

CHAPTER

6

**“Hidden in Plain Sight”:  
Language and the Importance of  
the Ordinary in Wallace, DeLillo  
and Wittgenstein<sup>1</sup>**

ALLARD DEN DULK AND ANTHONY LEAKER

Just look. You have to look.

Don DeLillo, “Looking at Meinhof” (28)

[It is about] simple awareness – awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: “This is water.” “This is water.”

David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (131-3)

David Foster Wallace’s fiction is often linked to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein *and* to the work of Don DeLillo, which itself has also been occasionally brought into connection with Wittgenstein. However, to our knowledge, a comparative reading of these three authors, taken together, has not yet been undertaken. This article aims to provide such a reading, examining elements of the complex relationship between their works.

The goal of this analysis is not, in itself, to establish (or deny) lines of influence. DeLillo’s influence on Wallace is well documented, not least through their own correspondence. For example, in a letter dated 11 June 1992, Wallace writes to DeLillo: “your work is very important to me, both as a reader and as a writer”<sup>2</sup>; and in his essay “E Unibus Pluram”, Wallace describes DeLillo as the “true prophet of [...] U.S. fiction” (Wallace 2002: 47).<sup>3</sup> In turn, DeLillo recognized Wallace as a fellow traveller, and in his *in memoriam* to Wallace,

DeLillo describes the former's fiction and essays as "scroll fragments of a distant future", in which a "vitality persists, a stunned vigour in the face of the complex humanity" (*Five Dials* 2010: 13).<sup>4</sup>

Nor is it our goal to claim (or deny) a direct influence of Wittgenstein on Wallace and DeLillo. As to these connections: Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), mentions Wittgenstein several times. Wallace himself repeatedly asserted his adherence to later Wittgenstein's view of language. In an interview he states: "Wittgenstein's conclusions seem completely sound to me, always have" (McCaffery 1993: 144). In another article, Wallace writes: "I like to fancy myself a fan of the work of [Wittgenstein]" (Wallace 1990: 218). DeLillo makes reference to Wittgenstein in *End Zone* (1972), and speaks favourably of his work in an early interview: "I like the way he uses the language [...] even in translation, it is very evocative" (quoted in Cowart 2002: 243n2).

Instead, by reading Wallace's and DeLillo's work in light of the philosophy of later Wittgenstein, we hope to achieve a better understanding of the writings of both novelists, of the connections between them, and thereby of important currents in contemporary American fiction. Several scholars have suggested the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for understanding the work of *either* DeLillo *or* Wallace (e.g. Cowart 2002, Boxall 2006, Boswell 2003; cf. Leaker 2012, Den Dulk 2015). However, as mentioned above, there is no extensive *combined* analysis of their fiction in light of Wittgenstein. Thinking about Wallace's and DeLillo's work in relation to the philosophy of Wittgenstein will enable us to resist and critique the postmodernist perspectives frequently invoked in DeLillo and Wallace scholarship,<sup>5</sup> but also to avoid recourse to traditionalist conceptions of language and meaning. What Wittgenstein, Wallace and DeLillo can be seen to share is the desire to replace the misperceptions (caused by abstract, self-reflective thinking) of how language functions and to regain our ability to give meaningful expression to the real world. This paper will offer some first outlines of these connections, focusing on DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972) and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996).

Again, the significance of the one novel for the other is no secret. For example, Wallace wrote to DeLillo that the Eschaton section in *Infinite Jest* "owes a rather uncomfortable debt to certain exchanges between Gary Harkness and Major Staley in *End Zone*".<sup>6</sup> Various scholars have also noted *Infinite Jest's* debt to *End Zone*. Mark Bresnan and Stephen Burn both identify clear correspondences between the two novels, such as: athletes who are aspiring sports casters; "coaches who oversee practice from a position of godlike omniscience in a tower"; the 'interweaving' of sports and apocalyptic

war games; and exceptionally literate and drug-addicted athletes in search of meaningful existence, of self-transcendence (Bresnan 2008: 67, Burn 2004: 48).

