum.

In his essay, "Humour and Faith," Reinhold Niebuhr acknowledges this affinity but qualifies it by saying that laughter effectively handles smaller, more inconsequential incongruities in our lives, those he calls "immediate issues... and surface irrationalities" (130-131), while faith has the capacity to handle incongruities of heavier weight, grandeur, or severity.<sup>5</sup> He says,

laughter, when pressed to solve the ultimate issue, turns into a vehicle of bitterness rather than joy. To laugh at life in the ultimate sense means to scorn it. There is a note of derision in that laughter and an element of despair in that derision. (127)

Walter Moss agrees that there are limitations to the subversive power of humour in relation to true evil. He uses the example of Charlie Chaplain's *The Great Dictator* to make the point that, while ridiculing Hitler "may have helped people see how ludicrous the German dictator was, Niebuhr and Auden were correct in believing that much more than humour was needed to deal with such great evil" (35).

But, as many Holocaust survivors and scholars attest, using the Holocaust as a

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<sup>5</sup> In response to Niebuhr's veneration of the capacities of faith over those of humour when it comes to 'dealing with' the great incongruity of evil, Conrad Hyers counters, (and Rod A. Eckhardt agrees), that "faith has considerable incongruities of its own": "Much of 'man's inhumanity to man' historically is the result of some faith, some vision or ideal, that has been taken absolutely and with absolute seriousness... If humour without faith is in danger of dissolving into cynicism and despair, faith without humour is in danger of turning into arrogance and intolerance. Faith without humour is itself an incongruity." (*Comic Vision* 31) For Eckhardt and Hyers, religious fundamentalism is the problem, and humour, an important diluter. In his book *Holy Laughter*, Hyers continues this thinking and moves from discussing faith and humour to his version of "the sacred". He says, "The sacred needs the comic as much as the comic needs the sacred... As in the case of the kind, if his sacredness of his person and role is taken too seriously to the exclusion of laughter, the door is opened to absolutism and despotism; but if the laughter does not presuppose a certain seriousness and sacrality, the door is opened to political chaos and social disruption." (209)

paradigm for the power of humour and laughter only strengthens its case. It has been said that the Jewish sense of humour was, perhaps surprisingly, strengthened by the Holocaust<sup>6</sup>, and, as John Morreall notes, some survivors even attribute their survival to their ability to sense humour. Deb Filler, creator of *Punch me in the Stomach*-- a stand-up comedy routine about her father's survival in four different concentration camps-- begins with a story of her father's first night in Auschwitz when it was so cramped that in order to turn over in bed everyone had to move together. He remembers, "What else could we do? We laughed the whole first night in Auschwitz"<sup>7</sup> (qtd. in Oldenbagen). As Conrad Hyers states, laughter is a "stubborn refusal to give tragedy... the final say" (qtd. in Morreall 3).

#### 1.2.4 *Humour Offers a Connection to the Divine*

Traditionally, 'the sacred' denotes any person, object, or practice that connects the human sphere with a God, Gods, or divine realm. For this reason it is often categorized as mystical, magical, or generally beyond the parameters of 'the human'. Like the sacred, the ontology of humour is largely mystifying. We tend to forget that humour is actually quite a bizarre and mysterious thing; human beings are the only living creatures who can sense it, and yet we do not fully understand it. Humour baffles scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology, and philosophy; there are many theories attempting to explain it but each one remains equivocal and unproven. In fact, the beloved American comedian W. C. Fields said it best when he distinguished: "[w]e know

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<sup>6</sup> Concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl famously stated, "I never would have made it if I could not have laughed. It lifted me momentarily out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it livable."

<sup>7</sup> Filler's father's anecdote is an example of what Terrence Des Pres calls the "survival value" of laughter (103).

*what* makes people laugh. We do not know *why* they laugh” (qtd. in Johnson ix). Peter Berger insists that to try to define the comic is to imprison it (*Laughter* 2). A. Roy Eckhardt describes humour as “an amorphous business” about which it is difficult to write. All three of these critical opinions reflect the difficulty in studying humour, but they also simultaneously reinforce its status as an entity that teeters liminally between what we know and what we do not know: epistemological categories which may reasonably be associated with what is human and what is beyond the human (and thus possibly divine). Russian Poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “Humour” expresses the inscrutability of this faculty and calls attention to its social, political, and ontological exceptionality. He personifies “Humour” as “a political criminal”, who escapes imprisonment, containment, execution and identification (79). Yevtushenko’s poem implies that humour is not containable within our realm of control, but instead, by nature, escapes it and is beyond us.

Mark Twain’s stipulations about the possible divinity of laughter (which preface the introduction of this study) are further support of the possibility that humour is beyond our knowledge simply because it is not within our realm of knowability. Nevertheless, however, we are ultimately still agents of its power insofar as we choose when to laugh and what to laugh at. In this way, humour exists as something that is neither a force controlling us nor a force that we control. In more religious terms we can see it as neither secularly humanist nor divinely hegemonic; its liminality gives it an acutely postsecular potential. And, moreover, the sacred and the comic are both varieties of perception and inference, meaning they do not exist empirically until we perceive them. In this way,

again, the comic is ontologically exceptional in that it cannot be hegemonic or dogmatic, and its perception is intrinsically fideistic.

### 1.2.5 *Humour Offers a Connection to the Other*

Some postsecular scholars are currently discussing the transformation of the definition of the sacred as moving from a signifier of the presence of divinity (within a top-down structure), to a more communal, perhaps atheistic, ontology.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, for thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, René Girard, and Georges Bataille, community is central to the postmodern understanding of the sacred. This is because, as Martin Buber argues, a humanist version of enchantment finds the sacred in relations *between* human beings. Buber sees “religion as relation, rather than dogma” (Ludwig iii) and his “Interhuman” is someone who recognizes the worth and equality of the other. For Buber, the sacred exists not between God and his created, but between people.<sup>9</sup>

But apart from this new tangent in theoretical discourse, religion has long offered man a connection to others, whether on a global scale (as religions are forms of imagined communities) or a local one (through the congregation of church members). One can imagine that a movement towards secularism, wherein practices of congregation, for example, cease to take place, might leave a void in the individual’s need to belong or be part of a community. It can be said, however, that humour has this capacity on both an imaginative and practical scale insofar as we convene locally to participate in comedy (television shows, stand-up shows, films, etc.) but also share senses of humour that are a

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Dworkin’s recent monograph *Religion Without God* is an interesting rumination on this idea.

<sup>9</sup> Buber uses the framework of ‘I -- Thou’ to illustrate his conception of sacredness in interpersonal relations. Love and respect, he says, are responsibilities of the “I” for the “Thou” (15).

result of shared experiences.<sup>10</sup> Our shared ability to sense humour also unites our species, as no other species has this capacity.<sup>11</sup>

Humour can also be seen as an antidote to one consequence of the movement towards secularism that Charles Taylor calls ‘self-buffering’. He says that, what he calls, the “porousness” of our ancestors was a result of their belief that the world was enchanted, and the disenchantment of our world caused a closing-up, so to speak, of these pores (35). Kathryn Ludwig uses this framework to discuss postsecularism in DeLillo’s *Underworld*; she says that characters in the novel achieve porousness, and embrace the other into themselves. She argues that this is DeLillo’s dramatization of the new sacred: the reopening of the self to the other. Our world is enchanted by the sacred connections we make with others, a condition that requires pores (not for the purpose of allowing in magic, but for the purpose of allowing in the other). Our ability to sense humour is predicated on our ability to connect with the other; the two actions can even be seen as one in the same. Even if we do “buffer” ourselves, this buffering vanquishes automatically when we laugh. As Paolo Costa states, “a world inhabited only by buffered selves (i.e. individuals with stable, sturdy, impervious identifies) would basically be a world shorn of humour and wonder” (151).

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<sup>10</sup> In their exploratory book, *The Humour Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, Peter McGraw and Joel Warner investigate the differences in senses of humour in disparate regions of the world such as Los Angeles, Tanzania, Palestine, and the Amazon. They find that the sense of humour is truly culturally specific and that it even serves different pragmatic functions in each culture, likely as a result of their shared experiences in history and evolution (199-200).

<sup>11</sup> This is, of course, with the exception of apes, chimpanzees, and other primates who have oft been observed expressing panting-like laughter and engaging in joking and tomfoolery. Some apes that have learned sign language have even been observed using puns, insults, and “incongruous word use” (Martin 3).

Pertinent to this perspective is Helmuth Plessner's theory of humour, which states that laughter is the result of the recognition of oneself not only as *being* a body, but as *having* a body (149). The cognitive acknowledgement of this "distance,"<sup>12</sup> as Brian Ribiero calls it, produces the sensation of humour for the individual. I use Ribiero's term here to invoke a spatial frame of reference: the implications of the word "distance" are that one's cognition is away from, or perhaps more accurately, outside of, the body. To be able to cognitively recognize a distance between being a body and having a body is tantamount to being able to imagine being in oneself and outside of oneself. Perceiving humour, therefore, is an act of moving outside the self towards an awareness of a very broad community: humanity. Put differently, the acknowledgement that 'I have a body' is necessarily predicated upon the recognition that 'everyone has a body'.

Thus, recognizing community is innate in sensing humour. But on a more unconscious level, the very utterance of the laugh itself is universal in nature as well. Every human laughs before he or she is segregated by the languages they learn (Martin 3), meaning laughter is pre-linguistic and innate. But, it is also post-linguistic as well insofar as it is a "limit of human behavior" (Plessner 138). It is, like the cry, the utterance used when all other means of expression cease to be enough. In this way, the laugh is a form of communication that is both before and beyond the inventions of human language: segregating inventions like nations, cultures, and religions. The laugh unites us before and after we individuate ourselves, and for this reason fills the role religion used to play

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Ribiero's "Distance Theory of Humour" is very similar to Plessner's apart from his discussion of the recognition of the "distance" between being a body and having a body. He gives an example of flatulence being humorous. He says we think flatulence is funny because we are able to see the distance between being a sophisticated disembodied mind and having a gas-releasing gastrointestinal system that makes sounds and embarrasses us (Ribiero 140).

in our lives without the negative ideologies and behaviors that come with inventions of language. The sensing of humour, whose mechanisms exist somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, involves imagining a community. There is a reason why the sense of humour is culturally specific and subjective: it is based in shared experiences and born out of them. It inherently *creates* community.

### **1.3 The Novels**

The postsecular treatments of laughter in the novels of this study are collectively foregrounded by the above surveyed theologies: *Vineland*'s postsecular laughter stems from conceptions of humour in categories 3 and 4, *Infinite Jest* deals with the ideology of categories 1 and 2, and *Underworld*, most overtly, deals with category 5. By working through some of these religious tenets, each novel presents its own form of what is sacred in a postsecular world and dramatizes it through scenes of laughter. The appropriations of the sacred in these novels can be visualized with spatial metaphors: specifically, in *Vineland* the sacred exists in the space between man and divinity, in *Infinite Jest* the sacred takes place outside of the self, and in *Underworld* the sacred can be experienced in the space between human beings. Put differently, in *Vineland*, the sacred is, in the traditional sense, super-human, in *Infinite Jest*, the sacred is extra-human, and in *Underworld* the sacred is inter-human. Laughter, in all of these cases, is the mechanism allowing for transcendence into the space where the sacred can be experienced, or else, in some cases, it is a numinous or spiritual experience in itself. Laughter presents three configurations of postsecular spirituality: in *Vineland*, laughter channels the superhuman, in *Infinite Jest*, laughter demolishes solipsism, and in *Underworld*, laughter creates community.

Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel concerns itself with two of the five elements of religion outlined above: the connection humour provides to realms of divinity or the supernatural and the theoretical assurance it offers in regards to cosmology and eschatology. Underlying the treatment of laughter in *Vineland* is the core principle that humour is mystical and ontologically exceptional. Pynchon's novel is aware, I argue, of the ontological exceptionality of laughter articulated by thinkers like Mark Twain and Roy Eckhardt. It is for this reason that the experience of humour on the body of *Vineland's* characters is so mystical and related to discourses of power. Recall the discussion in the previous section of this chapter that dealt with humour as both an entity that we understand and (to a certain extent) control, as well as, simultaneously, one that is outside of our scope of understanding. It is relevant to the reading of laughter in this novel to keep in mind that laughter both controls and is controlled. I will argue that through his formulation of what I call the novel's 'paradox of control,' Pynchon is able to dramatize the liminality of the laughing subject (as one who both acts and is acted upon). Reading the book this way causes the utterance of laughter to become prayer-like, which situates Pynchon's characters at a more premature stage of faith than those of the other two writers.

