

A Book Without Meaning:
Why You Aren't Happy With the Ending of *Infinite Jest*

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ABSTRACT:

The novel *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996 by David Foster Wallace, has a polarizing effect on its audience. Having finished it, readers tend to fall into the opposing camps of either scathing hate or cult-like devotion. Strangely, the reason for these two contrary points of view is, I believe, the same. The reason *Infinite Jest* is so simultaneously magnetic and frustrating is because it is a book that is totally lacking in meaning, at least in the traditional novelistic sense. In this essay, I demonstrate through the works of two literary theorists, Georg Lukacs and M.M. Bakhtin, how Wallace manages to create a novel of almost a thousand pages without any trace of unified meaning.

The wistful term “transcendental homelessness” was coined by Georg Lukacs in 1916, in a little book called *The Theory of the Novel*. It refers to the longing of all souls for the place in which they once belonged, and the “nostalgia... for utopian perfection, a nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality” (70). According to Lukacs, everyone has a sense that he or she once belonged somewhere. However, this place has been lost, and the purpose of human life is to once again find this place. The search for this place of belonging, for the “home” that will once more fill life with meaning, is the fundamental structure of the novel.

To better understand Lukacs’ conception of the novel and how it relates (or doesn’t relate) to *Infinite Jest*, it is useful to look at his comparisons between literary forms, particularly between the epic and the novel. The primary difference between these two forms is not just style or content; it is that these two forms reflect vastly different realities of the time periods in which they occur. The world of the epic, of Homer and the Greeks, was one which Lukacs considered a true totality, replete with meaning and brimming with purpose. This is the age when the world is the soul’s home, when the soul does not need to search for a place to which to belong because it has always belonged. While Lukacs does not explicitly say what special power existed for the Greeks that held their world together so tightly, it can be assumed that it was the gods – the Olympian gods who were doubted by no one, whose divine presence justified the lives of the Greeks. After all, Lukacs also describes brief periods that came after the time of the Greeks which could also be considered totalities – “in Giotto and Dante, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Pisano, St. Thomas and St. Francis, the world became round once more” (37). The one factor that all these artists have in common is that their works have

religious significance. In other words, these works are devoted to a God whose existence fills the world with meaning and gives the soul a place to which to belong in the cosmos (they can be considered epics). However, just as Socrates came along and began to question the foundations of all that the Greeks believed in, something always happens to threaten the completeness of such a rounded world. When this happens, the epic is no longer a viable art form. The epic is a tale of a world that is held together, and without the gods, everything in the world flies apart. To reflect this fragmentation, the novel form arose.

The world that is reflected in the form of the novel is the world that produces “transcendental homelessness” in the soul. In a world without a God to provide meaning, the soul finds nothing that corresponds to it in the exterior world. It is in such a world that Lukacs differentiates between “essence” and “life”, two terms that held the same meaning when the world of the epic still existed. In this no longer immanent world, the divide between the interior and exterior becomes apparent. When nothing in the world seems familiar or meaningful, the soul retreats to the interior, for the exterior is harsh, absurd and uncaring. It was not simply that meaning was no longer immanent in life, but that the “essence” which made life meaningful fled from this planet, and has existed ever since only in a realm that is *beyond* life. For the lost souls wandering the earth, essence exists only as an idea of how life “should be” (47). The “desperate intensity” of the should-be is the tormenting question that defines the novel hero’s psychology. Like the homeless soul, the novel hero is subconsciously aware of the sense that once it belonged somewhere. This psychology, a psychology of the author which has been objectivised in the novel, is the naïve and inescapable belief that meaning can still be found in the world,

that the soul has a purpose that is capable of being accomplished in reality. As Lukacs quotes Novalis saying, it is the “radiant youthful faith that ‘destiny and soul are twin names for a single concept’” (85).

This is what sets the novel apart from the epic – it is the fact that the hero of the novel, unlike the heroes of Homer, is problematic. “If the individual is unproblematic, his aims are given to him with immediate obviousness”, but the novel hero has no clear goals, only a vaguely cohesive momentum that pushes him to find the elusive meaning of life, to make *real* the “should-be”. However, his ideas of what meaning ought to look like and feel like find no correlates outside of the soul; they become ideals, and are fugitives of the real world. This “positing of ideas as unrealizable and, in the empirical sense, as unreal... destroys the immediate problem-free organic nature of the individual” (78).

In a world without God, meaning can never be found in the exterior – unfiltered reality is inherently meaningless. Thus, although the structure of the whole novel is the hero’s search, he will never find the essence and the immanence of life that he is looking for. He will be “destroyed by trying to turn his faith into reality” and will eventually be “forced to see the uselessness of the struggle and the final victory of reality” (85). At this point, the novel seems to be in quite a grim situation. However, Lukacs has a solution for it; indeed, crushing and brutal disillusionment is not the sensation that accompanies the conclusion of every novel. There is a way that the novel hero overcomes the utter disappointment of discovering that meaning is utterly impossible, and it is through self-recognition. The hero must find out “through experience that a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer, and that this glimpse is the only thing worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been

justified” (80). Thus, ultimately failing at finding a meaning which will marry the interiority of his soul with the exteriority of the world, the hero paradoxically gains immanence in his life through realizing the impossibility of his goal. It is his individual search that finally gives his life meaning, and not the presence of an outside force that fills the world with essence. Therefore, we can conclude that the individual is of utmost importance in making life immanent; it is clear that Lukacs considers the power of the individual to be crucial to the form of the novel.

The question at hand, then, is whether or not Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* follows the formula set out by Lukacs, which is supposed to be a typology of the whole novel form. If it is not, should *Infinite Jest* not be considered a novel? Or what significance does it carry for the future of the novel form?

In order to answer these questions, a basic question is raised: what is *Infinite Jest* about? This turns out to be an infuriatingly difficult question to answer. An impromptu response to this question might sound something like, “Well, it’s about this kid who goes to a tennis academy and also this man at a drug and alcohol recovery house, and the kid is trying to quit marijuana and the man, who is mostly recovered from the variety of hard drugs he used to do, gets shot trying to protect one of the recovery patients in the house, but their stories don’t really cross except that the recovery house is down the street (or hill) from the tennis academy, and there are these violent rebels from Quebec who want to separate from Canada, and they are all in wheelchairs, and they’re looking for something called the Entertainment which is a cartridge (video) which is so lethally fun to watch that anyone who watches it turns into a vegetable, and the guy who made this video happens to be the father of the kid who is addicted to marijuana, except he (the

dad) committed suicide a couple years back by sticking his head in the microwave... oh, and all of the U.S.A.'s New England has been converted to a toxic waste dump.”