In both *Infinite Jest* and *End Zone* the focus on *transcendence* – as the experience of something pure, sublime, rapturous, sacred, deeper – is intrinsically related to a focus on the *ordinary* – that is, the experience of the everyday, the simple, the things that are in front of us all the time. Both novels’ portrayals of their athlete characters, who live lives of isolated and rigorous training, function as a depiction and critique of the emptying out of meaningful language (leading to scepticism), and of its relation to a theorizing, self-reflective attitude (leading to solipsism). This critique, and thus the connection between the novels that provide it, can be better understood in light of later Wittgenstein’s philosophy. The analysis of these connections between Wittgenstein, Wallace and DeLillo will show that all three emphasize the importance of changing the way we tend to see things, demystify excessive theorizing, and emphasize instead the value of the ‘ordinary’, as a route toward meaningful experience.

### **Apocalyptic Horizons, Postmodernism and Wittgenstein**

DeLillo’s novels in general, and *End Zone* in particular, are set against a horizon of impending apocalypse. That *End Zone* (published in 1972 and set in a non-specific present) focuses on the Cold War anxiety of nuclear destruction, might seem an important difference with *Infinite Jest* (published in 1996 and situated slightly in the future, in relation to the novel’s publication date). However, as the 1990s witnessed the replacement of nuclear anxiety with the threat of terrorism and connected anxieties about new sources and methods of large-scale destruction, one could argue that the idea of the world moving towards a certain disastrous fate has merely changed form. *Infinite Jest* captures these new anxieties via its background plot of Quebecois wheelchair terrorists and national intelligence services both wanting to retrieve the master copy of the lethal film ‘Infinite Jest’.

Moreover, instead of focusing purely on a fear of nuclear war or terrorism, *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest*, in fact, address a deeper cultural anxiety, namely: a crisis of meaning, of meaningful language and thus of meaningful experience. In *Infinite Jest* the possible dissemination of the eponymous lethal film, leading to catatonia and death, appears to figure as the novel’s impending apocalypse, while, in fact, disaster has already realized itself, as most of the novel’s enormous cast of characters already suffer from depression, anhedonia, solipsistic “death in

life” (Wallace 1996: 698). In *End Zone*, too, the anxiously anticipated future is in fact already there. While nuclear war remains at a future distance, the world is already filled with despair. At the end of the novel, protagonist Gary Harkness seems to try to commit suicide, thereby, as David Cowart writes, “enacting a death wish that may be culture-wide” (Cowart 2002: 29).

In *End Zone*, this existential crisis is symbolized – thereby connecting the crisis to matters of language – by several instances of words losing their meaning (which will be addressed in the following section). Such instances might seem to invite a postmodernist reading, and this could be seen as another significant connection with *Infinite Jest*: as said, both novels and novelists have been read through the optic of postmodernism. To clarify: by ‘postmodernism’ we mean, here, approaches typically offering an ironic, critical account of contemporary culture and capital that undermines traditional, logocentric, foundational forms of discourse and epistemology, often adopting the work of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, in this case as a means of thinking through the issues DeLillo’s and Wallace’s novels raise. However, although there is a great deal in DeLillo’s and Wallace’s work that invites postmodernist readings, we believe that such readings inevitably fail to address some of the core features of the work of both authors. But we equally want to resist traditional metaphysical conceptions of meaning and language that are used to counter the postmodern strain in the works in question (e.g. Bonca 1996, Maltby 1996). Whereas the traditional view has to privilege the transcendent (as the locus of ‘essential’ truth) over the ordinary, the postmodernist deconstruction of both notions problematizes their meaningful functioning, and therefore is at odds with their role in the novels in question.

On the one hand, to read *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest*, via their portrayal of situations in which meaningful language is undermined, as ‘unmasking’ notions of truth or epiphany to be illusory, and thus embodying the ‘depthlessness’ often associated with postmodernism, would require one to overlook the many descriptions of transcendence that are central to both novels. On the other hand, “postmodernism’s disavowal of reality” (Hutchinson 2001: 119) – through its focus on image culture, the apparent loss of the ‘real’, and the commodification of materiality – also prevents a clear view of DeLillo’s and Wallace’s concern with the simple, real materiality of daily life.