David Foster Wallace's thousand-page tome presents a much more complex correlation between religion and humour. It is useful to utilize Taylor's buffered selves paradigm as a way to begin understanding what Wallace puts forth as the novel's central conflict. I argue that Wallace's characters fear most the 'disease' that is caused by the lethal cartridge itself: death in life, solipsism. For Wallace, much like Charles Taylor's theory, the means to re-enchanting the world is escaping the borders of the self. And, in

the tradition of Plessner's theory of humour, which stresses the psychological distance one achieves from one's body during the sensing of humour, I argue in this chapter that laughter is the means or mechanism used to overcoming this affliction. Wallace pays particular attention to the pre-linguistic quality of laughter, and he stresses the communal potential of sound-making. This chapter will focus on two particular characters in the novel to offer a contrast between (what can be taken as) successful and unsuccessful trajectories of the attempted movement outside of the self. The notions of morality and humour mentioned above-- insofar as senses of humour are discussed as moral and immoral-- elucidate the contrast in the outcome of the successes of laughter in this novel. This novel demonstrates a strong faith theoretically in the power of the laugh, but its conclusion is ambiguously cynical.

*Underworld* is the only novel of the three that strongly presents a secure and hopeful faith in the power of humour. In *Underworld*, the humoured body very simply creates a connection between people and establishes community. In this chapter, we will encounter scenes of laughter that: correlate to Paolo Costa's theory of the semblances between the moods of humour and wonder, cause physical and emotional connections between characters in the tradition of Martin Buber, and engender communal spiritual or transcendental experiences.

What unites all three novels is a curiously religious treatment of laughter and the experience of humour. An enormous amount of power and emphasis is given to the represented humoured body in a way that often is deeply involved in other major concerns that each novel has. In the following chapters, my intention is to provide a mode of reading scenes of laughter that exposes their postsecular proclivities and ultimately

perhaps validates the consideration of humour within the discourse of postsecularism in the study of contemporary American literature.

## CHAPTER 2: “Whatever his laughter had nearly overflowed him into”: Laughter as Prayer in Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*

“Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer.”  
— Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humour and Faith” in *Discerning the Signs of Our Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (111)

“At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities.”  
— Jean Houston

The postsecular condition is characterized by a problem of power: the interrogation of God’s existence alone creates an uncomfortable uncertainty concerning the source of cosmological control. In *Vineland* we find a set of characters whose thoughts, actions, and bodies represent a deep desire to mend the pieces of their “spilled...[and] broken world” (267), but, like the postsecular condition, at the core of this struggle is a question of who is in control.

Laughter and control are inextricably linked in this novel and together they formulate the novel’s postsecular subtext. In this chapter, I will argue that the foundation of this assertion is what the novel presents as the paradox of control: characters who desire control also simultaneously desire to be controlled. This paradox, I will argue, allegorizes the problem of the postsecular condition: the difficult negotiation between secular humanism and religious theism. Laughter is a site where this confrontation takes place, and, as I will explain, it becomes a kind of postsecular prayer, wherein the subject dramatizes the simultaneous desire to control and be controlled. It becomes the only event in the novel where the allegedly repulsive secular and religious forces collide and are forced to negotiate.

I will, first, discuss the novel’s thematics surrounding power and control and then turn to how this informs the few, yet seminal, scenes of laughter. In comparison to the

other novels in this study, there are fewer scenes of laughter upon which my argument rests (perhaps because of the length of *Vineland* in comparison to Wallace and DeLillo's tomes), but this is not so much a symptom of weakness as it is a result of Pynchon's subtextual style. As David Porush notes in his essay on *Vineland*, Pynchon may be prescribing the manner in which to read his book for his "hungry reader" (96) when Sister Rochelle mentors DL on the process of enlightenment. She says, "knowledge won't come down all at once in any big transcendent moment... it's always out at the margins, using the millimeters and the little tenths of a second, you understand, scuffling and scraping for everything we get" (112). This reading of *Vineland* will scrape and scuffle at the small glimpses into Pynchon's postsecular themes and ultimately offer a framework against which the more complex treatments of laughter in *Infinite Jest* and *Underworld* can be better understood.

Thus, to begin, I will give a brief synopsis of the narrative. *Vineland* takes place in California in 1984 and begins with the removal of former hippie, Zoyd Wheeler, and his daughter, Prairie, from their home by Drug Enforcement agent, Brock Vond. Vond's vengeance against them is a direct result of his relationship with Prairie's mother, whom Prairie has never met, Frenesi Gates. The love affair between Frenesi and Vond, taking place twenty years earlier, resulted in her involvement in the assassination of the leader of a hippie organization that Vond wants to eliminate. The organization is called "PR<sup>3</sup>", or "The People's Republic of Rock and Roll". Frenesi, being part of a similar radical hippie film collective called "24fps", goes under the witness protection program with the help of Vond. When Frenesi has disappeared, in the present day, 24fps, Vond, and others search for her, and she reappears after agreeing to be part of a film being shot in Vineland

where she reunites with her daughter, ex-husband Zoyd, parents, and friends. In an effort to regain control, Vond attempts to kidnap Prairie, but his D.E.A. funding is cut as just as he is attempting to grab her from a helicopter. He is then driven into hell by a tow-truck-duo who go by the names of Blood and Vato.

While this synopsis vastly oversimplifies the complicated narrative, one predominant theme is the fact that power and the desire to control is the primary motivation behind all characters and events. On a basic level there are two teams: you're either with them or you're against them, righteous or radical, pig or hippie. As I will show later in this chapter, however, there are more forces of power than appears in this 'cops and robbers' framework. Television, drugs, "parasitic" babies (286), and alien hijackers are all forces of power in the novel insofar as they affect and cause effects in the narrative outside of the rivalry of Vond and the hippies. Without getting ahead of myself, I will forewarn that laughter, as I will show, is the novel's exceptional force of power; it is different from the others because it embodies a homeostatic paradox of control (meaning it is a self-regulating and intrinsically balanced contention of power). But what remains consistent in this world of plural forces is that control is desired and fought for by the novel's characters. The politics of power in the novel is the dimension that most critics focus on, yet few have identified its relevance to postsecularism. Before turning to an exposition of my own theory on the novel, I will first survey the relevant criticism in order to situate my argument in relation to others'.

As Deborah L. Madsen writes, what distinguishes this novel from Pynchon's other works is its explicitness of power structures. And, Madsen argues that this is the reason behind a lack of enchantment in the novel. She says, "*Vineland* presents

repression as normal and [therefore] entertains no illusions of transcendence” (126) unlike *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* which “are all complicated by a residual desire for at least the possibility of transcending a fundamentally disordered but superficially meaningful world” (126). The problem with this reading is that it assumes that power in the novel is hegemonic and comes from one source. In fact, the *possibility* of transcendence is entertained precisely in the dramatization of the plurality of power.

David Porush, Brian McHale, and John McClure would disagree with Madsen’s secularization of the novel. Porush asserts that “each [character’s] story is tinged by its own hint of the mystical” (qtd. in Horstman 345). What makes this possible is what McClure and McHale call the novel’s “ontological pluralism”. Madsen’s dismissal trivializes the role of the magical, which, for McClure and McHale, is extremely influential and, as McClure argues, relates directly to its interaction with the theme of postsecularism. He says that the world in *Vineland* (like that in *Gravity’s Rainbow*), “accommodate[s] beings, domains, and energies drawn from a diverse range of religious and spiritual ‘spheres of reality’ and operate[s] as well, locally and partially, according to the ‘laws’ of secular scientific understanding” (4). These “ontological openings”, as he calls them, occur throughout the novel, and are, as he describes them, “windows [that] open in the walls of the secular world” (4). According to McClure, this is the main manner in which the novel “makes us suspicious” (30) of the polarity between the secular and the sacred.

That said, the openings to which McClure refers merely provide the setting in which the magical, sacred, or transcendental can enter into the narrative in a manner that legitimizes its existence. It does not prove that transcendence can occur or does occur. In

fact, for many critics, like David Porush, the possibility of transcendence expired with the onset of modernity in the novel. His essay, "Purring into Transcendence," argues that the only period hopeful for transcendence (from "pedestrian, but ubiquitous, evil" (94)) is what he calls *Vineland's* "magic middle," (94) or the section of the novel which takes place in the memory of the groovy sixties. For Porush, Pynchon's nostalgia is, in his own words, "lingering in the pre-fascist twilight," (*Vineland* 371) (which, tangentially, Porush feels would make for a great essay title) and the novel expresses discontent with the then contemporary Reagan-Bush era. But Porush's negation of the possibility for hope to emerge in the present time of the narrative ignores a major theme that is exemplified by the novel's title: the theme of preservation. Vineland as a symbol represents the irrelevance of time and imperviousness to change. The place is described in the novel as having been "protected from the sea and all its mysteries by two spits" (316) and its "sea coast, forest, riverbanks, and bay were still not much different from what early visitors in Spanish and Russian ships had seen" (317). Its mysticism, concentrated in the impossibly high and red "breathing redwoods," described as having been "alive forever" (317), is experienced by generations of Indians, tribes, and loggers. By titling his novel after such a place, Pynchon makes the story timeless. We can also see this through the strong emphasis the novel places on genealogy; genetic lineages often show the lack of change through generations. Jess Traverse and Eula Becker's fervor for activism is inherited by Sasha, and subsequently by Frenesi and Prairie. In fact, the matrilineal line in that family is almost repetitive. As well, significantly, the novel begins and ends with the description of Desmond, Zoyd's dog, as "the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe" (385). This strong emphasis on the lack of generational gaps negates a reading of

this novel as nostalgic and instead speaks to a belief in the perseverance or transcendence of hope. Thus, we can safely read any glimpses of hope for transcendence in the “magic middle” as hopeful in any temporal context. The sacred, loosely as it is used in this novel, has not been lost in the present.

That said, I will turn to explaining what I see as the novel’s paradox of control, which, as we shall see, underscores the novel’s postsecular voice. In the novel, as in real life, in order to control, one must first acknowledge that some control has been taken, or that the controller is in some way always already controlled if he or she desires control. Vond’s task forces are responses to the loss of control over the drug problems in America, and, likewise, in order for Zoyd to be free from Vond and have control over his daughter’s safety, he is bound to his agreement to run through a plate of glass every year. What results from this central conflict, however, is the beginning of a movement toward faith.

Jess Traverse, a life-long logging unionist who lost his legs to an industry ‘accident,’ communicates this idea during his “annual reading” of a passage from Emerson quoted in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* at the family picnic that ends the novel. The excerpt reads,

Secret retributions are always restoring the levels, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil. (369)

As Ralph Claire argues, it seems incongruous to put such “an enormous amount of faith in extrawordly affairs” (n.p.) given the book’s obsession with taking matters into one’s own hands. He says that this is futile and encroaching on a quietist philosophy; if these characters really believe this, why do anything that they do in this novel? One who truly has faith, by definition, relinquishes all power.

Many other characters express this same paradoxical desire to have control *and* faith. Takeshi repeatedly expresses a desire<sup>13</sup> to believe in the existence of “messages from beyond” (148), an impression that resulted from the “actuarial mysteries” he investigates for his job. DL uses this same choice of words to explain how the sensei’s pupil, Noboru, found her: “She’d been having no luck on her own, so maybe it was what her Aunt Tulsa liked to call ‘a message from beyond’” (122). The intentional ambiguity of the diction used to describe this phenomenon is a motif that continues throughout the novel in a number of ways. For example, Norleen uses capitalized indefinite pronouns to account for her unlikely perseverance through the struggles of her lifetime: “I know that something-- Somebody--was looking out for me” (121). And, moreover, unexplainable acts of what might be categorized under “providence” happen frequently in this novel. For example, on a number of occasions, characters who meet for the first time describe a sensation of already knowing the other person. We can see this being hinted at when Frenesi meets Vond for the first time and the narrator says, “She didn’t know who he was. Or maybe she did” (67), and likewise, when Zoyd inexplicably knows to give Prarie Takeshi Fumimota’s business card “as if she were supposed to be the one to have it all

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<sup>13</sup> I say “a desire” to believe because the belief in these examples is not stable. Characters in this novel do not have faith certainly, but instead hope to have faith, or want to have faith. Pynchon’s religious propensities are, perhaps obviously, in a premature stage.

along” (200). These examples show that there is more than a strong suggestion of the existence of extra-worldly forces at work and intervening in human lives.