A good way to look at the plot of *Infinite Jest* – if it can even be considered a plot – is to consider a term that is used by film critics in the novel to describe the work of the aforementioned suicidal father of the marijuana addict; this is the term “anticonfluential”. This is a word probably coined by Wallace himself, as it is not in the dictionary, and such words are rampant in *Infinite Jest*. The base word, “confluent”, can be used to describe a branch that flows into the main stream, or else a number of branches flowing together. Thus, we can deduce that “anticonfluential” means separate branches – or plot lines – that never come together. This would sound familiar to anyone who has ever read *Infinite Jest*. The stories of the characters informally sketched above are, while engaging and overwhelmingly detailed, related only coincidentally during the events of the novel, and they never come together to provide a satisfying conclusion. In fact, *Infinite Jest* can easily be said to be lacking a conclusion altogether.

For the sake of comparing the structure of *Infinite Jest* to the theories of Lukacs, however, the events of the novel can be grossly over-generalized to fit into two categories: the story of Hal, academic genius and junior tennis player extraordinaire who is struggling with his unlikely dependence on marijuana; and the story of Don Gately, a former addict who is working at Ennet Recovery House to hide from his past life of crime and a particularly vengeful ADA. The multitude of other stories in the novel can be traced back to one or the other of these two main stories, though they may or may not be relevant to the dubious main plot(s). All this takes place against the backdrop of a semi-dystopian near-future in which the U.S. government has coerced the rest of the North

American continent to participate in a massive project of energy production in which nuclear waste is dumped in what is known as the Concavity (to the U.S.) or Convexity (to Canada). It is this background on which I want to first focus, because it is an era in which nearly everything imaginable is commercialized, and entertainment is more important than any social or moral obligation.

For now, we will skip the issue of whether or not Hal and Gately's stories fit into Lukacs' "search structure" that supposedly defines every novel. The main point that I would like to explore in this section is Lukacs' idea of individuality, and how it does not, in fact, exist in the futuristic and absurd world of *Infinite Jest*. This, in turn, means that meaning cannot be subjectively found – the only two ways of making life immanent in *The Theory of the Novel* are through God and the individual, and since God has not been present since Dante's *Inferno*, the absence of the individual in *Infinite Jest* would mean that the world of Hal and Gately is devoid of the meaning that makes life immanent and that, according to Lukacs, justifies the existence of the novel.

The absence of individuality in *Infinite Jest* is the result of a warped American dream pursued to the very limits of its definition. At the time that the events of the novel take place – mostly in the Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland – even the names of each year have been commercialized by the government in an attempt to raise more revenue to fund the mass evacuation from New England that had to take place in order to turn it into a toxic dump. Wallace takes the clichéd idea that we are defined by what we purchase and pushes it to the max. Take, for example, the students at Enfield Tennis Academy, where Hal is currently in attendance. In every instance that the students' clothing is described, there is an arm or a leg emblazoned with the ETA

insignia. The students themselves are walking advertisements, brandishing rackets and tennis gear smothered in the logos of their sponsors. The value of each student is measured in terms of their rank as tennis players – the higher a student’s ranking, the more sponsors he or she has to choose from. It is interesting to note that some students are characterized by the clothes they choose to wear, which are, of course, provided by large corporations – one character who wears an all-black ensemble all the time is known to the other students as “the Darkness”. Furthermore, the students at ETA hold a condescending attitude toward their rival tennis academy, Port Washington, whose administration has “sold out” by requiring that all their students carry and use Wilson gear. The implication is clear that by allowing their students to choose among the corporations from which to accept sponsorship, ETA has given their players more freedom and thus more individuality. In comparison to Lukacs’ concept of individuality, this ability to choose commercial backing is a decoy, a fake sense of freedom designed to distract from the fact that real individuality, i.e. the real search for meaning, has gone missing, and has been replaced by the vapid choice of consumer products.

A hilarious and frightening portrayal of the degree to which American individuality has been lost is found in Wallace’s explanation of the rise and fall of video-telephoning, aka “videophony” (144). While Wallace goes on for eight minutely detailed pages about the various reasons that videophony ultimately collapsed upon itself, by far the most compelling reason is the videophoner’s fear of himself.

The real coffin-nail for videophony involved the way callers’ faces looked on their TP screen, during calls. Not their callers’ faces, but their own, when they

saw them on video. It was a three-button affair, after all... but this experience proved almost universally horrifying. (147)

The shock of seeing one's own face up there on the screen, according to Wallace's scenario, led corporate producers to come up with a product to amend that fear, by way of creating a "High-Definition Mask" which emphasized the most attractive features of the callers' faces. This led to such a frenzy for disguise that by the start of videophony's demise, masks were being sold that held no resemblance whatsoever to the original caller's face, and instead were molded in the likeness of famous personalities and celebrities. This led to a widespread fear of leaving the house, to avoid the event that one would run into someone to which they had spoken on the videophone and be revealed as looking different from his or her mask. In the end, the stress of the videophone proved to be too high, and it was abandoned in favor of the good ol' telephone.

At the surface, the tale of videophony is one of straightforward mockery with a strong flavor of criticism directed at the vanity of the society in which we live. Underlying the story, however, is a darker tone of fear and alienation. What kind of world is it when people are afraid to let other people see them in real person, afraid even to look at their own faces on a television screen? In recounting the short-lived popularity of the videophone, Wallace reveals a morose side effect of a society obsessed with entertainment. The users of videophony had become so absorbed in their televisual pastimes that they had become totally removed from themselves. Their individuality had become so alien to them that a physical manifestation of themselves on a screen was "universally horrifying".

This concept appears in other parts of *Infinite Jest*, as well. During Hal's long period of contemplation at the end of the novel, he observes that everyone is "dying to give our lives away to something" (900). It doesn't matter what it is that we give it away to, he realizes; "the object seem[s] incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly." Furthermore, the desire to give over completely stems not from passion or selflessness, but from fear. Hal thinks that there is "something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into." He realizes that the normal American human in his world and time is terrified of himself, and desperately tries to give himself away to anything in order to escape having to face the self. And what is it, exactly, that is so terrifying about the self? It is the fact that the self lacks substance, that it has no meaning, that it has become absent in an entertainment-obsessed world. Giving oneself away sustains the illusion that the self is justified, that it has purpose and weight. Hal compares it to an addiction – something that distracts so efficiently that it becomes necessary.

Another instance of being divorced from the self or afraid of the self appears in the fictional support group of *Infinite Jest* called UHID. UHID stands for the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. Its members all wear veils over their faces, a concept that mystifies Don Gately. Interfacing with veiled member Joelle van Dyne, he questions, "Why join a fellowship just to hide?" (534). Joelle explains that the veil gives the improbably damaged members the ability "to be open about their essential need for concealment" (535). While this is an admirable cause in the context of those hideously and improbably deformed, Wallace gives us reason to believe that not all those behind the veil are actually disfigured. Joelle tells Gately as much by the end of their conversation, though there might be reason to doubt the veracity of her statement. The

point, however, is that the society in which Hal and Gately live is one that drives people to don a veil of concealment even without any physical mutilation to conceal.

