

**INARTICULATE AND UNSHAREABLE: NEGATIVE FEELINGS AND
THE MEMOIR IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S POST-*INFINITE JEST* FICTION**

by

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Abstract

This thesis reads David Foster Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* fiction against forms of confession found in the American "memoir boom," a period marked by a surge in interest (both commercial and aesthetic) in nonfictional autobiography. More specifically, this thesis traces the way Wallace's fiction between 1997 and 2008 registers diffuse and non-intentional affective states that typically do not appear in conventional memoirs. Problems attending the representation of such feelings first appear in *Infinite Jest*, intensify in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and become an explicit point of concern with respect to the memoir-genre in *The Pale King*. Taking the memoir boom as defining a rhetorical milieu of confession, candor, and sincerity in which Wallace's later fiction should be situated, this thesis examines the short stories "Octet" and "The Depressed Person" with respect to Wallace's growing concern about the seeming disjunction between extant literary forms and the "nameless interhuman sameness" of contemporary experience. This thesis then discusses *The Pale King* – a long novel that self-consciously situates itself within the memoir boom, and which continues Wallace's interest in "inarticulate" and "unshareable" feelings. The Chris Fogle novella that makes up the twenty-second section of Wallace's final novel will be read as enacting a critique of the ways in which "inarticulate" feelings were passed over in literary representations of emotional experiences during the memoir boom. By contrast, section twenty-four – which features a notoriously long description of a traffic jam – will be read as illustrating the ways in which Wallace's fictional representations of "unshareable" feelings complicate the more optimistic claims about empathy, community, and civics that we find in his nonfiction.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kisuk Noh. An earlier version of the introduction was presented at the First Annual David Foster Wallace Conference in Normal, IL.

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List of Abbreviations

ASFT	<i>A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again</i>
BFN	<i>Both Flesh and Not</i>
BIHM	<i>Brief Interviews with Hideous Men</i>
GCH	<i>Girl with Curious Hair</i>
IJ	<i>Infinite Jest</i>
TPK	<i>The Pale King</i>
TW	<i>This is Water</i>

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To the memory of my grandfather

Introduction: David Foster Wallace and The Memoir

This thesis reads David Foster Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* output against forms of confession found in the American "memoir boom," a period marked by a surge in interest (both commercial and aesthetic) in nonfictional autobiography (Rak, Yagoda). Despite *The Pale King*'s extended discussions of the genre, Wallace's engagement with memoir continues to be a gap in the already substantial body of critical writing on his works. Yet the genre would have had deep personal significance for Wallace, who maintained a troubled romantic relationship with the poet and noted memoirist Mary Karr in the mid-1990s. More importantly, as a far-reaching, popular phenomenon, the memoir boom undoubtedly grabbed the interest of a Wallace arguably at the height of his career, surveying the cultural milieu in the late 1990s. Indeed, the sudden rise of memoir from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s was both determinant and symptom of a deeper shift in the American rhetorical milieu – one that moved away from self-aware irony in favour of a stripped-down confessionalism. As such, this thesis diverges from prevailing characterizations of Wallace as a writer enacting various formal arguments against metafictional irony. To be sure, Wallace's seminal critique of "TV's institutionalization" of self-referential irony remains an important point of reference for the author's early- to middle-period work, which attempted to revivify the metafictional techniques co-opted by advertisers in the 1990s (ASFT 27). At the same time, the arguments Wallace made in "E Unibus Pluram" seem to have exercised a disproportionate influence on interpretations of the late author, resulting in popular mischaracterizations of Wallace as one of the few "[t]oo sincere" literary "rebels" railing against a U.S. culture stultified by irony (ASFT 81).

The rhetorical context of the late-career Wallace – that is to say, the Wallace of 1997-2008 who interests this thesis – was one that was increasingly *less* ironic and *more* sincere. Undoubtedly, this rhetorical movement can in part be attributed to Wallace himself, whose middle-period works like “E Unibus Pluram” and *Infinite Jest* exercised (and continue to exercise) significant influence on U.S. culture. As I hope to show in this thesis, however, Wallace’s own works can only partly explain this cultural turn to sincerity. Indeed, a close examination of Wallace’s fiction between *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *The Pale King* (compiled, edited, and posthumously published in 2011 by Wallace’s long-time editor Michael Pietsch) reveals a Wallace deeply attuned to this shift, experimenting with fictional forms that both incorporate and struggle against the dominant modes of confession that came with the popular memoir. This thesis can therefore be read as a kind of genealogy that traces the development of Wallace’s post-1996 formal techniques against the “memoiristic” modes of confession of the early twenty-first century. If, indeed, memoir can be understood as a genre primarily interested in representing *transformative emotional experiences*, throughout Wallace’s later fictions we see an attempt to register and privilege, at levels of attention exceeding that of the sentence, diffuse, negative, and difficult-to-narrativize feelings like anxiety and depression. And as this thesis will show, it is Wallace’s interest in this latter type of “inarticulate” or “unshareable” feeling, falling outside of the domain of memoir, that drove the author’s late-career experimentations with form, as well as his thinking on civics and ethics in the twenty-first century.