But the belief in the existence of this being (which, for the purposes of this essay, is more important than proof of its existence) is most overtly displayed through characters in the novel repeatedly expressing a desire to be “saved”. The idea first surfaces at the beginning of the novel when Hector and Zoyd are discussing the state of the times (particularly the hippie movement and its success). Hector infantilizes Zoyd and the hippies and claims that they all “still believe in all that shit” and are all just “waitin for that magic payoff” (28). Thrice he asks Zoyd to ask himself, “Who was saved?” (29). Then, later, in a flashback of their honeymoon days, Zoyd asks Frenesi, “do you think that love can save anybody?” (39). Neither responder has a good answer to this question, but the repeated use of the word and its phrasing within an inquisition implicates a deep seated and ubiquitous desire for an answer; it conveys a hope that something will save us. Later in the novel, the narrator, describing the Yurok belief in the existence of the *woge*, a species of smaller human beings who inhabited the “Seventh River” in Vineland, reports that some hippies believed that the space was “sacred and magical” and that if “we started fucking up too bad” the *woge* would “come back, teach us how to live the right way, save us...” (187) And, further on, Frenesi admits that she has an, albeit diminishing, salvational faith in love: “its magic fading...the simple resource we once thought would save us. Yet if there was anything left to believe, she must have in the power even of that weightless, daylight commodity of the sixties to redeem even Brock, amiably, stupidly, brutal, fascist Brock. (217). These examples show consistent prayer-like expressions of desire for the existence of some kind of divinity. Regardless of the

failure of the saving grace, what persists is hope and semblances of faith, which implies that, perhaps, for Pynchon, the existence of a saviour is less important than the desire to believe in the possibility of salvation.<sup>14</sup> And it is logical that Frenesi's wish, here, uses Vond, the novel's embodied representation of fascism and hegemony, as a kind of measuring superlative. She desires a force strong enough to save even the limit of unsaveability.

As we will see later in this chapter, the force that the novel designates as strong enough to influence "even Brock" is laughter. And it is logical that laughter fills this role because of the way in which power is deeply connected to the body in this novel. Repeatedly, and in more ways than one, the novel reminds its reader, much in the tradition of Foucault, that the body is the site where power exists and takes place: "The schoolroom line was, 'You'll never know enough about your body to take responsibility for it, so better just hand it over to those who are qualified, doctors and lab technicians and by extension coaches, employers, boys with hardons, so forth'" (128). This process is most potently carried out by Vond, of course, whose work literally controls bodies. He debases Frenesi's body (particularly her most intimate body parts) to a mere conduit of power when he says, "You're the medium Weed and I use to communicate, that's all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places," about which Pynchon reveals, "She was too young then to understand what he thought he was offering her, a secret about power in the world" (214). Clearly, here, the revelation of Frenesi's ignorance suggests that the

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<sup>14</sup> David Evans discusses how a similar sentiment is presented in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. He says the Ennet House addicts *use* the idea of a Higher Power pragmatically to overcome personal challenges. See next chapter.

message is intended for the reader. This same idea is reiterated in the description of the philosophy of 24fps when the narrator says, “They particularly believed in the ability of close-ups to reveal and devastate. When power corrupts, it keeps a log of its progress, written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face” (195). Thus, power takes place in, from, and on the body.

The humoured body is a dramatization of the paradox of control in this novel, which, in turn, is, as I will show, postsecular. This will become clearer when we turn to the novel’s examples, but, first, we can see that laughter is psychologically linked with power in this novel because laughter is produced most often as a result of a perceived superiority or a perceived attainment of control. For example, Van Meter and Zoyd’s friendship is described as “based in part on each pretending to laugh at the other’s hard luck” (42) meaning there is always a butt to the joke, so to speak. Likewise, Sasha’s response to Zoyd’s relationship with her daughter brings about “an embarrassed laugh that seemed to mean, ‘You are so inappropriate for my daughter that even you must see it and be as amused as I am-- we’re adults after all, and we can certainly share a chuckle, can’t we Zoyd’” (56). In this case, Sasha’s offspring is perceived to be superior to Zoyd and his shortcomings as a man and life partner. The perception of Zoyd’s inferiority causes humour. Another example is after one of Brock and Frenesi’s sexual encounters, when Frenesi believes Brock to be asleep and surrenders to her feelings for him, but when she “leans in to whisper her heart’s overflow” (217) she realizes that his eyes are open and that he had been watching her. When she screams at this realization, the chapter ends with the statement, “Brock started laughing” (217). For Vond, the ability to manipulate Frenesi is what makes him feel superior. And finally, when DL learns that

while enduring an abusive relationship with Moody Chastain, her mother Norleen was defiantly sleeping with her husband's coworker, she is surprised and impressed. The revelation of this secret causes Norleen to sense humour: "Norleen born-again, mannerly and all, laughed like a girl with a garden hose in her hand" (125). Pynchon's use of simile here intensifies the superior emotions that bring about Norleen's laughter; the "girl with a garden hose" is metaphorically, superior to any bystanders and in complete control.

In all of these cases humour is perceived as a result of a sensed superiority over someone or something. Thus, the laugh signals the subject's *attainment* of power, or a perception of the like. This means that most characters in the novel share a sense of humour that is tied to constructs of power; what's funny in this world is being on top of someone or something.<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, however, instead of signifying one's attainment of control, the laughing subject loses control, or needs to be controlled. One example of this is during one of Blood and Vato's conversations about women; the narrator says, "Blood, whose amusement quota that month has not so far even been approached, allowed himself a snort and a half a chuckle" (184). What is being described here is a subtly bizarre systematization of personal emotions. Blood governs his sense of humour by placing a cap or "quota" on the *amount* of amusement he is "allowed" as well as the quantity of laughter he can release. Perhaps the most nonsensical detail in this case is the way in which laughter is quantified (as though half a chuckle were exactly one half of a whole) and can be counted towards an amount that can reach a limit. This quantification reveals the shifting of the ontology of laughter; it changes from being an intangible speech act to

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<sup>15</sup> The majority of the scenes of laughter in this novel feature this kind of humour. For more examples see pages: 96, 199, 211, and 240.

a material and measureable object in the physical world. But most importantly, this example shows how laughter is an event in this novel that is heavily policed, or, perhaps more accurately, an event whose policing reveals its need to be policed in the first place (its uncontrollability). Thus, laughter exemplifies how Pynchon uses control to signify a lack there of.

In other cases, this uncontrollability becomes numinous, divine, or transcendental in some way, and the ontology of laughter moves into a category that, for lack of clearer terminology on Pynchon's part, we can simply call 'otherworldly'. One such example is when Frenesi and Rex sense humour as a result of their perceived superiority over Weed and his alleged involvement with the FBI. While their laughter signifies the attainment of power that comes with the knowledge of this secret, it also strongly affects their bodies, causing their eyes to be "dark and moist" and their "faces flushed" (234). The narrator says, "The two started laughing again, an amateur, ungainly sound, as if the forces they were letting out were new to them and just about as much as they could handle" (234). Here Pynchon's use of language attributes a transcendental quality to laughter. He describes it metaphysically as "forces" teetering on the brink of uncontrollability. Laughter is "[let] out," in place of a more active verb choice, which implicates the passivity of the subjects (as well as the activity of the force of laughter). Describing the sound of the laugh as "amateur" and "ungainly" renders the experience of laughter unfamiliar, new, and awkward, suggesting that its ontology is outside of their scope of knowledge and control. These descriptors work to defamiliarize laughter and reframe its ontology in this scene. Pynchon is emphasizing laughter as something both produced by the body and experienced by it. It is both self and other, a bodily power to which the body

is both subject and object, a perfect example of a paradox of control.

A similar characterization, which also depicts laughter as a “force,” occurs during the concluding family picnic. The narrator describes how groups of people were “sending up gusts of laughter like ritual smoke cast to an unappeasable wind” (371). This simile is significant because, again, its purpose is to highlight a contest of power and characterize laughter as the novel’s paradigm of the postsecular condition. It may be that Pynchon’s description here originates from the typical movement of the body during laughter: the throwing back of one’s head so that one’s mouth faces skywards. The use of an active verb (“cast”) establishes the laughers’ agency, but the association of laughter with a ritual sacrifice to a deity, and more importantly, a deity that is “unappeasable,” suggests that this action is also submissive. This simile literally associates laughter with prayer: an utterance that humbly acknowledges the power of a greater being and requests its approval.

The enchantment of laughter is most potently depicted in what I argue is the most central flashback of the novel. This is the laughing fit that Vond undergoes while watching the Tube. It is central because it is one of the only moments exposing Brock Vond’s weakness, or the possibility thereof. If we look at Vond not as a character, but as a representation of a system of control, it is significant that laughter is the only ‘force’ strong enough to jeopardize his body, which, as we know, is a vessel for power. The narrator describes Vond’s experience thus:

Once, not too many years ago, sober, wide awake, he’d began to laugh at something on the Tube. Instead of reaching a peak and then tapering off, the laughter got more intense each time he breathed, diverging toward some brain

state he couldn't imagine, filling and flooding him, his head taken and propelled by a supernatural lightness, on some course unaccounted for by the usual three dimensions. He was terrified. He glimpsed his brain about to be turned inside out like a sock but not what would happen after that. At some point he threw up, broke some cycle, and that, as he came to see it, was what "saved" him-- some component of his personality in charge of nausea. Brock welcomed it as a major discovery about himself-- an unsuspected control he could trust now to keep him safe from whatever his laughter had nearly overflowed him into. He was careful from then on not to start laughing so easily. (278)

As in the examples above, Pynchon characterizes laughter as supernatural here, bringing about, for the laughing subject, an experience of transcendence or connection to the numinous. The power that laughter is given here is immense, particularly in its affliction of a character like Vond who largely represents a fascist control over bodies in the novel. But at the heart of these episodes is a conflict of power, and although laughter is depicted as having a supernatural power, it is in no way completely hegemonic. Pynchon's use of language here depicts the control of both parties as equal; it is a constant vacillation between having control and being controlled. The easiest way to track this is through the use of active and passive verbs (as we have seen earlier). Certainly Vond "is taken and propelled," but the escalation of this infliction is his own doing: it "got more intense each time *he breathed*." He is even granted some of the power of the supernatural through foresight insofar as he is suddenly able to see the immediate future ("his brain about to be turned inside out"), but importantly this power is limited ("but not what would happen after that"). "[H]e threw up" yet considers this action to be passive, insofar as it

purportedly “‘saved’” him. The language used suggests that parts of Vond’s body are granted their own agency (“some component...*in charge* of nausea”). Power in this scene is plural, constantly oscillating, and never monopolized.

Pynchon’s characters’ laughter is prayer-like because, as I mentioned earlier, characters in this novel are in a stage of faith that is more hopeful than certain. Prayer is merely a traditional religious framework that helps to elucidate what is happening through laughter in this novel; it is the utterance through which the human subject can gain control by requesting to be controlled. It is, in this novel, a perfect amalgamation of ‘DIY’ secular humanist belief and ‘Laissez-faire’ theistic faith.

In this same way, laughter is also a paradigm through which we can imagine Pynchon’s possible postsecular utopic vision: a theology that incorporates a perfectly equal power treaty between humanism and fideism. Control neither comes dogmatically from the top-down, nor does it rest in the hands of potentially corrupt human beings. This homeostatic balance of power may eliminate, in theory, all of the problems that the previous theological systems caused. But, as many Pynchon readers know all too well, we can scuffle and scrape at the margins to formulate a narrative of hope, or a perfect resolution, but, for the most part, Pynchon tends to raise more questions than answers, which is why, as I argue, his characters pray.