Perhaps the best assessment of what has become of the American people in Wallace's novel is given by an outsider. Throughout *Infinite Jest* are scattered little vignettes of an extended conversation between Hugh Steeply (disguised as Helen Steeply), a U.S. field operative, and Remy Marathe, a member of the guild of wheeled assassins of Quebec, about the differences between their respective societies. In a particular conversation about utilitarianism, Marathe questions whether the "best good" in the United States is considered the maximum pleasure of the individual or the maximum pleasure of the society at large (428). Steeply responds by saying that the genius of American society is that it has discovered that maximizing pleasure for the individual – every individual – leads to maximal pleasure for everyone in the society. Marathe then poses the age-old dilemma in which the object of one's pleasure leads to the suppression of another's pleasure. Steeply's retort is that refraining from such pleasures is the sacrifice that must be made for being a member of American society. Marathe then brings up the Entertainment – the viewing cartridge that is so pleasurable to watch that once it has been viewed, the viewer is unable to do anything but desire to watch it again. This, clearly, is the solution the dilemma initially posed – it completely eliminates the impulse in the individual to inflict any harm, deliberate or incidental, on any other individual, and it seems to provide the maximum pleasure possible, since viewing it just once has the effect of replacing all other desires. Steeply tries to argue against this, but his case is weak – it is clear that the American people have already succumbed to this, to some degree. The only difference is that they are given the illusion

of freedom in choosing what entertainments to view; the Entertainment simply removes this inconvenience. The commercialization of everything is a contributor to this situation: advertisements for different options of viewing encourage the opposite of action, demanding of their customers: “Don’t Sit Still for Anything Less!” (412). Without action, there can be no individuality; this is clear from Lukacs’ descriptions of the novel’s structure as taking the form of an aggressive search – after all, without the fruit of this search, the novel hero’s life is rendered meaningless. Marathe proceeds to relate an anecdote that poignantly demonstrates how ineffective and complacent the people of this era have become. He tells about a team of scientists who located a certain part in a rat’s brain lobe that triggered intense feelings of pleasure. They performed an experiment on the rats by hooking up electrodes to that pleasure-center of the brain, putting the rat in a cage with a lever that activated the electrodes in its brain. The results of the study were definitive:

The rat would press the lever to stimulate his *p*-terminal over and over, thousands of times an hour, over and over, ignoring food and female rats in heat, completely fixated on the lever’s stimulation, day and night, stopping only when the rat finally died of dehydration or simple fatigue. (471)

The punch line of the story, though, was that word leaked out to the public that the lab was considering doing tests on human subjects, and that hordes of people – young, healthy, and stable citizens – showed up at the lab without any official announcement of human testing, volunteering themselves up for “fatal addiction to the electrical pleasure” (473). The implications of this for Lukacs’ concept of individuality are enormous. *The Theory of the Novel* decrees that meaning in the novel must take the form of an active

search, and that the search must conclude in a mere glimpse of a true, higher essence that then fills the individual life with purpose and allows the character to carve out his own version of meaning in his individual soul. In *Infinite Jest*, however, human beings have forsaken the search entirely, devoting their energy instead to the pursuit of pleasure. They are so intent on triggering their *p*-terminals that they are willing to give their lives away for it. There is no room for individuality here – every human seeks the same thing – not personal meaning or immanence in life, but a pleasure so intense it will take them away from life.

It is clear just from studying the background in which the events of *Infinite Jest* take place that at least one important element of the traditional novel is missing – this is the requisite of individuality that precedes the search for meaning. The humans that populate the world of *Infinite Jest* are either scared of facing their own individuality or eager to sacrifice it for the sake of pleasure. As a result, *Infinite Jest* is in this analysis a novel lacking in meaning.

The theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin in regards to literature is particularly relevant to *Infinite Jest* because of the staggering number of characters, each with his or her own distinct voice, which Wallace introduces into the novel. Bakhtin is most famous for developing the idea of “heteroglossia”, which is taken at face value to mean the existence of many socio-ideological languages within a main, unitary language such as English or Chinese. Bakhtin uses the example of occupational jargons to demonstrate how these languages-within-language work: a computer programmer, for example, is capable of using English in a way that could completely fluster anyone else fluent in the

language, even if they are a native speaker. The importance of heteroglossia lies at the heart of language's basic function: its purpose of representing objects or ideas with words. In representing an object or idea in this way – i.e. using language – a person is not conveying a universally agreed-upon definition of the said object/idea. Bakhtin argues that each utterance of language transmits a specific place that the object takes in the psyche of the speaker. For example, the phrase “CAT scan” may exist in the languages of both a doctor and patient undergoing treatment, but their conceptualizations of the medical test are likely to be vastly different. This is because the two individuals have drastically different perspectives of the procedure, based on their socio-linguistic backgrounds. Beyond the occupational level, however, separate languages-within-languages exist at all levels of society, from units as small as the family to the particular style of a national language spoken by an entire country. The most crucial aspect of heteroglossia is Bakhtin's assertion that each individual language represents not only a socio-linguistic group, but that socio-linguistic group's entire point of view on the world. In other words, any given group's philosophical totality is encoded in the way it uses language.

This takes on a specific importance in the novel. Heteroglossia occupies a central position in the creation of literature. The act of recreating multiple languages which exist simultaneously within a language is necessary in order for a novel to be a novel – it is through heteroglossia that the author makes his ideas known. According to Bakhtin, the only way that the author can sound his voice in a novel is through the language of another, an “alien” language. A straightforward articulation of a person's ideas does not constitute a novel; at the beginning of Bakhtin's essay “Discourse in the Novel”, he

derides those literary critics who “seek in the stylistic phenomenon a direct and unmediated expression of authorial individuality” (267). The special art of the novel is that the author refracts his intentions through many different voices, none of which is his own. The task of the author is to select certain voices from the dissonant noise of many socio-linguistic viewpoints sounding all at once, and to organize these autonomous voices into “the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole” (262). Furthermore, the author uses these alien languages to sound out a specific response in the mind of the reader. Bakhtin devotes a good part of his essay to explaining how “no living word relates to its object in a *singular way*” (267). In other words, even in a constituent as small as a word, meaning varies widely from listener to listener. This is obviously a critical issue to the novelist. In any utterance, the speaker expects the listener to hear the word, assimilate it into his unique apperceptive background, and respond with some kind of understanding. The novelist, in order to make his message clear, must use certain languages in a specific way to ensure a particular response from his reader. Not only does he need to use a language that is not his own, he must break “through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener [and] construct his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s background” (282).

