

## Wallace's INFINITE JEST

A crucial passage in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* occurs in the middle of an encounter between the ghostly "wraith" figure of avant-garde director James O. Incandenza and the gunshot-wounded convalescent Don Gately (832). As Gately wonders if he is dreaming or hallucinating, a series of words and phrases race into his consciousness. These "ghost words," which Gately does not know "from a divot in the sod" (832), recapitulate Incandenza's life. The capitalized series of obscure terms interpolated in the text are mainly medical or optical in origin. The word "LUCULUS," however, is elusive. Listed in the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* as a rare alternate spelling of "*louculus*," a small box or reliquary, the word has many other potential meanings and evokes many aspects of the novel. By exploring what this scene reveals about Incandenza's fatally addictive film "Infinite Jest" (presented in quotation marks here to distinguish it from the novel), I will explain some potential allusions and suggest why Wallace may have chosen the unconventional spelling.

The phrase *infinite jest* alludes to the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (5.1.159), and Incandenza much identifies with the play. One of his production companies was called "Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited" (Wallace 990), and he requested in his will that several of his films (including the master copy of "Infinite Jest") be buried with him. They were to be placed in a small box (or "luculus") inside his coffin. If Incandenza had recognized the deadliness of his creation, he may have been consciously attempting to re-create the graveyard scene. There are two other direct references to *Hamlet* in the interpolated terms: "LAERTES" and "POOR YORICK" (832). Gately's role in the events surrounding the search for "Infinite Jest" may strike Incandenza as being analogous to Laertes' role, as one of the director's innovations was the parodic concept of "found drama": "A few people are randomly selected, and whatever happens to them in a set period of time constitutes the 'drama'" (1028).

Two of the other words have less obvious references to *Hamlet*. "LEVI-RATE MARRIAGE" could describe not only Claudius and Gertrude's situation but Incandenza's as well. His wife Avril now lives in his former home with her half-brother Charles Tavis, though they are not openly involved. "LUCULUS" itself may allude to the play. If the meaning intended is "little grove," from the Latin "lucus," then it suggests the Ghost's speech to Hamlet (1.5.59) describing the poisoning in the orchard. Incandenza's eldest son, Orin, believes that his mother—and possibly Tavis—drove his father to suicide. Incandenza's purgatorial, wraithlike state, like King Hamlet's, allows him to "hear the symphonic thoughts of animate men in toto" (839), but he does not explicitly mention any plots or ask for revenge.

The word “*lucus*” is derived from “*lux*” (light); and the paradox that it means “grove,” or a small area shaded by trees, was the subject of Quintilian’s epigram: *lucus a non lucendo* (“a grove [so-called] from the absence of light”) (*OED*). Incandenza was a brilliant optical physicist, and many of the other words and phrases in the list refer to lenses and human sensory perception: “NEUTRAL DENSITY POINT,” “MENISCUS,” “CHRONAXY,” and “PRO-PRIOCEPTION,” for example. (832). His son Hal, who along with Gately is the closest candidate for the novel’s protagonist, has an eidetic memory and has committed a future version of the *OED* to memory. Incandenza suffered from delusions during the last years of his life that Hal had lost his ability to communicate, which prefigures Hal’s apparent descent into infantilism (literally, “speechlessness”) at the end of the narrative chronology. The cause of Hal’s malady is one of *Infinite Jest*’s main mysteries, and the paradox inherent in the etymology of “*luculus*” may offer a clue to Hal’s fate: Hal, like Incandenza, has been shaded from the world by his parents, and the “little light” let through has blinded him to human interaction.

The questions of legacy and judgment that arise in the ghostly hospital encounter may allude to Brecht’s *The Trial of Lucullus*, a play about the epicurean Roman general whose exploits were detailed by Plutarch; his name is sometimes spelled “*Luculus*” (as the “ghost words” are all capitalized, it is impossible to tell if they are meant to be proper nouns). In Brecht’s play, *Lucullus* has died and is being tried in a purgatorial court by a jury of the people whose lives his wars have decimated. Though the jurists are themselves shades, they represent the living mass of humanity. The dead are judged based on their actual contribution to the living. Incandenza’s film, which he hoped would “reverse thrust on a young self’s [Hal’s] fall into the womb of solipsism” (839), has instead become his deadly testament to the living.

The phrase immediately following “*LUCULUS*” in the ghost words is “*CERISE MONTCLAIR*” (832). Although most directly a reference to Incandenza’s father’s beloved cherry-red car, “*cerise*” may also be an allusion to Brecht’s play. In that play, the only thing that the jury credits *Lucullus* with is bringing a single cherry tree back from an Asian conquest. As the Farmer says,

When all the plunder  
Of both Asias has long turned to rot  
This, the smallest of your trophies  
Will stand upon the windy hills and wave  
Each spring its bloom-white branches to the living. (Brecht 127)

The general’s plunder did not help the Roman people, and he failed to understand why his efforts were unappreciated. Incandenza’s “most serious wish was: *to entertain*” (839 emphasis in original), but instead he opened an abyss. Both of them have failed to communicate: *Lucullus* with the people he led,

and Incandenza with the son he fathered. One reason for Incandenza's obsession about being able to communicate with his son is his feeling that his own father could not hear him. Incandenza's father describes his 1956 Mercury Montclair in the scene where he decides to make his son into a tennis prodigy (159), and the car has become a symbol of artificial perfection that Incandenza could not achieve. He nearly attained perfection with the creation of "Infinite Jest," but it was a perfection fatal to others—just like Brecht's Lucullus.

As Frank L. Cioffi notes, *Infinite Jest* "[blurs] the boundary between a real world and a fictive one" (163). One way in which the novel achieves this effect is by its density. The significance of the one word outlined above gives every impression of purposefulness, yet serious effort is required to uncover the relation of that purpose to the rest of the narrative. That which is most hidden is often most important; and of all the words Incandenza thinks at Gately, "LUCULUS" is the most obscure. It contains within its history many of the novel's own contacts between the fictive and the real.

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#### Wiman's AFTERWARDS

. . . it is no great distance  
From slimness to cool water.—Ovid

There is nothing left for anyone to hold.  
The days are long and mild, and parts  
of herself are drifting imperceptibly  
into them. She almost remembers rain,  
each drop colder than she is, clearer.  
Her face becomes the face of everyone  
who looks into her, her longings their own.  
When she feels the warm bodies of children  
swimming inside of her, or lovers