Quite fittingly, David Foster Wallace’s first connection to memoir is biographical, the stuff of memoir itself. Shortly after quitting a Ph.D. program in philosophy, the young author

of *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) became infatuated with Mary Karr, and followed her to Syracuse NY, where the poet (and later, a key figure of the memoir boom) would begin to teach writing (Max 164). Wallace's relationship with Karr, which coincided with his early work on *Infinite Jest*, was not a happy one.¹ But the relationship is notable on a literary-historical level as well. Both at nascent stages of their careers, Karr and Wallace wrote and published, around this time, works of criticism that diagnosed problems in rhetoric and aesthetics in American literature. These essays are important not only for revealing key continuities between the works of Wallace and Karr, but also as symptoms of a more general frustration, in the early 1990s, with the misalignment between literary form and subjective experience – or, more simply, about the frustrated need to *say what one feels*.

In 1991, Karr's "Against Decoration" appeared in an issue of *Parnassus Review*, criticizing the poetry of James Merrill with an uncommon bluntness, claiming that Merrill's Ashbery-influenced verse was symptomatic of broader problems in American poetry. In particular, Karr's essay identified "two sins" in American poetry in the 1990s (51):

1. *Absence of emotion*. What should I as a reader feel? This grows from but is not equivalent to what the speaker/author feels. Questioning a poem's central emotion steers me beyond the poem's ostensible subject and surface loveliness to its ultimate effect. Purely decorative poetry leaves me cold.

¹ Certain low points of their relationship are worth mentioning, if only to illuminate an ugly and rarely discussed side of Wallace. Through the course of their courtship, which included a marriage proposal and a tattoo of her name on his arm (later to be crossed out and footnoted with Karen Green's name [Max 249]), Karr was married to another man. In 1992, after mailing a 250-page sample and outline of *Infinite Jest* to his agent, Wallace purchased a gun after "decid[ing] that he would no longer wait for Karr to leave her husband" (163). Wallace would behave violently with Karr during arguments, once trying to "push [her] from a moving car," and later getting "so mad at her that he threw her coffee table at her" (Max 175). Karr recounts this last incident in her third and most-recent memoir, *Lit* (2009).

2. *Lack of Clarity*. The forms of obscurity in decorative poetry are many and insidious: references that serve no clear purpose, for instance, or ornate diction that seeks to elevate a mundane experience rather than clarify a remarkable one. Lack of clarity actually alienates a reader and prevents any emotional engagement with the poem. (52)

Although Karr's essay has held a consistent, if controversial, place in American poetics, I would argue that the claims here are equally (if not more) important for prefiguring the aesthetic values of the contemporary memoir: Karr may be working out an aesthetics of the memoir, not just poetry. As Ben Yagoda has noted, Karr's *The Liars' Club* (1995) holds a central place in the history of the memoir boom. The best-selling autobiography was the first to take up the impressionistic mode of confession found in Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* (1989) in conversational language, thereby setting the tone for memoirs to follow (Yagoda 231). It is clear how Karr's vision of an undecorated poetry – aspiring to “clarify a remarkable” life rather than “elevate a mundane experience” – would have paved the way for *The Liars' Club*, a massively influential memoir almost singularly responsible for the formal conventions of the memoir as we know it today, involving the matter-of-fact revelation of addiction and familial trauma.

For the purposes of my argument, Karr's essay on poetics is important, as well, for the lateral influence it seemed to have had on Wallace's “E Unibus Pluram” (1993), which appeared in the *Review of Contemporary* bearing the dedication “For M. M. Karr.” To be sure, Wallace's arguments about the subsumption of metafictional irony into U.S. advertising should be read on their own terms, as should the highly influential call-to-arms, at the end of the essay, for a generation of “anti-rebel” writers who “dare to back away from ironic

watching, who have the childish gall to endorse single-entendre values” (ASFT 81).² At the same time, Karr’s essay is useful for providing us with a point of reference from which to read Wallace’s essay at a somewhat abstracted vantage: one that helps situate “E Unibus Pluram,” an essay lamenting the rhetorical limits of self-reflexive irony, within a broader culture “against decoration” in all its multivalent forms (ornamentation, abstruseness, and self-reflexivity); a broader culture, that is, increasingly preoccupied with what Karr describes in terms of emotion and Wallace as “single-entendre values.”