The point that I want to emphasize with Bakhtin is the insistence that the novelist must use many different languages, all separate from his own, to orchestrate a central theme that dictates the events of the work, in order for the piece to be considered a novel. It is tempting to compare *Infinite Jest* with Bakhtin’s theories because of the immense polyphony that Wallace successfully reproduces in the novel, but in the critical aspect described above, it is clear that *Infinite Jest* lacks components of what Bakhtin considers

crucial in the novel. In particular, the concept of “authorial intent”, in which the writer attempts to shape the listener’s response in a fundamental way, is blatantly missing from *Infinite Jest*. Wallace has no desire to mold the understandings of his readers; he produces stories in the voices of his characters for no ostensible reason other than that he finds them interesting and that he wishes to share them with the reader. How the reader will respond is left entirely up to himself.

Another problem that arises in trying to fit *Infinite Jest* into Bakhtin’s theory of the novel is the idea that all the voices contribute to some definite end that the novel creates. Lukacs actually articulates a similar idea when he says that the novel is composed of disparate parts whose relationships to one another and overall significance is made clear by the end of the novel, by the glimpse of meaning that “irradiates” everything that has occurred before it with essence. Wallace’s style rejects Bakhtin’s idea that every utterance in the novel must serve some purpose to its unifying meaning. In fact, there is no unifying meaning at all in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace deliberately leaves it out. In his recreation of novelistic heteroglossia, he concocts such a cacophonous polyphony of voices that any attempt by a reader to sound out a unifying meaning is rendered impossible. His ultimate intent, it seems, is to highlight the fact that unified meaning is unrealistic as well as arbitrary and absurd. In this regard, his philosophy resembles the ironic ideas of Frederich Schlegel, who defined irony as the inescapable condition of the human psyche that acknowledges all points of view being equally valid and invalid, thus making the choice of any among them paralyzingly difficult. Wallace puts all these voices into the story of *Infinite Jest* to show that they are all equally valid just because

they exist, and that they do not need the justification of unified meaning made clear at the end of the novel to prove their worth.

Wallace introduces us to this meaningless (and by “meaningless” I mean lacking in teleological significance) chorus of voices straight off the bat. The first hundred pages of *Infinite Jest* are peppered with random characters to whom the reader is not exactly introduced, and whose stories are entirely unrelated. It becomes somewhat apparent later on that these are the characters who reside at Ennet House where Gately works, but even then their tales have nothing to do with any central plot, if *Infinite Jest* can be said to have a central plot.

The first of these characters to whom we are introduced is the character of Ken Erdedy, though at this point we know him only as Erdedy. In the passage, Erdedy is sitting in his apartment, waiting for a phone call or a visit from a woman who has promised him \$1250 worth of “unusually good marijuana” (18). This passage goes on for nine pages, and the entirety of the action contained in these pages consists of Erdedy sitting in his room, thinking about why the woman has not contacted him yet. According to Bakhtin’s theory of analysis, the way to go about interpreting this passage is by looking for evidence of how Wallace has permeated this alien language of Erdedy’s with his own “particular accents” (Bakhtin 299). One stylistic aspect of novelistic prose that is stressed by Bakhtin is the variable of authorial distance. The author must “oscillate” the expanse between the alien language and his own opinion – sometimes keeping so far from the language that it becomes an object to be judged, sometimes coming so close that the divergence is infinitesimal, that his own opinion is merged with that of the alien language. Bakhtin demands that the author maintain “a lively to-and-fro movement in his

relation to language... so that first some, and then other aspects of language are thrown into relief” (302). This technique, which Bakhtin considers so essential to the novelistic genre, is lacking in considerable chunks of *Infinite Jest*, and it is most clearly so in this passage featuring Erdedy. In it, Wallace “maintain[s] an almost imperceptible distance” between his own point of view and Erdedy’s, but he stops short at “forcing it to reverberate with his own ‘truth’” (302). In fact, Wallace zooms in so intimately close to Erdedy’s perspective that the passage is almost too full of Erdedy’s thoughts. So crowded are they in the nine pages of this passage that Wallace’s own voice has no room to sound – nor did he have any intention of it doing so. Wallace captures Erdedy’s self-consciously calm yet involuntarily panicked state of mind perfectly as his anxiety rises at the amount of time that has passed since the woman had said she would call.

He did not use the phone to call the woman who’d promised to come because if he tied up the line and if it happened to be the time when maybe she was trying to call him he was afraid she would hear the busy signal and think him disinterested and get angry and maybe take what she’d promised him somewhere else. (18)

This sort of paranoia which is typical of people who smoke great deals of marijuana is easily interpreted to be written with an ironic tone, in which case the intent which Wallace has refracted through the passage would be one of satire. However, the thoughts of Erdedy are rendered in these passages with such faithfulness, with such careful attention to detail and authenticity and scrambled order of thought, that it would not be giving Wallace enough credit to say that he was merely making fun of drug addicts here. Even the way in which unrelated thoughts intrude into a steady train of thought is included in this description of Erdedy’s mind as he waits:

Once he had asked her to get it, he was committed to several course of action. The insect on the shelf was back. It didn't seem to do anything. It just came out of the hole in the in the girder onto the edge of the steel shelf and sat there. After a while it would disappear back into the hole in the girder, and he was pretty sure it didn't do anything in there either. He felt similar to the insect inside the girder his shelf was connected to, but was not sure just how he was similar. Once he'd decided to own marijuana own more last time, he was committed to several courses of action. (19)

It seems to me that Wallace rejects the idea of the bug in Erdedy's apartment (a recurring observation in Erdedy's story) being a parody of Erdedy's motionlessness, simply by having Erdedy himself acknowledge it. This quote also underscores the utter banality of the whole nine pages in which Erdedy sits and waits for the woman. Absolutely nothing occurs, besides some reflection on Erdedy's part about the last woman who had scored him marijuana and the paranoid steps he has taken this time in order to be able to enjoy his binge with security. He does not move from his apartment or take any sort of action whatsoever. Nevertheless, his thoughts cover nine sparsely indented pages of *Infinite Jest*. It is an overflow of the workings of Erdedy's mind, and Wallace is so devoted to recreating it realistically that no authorial intent of his own is able to filter through the mundane barrage of thinking. In any case, this is the last time that Erdedy's voice is heard in the novel, and his character and addiction have very little to do with anything else that happens in *Infinite Jest*.

Later, on page 85, we meet Tiny Ewell, a dwarf of a man whose name contains no "jolly irony". We meet him as he is being conducted to a rehabilitative home after a stint

in a detoxification center. In contrast to the story of Erdedy, Tiny Ewell's passage contains almost no personal information whatsoever. The passage is entirely descriptive, lacking any subjective bias towards any of the things it describes. A brief scene is recalled in which Tiny Ewell finds out that he has been kicked out of his house. Though this would seem to be an emotional event, it is told without feeling:

He wears size 6 Florsheim wingtips that gleam nicely except for one big incongruous scuff-mark of white from where he'd kicked at his front door when he'd returned home just before dawn from an extremely important get-together with potential clients to find that his wife had had the locks changed and filed a restraining order and would communicate with him only by notes passed through the mail-slot below the white door's black brass knocker. When Tiny leans down and wipes at the scuff-mark with a slim thumb it only pales and smears. (85)

The accounts of Tiny's subsequent hallucinations of fornicating vermin in detox, of the passing street scene as he is transported to the house, and of his batsy roommate in detox are narrated in a similarly deadpan fashion. The one instance of any substantive opinion to be found is when Tiny Ewell complains that his roommate, who watches the air conditioning unit like it is a television, gives him the "screaming meemies" (87). This passage is evidence of lack of authorial intent displayed in a manner directly opposite to the case of Erdedy. Instead of overloading the reader with so much passively mental information that the author's voice is crowded out, Wallace in these two pages refrains completely from subjective opinion, so that not only his character's but also his own voice is missing from the story.