That said, cheesy and suspicious as it may be, the novel does have a superficially happy ending. And, as Peter Berger argues, as I discussed in my introduction, humour contains a promise that makes it religious, and that is the promise of a final resolution. One example in the novel can be read as exemplifying this idea. When DL and Takeshi tell Blood and Vato the story of their past, the narrator describes, “Vato wanted it to be a

sitcom. Whenever the topic came up, he made a point to laugh about it a lot, trying to fill in for a live studio audience” (179). The use of verbs expressing desire, like “wanted” and “trying to,” characterizes this action, like the previous examples, as prayer-like. Vato’s wish implicates a desire for the narratives of real life to be structured like a comedy, or in other words, a series of zany misadventures that end in felicitous resolution. This desire for life to be “like a sitcom” is its own philosophy. And, importantly, for Vato, the means framing it as such is laughter; this story will become a comedy if he laughs. The idea here is that prayer is granted more power than it is typically given in the rest of the novel. The prayerful laugh not only requests an outcome, but brings it about. In this way we can read Pynchon’s treatment of laughter as a depiction of Berger’s philosophy in reverse: we need not wait for humour to enchant our world, instead, the prayer of laughter may come first.

In the next two chapters, we will see novels wherein this faith in humour and the humoured person becomes stronger and more overt (compared to the ever-evasive Pynchon). DeLillo and Wallace present conceptions of sacred laughter that move away from the traditional incorporation of the supernatural or the divine toward a more humanist enchantment.

**CHAPTER 3: “Unless the screams are really laughter”: Solipsism and Pre-linguistic Sounds in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest***

“When you laugh[...]there’s also a spiritual opening.  
You’re not so tight inside yourself.  
That opening I’ve found to be a real gift,  
in people being able to absorb spirituality.”  
—Rabbi Sydney Mintz

“Laughter is a sense of proportion  
and a power of seeing yourself from the outside.”  
—Zero Mostel

The title of David Foster Wallace’s thousand-page tome is an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the play, the “fellow of infinite jest” (V.i.76) is Yorick, the King’s jester, whom Hamlet praises for his “flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar” (V.i.181-182). Holding Yorick’s skull in the graveyard, Hamlet jokes,

Now get you to my lady’s chamber and tell her,  
let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come.  
Make her laugh at that. (V.i.83-86)

Though this is considered one of the funniest scenes in the play, the joke that Hamlet makes about Ophelia loosely conceals a strong fear: the fear of death. The humour of this joke is dark, first because it implies that the real joke is on everyone (we are all doomed to die no matter our actions on earth), and second because of the dramatic irony in Hamlet’s ignorance of Ophelia’s recent death. But the scene broadly suggests that, although death is the ultimate silencer of humour, the human race nevertheless needs to laugh in order to come to terms with our collective inescapable fate. *Infinite Jest* is, per its author’s reputation, as funny as it is depressing. It yokes the tragic and the comic and often tangles fear with humour. However, death is not the ultimate fear in the novel.

Instead, the novel fears a different kind of death, what James O. Incandenza calls “death in life” (839): solipsism.

The lack of scholarship that has considered the role of laughter in *Infinite Jest* is surprising, first, because the title’s allusion deals with laughter and humour, and second, because the novel’s abundance of scenes of laughter (there are more than one hundred) clearly illustrates a fixation with laughter and humour and, more importantly, as this chapter argues, these themes are intrinsically tied to other important concerns in the novel. The focus of this chapter will be on the involvement of humour and laughter in what I see as the novel’s greatest concern: the threat of solipsism.

This chapter will examine the representation of the utterance of the laugh as a signal of the transcendence of the self or the overcoming of solipsism. As I will show, the treatment of solipsism as a kind of failure in the novel is most clearly displayed through the novel’s central symbol (and the one object that coheres all narratives): the lethal cartridge. For characters whose lives are strongly and negatively influenced by the omnipotent threat of the cartridge’s ability to cause death in life, the novel’s universe of belief considers the transcendence of this obstacle (through the powerful effects of laughter) a form of success in life. As I state in my introductory chapter, this chapter will focus particularly on Mario and Hal Incandenza to contrast the success of the power of the laugh. Specifically, Mario’s laughter signals his ability to transcend solipsism, whereas Hal’s suggests a less successful conquest.

My chapter will begin with a short summary of plot and then will outline the formulation of the postsecular in this novel with respect to other relevant scholarship. Before turning to the scenes of laughter that illustrate (the failures and successes of) its

salvational power, I will first draw my reader's attention to two major passages in the novel that help to substantiate the claims I will later make. Particularly, one scene involving James O. Incandenza's explanation of his hopes for the lethal cartridge explains the novel's conception of solipsism and how laughter is characterized as a signal of having surmounted it, and another scene describing one of Orin's football victories illustrates Wallace's configuration of the connection between pre-linguistic sounds and spirituality and how the use of auditory imagery contributes to the characterization of the utterance of the laugh as powerful and spiritual. At this point I will draw upon Giorgio Agamben's linguistic theory and other scholarship on the novel to accurately demarcate the theoretical space with which I will be dealing.

Thus, to begin, there are three main plot lines in the novel with which the reader can orient him/herself amidst the tome's narrative profusion. The first follows the lives of young tennis players at Enfield Tennis Academy, a tennis preparatory school, (at which, the novel's protagonist, Hal Incandenza, is ranked second best). The second narrative tells the stories of drug addicts in recovery (most prominently, Don Gately, a recovering addict of Demerol and Talwin and former burglar) who reside together in Ennet House, a recovery residence for addicts, which is down the road from E.T.A.. The third narrative takes places on a larger scale as it involves a quarrel between representatives of O.N.A.N. (Organization of North American Nations) and Separatist Quebec's A.F.R. (Assassins de Fauteuils Rollents) who are both attempting to gain control over a circulating entertainment cartridge, which is so pleasurable to watch that it kills the spectator. Hal's father James O. Incandenza (also called "Himself"), for example, is the former Headmaster of E.T.A. as well as the creator of the "*samizdat*," or lethal film cartridge.

Don Gately, as it turns out, is the one who leaked the film to the public and caused the epidemic.

I argue that what makes this an innovative postsecular text is its relocation of the sacred from a liminal space between the divine and the human (like that in *Vineland*) to a space outside of the self. Put differently, spirituality begins when one transgresses the boundaries of the self or overcomes solipsism.

Many scholars have written about the complicated relationship *IJ*'s characters have with religion, both institutionally and ideologically. Not only is the topic of God extremely charged, characters also demonstrate an ironic and incredulous treatment of religious conventions. Gately and the other AA/NA addicts strive to have faith in a “Higher Power” to help them through recovery. But, as David Evans points out, “what the novel seems to endorse, however, is not the reality of a Higher Power, or even belief in a Higher Power, so much as the *willingness to act as if one believed* in a Higher Power” (186). As Evans argues, this “*willingness*” is pragmatic for addiction recovery, and unlike in *Vineland*, it is not underscored by a prayerful desire to bring into existence the divine realm. Characters in *Infinite Jest* do not have theistic propensities (hence the shift in the *location* of the sacred). We can see this through the way in which belief in the “God stuff” feels like a superfluous pretense and misdirected energy. Gately purports to being “turned off by the simplistic God stuff and covert dogma” (689), and ridicules things like prayer and ritual, calling it “the limpest kind of dickless pap” (466). Even the narrator avoids Catholic religious jargon when describing acts of worship, for example, he/she describes praying a rosary as “d[oing] that devout thing with beads” (698). While capital N- Nothingness seems to be more appealing than the “capital-g God” (271) that

“only morons believe in, still” (350), there is nevertheless an obsession with religious tropes, and many critics agree that the characters of this novel display a clear desire for something to believe in. Things are often described as “miraculous,” particularly in relation to addiction recovery, and sports also indisputably become a form of religion in this novel insofar as they engender discussions about spirituality and value communal rituals as a kind of salvational grace<sup>16</sup>.

Interestingly, however, in his essay on Wallace’s likely inheritance of the theological philosophy of William James, Evans posits a reason as to why this search for belief is such a struggle in the novel. He shows that, given the novel’s preoccupation with various forms of paralysis (176), it is likely that Wallace shares James’ concern that hegemonic institutions of ontology and epistemology are squandering the self and the possibility for religious belief (183). Yet still, for scholars like Stephen Burn, “the spiritual hollowness of a life without belief seems to be one of the most persistent themes” (61). Burn posits that “belief may provide, as the last two words [of the novel] hint, a ‘way out’” (61). The question is, a way out of what?

I argue that the novel’s spiritual conflict is not caused by atheism, agnosticism, or hegemony, but solipsism. Allard den Dulk provides an excellent model through which this can be visualized. He suggests that transcendence in *Infinite Jest* is not portrayed on a vertical axis, but a horizontal one. His argument, however, is not theological, but has more to do with the movement towards the other in an effort to build inter-human connection, something the novel severely lacks. What I would add to den Dulk’s reading is that the novel suggests that transcendence need not necessarily reach the other, nor

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<sup>16</sup> See pages 269 and 111 for examples.

move towards the other, but solely requires passing the barriers of the self. The focus is not necessarily on building community. This may be a consequence of the desired movement, but Wallace's greatest concern is *the escape*, the passage through the threshold of psychological confinement. I place this chapter before *Underworld* in my study for this very reason: it prefaces the postsecular concern with community, but does not prioritize the need to get there yet. For Wallace the biggest theological threat to humanity is the "thrust" inward (839), as he terms it, and the fight against this, the novel implies, can engender our salvation. Similar to Evans's point that the novel endorses "the willingness to act as if one believed in a Higher Power," what is valued is agency. What is sacred is not only this space outside of the self but the enterprise behind this "reverse thrust" (839). Wallace considers breaking free of solipsism religious or sacred because, I argue, he believes in something akin to Charles Taylor's "buffered selves" paradigm which states that modernity has caused an 'inward thrust,' (Wallace's terms), within the self, and away from the other. As well, there are many postsecular scholars who believe that the new sacred is not on a vertical axis, or theistic (between man and a higher power), but on a horizontal axis, between people. This is the conception of postsecularity that Wallace dramatizes through scenes of laughter.

But before turning to those representations of the humoured body, I must first explicate the relationship that Wallace's conception of spirituality has with language and laughter. Stephen Burn makes an interesting point in his reader's guide to the novel that helps to introduce this idea. He says that in the search for the self in the novel, language

becomes futile.<sup>17</sup> We can see that this same idea resonates on a larger scale, or metafictionally, insofar as the novel's long-windedness and encyclopedic style fail to provide us with a clear understanding of Hal. In other words, not even one thousand pages of words can articulate Hal's true self; we are still left guessing. But if words are not enough, what is?

In an interview published around the same time as *Infinite Jest*, Wallace discusses his own thoughts on religion that offer insight into a possible answer to this question:

To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought-- it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable. ("The Future" 7-8)

Here Wallace situates true religious experience before language. And the ineffability of this "stuff" is precisely the focus this essay will take on Wallace's treatment of religion in *Infinite Jest*. Granted, searching for the ineffable in a literary text may sound impractical, but in this novel Wallace features an important focus on sounds and auditory imagery that compliments and elucidates his treatment of laughter.

It is here that Giorgio Agamben's distinction between *logos*, or language, and *phone*, or voice (7), can provide a helpful framework for understanding an important distinction between language and non-linguistic utterances. I contend that *phone*, or pre-linguistic sounds, are more expressive and powerful than *logos*, in this novel. And as I

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<sup>17</sup> Burn comes to this conclusion by looking at the list of synonyms Wallace invents for the word "unresponsive" on page 17 of the novel. He says it goes to show that "no matter how expansive your vocabulary, or how careful your description, a list of words is not enough to make a self" (40).

said, an examination of Wallace's fixation on sounds includes and illuminates the importance of the laugh.