In the case of *End Zone*, both David Cowart and Peter Boxall connect the novel’s references to the ineffable to the thought of *early* Wittgenstein, and to the latter’s distinction between what can and *cannot* be said – captured by the famous final proposition of

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 1961: 151 [7]). For example, Cowart and Boxall examine the way in which *End Zone*’s protagonist Gary Harkness is engaged with Wittgenstein’s early ideas on the limitations of language and mystical claims concerning “the realities beyond language that silence harbours” (Cowart 2002: 28; cf. Boxall 2006: 42).<sup>7</sup> This results in a reading of *End Zone* in which the transcendent and the ordinary remain in an opposition that cannot be resolved, thereby overlooking the fact that the actual realizations of transcendence, the – as Boxall calls them – “transfiguring epiphanies” portrayed in *End Zone*, occur within the ordinary, immanently (Boxall 2006: 46). Interestingly, the result of such a reading is not very different from a postmodernist one that displaces both notions, placing them beyond reach, requiring endless postponement of their (meaningful) use.<sup>8</sup>

However, this idea – that the transcendent, the meaningful must necessarily reside beyond language, in the ‘unsayable’, and therefore ‘unreachable’ – is in fact *critiqued* via the novels’ portrayal of some of the characters’ conviction of the inadequacy of language to express the world and to express themselves. In *End Zone*, this is ridiculed through character Billy Mast taking a course in ‘the untellable’: “Knowledge of German was a prerequisite for being refused admission”, “I think the theory is if any words exist beyond speech, they’re probably German words, or pretty close” (DeLillo 2004: 69, 173). It leads the characters of these novels to a cerebral, solipsistic struggle with the ‘unsayable’. In *Infinite Jest*, compare, for example, the repeated declaration of several severely addicted characters that ‘addict’ is “just a word” or that they want to hear the “exact definition” of that term, that is, self-reflectively rejecting the possibility that words might adequately express who they are (Wallace 1996: 1066n321, 205).

These elements from *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* constitute a critique of excessive theorizing that leads to scepticism, according to which the world cannot be accurately described but merely revealed as a construct and thus seems to ‘disappear’, fostering a *solipsism* in which only this continued self-questioning can be seen to prosper. This is a critique (aimed, in a sense, at ‘philosophical’ self-reflection) that we can clearly recognize in later Wittgenstein as well, for example when he writes that, in such reflection, “language *goes on holiday*”: “The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work” (Wittgenstein 2001: 16<sup>c</sup>, 44<sup>c</sup> [ §§38, 132]). Moreover, the following sections will show that thinking about DeLillo’s and Wallace’s work in relation to the philosophy of later

Wittgenstein (instead of a traditional or postmodernist view of language) *does* provide us with a clear, comprehensive view of their concern with both transcendent elements as well as the materiality of daily life, and functions as a critique of the solipsistic fascination with the ‘unsayable’.

### **Loss of Meaning, War Gaming and Fallacious Language-Use**

*End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* might be said to show two types of engagement with language – two types of ‘language-games’, to use a Wittgensteinian term. The first type consists of moments when words lose their meaning, when boundaries of meaningful language use are blurred, and truth seems to disappear, becomes ‘unsayable’ (the second type, which might be seen to constitute an alternative to this, will be addressed in the next section).

In *End Zone*, we can recognize this first type in, for example, the descriptions of football player Bobby Luke and of Mrs. Tom’s plane crash. The only thing Bobby Luke is known to say is that “he would go through a brick wall for Coach Creed”. Protagonist Gary Harkness reflects:

Young athletes were always saying that sort of thing about their coaches. But Bobby became famous for it because he said practically nothing else. [...] Men followed such words to their death because other men before them had done the same, and perhaps it was easier to die than admit that words could lose their meaning (DeLillo 2004: 50-1).