Jumping back a bit, we find on page 37 a character of Wallace's named Clenette. The passage is immediately confusing to the reader for a few reasons: first of all, because of the many unfamiliar names that appear on just the first page (seven total) and secondly, because the passage is written in the dialect of a "ghetto" neighborhood that ignores the prescriptive uses of grammar and punctuation normally found in prose. By doing this, Wallace almost instantly alienates the reader from this story; it is too difficult and confusing for him (the reader) to want or care about finishing this portion of the text. This is a method classified by Bakhtin as objectification: the topic and the language of the story are too foreign to the reader for him or her to empathize. In this case, the language itself becomes an object instead of a living, autonomous thing; it becomes calcified and no viable worldview can be extracted from it because it is too peculiar (Bakhtin 292). This is not, however, the case with Clenette's story. Though Wallace pushes readers away within the first few sentences, he draws them back with content of the story. Clenette straightforwardly tells such a blank tale of human hardship and despair that the reader is forced to see her as a human being – and thus her language as a real and viable worldview. Though the syntax is convoluted and hard to understand, the meat of Clenette's story eventually comes clear: a girl in her neighborhood is being molested by her mother's partner and being beaten by her mother when she confesses to her about it. The girl, Wardine, cannot tell anyone else in the neighborhood because the man has threatened to kill her, and he has killed people before. Clenette's version is the second retelling of the story, since she heard it second-hand from the Reginald, the boy who loves Wardine. This might be, unfortunately, a sad but cliché story of the abuse that occurs in impoverished communities that the reader has heard many times before. However, by

using unusual syntax and grammar, Wallace imbibes the story with an air of direct and frightening experience that makes it much more real for the reader. Take, for example, the pitiful paragraph in which Clenette describes the scene in which Wardine comes to take refuge at Reginald's:

Reginald try to hush Wardine but he can not stop Wardine cry. Wardine look like crazy she so scared... Reginald tell Wardine to hush herself and lie down quiet. He put Shedd Spread out the kitchen on Wardine cuts on her back. He run his finger with grease so careful down pink lines of her getting beat with a hanger. Wardine says she do not feel nothing in her back ever since spring. She lie stomach on Reginald floor and say she aint got no feeling in her skin of her back. When Reginald gone to get the water she asks me the truth, how bad is her back look when Reginald look at it. Is she still pretty, she cry.

The point of including such a description is not to elicit any specific response from the reader in concordance with the novel's overall theme (since *Inifinite Jest* cannot be said to properly have any overall theme) but rather to get the reader to acknowledge, in a generic way, that a language cannot be written off as an object simply because it is unfamiliar. The reader's personal reaction is still left untampered. Clenette's story about Wardine also does not recur in any part of *Inifinite Jest*, nor do any of the characters in it have any effect on the rest of the events on the novel. Wallace does not classify the story or give it any subjective meaning; this part he leaves up to the reader. His point with Clenette's story, like his point with all the rest, is that he refuses to let any of the voices in his story to become objects or to let any single character's point of view sound less valid than another.

The biggest clue to what Wallace is trying to accomplish with this abundant polyphony of voices in *Infinite Jest* is, once again, found through the character of the late director James Orin Incandenza, father of precocious tennis star Hal Incandenza. Late in the novel, when Gately is lying unconscious in the hospital, he interfaces with the ghost or “wraith” of the suicided *auteur*. The wraith explains to Gately the meaning of the term “figurant”, which describes the muted extras on screen in movies or television shows. The concept of the figurant had always horrified J.O.I. in life, the wraith confesses. He asks if Gately remembers them,

...the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar’s crowd, concessions to realism, always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound... And Gately remembers them, or rather remembers how he doesn’t quite remember them, how it never struck his addled mind as in fact surreal that their mouths moved but nothing emerged, and what a miserable fucking bottom-rung job that must be for an actor, to be sort of human furniture...
(834)

The wraith goes on to tell Gately about how whenever he made a film that used extras, “he made goddamn bloody well sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn’t silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer’s voice” (835). Like Wallace, James Orin Incandenza refused to let any of his actors’ stories become background to a central story. He was appalled at the idea that the people in the sidelines were considered less important than those in the foreground. He took the idea of Schlegel’s irony and advanced it one more step: if every point of view is equal, and the choice of a

single one among them is absurd, then choose *all* of them. It does not matter that the result will be incoherent, as long as no one is turned into a figurant. Looking back, it is obvious that this is also the philosophy that Wallace incorporates into *Infinite Jest*, and the reason that so many seemingly irrelevant stories are included in the novel. It is not that Wallace is trying to overwhelm or confuse the reader. It is the fact that Wallace finds the concept of forcing multiple voices into chiming into a coherent them unacceptable. Each voice has a life and worldview of its own, and should not be manipulated or used to refract “authorial intent”. What Wallace recreates is “real life’s egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which [is] the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment” (835).

Thus we see that Bakhtin’s theory of the novel is also not one into which *Infinite Jest* easily fits. If Bakhtin’s definition of a novel is a work in which meaning is created by the organization of heteroglossic voices into a coherent, unified theme, then *Infinite Jest* can be said to be lacking in meaning in this respect as well. Though Wallace recreates heteroglossia in his novel to an impeccable degree, he does not even attempt to reign these voices in so that they might convey his own authorial intent. Instead, he lets the voices tell their own stories, with their own particular points of view, and confronts the reader with the fact that all these voices and worldviews are viable and valid in their own right.

The previous two sections discussed meaninglessness in *Infinite Jest* in general. Meaninglessness takes place in the context of the encompassing style and setting of the

novel, but it occurs in a specific, structural context as well. This section narrows down the search for meaninglessness to two characters: the two who occupy, arguably, a central position in the novel. Since *Infinite Jest* has no clear plot, it is hard to locate a center to it. However, it is unarguable that Wallace spends more pages on these two characters than he does with anyone else in the book. The two characters in question, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, are up-close and personal examples of how one's desire to find meaning becomes irrelevant in a society that has become estranged to individuality. Significantly, both of these characters undergo a loss of voice at the ends of their respective stories (Gately's story cuts off at the end of *Infinite Jest*, whereas Hal's last word, though chronologically the latest event in the novel, is the opening scene of *Infinite Jest*). I argue that this muteness symbolizes the entombment of their individuality, and sounds the death knell for a search for meaning that will inevitably be forsaken.