Specifically, the laugh is not so much helpful in (as Burn puts it) "mak[ing] a self," as it is a signal of the transcendence of the self. The most overt depiction of this idea, and its importance to the novel, is when the wraith (who we can reasonably assume is James O. Incandenza's ghost) explains to Gately his hopes for *Infinite Jest IV*, the cartridge. He says that he made it for "his youngest and most promising son" (Hal) whom he felt was "disappearing" (839); he wanted to,

Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him 'outside of himself,' as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it *heard*. (839)

The words "to laugh" in the second sentence of this excerpt are accentuated by their syntactic placement at the most emphatic part of the sentence and by their separation with a comma. These grammatical choices indicate an emphasis: the laugh here is presented as an expression that signifies the transcendence of solipsism. The use of a pre-natal metaphor is interesting as well; Wallace describes solipsism as a kind of womb, and suggests that the true self is contained within it. This figuration does two things: firstly, it substantiates my claim that the realm of 'the real,' is pre-linguistic. In deeming this truer self "infant[ile]" and "toothless," Wallace is suggesting that pre-linguistic and "[unconscious]" communication is more true or real in some way (an idea that reappears

in the novel). Secondly, it configures the escape from solipsism as a kind of second birth. The most cryptic sentence in this seminal passage is the statement, “The womb could be used both ways.” We can presume that these two ways are converse: containment and expulsion. But what is most mystifying about this sentence is its use of the passive voice. It calls to question who the subject of this action is: who is doing the “us[ing]?” This notion of agency and passivity is central to the overall argument of this chapter since the willingness and ability to act is what the novel sees as redemptive. And finally, the last sentence introduces a theme that I will explore later surrounding the concepts of hearing and being heard. As I will show, these actions are greatly important to Wallace and *Infinite Jest*’s characters.

The above passage is seminal as it foregrounds the aims of this chapter. The problem is, however, that despite James Incandenza’s intention to create a “figurantless entertainment so thoroughly engaging that it’d make even the most in-bent figurant of a boy laugh and cry out for more” (839), the cartridge fails. In fact, it accomplishes the opposite; it seems to cause a further thrust inwards, wherein one is so solipsistically interned that, not only does the other not exist, but the subject’s own bodily needs are ignored and living is of secondary importance to experiencing the film’s pleasure. It can be said that the film causes an extreme form of solipsism. Stephen Burn speculates that one possible explanation for Hal’s communicative disability in the opening scene of the novel may be that he was forced, by the A.F.R. to watch the film, and survived because of the rumored antidote (38). This, he says, would account for why he is unable to communicate at the beginning of the novel. Either way, *Infinite Jest IV* did not succeed in bringing Hal “outside of himself”, but what the wraith’s testimony does reveal is what

Wallace sees as the evidence, qualifications, and importance of such a movement. The pre-linguistic utterance of the involuntary laugh signals that one has managed to get ‘outside of himself’.

The second passage whose explication prefaces the analysis to come in this chapter is the flashback of Orin’s football career. This passage exemplifies how *phone*, or extra-linguistic sounds, are important to the novel’s postsecularity can be inferred from the language used to describe Orin’s memories of punting. Here a connection can easily be made between these sounds and spirituality, and, moreover, the communal utterance is attributed to, or perhaps equated with, an altered form of divinity. The narrator describes,

a lot of it seemed emotional and/or even, if there were such a thing anymore, spiritual: a denial of silence: here were upwards of 30,000 voices, souls, voicing approval as One Soul...Audience exhortations and approvals so total they ceased to be numerically distinct and melded into a sort of single coital moan, one big vowel, the sound of the womb, the roar gathering, tidal amniotic, the voice of what might as well be God[...]the sound of all those souls as One Sound, too loud to bear[...]he literally could not hear himself think out there, maybe a cliché, but out there transformed, his own self transcended as he’d never escaped himself on the court, a sense of a presence in the sky, the crowd-sound congregational, the stadium-shaking climax as the ball climbed and inscribed a cathedran arch, seeming to take forever to fall (295)

Here Wallace associates the transgression of solipsism with religious spirituality using the extra-linguistic utterance. The focus is not on the idea behind the cheering, but the sound of the cheering itself. In other words, community is not formed because of a shared

love of the game, or any other ritual, it is formed because of the shared utterance that is outside of language. The novel treats the sound as the transforming agent of “out there”. The sound of the “moan” is the force that disintegrates the borders of individuality, fuses all voices into “One Sound” and “One Soul”, and moves this experience into a realm of spirituality. The use of religious diction in the words “congregational” and “cathedral” encourage a religious reading of this event. The narrator’s description of the sound as “what might as well be God,” and prefacing spirituality with, “if there were such a thing,” however, illustrates a hesitancy or skepticism in using this language, yet a reluctant obligation to do so. The language is innately postsecular insofar as it appropriates these linguistic religious conventions into slightly agnostic versions of them. And, by capitalizing “One Sound” and “One Soul,” Wallace reassigns an authority or divinity from “Capital G-God” to a new capitalized community. His use of language reinvents the sacred. Instead of coming down from a divine, dogmatic source, divinity grows out of *phone*. And, most importantly, Orin’s inability to “hear himself think” is evidence of how the erasure of the self is a prerequisite for this spiritual experience.

In this particular case, individuality ceases to exist; the self is so transcended, its borders are no longer perceptible. We can read this perhaps as slightly utopian; it is what Wallace sees as the ultimate development of the desired movement in the novel. But I would not say that this all-encompassing wholeness of community is what is desired. I get the sense that the *complete* erasure of the borders of the self is not ideal. My suspicion lies in Orin’s assertion that he “could not hear himself think out there.” Given the repeated importance placed on hearing and being heard, I would argue that the novel advocates a movement out of the self, but not away from it. Another small suggestion of

this discomfort is in Wallace's reuse of the womb metaphor. Again the exiting of solipsism is described as natal, but the imagery implicit in the term, "tidal amniotic," which depicts the amniotic fluid as a force as great as a tidal wave, is almost violent. It suggests that the force with which this expulsion is occurring is overpowering. The sacred individual agency ceases to be in control by the end of this episode, suggesting that there is some ambivalence here. The above two examples have outlined the parameters of the sacred in this novel, and with these in mind we can now turn to reading examples of laughter from this perspective, the understanding of which, however, requires one short interjection about the theme of sounds.

In spite of the importance that the above examples have placed on it, *making* sounds is not the novel's only imperative; another is the imperative to *hear* them. It is for this reason that, at the end of his confession to Gately, the wraith emphasizes the importance of being "*heard*" (839). Scholars have noticed the not-so-likely coincidence that *Hamlet* begins with the question "Who's there?" (I.i.1) and Wallace's novel begins with Hal's assertion that "I am..." and shortly thereafter, "I am in here" (3). It is possible to take Hal's declaration here, which opens the novel, as either a response to the original question, implicating that he heard it, or as an affirmation of the imprisonment of the self: "I am *in here*" (emphasis mine). The opening scene of the novel is greatly concerned with the fallacies of communication, but Hal struggles greatly to speak and be heard throughout his life. He recalls in a conversation with Stice how his block in communication often happened with his father: "[He] claimed I wasn't speaking sometimes when I was sitting right there speaking to him" (870). Similarly, in the ending hospital scene, the wraith emphasizes to Gately how hearing is the most important part of

a true conversation (838).

Similar to the manner in which prayer is treated in the minds of Ennet House addicts, (like Gately, for example, who ridicules the “knee-stuff” (praying) and decides “[t]hinking of it as talking to the ceiling was somehow preferable to imagining talking to Nothing” (467)) there is a sense in the novel (or perhaps, more accurately, a fear) that no one is listening. To be truly heard is an ideal that is debatably not achieved.

One of the most remarkable manifestations of this in the novel is the repeated inability of characters to distinguish between sounds of crying and sounds of laughter, as the title of this chapter indicates. Repeatedly, these sounds are conflated and difficult to distinguish. For example, during a walk back to Ennet House, Randy Lenz and Bruce Green witness “a woman’s either laugh or scream from who can tell how far, coming off the grid” (556). Tangentially, laughter in Ennet House is also repeatedly compared with other sounds that signify what we might call “dis-ease”: A “howl” that Joelle hears from the kitchen ends up being “McDade’s tubercular laugh” (740), the narrator’s description of an Ennet House scene reveals that “[s]omeone is crying and someone else is either laughing or coughing very hard” (591), and again, in another scene, “someone either laughed or was in pain” (749).

What makes this motif so poignant, apart from its frequency, is its darkness. As I stated earlier, for Wallace the comic and the tragic often go hand in hand. My argument is that this is a symptom of solipsistic society; it is evidence that characters are so closed off that they cannot hear or understand the other. It is troubling for a reader to notice that, if in fact these are cries of pain, fear, or great need, no one can hear them. What is more troubling, however, is that even the narrator second guesses him/herself when attempting

to describe these sounds: “[u]nless the screams are really laughing (557). His/her failure to accurately convey the sound of laughter is also evident through the frequent use of simile. For example, according to the narrator, Molly Notkin’s laugh “sounds like a shriek” (235); Randy “Lenz’s own mother’s laugh had sounded like she was being eaten alive” (557); and Nell G’s “laugh always sounds like she’s being eviscerated” (736). That laughter constantly sounds *like* another sound evades an explanation as the sound that it is; the laugh is constantly deferred to another sound. The sound is therefore epistemologically unreachable, and it is never truly heard by the reader either.<sup>18</sup>

The development made so far in this argument makes Idris Arslanian’s idiomatic blunder-- he confuses ‘sense of humour’ with “sense of laughter” (569) in a conversation with Michael Pemulis-- an interesting ‘mistake’ to reflect on. It is Idris’ otherness, or newness to the English language that causes this mistake, but it is this same perspective that destabilizes the meaning of the idiom. The emphasis is placed on hearing the sounds of the other, rather than inferring a subjective feeling. This mistake is significant because it shifts the zone of action from inside the self to outside the self, and shows that, for Wallace, sensing laughter or bearing witness to the laugh is important.

There is, however, one character who *can* bare witness to the laugh. Mario Incandenza is the only one concerned with distinguishing between laughter and crying. We can see an example of this when ‘the Moms,’ as she is called, is making noise in her bedroom at night, the narrator describes how “Mario listens closely for whether the sound

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<sup>18</sup> I might also add here that the narrator’s complicity in this trope constructs a metafictional dimension to Wallace’s message here and drags the reader into this fear of solipsistic disconnection. By making the gatekeeper of the novel’s diegesis unreliable, or afflicted with solipsistic symptoms, the reader’s world is merged with that of the novel: we therefore adopt the same fear that no one is listening.

ends up as Avril laughing or Avril screaming” (590). He is also the one to notice that after the death of Himself, the Moms never cried, but instead now, “laughs more” and “laughs from deeper down inside” (42). To borrow Idris’ mistake as a term for my argument: Mario has an excellent “sense of laughter” and clearly demonstrates a desire to hear the other’s extra-linguistic sounds.

Allard den Dulk also feels that Mario is a significant character in this novel. For den Dulk, Mario is the novel’s transcendental paradigm (on a horizontal axis) because his inability for self-reflection allows him to be exceptionally empathetic. As such, he “prefigures the development of other characters in *Infinite Jest*” (424). Mario’s empathy is undeniably superior to that of the other more enclosed characters. But what den Dulk misses is the dimension of Mario’s laughter and sense of humour, which are perfect representations of his superior morality, empathy, and openness.

Mario is a significant laugher in this novel because he laughs most frequently, compared to the other characters, and, as we shall see, most freely. He says, “I have a phenomenal memory for things that make me *laugh*” (772), hinting at the importance of laughter not only to his memory but also to his conception of reality. He also very significantly “has this involuntary thing where he laughs whenever anyone else does” (85). His propensity for being ‘infected’ by laughter shows his cognitive openness and his ability to recognize the other.

As was outlined in the introduction to this study, humour theologians like Konrad Lorenz and Rod A. Eckhardt believe that sensing humour innately and heuristically teaches moral virtues such as forgiveness, compassion, and reason. And for postsecular theorists like Habermas, a puzzle of postsecular theology lies in the fact that it requires a

code of morality but rejects dogmatic pedagogy or the enforcement of religious law. An ideal compromise of this quandary is dramatized in Mario's sense of humour. In response to den Dulk's argument, however, I would add that most other characters do not learn from him what they should (especially Hal). In fact, I would disagree that any pedagogic development is made at all. Mario is certainly a model, but in no way a successful teacher. The other characters are far too closed off for this to take place.