In another example, when Mrs. Tom, the Logos College principal, is involved in a plane crash, word travels around campus, and the same standard formulations – that she was on a “light plane”, which “overshot the runway”, and that Mrs. Tom is “on the critical list” – are repeated so often that they lose meaning; within the space of less than two pages of dialogue, the formulation “light plane” is repeated 4 times, “overshot the runway” 8 times, and “on the critical list” 7 times. As Boxall writes: “In this trading of the ready-made phrase, it is precisely the referent that goes missing” (Boxall 2006: 43-4).

We can find similar descriptions of words losing their meaning in *Infinite Jest*. For example, when the ETA students describe their fatigue in the following, self-conscious way:

‘Tard tard tard’ [...]

‘So tired it’s out of tired’s word-range,’ Pemulis says. [...]

‘Wrung dry. Whacked. Tuckered out. More dead than alive.’

‘None even come close these words.’

‘Word-inflation,’ Stice says (Wallace 1996: 100).

In another example, Tiny Ewell, when confronted with his alcohol addiction, insists on hearing the “exact definition” of the word ‘*alcoholic*’, rejecting the possibility that this word, and words in general (which are, apparently, ‘just’ words), might describe him in an accurate, meaningful way (Wallace 1996: 205).

More specifically, throughout *End Zone*, characters repeatedly draw an analogy between the language of football and that of nuclear warfare. Harkness is initiated into the language of war-gaming by Air Force instructor Major Staley, who thinks that nuclear warfare will take on a “humane” form, as the result of mutual agreements between the parties at war: “There’d be all sorts of controls. You’d practically have a referee and a timekeeper”, he says, invoking the analogy with football, as another form of controlled aggression, demarcated by a clear set of rules (DeLillo 2004: 77).<sup>9</sup>

But, as Cowart notes: “[this] analogy must break down sooner or later. The analogy between football and war [must not be taken as comprehensive] [...] one is played by rules [...], the other only deceives itself with rules” (Cowart 2002: 27). We can thus see that *End Zone* invokes the analogy precisely to illustrate its fallacious character. This is shown via the clearly self-deceived ideas of Major Staley, who, although he is portrayed as humble and earnest, is also shown to be sterile and out of touch with lived reality.<sup>10</sup> The analogy is also explicitly challenged when one of the Logos College teachers says: “I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don’t need substitutes because we have the real thing” (DeLillo 2004: 105). Burn points out that *Infinite Jest*’s Marlon Bain seems to paraphrase this passage from *End Zone* in his letter to Hugh ‘Helen’ Steeply: “pay no attention to Orin’s defense of football as ritualized substitute for armed conflict. Armed conflict is plenty ritualized on its own, and since we have real armed conflict [...] there is no need or purpose for a substitute” (Wallace 1996: 1047n269). As Burn observes, this statement “strongly echoes” the refutation of fallacious analogical language-use formulated in *End Zone* (Burn 2004: 43).

*Infinite Jest*’s Eschaton episode, a reworking of *End Zone*’s penultimate chapter, in which “Harkness and Major Staley war-game their way to Armageddon in twelve easy steps” (Cowart 2002: 23), can be seen as a continuation of this critique – a critique of the confusion of

language-games that blur how we see and understand different aspects of reality. Eschaton is a nuclear war simulation game played by the students of the Enfield Tennis Academy. During the Eschaton game that *Infinite Jest* describes in detail, it starts to snow in Enfield, and a quarrel breaks out among the participants as to whether the snow falling on the tennis courts affects the nuclear war being simulated there – that is, whether it only affects the ‘map’ (the tennis courts) on which they are playing, or also the territory (that is, the world) represented by that map.

In a postmodernist conception of language, the analogy between football and war is both invited and disrupted by the endless ‘play’ of language, and consequently the two concepts cannot be strictly separated. The Eschaton episode can be seen as a critique of this postmodernist blurring of meaningful boundaries. The featured debate about the relation between reality and representation needs to be read in light of Jorge Luis Borges’ well-known fable “On Exactitude in Science”, about a map that completely coincides with reality, causing the territory (reality) to gradually disappear, leaving just the map (that is, the ‘artificial representation’). Borges’s fable – also used by Baudrillard, in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), as an apt illustration of the contemporary, postmodernist condition – has come to exemplify the postmodernist idea that the ‘artificiality’ of representation infects or even completely usurps reality.