Facially, it appears that Hal Incandenza is in the ideal situation for undertaking Lukacs' quest for meaning. Hal appears to be the perfect son. He is the second top-ranked player at the tennis academy that his father conceived of and created, he reads the Oxford English Dictionary for kicks, and cranks out essays far beyond his maturity level, much to the pleasure of his "academic bombshell" of a mother (64).

Hal Incandenza for a long time identified himself as a lexical prodigy who – though Avril had taken pains to let all three of her children know that her nonjudgmental love and pride depended in no way on achievement or performance or potential talent – had made his mother proud, plus a really good tennis player. Hal Incandenza is now being encouraged to identify himself as a

late-blooming prodigy and possible genius at tennis who is on the verge of making every authority-figure in his world and beyond very proud indeed. (155) Hal himself, however, seems oddly removed from his accomplishments. Coach Schtitt and the other instructors at the academy have assessed him as astonishingly level-headed for a boy with such erumpent talent. Hal is unusually cool about the attention he is suddenly getting: “When asked how he’s doing with it all, Hal says Fine and thanks you for asking” (155). Although Hal does not display signs of being unsatisfied with himself, his level of detachment at his stellar achievements denotes Lukacs’ “endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished” (34). According to Lukacs, the plague of the modern man (since the loss of the epic) is the fact that his deeds “are not adequate to his soul” (37). This is also the demon that torments the hero of the novel – the problem that he strives to overcome is the “unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and the world” (34). Hal, in assessing his own removal from his skills, blames it on two generations of dead fathers:

Have a father who lived up to his own promise and then found thing after thing to meet and surpass the expectations of his promise in, and didn’t seem just a whole hell of a lot happier or tighter wrapped than his own failed father, leaving you yourself in a kind of feral and flux-ridden state with respect to talent. (173)

Hal, like his father before him, sees through the hollow promise of accomplishment, and realizes that being good at everything does not necessarily mean self-fulfillment. Lukacs expresses this idea of never being good enough for oneself as a tenet of the modern condition: “... everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete” (34).

It would seem, then, that Hal is a prime candidate to embark on the search for meaning. Having realized that the accomplishments of this world do not make a life immanent, one begins to pursue an essence that is located in “a higher reality outside it” (Lukacs 34). However, this pattern of action delineated by Lukacs occurs only in a world where individuality exists and not in a world in which people are so distracted that they have forgotten what individuality is. Hal is already very familiar with this prospect and how it may be desirable; he has made the connection that, “If you are an adolescent, here is the trick to being neither quite a nerd nor quite a jock: be no one” (175). Being a product of the latter world, he has by the age of seventeen already come up with several strategies to cause himself to forget about his individuality. The first one, the one that he is taught, is tennis. The Enfield Tennis Academy recruits players as young as eight to drill the philosophy of tennis into their heads, and Hal, being the son of its founder, has probably been inculcated with the doctrine since he was a child. The problem with this distraction is that he has already become aware of its power as a distraction, a realization that tends to decrease its sway. He reflects, “This was why they started us here so young: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions *why* and *to what* grow real beaks and claws. It was kind, in a way” (900).

Hal, therefore, needs something a bit stronger to keep himself distracted. He finds solace for the first part of the novel in the soothing and amnesiac power of marijuana. Addiction is a central theme in *Infinite Jest*, seeing that a large part of the novel takes place in a Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. Wallace’s view is that commercial entertainment is no better an addiction than a physical addiction to narcotics, as he shows with the fatal, one-time-and-you’re-gone addictiveness of James Orin Incandenza’s

samizdat. The circumstance of Hal, however, is not one of entertainment but a classic case of substance abuse and dependency. Hal's love of marijuana has effectively eliminated his desire to find more meaning in life and has, in a way, become a decoy for his lost individuality. Marijuana (or "Bob Hope" as it is known in the slang of *Infinite Jest*), unlike the rigor of academic tennis, is consuming enough to not let him realize its power as a distraction. Particularly interesting is the fact that "Hal likes to get high in secret, but a bigger secret is that he's as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high" (49). Everything else about Hal is on display and a source of pride for the authority figures in his life, but smoking weed is the one thing that he can maintain in secrecy – to him, this appears to be the last aspect of his personality that he can keep to himself. To boost the power of this decoy is the fact that Hal doesn't realize it is a decoy. The fact that a major part of the marijuana's appeal is that he smokes it in hiding only vaguely occurs to him:

Avril and C.T. know nothing about Hal's penchants for high-resin Bob Hope and underground absorption, which fact Hal obviously likes a lot, on some level, though he's never given much thought to why. To why he likes it so much. (51)

Unfortunately for Hal, an event occurs halfway through the book, an impending urine test for drug abuse that forces him to kick his habit for a minimum of thirty-one days. At this point, Hal is finally forced to really look at his situation. He undergoes some serious soul-searching and realizes that without his substance, he doesn't have much there, in the way of a soul. He confesses to his damaged brother: "It's been forty hours without Bob Hope and already I'm bats inside." The thought of staying clean for the entire thirty-one days is enough to cause Hal to doubt the rest of his life.

I feel a hole. It's going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole... and the hole's going to get a little bigger every day until I fly apart in different directions. I'll fly apart midair... in front of all these people who knew Himself (Hal's father) and think I'm different. Whom I've lied to, and liked it. It'll all come out anyway, clean pee or no. (785)

This kind of life-altering crisis ought to be the catalyst for Hal to commence a full-blown expedition for a real substance, and not just the habit-forming type, to bring immanence into his life. Hal has gotten further than the majority of people who inhabit the world of *Infinite Jest*; Wallace has created a society that very rarely questions their distractions and almost never reaches the realization that life requires more meaning than entertainment. Though Hal has reached the breaking point where he would actually begin a search, however, the path that normally leads to a glimpse of meaning, that leads the hero to realize that reality will always surpass idealism – this path has been erased. Hal reaches out and tries to grasp for an essence that will save him, but he has no idea what direction in which to turn. In this regard, Hal has fulfilled one requirement of Lukacs' archetype of the novel hero: he is a seeker (Lukacs 60). Furthermore, in his scenario “neither the goals nor the way leading to them can be directly given”; this is another characteristic of the fundamental structure of the novel according to Lukacs. The problem with Hal is that his search does not lead the result that Lukacs claims is inevitable for every novel hero. Lukacs' hero places an unrelenting demand against reality for meaning to be found. His epiphany arises when he concedes to reality and understands that the unreal ideality of the soul will never achieve mastery over the absurdity of the real world (85). In having this realization – it being the “mere glimpse of meaning [that] is the

highest that life has to offer – he finds that the only source of stability in the world is himself, and from his individuality blooms a new and personal source of essentiality that “irradiates [his] life as its immanent meaning” (80). This process of realization and immanence cannot possibly happen for Hal because he has locked away his individuality, replaced it with a fixation on marijuana, and is unable to find it again. Furthermore, he finds the idea of even trying to locate his individuality unbearable.