We can see this contrast in Hal's and Mario's reaction to jokes told by his peers at ETA. The narrator describes,

The Older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that the real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy. The worst-feeling thing that happened today was at lunch when Michael Pemulis told Mario he had an idea for setting up a Dial-a-Prayer service for atheists in which the atheist dials the number and the line just rings and rings and no one answers. It was a joke and a good one, and Mario got it; what was unpleasant was that Mario was the only one at the big table whose laugh was a happy laugh; everybody else sort of looked down like they were laughing at somebody with a disability. The whole issue was far above Mario's head, and he was unable to understand Lyle's replies when he tried to bring the confusion up. And Hal was for once no help. Because Hal seemed to be even more uncomfortable and embarrassed than the fellows at lunch, and when Mario brought up the real stuff Hal called him Booboo and acted like he'd wet himself

and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change. (592)

This scene shows a clear contrast between Mario's sense of humour and Hal's: Mario laughs because it is a "good one," whereas Hal and the other boys laugh "like they were laughing at somebody with a disability". The distinction Mario makes between "happy" laughter and "uncomfortable" laughter is moral. Happy laughter does not require a feeling of superiority over something, perhaps even over the "real stuff" (which is, in this case, the debate between theism or atheism). Their superior laughter ridicules atheism as an unintelligent and isolating belief system. But their self-elevating senses of humour and the need to infantilize Mario suggests that "the real stuff" is difficult for them to face.

Moreover, the characters are not the only ones who infantilize Mario: the narrator does as well. The language he/she uses to describe Mario's feelings is repeatedly juvenile in tone. For example, instead of describing adults, the narrator uses the phrase, people "over the age of about Kent Blott." It is more child-like to use a person as an example of an age in the place of stating the age itself. We can also see this through the simplicity of diction in words like "happy laugh" and "[t]he worst-feeling thing". These are vague euphemisms that can easily be stated more maturely or formally. This motif is interesting because Mario is older than Hal, and therefore his infantilization is conspicuous. But the passage with Gately and the wraith, which I discussed earlier, suggests that the true self is somehow infantile. Therefore, this characterization proves, perhaps in a counterintuitive way, Mario's superiority over the other characters. His childishness is in fact the quality that allows him to, in theory, overcome solipsism and face "the real stuff". The infant inside the womb, which, the wraith says, is trapped inside Hal, is freer in Mario.

It is for this reason that Mario is able to ask questions that might alarm or frighten

other characters. In the beginning of the novel, Mario asks Hal if he believes in God, to which Hal responds,

“‘I’m going to propose that I tell you a joke, Boo, on the condition that afterward you shush and let me sleep.’

‘It is a good one?’

‘Mario, what do you get when you cross an insomniac, an unwilling agnostic, and a dyslexic.’

‘I give.’

‘You get somebody who says up all night torturing himself mentally over the question of whether or not there’s a dog.’

‘That’s a good one.’

‘Shush.’ (41)

Hal uses humour here to avoid his responsibility to consider his own faith and answer Mario’s question. His discomfort with the question is likely a result of his own agnosticism. We can see this in a later conversation he has with Stice who asks him, “‘You believe in shit, Hal?’” (referring to “‘little kid shit” like ghosts or the supernatural), to which he admits “‘belief-wise I don’t know what I think” (871). However, Mario’s affirmation that the joke Hal makes was “‘a good one” correlates its humour to the previous scenario about the Dial-a-Prayer phone service (both are ‘good ones’) and illustrates his openness for dealing with, what he calls, “‘the real stuff,” or weighty topics like religion and cosmology.

Mario notices that the confrontation of these issues is not uncomfortable for the tenants of Ennet House, either, and he proposes a reason for this.

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

This passage connects the action of "making noise" with the consequences of 'getting real,' "getting less unhappy," and getting rid of anxieties surrounding 'real' issues like religion. A distinction can be drawn between tenants "making noise" in Ennet House and the 'unhappy laughs' of Hal and the E.T.A boys. In the latter case, making noise *does not* cause moral improvement or personal development nor does it ease the ability to face uncomfortable cosmological uncertainties. Also, again, the narrator infantilizes Mario by calling it "Ennet's House" instead of Ennet House, suggesting, once more, that a childish point of view is a necessary prerequisite for the explanation of these ideas.

That said, not all laughter in this novel is redemptive or symbolic of redemption in the same way that Mario's is. In fact, for Hal, as we can see in a number of other scenes where he laughs, sensing humour and laughing is in fact evidence of a further thrust inwards. For example, when Hal visits a therapist and senses humour in the size incongruity of his therapist's hands and body. Hal reports (to Orin over the phone),

'This massive authoritative figure, with a huge red meaty face and thick walrus mustache and dewlaps and a neck that spilled over the rim of his short collar, and his hands were tiny and pink and hairless and butt-soft, delicate as shells...I barely made it out of there before it started.'

'The cathartic post-traumatic-like-reexperience hysteria. You reeled out of

there.’

‘I barely made it to the men’s room down the hall. I was laughing so hysterically I was afraid all the periodontists and C.P.A.s on either side of the men’s room would hear. I sat in a stall with my hands over my mouth, stamping my feet and beating my head against first one side of the stall and then the other in hysterical mirth. (257)

Again, Hal finds humour in what is inferior to him. Certainly this man is an example of incongruity, but the description used here is insulting: descriptions like “red meaty face” and “butt-soft” are not objective. His laughter is in no way the “happy laugh,” that Mario endorses. But most clearly, this scene demonstrates how Hal’s sense of humour does not allow him to liberate himself or transcend and represents his inward confinement.

If we think of laughter as a kind of prayer, as the previous close readings have hinted at, we can see the extent to which Hal is spiritually solipsistic. Hal’s assertion that he was “afraid” that others “would hear” his laughter shows that he is actively working against his own expression. In other cases it is clear not only that he does not want a listener, but that he believes there is not one. For example, the narrator relays Hal’s feelings about Mario’s spirituality. Hal feels that Mario’s “nighttime prayers” are “not a chore. He doesn’t kneel; it’s more like a conversation. And he’s not crazy, it’s not like he hears anybody or anything conversing back with him, Hal’s established” (590). It is clear that Hal believes that hearing a voice in conversation with one’s prayers would be “crazy”, but he characterizes it as a conversation, implying, through its prefix, two distinct parties of equal involvement. By qualifying this statement as Hal’s opinion, the narrator inserts a kind of subtle undermining of the statement. This shows a contrast

between Mario's openness for conversing in prayer and Hal's instinctive skepticism of a possible listener.

Hal's isolation is also dramatized in the bathroom laughter episode through the descriptions of the movements of his body. He uses his body to contain his laughter, though it violently erupts out of him through his extremities (feet and head). Laughter is portrayed here, thus, as a force which innately moves outward, and Hal's containment of it dramatizes his aversion to outward movement and, consequently, his inability to overcome solipsism.

Tracking Hal's laughter throughout the novel illustrates a progression of how his body and mind are increasingly at odds with each other. For instance, when Hal asks for help from E.T.A.'s janitorial crew, Kenkle and Brandt, when Stice's face gets stuck to a window, Hal's internal and external selves are completely disconnected. Kenkle asks Hal,

'but why the hilarity'

'What hilarity?'

...'What hilarity he says. Your face is a hilarity-face. It's working hilariously.

At first it merely looked *a-mused*. Now it is open-ly *cach-inated*. You are almost doubled over. You can barely get your words out. You're all but slapping your knee. *That* hilarity, good Prince atheling Hal. I thought all you players were compadremundos in civilian life.' (875)

As a result of this comment, Hal "[feels] at [his] face" (867) and tries to make out his own reflection in a window: he says, "I looked sketchy and faint to myself, tentative and ghostly against all that blazing white" (876). As in the opening scene of the novel, Hal is not aware of the discrepancy between his internal self and his external self. He scrambles

to connect himself to his external appearance by looking in the mirror and feeling at his face, but his senses are unable to bridge the connection. Formally, the abundance of hyphenated words used to depict Kenkle's disjointed manner of speaking presents a linguistic illustration of dichotomization or disjunction. Likewise, it is significant that Kenkle reads Hal's expression as a disjunction of friendship between Hal and Stice: "I thought all you players were compadremundos." The language of this scene repeatedly thematizes disjunction.

Most significantly, however, his external body is humoured. It is ironic that Kenkle says Hal's face is "open-ly" expressive as it implies not only that it is plain to see, but also that it is without restraint. It seems as though he is no longer in control of his own sense and expression of humour. That part of him has moved outside of his borders, and his cognitive awareness remains captive inside. His assertion that he looked "sketchy and faint" to himself literally iterates what James Incandenza called his progressive "disappearing".

Due to the protagonist's failure to transcend "death in life," the novel presents a less hopeful postsecular allegory in comparison with the other novels in this study. And although laughter tends to dramatize the difficulty of postsecularity, it is nevertheless central to the novel's supposition of the sacred. It is clear that humour is a theoretically redemptive force and contains the potential to push the self towards the other. In the following chapter, I will show how Don DeLillo's 800 page magnum opus illustrates what can be seen as an extended exposition of the framework that *Infinite Jest* began.

## CHAPTER 4: Laughing Together in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

“Laughter has no foreign accent.”

— Paul Lowney

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

— Victor Borge

“...mirth becomes a feast.”

— William Shakespeare, *Pericles* (II, iii, 827)

Don DeLillo's faith in humour can be inferred from his most recent publication, a book of short stories entitled *The Angel Esmeralda*, which alludes to a murdered child from *Underworld*. This theme can be most overtly inferred from the use of suggestive refrain in one particular short story, “The Ivory Acrobat.” Specifically, the narration in this story repeats sentences like “There must be something funny in this somewhere,” (60) “There must be something funny we can cling to” (68), and “There must be something funny that we can use to get us through the night” (70). This desperate plea, which comes from the thoughts of neither narrator nor protagonist for certain, resonates through a story about devastating earthquakes in Athens, Greece. Its presence alone in a story characterized by hopelessness and fear suggests that, for DeLillo, funniness has a pragmatic function similar to that of religion; it is something worth “cling[ing] to,” or something powerful enough to “get us through the night”. Even the diction and syntax of the anaphora, “[t]here must be,” subtly expresses the paradox of belief: faith-based certainty. And, perhaps most significantly, the focus on the first person plural pronoun points to DeLillo's conception of faith as a necessarily communal experience.

This chapter argues that these ideas originate from DeLillo's 1997 tome *Underworld*, wherein a similar faith in the comic and a postsecular emphasis on

community can be read in scenes of laughter. I will show how this novel imagines a sacredness found in the community and how laughter is portrayed as a force which facilitates connections between people. This novel comes last in this study because *Underworld*'s postsecular thematics amalgamate some of those presented in the previous two novels. These include notions of numinosity, wonder, and transcendental spirituality, like that found in *Vineland*, and the movement away from self-buffering, like that found in *Infinite Jest*. *Underworld* puts faith in the power of the laugh (often to a point where it is treated as wondrous and miraculous) and its characters connect with each other as a result.

Before discussing the novel's theological undertones, I will first give a short synopsis of the book. *Underworld* is a Mannipean satire that tells the stories of the, at times, interwoven tales of characters living in America between the 1950s to the 1990s. The prologue, initially published separately, features the story of a young kid from the Bronx, Cotter Martin, who sneaks into the Polo Grounds and obtains the baseball from Bobby Thomson's 1951 game-winning homerun that won the Giants the National League pennant (also known as "The Shot Heard Around the World," which also stands for the successful completion of the Soviet's nuclear bomb test that happened on the same day). Throughout the narrative, the Cuban Missile Crisis and Cold War disturb the lives of all characters, and, like *Vineland*, American history and politics are deeply involved in DeLillo's project. The main protagonist and Waste Management Executive, Nick Shay, eventually comes into possession of this ball during his mid-life existential struggles that take place during the 80s and 90s. Because of his wife's infidelity and issues from his childhood, like the disappearance of his father and his own transgressions of the law,

Nick attempts to find clarity on his present and future. He visits the woman with whom he had an affair earlier in his life, artist Klara Sax, who now paints decommissioned Cold War era bomber planes. Klara is interested in a graffiti artist in the Bronx by the name of Ismael Muñoz (or Moonman 157) who paints graffiti murals of murdered children. Sister Edgar, an old school teacher of Matty Shay (Nick's younger brother), works in the Bronx on religious philanthropic projects. Her germophobia is eventually cured by the emotional toll of the communal mourning at Moonman 157's mural of a young child named Esmeralda, raped and killed in the neighborhood.