However, in the Eschaton episode this distinction between reality and representation is quite clear. As Michael Pemulis – the “eminence grise” of Eschaton – says: “It’s snowing on the goddamn map, not the territory [...] Real-world snow isn’t a factor if it’s falling on the fucking map!” (Wallace 1996: 333, 334). Still, the issue is exploited by some of the students to disrupt the game play. The novel connects the ensuing debate to a theorizing, highly self-reflective inclination to abstraction and generalization, and to thereby losing sight of the practice of the specific situation concerned. During the debate, Hal Incandenza is described as getting “lost in a paralytic thought-helix”, as he realizes that he finds the “real-snow/unreal-snow snag in the Eschaton extremely abstract but somehow way more interesting than the Eschaton itself” (335).

Pemulis, however, characterizes the dispute as resulting from “equivocatory horseshit” (337), which he counters with the following Wittgensteinian arguments. A language or a game presupposes the existence of reality. As Pemulis says: “[that] is what makes Eschaton and its axioms fucking possible in the first place. [...] it’s like preaxiomatic” (338). A language/game exists by the grace of a group of people dealing with each other and the world in a certain way. That

reality outside the language/game cannot be doubted; it is presupposed. The grammar of the language (or: ‘the rules of the game’) is in fact a determination of the relation of that group of people to reality: these rules determine how reality is to be handled. That language/games determine how reality is to be treated, instead of language being determined by the ‘nature’ of reality (as traditionalist views of language would have it), is what is called – both on the postmodernist and Wittgensteinian account – the ‘autonomous’ or ‘arbitrary’ character of language.

However, in the postmodernist view this ‘arbitrariness’ means that language is always equivocal, ambiguous, polysemic. As a result, supposedly, there is no such thing as ‘normal’ meaning directly understood: misapprehension is an essential, inevitable possibility with every utterance. Understanding an utterance always requires interpretation. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, strongly opposes such an interpretivist view. The ideal of pure and exact definition is not derived from how language actually works, but imposed on language by philosophy: the ideal of purity sends us on a quest without end – just like the endless postmodernist postponement of affirmation that springs from the *deconstruction* of this illusory ideal –, and impedes our ability to understand language in the right way.

Wittgenstein often compares the arbitrariness of the rules of a language to that of the rules of a game, for example, chess: “the purpose of the rules of chess is not to correspond to the essence of chess but to the purpose of the game of chess” (quoted in Baker and Hacker 1985: 331). We can of course decide, while playing chess, to ignore the existing rules and make up new ones, but then we are not playing chess anymore, and there is a good chance that our opponent does not understand what we are doing (as in the Eschaton game, which ends in a massive fight). The space or freedom of movement within language is limited by the structures within which the language is used and that enable a certain utterance (or move) to have meaning (which is why in *End Zone* the analogical assumption of the language of football for understanding nuclear war is shown to be fallacious). The same holds for the ETA students playing Eschaton: to be able to do so, they have to commit to the rules of the game that imply a certain relation to reality. It is *not* possible, says Pemulis, when “asswipes like Jeffrey Joseph Penn run roughshod over the delimiting boundaries that are Eschaton’s very life blood” (Wallace 1996: 335). Such sceptical blurring of meaningful boundaries, resulting from excessive theorizing, which we also saw criticized in *End Zone*, exemplifies the conception of subjectivity that according to Wittgenstein leads to solipsism.<sup>11</sup> (Here, it is also significant to note that in *Infinite Jest* the

nuclear war simulation escalates into actual aggression because of this blurring of meaningful boundaries.)

In the postmodernist view, the essential impossibility of precise definitions results in the ambiguity of language that forms the ‘seed-bed’ of deconstruction, which is not a process resulting from (or controllable by) choices and decisions, but something that is ‘at work’ in language itself. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, shows that a language-game always presupposes a limit to possible doubt, a limit set by the life-form shared by a group of people. Wittgenstein summarizes his analysis of the actual functioning of language by stating: “ordinary language is all right” (Wittgenstein 1998: 28).