It wasn't just nightmares and saliva. It was as if his head perched on the bedpost all night now and in the terrible early A.M. when Hal's eyes snapped open immediately said Glad You're Up I've Been Wanting To TALK To You and then didn't let up all day, having at him like a well-revved chain-saw all day until he could finally try to fall unconscious, crawling into the rack wretched to await more bad dreams. 24/7's of feeling wretched and bereft. (796)

Hal's reluctance to converse with his own head, as it were, signals his unwillingness to face his individuality. Instead of turning to himself when life becomes overwhelming, he looks to outside sources to once again distract him. His attempt to attend a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, for example, turns out to be hilariously disastrous (800). His final solution to the growing, gnawing hole with which he has been left is a self-dosage of a mythically powerful hallucinogen known to Hal and his friends as “the incredibly potent DMZ”¹. Although Hal undergoes some rather intense self-reflection during his trip, it is scattered and unfocused, and perpetually interrupted with intrusive observations of the weather or memories of the past. The closest that he comes to a self-recognition is when he realizes that he has no desire to play tennis that day, and that he has never felt this way

¹ To be honest, Wallace leaves it completely unclear as to what exactly it is that happens to Hal towards the end of the novel. Whatever it is, it causes him to suffer fits of “unintentional hilarity” – appearing to all others to be laughing uproariously while Hal himself feels perfectly sober and serious – slow and lucid panic attacks, and long moments of horizontal reflection in Viewing Room 5.

before towards tennis. Beyond that, nothing. Never does he have the realization that the sense of well-being that he is looking for will never, in fact, become complete in this life. This, in turn, precludes him from the glimpse of meaning that would lead to a fully-rounded individuality that could provide him with the stability that all humans desire. It could be argued that the non sequitur and random memories and thoughts that run across Hal's mind during his trip are a reflection of the absurdity and contingency of the real world, and that this is his own drug-addled way of acknowledging the triumphant meaninglessness of reality. Even if this were the case, however, it does not lead Hal to self-recognition. Hal is unable to recognize the self because it is gone; his individuality has been swallowed up by a culture of consumerism and entertainment. It has been given away in bits and pieces, first by the tennis academy that tries to replace the quest for meaning with the desire to improve one's rank, and then by Hal's own addiction which posed a false sense of individuality at the expense of withering away the original.

This takes us to the second "main" character of *Infinite Jest*, the thug-like yet adorable figure of Don Gately. Unlike Hal, Gately's story is rather difficult to fit into Lukacs' archetypal novel hero. If Gately were on a search for meaning, it would appear that he had come to its conclusion long before the events of the novel. By the time we meet Gately, he has been sober for over a year and working hard as a staffer at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. What we know of his violent and crime-ridden past is revealed to us in flashbacks, and it is clear that the mellow Gately regrets and is repulsed by his former deeds. Indeed, he seems to have made a complete one-eighty and to have truly found solace in the dictums of the Twelve-Step program.

If any character in *Infinite Jest* appears to have found meaning, it would be Don Gately. His unwearied patience with his fellow residents at Ennet House and his earnest humility towards his own situation show him to be the calmest and balanced portrayals in the whole novel. He constantly reassures newly reformed addicts that the program works, that he was just as skeptical and condescending when he first started, and that he still doesn't understand how it works, merely accepting the fact that it does. However, in rare passages throughout the book we get glimpses of how even the immutable Gately sometimes doubts himself. The most revealing example of this occurs when Gately takes the stage at an AA meeting and confesses that "he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power" (442). In a moving testament he relays how frustrated he is that he goes through the motions and that they seem to be working to benefit his recovery, but that he still has no idea of what entity resides behind the motions to make them effective.

Gately's sole experience so far is that he takes one of AA's very rare specific suggestions and hits the knees in the A.M. and asks for Help and then hits the knees again at bedtime and says Thank You, whether he believes he's talking to Anything/-body or not, he somehow gets through that day clean... He says but when he tries to go beyond the very basic rote automatic get-me-through-this-day-please stuff, when he kneels at other times and prays or meditates or tries to achieve a Big-Picture spiritual understanding of a God as he can understand Him, he feels Nothing – not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with. (443)

Gately's mysterious and unfathomable Higher Power sounds very much like Lukacs' essence which resides beyond our realm of comprehension, the "higher meaning outside reality" for which the novel's hero searches but never finds (34).

Though Gately does not experience anything as psychologically jarring as Hal's forced kicking of the habit, he too encounters a serious obstacle to the continuance of the rest of his life when he gets shot and otherwise battered in trying to protect a resident of Ennet House. He winds up confined to a bed in a hospital, unable to speak and unable to move without excruciating pain. The last hundred or so pages of *Infinite Jest* alternate between Gately's hazy state of mind as he struggles to deal with the pain without the aid of Class-III narcotics, and Hal's atomic thoughts as the effects of DMZ sink into his brain. The workings of Gately's mind as he lays in bed are mostly of his past life, of his substance-riddled upbringing and his descent into heavy drugs. Though Gately's trajectory throughout *Infinite Jest* does not exactly resemble a search – Gately spends much more time reassuring other people of their searches than he does doubting himself – the homelessness of the modern soul described by Lukacs still manifests itself in his story. Supine in the hospital cot, Gately recalls the disturbing events of his childhood, like the former M.P. his mother had dated, who had beat her on a regular basis, "hitting her very intently so that the bruises would not show," in a paralytic, involuntary fashion. There is no sense of closure as he recalls these events, only the recurring thought that "one of the highest prices of sobriety was not being to keep from remembering things you didn't want to remember" (840). The fact that Gately has no place in his head to deal with these events, that he can only helplessly watch as they float to forefront of his consciousness, signifies that he has not yet, in fact, gained a sense of meaning for his life.

In the event that he had, he would have a place in which to put the events, a system of classification within a totality that came with the flash of meaning which irradiated his life with immanence. Instead, Gately's memories become progressively more horrifying, and he has no way to stop them from rolling hideously through his mind. The very last scene of the novel is one of these flashbacks, and in addition to providing no conclusion whatsoever to the various plots of *Infinite Jest*, it leaves the reader with a series of lurid images that cannot be easily forgotten. In it, as he recalls through the memory's narcotic-induced haze, he witnesses the gruesome murder of one of his associates via a deliberately lucid and sensory overdose brought on by a violently vengeful dealer and bookie named C. As he remembers, he and his associate Fackelmann are both involuntarily pumped full of highly effective painkillers – although Gately's is of a non-lethal dose – cut with an anti-narc so that Gately can clearly see and Fackelmann can clearly feel how death proceeds by overdose. As Gately watches, C's crew sews Fackelmann's eyes open over his screams, and Gately's last memory is of one of Fax's eyes "as open as his mouth" and feeling "obscenely pleasant" as the narcotics wash over him, before he passes out and the novel ends (980).