DeLillo's interest in the role of religion is clearly conveyed in the intertextual title of his most recent book of short stories mentioned above (published in 2012), but critics agree that his exploration of postsecularism began in *Underworld*, originally published in 1997. It is here that he spends eight hundred pages dissecting and exploring questions of faith and religion and their role in contemporary America. The cover of the first edition of the novel (a photograph of a World Trade Centre tower eclipsed by a shadowy church steeple) forebodes the twisted and complicated relationship that DeLillo's America has with its religiosity.

But, conversely, DeLillo's relationship with religion in his childhood was amicable; he was raised Catholic in the Bronx of New York, like his protagonist Nick Shay, and he recalls his church goings as some of his "warmest childhood memories" (LeClair 26, Duvall 10). But, as John Duvall points out in his reader's guide to the novel, DeLillo saw a conflation between religious ritual and art; in an interview DeLillo states, "[Catholic] ritual has elements of art to it and it prompted feelings that art sometimes draws out of us. I think I reacted to it the way I react today to theater" (LeClair 26,

Duvall 10). DeLillo's homology of art and religion implies that elements of religion, to him, can exist outside of the church, and that art may be a means of experiencing it just as purely or forcefully. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the ontology of the sacred is not monolithic for DeLillo, and his treatment of laughter in *Underworld* is evidence of this.

In his essay, "The Baltimore Catechism; or Comedy in *Underworld*" Ira Nadel focuses on the role of comedy in the novel, which he finds to be political. Nadel avers that "[c]omedy is resistance in *Underworld*, a way of striking back at the conformity, mediocrity, and uniformity of American life that is repeatedly shown to be duplicitous, questionable, and tricky" (177). He finds that comedy is a means through which these problems can be neutralized. He dichotomizes comedy in the novel into "two poles" through a series of comparative chiasmic contentions which expose his theory on the cosmic balance he claims comedy sustains: "Bruce dismantles the accepted; Gleason reasserts it;" "Bruce is spontaneous, Gleason rehearsed;" Bruce "'the diamond cutter,'" Gleason "the cut-up" (179). Both of these types of comedy are *needed* by the American public. Gleason's, as the novel's Nick Shay asserts, "gave us the sure laugh, the one we needed at the end of the day" (106), and Bruce's, Nadel argues, "like traditional Juvenalian satirists, needed to offend in order to correct the wrongs of the age" (181). Both pragmatic functions of these two comedies can be seen as postsecular in nature insofar as one offers comfort and stability, and the other encourages skepticism of dogma. Thus, Nadel's ideas contain the beginnings of postsecular ideas, though they remain mostly within secular discourse.

However, Kathryn Ludwig is the only scholar who calls this text distinctly postsecular. As I mentioned briefly in my introduction, Ludwig writes about how the

characters in *Underworld* are “buffered” in Charles Taylor’s sense of the term. She sees the image of buffering in the novel manifest itself in a variety of ways: from the repeated presence of condoms or “condom-like landfills” (35) to Sister Edgar’s germophobic glove compulsion. The postsecular takes place, she says, in characters’ openness to each other in the model of the Buberian “interhuman”. She borrows Taylor’s term and claims that “porousness” begins to occur metaphorically in characters like Sister Edgar who shakes hands and hugs all the people at Esmeralda’s billboard spectacle (56).

Like many critics of the novel, I agree that the major movement is toward togetherness, but I argue instead of a “porous” body, that the humoured body, or a body experiencing humour, initiates this communal force. The utterance of the laugh is the defining signifier of a transgression into DeLillo’s location of the sacred. My reading is similar to Daniel Born’s impression of DeLillo’s fiction, in his work “Sacred Noise in Don DeLillo’s Fiction,” wherein he finds the sacred in “the intersection between communal bonding, violent sacrifice, and linguistic utterance” in his reading of some of the cult-like events in other novels of DeLillo’s like *White Noise* and *The Names* (213). Born’s identification of the linguistic utterance as complicit in sacred communal ritual is prefatory to my argument insofar as laughter is treated as ritualistic in this novel, even if it is not a completely linguistic utterance.

The other aspect of postsecular discourse that Ludwig misses is the way in which humour and wonder are conflated in the novel. The novel’s secular lack of enchantment is articulated by Klara Sax’s declaration that “People weren’t saying *Oh Wow* anymore. They were saying *No way* instead and she wondered if there was something she might learn from this” (382). In spite of this, however, the novel indubitably contains many

examples of experiences of wonder and awe. One such example is laughter, which often either causes an experience of wonder, or is intrinsically connected to it in some way. For Paolo Costa, as my introduction has noted, experiences of wonder and humour are very close in nature. In accordance with Costa's assertion that "a world inhabited only by buffered selves (i.e. individuals with stable, sturdy, impervious identities) would basically be a world shorn of humour and wonder" (151), the novel suggests that community is both a prerequisite and a product of the (often enchanted) experience of humour. In this way, DeLillo's conception of the sacred incorporates the previous formations of it that we have seen in the past two chapters: the sacred is a wondrous communal bond that overpowers the buffering that imprisons the self. In the following paragraphs I will use the text to explicate the role of the humoured body in the figuration of the sacred.

Thus, to begin, following the novel's prologue, the opening scene in which Nick Shay drives into the desert contains a simple illustration of my overall argument. Ludwig asserts that Nick is the novel's quintessential buffered modern man for a number of reasons. But as John Duvall points out in his reader's guide, Nick's venture into the desert to find Klara Sax has less to do with seeing an old lover than it does his desire to find wholeness and community, or an "imagined completeness" of his past (26). It is therefore significant that during their conversation their laughter is portrayed as the vehicle for such development. Nick recounts: "We laughed again and I felt better. It was wonderful to laugh with her. I wanted her to see me. I wanted her to know I was out of there, whatever crazy mistakes I'd made--I'd come out okay" (73). The "crazy [mistake]" Nick refers to in this passage is the accidental shooting of George Manza in his youth, for

which he served time in a juvenile correction facility.<sup>19</sup> Its effect was powerfully isolating insofar as it literally relegated him to the margins of society. The assurance that Nick “felt better” after this laughter suggests very simply that the act of laughing is at least beginning to fill the need which prompted this expedition in the first place-- his need for connection. Regardless of whether or not Nick is “okay”, he requires that another see him that way; his wholeness is dependent on the other, and again, the vehicle for this transaction is laughter.

The use of the word “wonderful” in this passage is also significant as it invites the discourse of wonder into this humorous dialogue, and the affirmation that it is “wonderful to laugh *with her*” (emphasis mine) intimates that the wonder innate in laughter transpires communally. These ideas are developed in the scene when Cotter is listening to his father urinate in the upstairs bathroom. He calls it “the all-time” “king leak” and thinks, “[i]t is quickly becoming funny, the time span and force of the leak and Cotter wishes his brothers were here so they could all be amazed together” (143). The Bakhtinian humour of this anecdote relies upon incongruity; it is funny because of the loudness, force and span of the urination, and because “[y]ou usually don’t hear anything but the shower in there and noises from the pipes” (143). But most significantly, this humour produces “amaze[ment]” despite the fact that the incongruity is fairly menial and colloquial. And, during the experience of this amazement, Cotter wishes that this it could be experienced communally rather than individually. This instance is therefore exemplary of the tendency for humour in this novel to create a desire to connect with the other in the face of wonder.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the first of three “fatal shots” in Nick’s life which Ludwig reads as milestones of the novel’s postsecular trajectory (33).

The wonder of humour and laughter is amplified by its existence in a novel that largely takes place in contexts of dejection, despondency, fear, and tragedy. In fact, despite the large number of scenes of laughter, the novel's plot pivots on a spectrum of tragedies plaguing contemporary Americans: war, crime, loss, and abandonment. Rosemary's description of the state of affairs during difficult times in her life and in others' articulates the anomalousness of this faculty. She asks, "How is it we did so much laughing? How is it people came over with their empty pockets and bad backs and not so good marriages and twenty minutes later we're all laughing?" (699). This continues as a kind of anaphoric epimone in the following pages: "How is it she could laugh all night at his stories about a day in the garment district, or a day when he went to Toots Shor's famous restaurant..." (699). And again: "But how is it we did so much laughing? How is it we went dancing the night of the seven hundred dollars and we laughed and drank?" (701). This question is premised on the fact that laughter is seemingly impossible under infelicitous circumstances; that the "not so good marriages" and "bad backs" would inhibit this ability. While the Relief Theory of Humour suggests that this is precisely the time to laugh, as laughter provides the human being with a release of accumulated tension, I argue, nevertheless, that to focus on *the reason* for their laughter is to miss the point of this rhetorical device. This epimone resembles the perplexity, shock and incredulity typically experienced in an encounter with wonder or awe; the repeated question of "how," expresses the impossibility of explanation, and that this event is epistemologically out of reach. In order to understand it, one must fideistically dispose of reason. And given the number of times it is repeated, that "we did so much laughing" is portrayed here as miraculous; an event that is seemingly impossible takes place beyond

reason.

I also feel that the important detail about the miraculousness of this laughter has to do with its pronoun: “How is it *we* did so much laughing?” (emphasis mine). An answer to the question seems to be given at the end of the chapter:

But how is it we ate a German meal on 86<sup>th</sup> Street and went dancing at the Corso down the block, seven hundred dollars poorer?

There was less of her now and more of other people. She was becoming other people. Maybe that’s why they called her Rose. (701)

The truncation of Rosemary’s name represents the erasure of the self and its regeneration as hybrid or intrinsically connected to others. Rosemary’s “becoming other people” is presented as accounting for the “how” of the repeated question; they were able to do so much laughing because they opened themselves up to the other and embraced the other in themselves. Whether laughter is the vehicle for interhuman connection or the result of it, it nevertheless thrives in a communal environment.

There are also scenes in the novel where laughter, instead of being a wondrous experience on its own, is an expression of wonder perceived in other stimulus. Nick and Marian’s hot air balloon experience, for example, is quasi-religious and contains a lot of laughter. Nick describes,

Marian leaned into me and laughed, watching the land surface expand around us...[t]he pilot yanked the blast valve and we heard the burners pulse and roar and this made Marian laugh again. She talked and laughed incessantly, happy and scared...Jerry the pilot said, “We need this wind to hold just like it is. Then we make it okay, I think. But we got to be boocoo lucky.”

This Made us both laugh. We were lighter than air, laughing, and the balloon did not seem like a piece of science so much as an improvised prayer. (123-124)

The mechanism behind the hot air balloon is importantly shifted from scientific to religious, and its ability to function safely relies more upon faith than reason.