### **Transcendence, the Ordinary and Meaningful Language**

The claim that ‘ordinary language is all right’ needs to be seen in conjunction with Wittgenstein’s claim that “nothing is hidden” (Wittgenstein 2001: 109<sup>e</sup> [§435]). He writes that, paradoxically, “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes)” (43<sup>e</sup> [§129]). Therefore, insight – into the transcendent, the meaningful – is to be found in the process of returning to the ordinary and properly attending to it. Wittgenstein attempts to show that the satisfaction or answers we seek from metaphysical questions can be provided by a turn or *return* to the ordinary, but seen in a specific way – by “seeing connexions”, “arranging what we have always known” (42<sup>e</sup>, 40<sup>e</sup> [§§122, 109]). And because of this ‘*re-arranged* seeing’, the ordinary (‘what we have always known’), may, paradoxically, ‘feel’ metaphysical.

We can clearly recognize similar ideas in *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest*, in the actual realizations of transcendence – the “transfiguring epiphanies” – occurring within the ordinary: for example, the simple games played by Harkness and his fellow students in *End Zone*, and the simple, ‘clichéd’ interactions of ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ (AA) in *Infinite Jest*. This relates to what was mentioned above, namely that *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* might be said to show us two types of ‘language-games’. The first type, discussed in the previous section, consists of moments when words lose their meaning, when boundaries of meaningful language use are blurred, and truth seems to disappear, becomes ‘unsayable’. The second type of language-game, however, allows for the opening up to the transcendent found in the ordinary (an opening up to meaningfulness, to beauty).

In *End Zone*, a first instance of this can be recognized in a different example of words losing their meaning, namely Harkness’s father hanging up in his son’s room a sign that reads “When the going gets tough the tough get going”. This clichéd expression comes to function to the opposite effect of, for example, Bobby Luke’s expression. Harkness describes the effect as follows:

[I looked at this sign for three years] before I began to perceive a certain beauty in it. The sentiment of course had small appeal but it seemed that beauty flew from the words themselves [...]. All meaning faded. The words became pictures. It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings. A strange beauty that sign began to express (DeLillo 2004: 16-7).

Here, a wall plate cliché acquires meaning and beauty, by *losing* its initial (clichéd) meaning. The words in question do so by ‘becoming pictures’ – a formulation that brings to mind early Wittgenstein’s picture theory, while also reversing it. Because, in ‘becoming pictures’, words, here, *lose* meaning, instead of *acquiring* it by ‘picturing’ reality, as early Wittgenstein has it. Also, notice how Harkness’s experience is an example of ‘rearranged seeing’: he comes to see something as beautiful that, reflectively, he had initially discarded as clichéd and without value. Here, this might be seen to symbolize both that meaning can arise from clichés, and that words do not acquire a clear, fixed meaning in their attempt to refer to, picture the world, but in their connection to the communal practices of human beings, as later Wittgenstein holds.

Early on in *End Zone*, we encounter an example of transcendence found in such an ordinary communal practice, in the novel’s description of the children’s game ‘Bang You’re Dead’ among the football players of Logos College:

It’s an extremely simpleminded game. [...] You had to fall if you were shot. The game depended on this.

It went on for six or seven days. At first, naturally enough, I thought it was all very silly, even for a bunch of bored and lonely athletes. Then I began to change my mind. Suddenly, beneath its bluntness, the game seemed compellingly intricate. [...] [Afterwards] I would think of it with affection because of its scenes of fragmentary beauty, because it brought men closer together [...] and because it breached the long silence (30-2).

Again, the rearranged seeing, the simplicity and rule-dependency of the game are emphasized, resulting in community, beauty, and meaning.