The abrupt cessation of the flashback, along with the inconclusive nature of the ending of *Infinite Jest*, conveys structurally the sense of incompleteness that plague Hal and Gately at having never found the meaning that they feel so strongly *should be* in their lives. For Hal, the "should be" is conveyed by the loss, the "way bigger than Hal-sized hole" that he feels when his distraction of marijuana is withheld. For Gately, the "should be" is not so obvious. We catch only glimmers of Gately's moments of doubt for the most part of the novel. However, in the tumultuous images that he flashes back to when

he is confined in bed, we gain a greater sense of Gately's homelessness and incompleteness. Wallace reveals, for example, how Gately has never once visited his mother in the catatonic home where she resides since an attack of cirrhosis rendered her a vegetable, and most of the time he is able to ignore the nagging guilt he feels by following AA protocol, but how these memories and self-condemnations come whispering out of the corners of his mind as soon as he is incapacitated and unable to block them from his consciousness. Gately does not, perhaps, feel the sense of unjust loss and the need to put something aright again that Hal does, and thus his experience through *Infinite Jest* does not take on the structure of a search, but he still clearly exhibits the transcendental homelessness that Lukacs describes, and that he is not explicitly looking for meaning does not downplay the fact that he never finds it.

Interestingly, both Hal and Gately are rendered speechless by the ends of their respective stories. It seems to me that this inability to communicate is not a coincidence (though *Infinite Jest* is rife with meaningless coincidences), that Wallace deliberately put both of them in this condition to symbolize their inability to find their ways to a transcendental home. Gately's story closes with him still in a hospital bed, a feeding tube down his throat that prevents him from speaking and agonizing physical pain preventing him from being able to write anything down. Hal's story ends about a year later, with us finding out (at the beginning of the novel) that something has happened to him so that when he thinks he is speaking normally, he is actually making inhuman noises and animalistic gestures. According to Bakhtin, speech is the essential medium that conveys individuality. It is through written language that the author of the novel "sounds his voice" against the background of a multitude of other voices that have sounded before

him. The function of speech and language is not just to facilitate communication but also to express “concrete value judgments and belief systems” (Bakhtin 289). In an assessment of language reminiscent of Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power, Bakhtin says that language is a clay that can be molded by any individual will into a manifestation of that individual’s desires and points of view. Whole worldviews are contained by the way one uses a language, so a loss of ability to use language is very crippling indeed. Furthermore, Hal and Gately are not just incapacitated in their ability to speak; their function of writing is also handicapped. Given a pen and a pad, Gately’s attempt to write “YO!” to a visitor resembles a child’s scribble, and Hal tells us that anything he tried to type since his experience with DMZ had resembled “some sort of infant’s random stabs on a keyboard” (9). They are both completely unable to employ language in any way. This is symbolically significant, given the prevalent position that language occupies in *Infinite Jest*. The muteness of these characters represents the imprisonment of the individual within them, locked away because the idea of an individual is no longer functional in the society in which they live. Hal and Gately are probably the most relatively independent characters in the novel, seeing as no one else around them even realizes that their individuality has been lost. The fact that they both recognize their transcendental homelessness, but are unable to do anything about it, is portrayed symbolically by Wallace in their involuntary silence. Without language, the individual cannot be expressed, and thus locked away, the individuality of these characters cannot strive for the meaning which it declares to be necessary. In the end, both Hal and Gately have to settle for an existence that is meaningless.

Now that the case for meaninglessness has been sufficiently established, we return to a question that was posed at the beginning of this paper (page 4): if *Infinite Jest* lacks any meaning whatsoever, can it still be considered a novel? Perhaps this is an absurd question, since I've spent the last thirty-four pages demonstrating how *Infinite Jest* defies the central elements of which a novel is composed. Nevertheless, my final argument is that, despite everything, *Infinite Jest* is in fact a novel, one that is actually very good and quite important. The reasoning behind this is informed mostly by another essay by Bakhtin, a rather shorter one called "Epic and Novel". In it, Bakhtin argues that the difference between epic and novel is that the epic springs out of and reflects a world that is complete. This line of reasoning is not unfamiliar; it is the same argument that Lukacs advances in *The Theory of the Novel*. What is new about Bakhtin's assertion begins in his claim that the novel is in "direct contact with inconclusive, present-day reality" (39). Thus, the novel cannot be defined with the same fixed characteristics that are used to define other genres. "Novel", after all, is the French word for "new". The shape, structure, and style of the novel are constantly undergoing change, keeping in place with the flux of contemporary society. Therefore, the fact that *Infinite Jest* is lacking in plot and meaning cannot be used to prove that it is not actually a novel. This is because even the traditional bases of the novel (such as plot and meaning) will fade away when they are no longer adequate for the times. In Wallace's eyes, the traditional construct of meaning and its basis in individuality is no longer viable. Wallace's vision of contemporary society shows a constant attack on meaning by forces stronger than the lone hero. Meaning is not merely absent from the present world, it is being actively chased away, expelled by human energies who see it as damaging for their profits.

Wallace saw a constant erosion of individuality by impersonal and unstoppable powers. In his world, it is no longer possible to find meaning through individuality, so it would be tantamount to duplicity for him to publish a novel that reflected this outdated process. It is indeed hard to argue that today's world is not increasingly devaluing the individual, placing a greater emphasis on consumer choice than genuine meaning. This is why *Infinite Jest* is, in the end, a novel: it sounds true to the inhabitants of modern times. If it is unsettling to us that *Infinite Jest* is lacking in meaning, it is because we have become accustomed to the traditional novel and have not yet noticed that lack of meaning in our own, very real lives. I do not think, however, that Wallace was saying that the modern world is without hope, and that never again will meaning be immanent in our lives. Rather, he is ringing the alarm, warning us half-awake readers that we are in severe danger of ending up in a world like the one he creates in *Infinite Jest*. It is as if he has to kill meaning in the novel in order to remind us of its absence in our lives. Wallace seems to describe it best himself, in a passage where a character has just died a grisly death:

... as he finally sheds his body's suit, Lucien finds his gut and throat again and newly whole, clean and unimpeded, and is free, catapulted home over fans and the Convexity's glass palisades at desperate speeds, soaring north, sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world's well-known tongues. (489)

The distress signal he is sending is all the more disturbing because it hits so close to home, because the homelessness of his characters is too well-known to us. This *Infinite Jest*'s truly novelistic aspect: that Wallace depicts a frighteningly realistic image of our society today, capturing perfectly the newly meaningless condition of the modern world.

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