Moreover, the fact that this literal leap of faith prompts laughter from Nick and Marian suggests that choosing to perceive humour and choosing to have faith are aligned here. In fact, the presence of giddiness and fear in this scene (two typical emotions associated with the experience of wonder) contribute to its conflation of wonder and humour. The two are largely indistinguishable in this scene. Nick's account of the view from the hot air balloon provides insight into the kind of experience this is for them: "It was a heart-shaking thing to see, bursts and serpentines of color, a power in the earth, and she pulled at my sweater and looked at me. Like where are we and what are we seeing and who did it?" (125). The language of this excerpt reflects Costa's theoretical discussion of the postsecular, wherein he writes that the mood we experience in laughing, like the experience of wonder, "changes [not] a single mental representation, but our whole epistemic background, our stance toward, or better, attunement with the world" (150). The above questions that Marian's look asks reflect the defamiliarization these two are experiencing with the world as well as a renewed amazement, and their laughter is an expression of this limit experience, which is, again, experienced together. Notice that the times when Nick and Marian's bodies touch in this scene are when one of them is experiencing wonder or humour. Wonder and humour are almost the same experience in

this scene, and wonder, like the humoured body, again is, borrowing Costa's terms, a "mood" that brings people together.<sup>20</sup>

Another example of this kind of comical reception of the experience of wonder is Lenny Bruce's discussion in his comedy routine of the woman who blows smoke rings out of her vagina. He says that "[s]ome people interpret the girl's gift in a religious manner. They think it's an omen, a sign from heaven that the world is about to end" (630). Bruce's audience, witnessing this 'miracle' or 'divine message' second hand, "didn't exactly gasp, as the men in the whorehouse had, but there was a certain disquiet in the hall, underscored by a smatter of nervous laughter" (630). Like Marian's laughter in the hot air balloon, the experience of wonder or enchantment is something which evokes laughter (although the two scenes feature very different emotions). The ambiguous auditory imagery depicts the combined experience of emotions of shock, awe, and humour: a similar mixture to that of the previous scene. We can speculate that this is perhaps due to the event's incongruity with a secular world or, perhaps, to the notion that the laugh is an expression of a limit of experience that encapsulates awe, fear, and giddiness. Either way, DeLillo repeatedly ensures its involvement in scenes where miracles (or wonder) are perceived, hinting at its complicity in an enchanted world.

Bruce's own laughter during his comedy sets is described in such a way that emphasizes the connection between laughter and religion. A simile compares Lenny's bent-over laugh with prayer: "He did his hipster crack-up laugh, bending from the waist like some Hassid at serious prayer" (581). Here the humoured body is aligned with an act

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<sup>20</sup> Notice as well in this passage Nick's remark, "we were lighter than air, laughing," as it hints at DeLillo's leitmotif of affiliating laughter with a kind of transcendentalism. Later in this chapter I will discuss this in more detail.

of religious worship, and the ability for it to do so highlights their affinity. This pattern of DeLillo using the human body to dramatize religious ideas continues throughout the novel. Specifically, on a number of other occasions, the body is used to illustrate the novel's own postsecular conceptions of the sacred. For example, on a few occasions the laughing body literally touches other bodies. We have seen this in the description of the hot air balloon scene with Nick and Marian ("Marian leaned into me and laughed," (123)), but, it is also present at the ballgame in the prologue, when Jackie Gleason iterates a familiar line from "The Honeymooners" and the people around him "knock together laughing" (29). Finally, when Klara walks through what she thinks is some kind of street festival, the narrator describes her response:

She felt a static, a depth of spirit, she felt a delectation that took the form of helplessness. Like laughing helplessly as a girl, collapsing against the shoulder of your best friend. She was weak with sensation, weak with seeing and feeling. She touched and pressed. (492)

Here, the idea of laughter as connecting bodies is presented as a metaphor and is used as a means to describe the way in which Klara's quasi-spiritual enchantment causes a desire to touch and press the things around her. Laughter is also portrayed as a bodily affliction, and, in this way, is an involuntary force behind the movement of the body towards the other. In all of these examples, laughter is literally a force prompting physical connection.

Other examples are less literal in that they depict the metaphorical humoured body as degenerative; it is portrayed using idioms that force the recognition of equality between the self and the other through its metaphorical deconstruction. And, this body, afflicted by laughter, as in the examples above, creates communion. In a flashback to

Klara's youth recounting an interaction with her friend Rochelle, the narrator says (in response to a comical discussion about what the F stands for in Fred F. French), "They dissolved, as the saying goes, in laughter, they practically disappeared into their constituent elements, into atoms and molecules, a couple of girls in a gangster Packard..." (399). This exchange ostensibly "made them friends again" (399). DeLillo stresses how laughter reduces the body to its most basic "constituent elements", which, in the Bakhtinian sense, situates them at their lowest common denominator. This figurative illustration represents laughter's ability to mend friendship. For example, in this case, laughter is the mechanism which results in their being described as "a couple of girls" (emphasis mine) (instead of 'two girls', for instance).

As I alluded to earlier (see note 20), the final facet of DeLillo's treatment of laughter that I will examine in this chapter is the manner in which the novel repeatedly describes the utterance of the laugh as something uniquely transcendental. Such examples include Sister Edgar's laugh, which is described as "a high frequency laugh that travels through time and space" (811). Esther's laugh is described similarly: "She had a laugh that was two thousand years old" (477). These two descriptions indicate DeLillo's literary treatment of laughter as a metaphysically exceptional entity; it has the capacity to exist outside of rigid ontological categories. But laughter transcends in other ways as well. For example during the concert that Miles, Klara, and Esther attend, a funny incident occurs and the narrator describes how "laughter *swept* the auditorium" (441, emphasis mine). This figurative device correlates laughter with a transsubstantiative capacity, as it figuratively transforms from a sound to a physical force that can 'sweep'. But although this is not a literal description of laughter, it nevertheless highlights its

singularity; instead of describing individual laughter, the sound is described as one communal utterance.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly the uniqueness of laughter as a sound is important to DeLillo given its presence in numerous descriptions of scenery and cityscapes, and in one particular such description the narrator describes “the laughter of a dozen people” as “sounding small and precious in the night, floating over the cold soup towards skylights and domes and water tanks” (371). The novel’s tendency to hide meaning in plain sight occurs here as the quotidian banality of laughter is deemed “precious”, and again, “floats” above civilization. The physical space which laughter occupies alone in this description is an image of post-human transcendence whose capacity reaches into the night sky, the archetypical space of divinity.

This transcendence that is granted to laughter through literary figuration also often hinges on, predictably, the presence of a crowd or group. And on more than one occasion DeLillo calls this “*shared* laughter” (356, emphasis mine). This diction implies that the laughter is not choral or multifarious, but singular-- that there are not many different laughs but only shared parts of a whole. We can see this idea of laughter represented as something *whole* (by means of contrast) when Nick’s describes his boss’s laugh. He says, “I tried not to laugh a certain way myself, like Arthur Blessing laughed, our chief executive, with articulated ha-has, a slow nod of the head marking the laugh beat”(87). And later, he states, “together we laughed his wacko laugh, those enunciated ha-has, clear and slow and well spaced, like laughing with words” (120). The use of the hyphen between the “has,” and their designation as “well-spaced,” is representative of

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<sup>21</sup> This is a similar idea to that found in *Infinite Jest* wherein the sounds of the people in the stadium at Orin’s game are portrayed as singular and spiritual.

disconnection. Even the adjectives describing it are separated by the repeated conjunction “and”. Nick’s description seems to imply that Arthur’s laugh is in some way unnatural or wrong, and that this is related to its aural disjointedness. The simile “like laughing with words” attributes the aesthetics of disconnection to language. In other words, it suggests that language is inherently disjointed if the disjointedness of Arthur’s laugh is a result of its affinity to words. The simile therefore also implies that natural laughter, being extra-linguistic, is innately whole in some way, by contrast.

A similar idea is presented at the beginning of the novel during Klara Sax’s interview when she is describing her use of color and someone shouts out ““Better red than dead”” and everyone laughs (79). Here not only is laughter shared, but it is even granted its own post-lingual (almost) telepathic communicative capacity: Nick recounts,

And we all laughed. The remark had a resonance that seemed to travel on our voices, caroming off the facing walls of the space we shared. We stood and listened to our own laughter. And we all agreed together that the evening was done. (79)

Laughter in this scene is the vehicle for communal thinking. Again we see that it is characterized as transcendent insofar as it “carom[s] off the facing walls.” And, again, the word “shared” surfaces, stressing the community that laughter creates. Laughter also literally carries meaning insofar as it is the sound of this laughter, both produced and witnessed by the group, that enables a kind of communal decision or awareness that “the evening was done.” Thus, here the shared laughter of a group becomes a means to creating a kind of shared, post-linguistic communicative mind space that is unanimous (“we all agreed together”) and singular.

Laughter in *Underworld* incorporates similar tropes found in the previous two novel studies of this thesis. Discussions of transcendence and spirituality in *Underworld* relate to Thomas Pynchon's characterization of the laugh as a medium connecting humanity with the superhuman or divine. And DeLillo seems to anachronistically complete the postsecular formula set out in *Infinite Jest*, whose characters struggle to transcend their own borders let alone connect with each other. It is clear, however, that both texts exhibit not only a desire for movement towards the other, but also a faith in the importance of it; both designate this connection as sacred in a secular world. And, it is, most importantly, a product of the ability to sense and experience humour.

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

“From there to here, from here to there, funny things are everywhere.”  
—Dr. Seuss, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

Through the close reading of scenes of laughter in DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, and Pynchon’s *Vineland*, this thesis has attempted to uncover the manner in which these writers are dramatizing postsecular themes through the representation of the humoured body. In each case, laughter resurrects different facets of religion into secular worlds, and the experience of humour brings about staple components of a postsecular cosmology: enchantment, agency, and community. In *Vineland*, we see the beginnings of an awareness of the liminal ontology of laughter between the realms of the secular and the divine wherein the struggle for control reaches an egalitarian (albeit paradoxical) resolution. The novel’s form, however, contributes to the idea that this is less a utopic imagination, and more a kind of prayer or wishful thinking. In *Infinite Jest* we see that the central existential conflict is not political, in spite of the bleak depiction of a future America, but individual, and the greatest threat to humanity is not hegemony, but solipsism. As the great James O. Incandenza hoped, “Infinite Jest IV” was supposed to reverse the inward thrust of the subject by causing laughter. Laughter in this novel is depicted as salvational insofar as it can preserve the universally “sacred[...]individual choice” (that Marathe holds so dearly) (424), but fails to do so for Hal. In *Underworld*, what is sacred is not simply the ability to move outside of the self, but to connect to the other. And unlike in *Infinite Jest* where almost all instances of laughter are individual (apart from Mario Incandenza’s “involuntary thing where he laughs whenever anyone else does” (85)), characters in *Underworld* laugh

together, and their laughter not only signifies a desire for community but also, in many cases, actually forges it and asserts its religious potentiality.

The theologians and humour theorists mentioned in my introduction suggest that humour can offer us a non-dogmatic code of morality, an antidote to suffering, a reasonable cosmology and eschatology, a connection to the divine that is not hegemonic, and a connection to each other that builds community. And in each novel, one or more of these theoretical conjectures are taken up and explored in a fictional rendition of modern America. Their subtext suggests that humour is (at least theoretically) capable of fulfilling all five roles in our lives.

For these literary comedians whose works display a clear veneration of the role of humour in their postsecular projects, it is fitting that their characters laugh so frequently, so prominently, and so suggestively. The scenes of laughter that this study has examined are portals into the authors' musings on the power of humour. In all cases, laughter leads the subject in the direction of some kind of peace or transcendence, and for this reason it is consistently something to believe in. And while in two out of three cases, the faith in this idea is, at times, weak, the seeds of it are nevertheless there in novels that are self-declaredly exploratory.

The Americas presented in these novels are, as I have said, more experiments in thought than realistic depictions. But, that said, the implications of this thesis are not entirely impracticable. On a very basic level, this study prescribes a change in individual conceptions of religion as monolithic and rooted in tradition. Conceiving of religion as a response to our external world may help to alleviate some of the tension caused by perpendicular trajectories of an unchanged set of beliefs and an ever-changing world.

Much in the tradition of Mark Twain's philosophy, these novels imply that broadening the conceptual borders of religion is a truly important and beneficial practice. After all, corruption, exclusivity, and tyranny are products of the combination of religious faith and closed-mindedness as we can see in our contemporary world. Perhaps the ultimate goal of postsecularism as a discourse is to merely provide a healthy space to re-imagine and reassess. In this way, secular reason and fideistic enchantment are mutually beneficial, and we can define a 'cosmology of enchanted reason' as a system of belief wherein amendments are perpetually negotiated with an understanding of the world that is both respectful of the forces beyond us and mindful of the forces we have created.

It would seem, as the representations of these novels suggest, and as the body of theology in my introduction asserts, that we can live in a world where God does not exist, but we cannot live in a world that isn't funny. Funniness and the perception of funniness are tantamount to those elements of religion that we admit to still needing. And if these elements fulfill the needs of the postsecular condition, then it is reasonable that the theological study of humour ought to be included in the discourse of postsecularism.

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