This occurrence is mirrored by a similar ‘transfiguring’ game towards the end of the novel – a game of pick-up football in the snow: “Jim Deering brought a football out to the parade grounds and we played for several hours in the fresh snow. [...] The idea was to keep playing, keep moving, get it going again” (184). The players gradually ban different kinds of passes and plays, simplifying the game, as it starts to snow ever more heavily:

in time it was almost impossible to see beyond the limits of the parade grounds. It was lovely to be hemmed in that way [...]. We were part of the weather, right inside it, isolated from objects on the land, from land, from perspective itself. There were no spectators now; we were totally alone. I was beginning to enjoy skidding and falling. I didn’t even try to retain my balance when I felt myself slipping. Certain reflexes were kept slack; it seemed fitting to let the conditions determine how our bodies behaved. We were adrift within this time and place and what I experienced then, speaking just for myself, was some variety of environmental bliss (185).

Again, the ‘basic’ nature and simplicity of the setting, of the rules, are emphasized (the ‘limits’ are clear, with only the playing field visible, and nothing ‘beyond’ it). These make the players merge with their environment, without thinking about ‘perspective’, without ‘spectators’, and without striving for full control, but, instead, keeping ‘certain reflexes slack’ – which might all be seen as references to the absence of paralyzing self-reflection. The players enjoy fully immersing themselves in the game that they play so often, but that now brings about a joy, a transcendent ‘bliss’ that is not encountered in the novel’s descriptions of ‘normal’ football practice and games.

In *Infinite Jest* we might recognize the arising of transcendence from a stripping-down of a sport to its simplest, constitutive relations, in Schitt’s tennis philosophy, which focuses on the player’s relation to the other, the ‘opponent’, as a partner in a dance, and on the lines of the tennis court as the basic coordinates enabling their ‘encounter’ (Wallace 1996: 459). However, in *Infinite Jest* the game of tennis (which, despite Schitt’s ideas, remains an individual experience, as opposed to the team activity of football), and the ETA students’ experience of their sport functions mostly as a symbol of the solipsistic attitude that the novel critiques.

Rather, it is in *Infinite Jest*’s descriptions of the workings of ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ that we can most clearly recognize descriptions of “transfiguring epiphanies” similar to those in *End Zone*. Gately tells newly admitted residents of Ennet House: “the vapider the

AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers” (446). Such statements are aimed against the addicts’ (excessive) self-reflective tendencies (to distrust the clichéd, the simple, as by definition incapable of capturing the individual addict’s ‘unique’ experience). Gately’s counsellor, Gene M., compares AA to a box of Betty Crocker Cake Mix: “[all Gately had to do was] follow the directions on the side of the fucking box. [...] if he just followed the childish directions, a cake would result” (467). Through a dutiful execution of AA’s simple directives, including the task to pray to a Higher Power, Gately eventually overcomes his (self-reflective) distrust of those directives:

he found it embarrassing to get down on his knees in his underwear, and like the other guys in the room he always pretended his sneakers were like way under the bed and he had to stay down there a while to find them and get them out, when he prayed, but he did it, and beseeched the ceiling and thanked the ceiling (467).

Thereby, Gately also overcomes his *addiction* and experiences transcendence, as a simple experience of the moment, as the manifestation of his freedom:

after maybe five months Gately was riding the Greenie at 0430 to go clean human turds out of the Shattuck shower and all of a sudden realized that quite a few days had gone by since he’d even thought about Demerol or Talwin or even weed. [...] He was, in a way, Free. It was the first time he’d been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten (467-8).

It is on his way to the most mundane (one could even say degrading) of tasks (cleaning out human excrement) that Gately experiences this transcendent realization. The main obstacle impeding this realization, this re-arranged seeing of the present, is the addict’s tendency towards abstract self-reflection, Gately observes: “everything unendurable was in the head, was the head not Abiding in the Present” (860-1). AA helps Gately return from the addict’s solipsistic disconnection from the world to the simple reality of the present moment – this is what AA is aimed at: “It’s a gift, the Now [...]: it’s no accident they call it *The Present*” (859).

These “transfiguring epiphanies” from *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* are very much like the experience of the return to the ordinary that Wittgenstein describes. They are brought about by what Wittgenstein calls a “[changed] *way of looking at things*” (Wittgenstein 2001: 49<sup>e</sup> [§144]). This gives the experience of the ordinary the air of religious

revelation, the appearance and magical effect of metaphysical insight. Wittgenstein speaks of finding “the liberating word” (Wittgenstein 1993: 165). This word functions not by unlocking a secret or by revealing hidden truths, but by making problems disappear. The liberation is not an insight into ‘true reality’ or an otherworldly realm; it is the liberation of “peace” (Wittgenstein 2001: 44<sup>e</sup> [§133]). Wittgenstein writes: “The problems are dissolved in the actual sense of the word – like a lump of sugar in water” (Wittgenstein 1993: 183).

### **In Closing: ‘Hidden in Plain Sight’**

We already mentioned that Wittgenstein describes such transfigurations as rooted in the seeing, the noticing of things that were previously “hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity”, “because [...] always before one’s eyes” (Wittgenstein 2001: 43<sup>e</sup> [§129]). It is interesting to note that we can find similar references to the need for ‘simple attention’ throughout the work of Wallace and DeLillo. Whether it is Wallace, emphasizing, in *This Is Water*, the “awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: ‘This is water’” (Wallace 2009: 131-3).<sup>12</sup> Or that we read in DeLillo’s short story “Looking at Meinhof”: “Just look. You have to look” (DeLillo 2002: 28). Or the following passage from Wallace’s *The Pale King*, on the topic of boredom and attention, which clearly echoes Wittgenstein’s afore-mentioned description: “[There may] be more to it... as in vastly more, right before us all, hidden by virtue of its size” (Wallace 2011: 85). Or that, in an interview, DeLillo talks of his “sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments”, adding: “there is something that we tend to miss” (quoted in DeCurtis 1991: 63). These mottos of meaningful experience and description, of epiphany to be found in the ordinary, *hidden in plain sight*, point us towards the strong connections between the perspectives of Wittgenstein, Wallace and DeLillo – which we should take care not to miss.

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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This paper derives part of its content from: Leaker 2012, Den Dulk 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Wallace to DeLillo, d.d. 11 June 1992, <http://kottke.org.s3.amazonaws.com/dfw/DFW-DD.pdf> [Accessed 15 May 2016].

<sup>3</sup> In another letter, from 1995, Wallace writes to DeLillo: “Because I tend both to think I’m uniquely afflicted and to idealize people I admire, I tend to imagine you never having had to struggle with any of this narcissism or indulgence stuff” (Max 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> cf. DeLillo in: “Endnotes” [24:00].

<sup>5</sup> “[D]ebate in DeLillo criticism has been organised around DeLillo’s response to postmodernity” (Boxall 2006: 12); “Wallace is often labelled a ‘postmodern’ writer” (Boswell 2003: 1); cf. Bresnan 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Wallace to DeLillo, d.d. 11 June 1992, <http://kottke.org.s3.amazonaws.com/dfw/DFW-DD.pdf> [Accessed 15 May 2016].

<sup>7</sup> Boxall also examines how Wittgenstein’s thought is central to the concerns of DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star* (1976). He suggests that the character Edna Lown embodies the contradiction between early and late Wittgenstein: that despite her belief that everything can be expressed, she remains “in the thrall of the *Tractatus*” and the lure of the inexpressible. “Wittgenstein’s famous paean to silence”, Boxall claims, seems to “offer the guiding spirit to her notes” (Boxall 2006: 67).

<sup>8</sup> As Ralph Shain remarks: “metaphilosophically, Derrida’s views are closer to the *Tractatus* than to the *Investigations*” (Shain 2005: 83).

<sup>9</sup> cf. Cowart 2002: 23.

<sup>10</sup> cf. Cowart 2002: 23.

<sup>11</sup> For a more elaborate and detailed version of the preceding argument, regarding the relation between Wittgenstein and the Eschaton episode, *Infinite Jest* and Wallace’s work in general, see Chapter 5 of: Den Dulk 2015.

<sup>12</sup> In *This Is Water*, the titular ‘reminder’ follows the recounting of the ‘fish story’ that is also included in *Infinite Jest*, and that is taken up in DeLillo’s play *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005) as well – with the young fish in the story wondering: “What the fuck is water”? (Wallace 1996: 445; DeLillo 2005: 77).

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