These connections between Karr and Wallace would likely have remained critically dormant, were it not for section nine of *The Pale King* – a belated “author’s foreword” that interrupts the story of the novel and stages the appearance of one “David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 975-04-2012, addressing you from my Form 8899-deductible home office at 725 Indian Hill Blvd., Claremont 91711 CA, on this fifth day of spring, 2005” (TPK 66-7). The putative purpose of this authorial intrusion is for “David Wallace” – who shares many important biographical details with the actual David Foster Wallace, but who quickly emerges as a highly fictionalized author-persona – to inform the reader that what is underway is not a work of fiction but in fact a “nonfiction memoir” recounting events at a regional outpost of the IRS between 1985 and 1986 (73).³

For Marshall Boswell, David Wallace’s intrusions serve to “complicat[e] . . . the distinction between the fictional and the real” as part of *The Pale King*’s broader goals to

² The connections between “E Unibus Pluram” and what ended up being Wallace’s magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996), are especially well-documented, and have informed important readings of Wallace’s works by critics like Lee Konstantinou, who is interested in the 1079-page novel’s “rejection of the ethos of irony” and eventual affirmation of “the possibility of an ultimate art, one with the power to . . . break down the fundamental barriers that separate the viewer of art from its author” (“No Bull” 103).

³ Throughout this thesis, I distinguish David Foster Wallace from the author-persona of *The Pale King* by referring to the actual author by his full name (or simply Wallace) and the latter as David Wallace.

make readers “weigh the value of fictional truth over that of supposed non-fiction” (“Author” 26). But if Boswell’s main historical reference point is Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock* (1993) – a novel that features a Jewish-American novelist named Philip Roth who visits Israel to track down an anti-Zionist impersonator, also named Philip Roth – the article misses out on the broader context of the memoir-genre that subtends both *The Pale King* and *Operation Shylock*. The stakes of this omission emerge in the somewhat uneasy conclusion Boswell draws about David Wallace’s appearances in the novel; namely, that the “author here” sections serve to show “that the sense of intimate communication one might feel with the author of a text, an intimacy that Wallace spent his career as an author urgently trying to establish and maintain, is an illusion” (38).

Boswell’s reading seems to contradict not only Wallace’s career-long interest in authorial intimacy, but also the very real sense of intimacy produced by these “illus[ory]” interruptions – a sense that Toon Staes describes as “the actual voice of the author reaching out to us” (39). Boswell’s reading is limited by its strict focus on truth-value and by its broader omission of the memoir-genre. Indeed, although the memoir is a genre frequently (and often exclusively) discussed in terms of truth-value, the *aesthetic* value of candor underwriting the memoir operates primarily on rhetorical levels, involving the divestment of ornamentation. The most important reference to the memoir boom in *The Pale King* – one that I believe justifies this thesis’s memoir-centered approach to the novel – appears in David Wallace’s extended answer to the question, “why a nonfiction memoir at all, since I’m primarily a fiction writer?”

There are two kinds of valid answers here, one being personal and the other more literary/humanistic. The personal stuff it’s tempting to say is just none of

your business . . . except that one disadvantage of addressing you here directly and in person in the cultural present of 2005 is the fact that, as both you and I know, there is no longer any kind of clear line between personal and public [. . .] Among obvious examples are web logs, reality television, cell-phone cameras, chat rooms . . . not to mention the dramatically increased popularity of the memoir as a literary genre. Of course, *popularity* is, in this context, a synonym for profitability . . . (TPK 80-1)⁴

The concerns of the marketplace that are evoked here are particularly important for framing the memoir as a vulgate genre, a commercially viable alternative to a literary form (viz. the novel) that, for better or worse, continues to stand as the primary aesthetic benchmark for serious writers of fiction. It is significant, too, that Wallace lists the profitable and popular genre of memoir within a list of technologies – the internet, cell-phone cameras, reality television – that come to supplant television as the wider culture’s historically exemplary media of communication, thereby transforming the hip, self-aware, and exclusionary culture of the 1990s into a rhetorical milieu that fetishizes confession, over-sharing and, indeed, sincerity.

It is clear, then, that the usual characterization of Wallace as an anti-ironic writer will lead us astray, at least when examining *The Pale King*’s interest in the memoir. Indeed, David Wallace’s tone throughout the author’s foreword is decidedly sardonic, at times evoking an ennui that might have made a younger David Foster Wallace flinch, preoccupied

⁴ I omit Wallace’s “literary/humanistic” justifications because they are not as important for understanding the context in which *The Pale King* situates itself. The “significant social and artistic value” that David Wallace claims to see in writing a nonfiction memoir, however, relates to the value the novel accords to the boring, or what it calls “the advantages of the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex” (82, 83). I discuss these aspects of *The Pale King* in relation to ideas about civics and attention emerging in Wallace’s later works in the second chapter of this thesis.

as he was by television and metafiction. One of the funniest – and most important – claims of the foreword appears in the author-persona’s discussion of author-advances, as he continues his justifications for writing a “memoir”:

Consider that in 2003, the average author’s advance for a memoir was almost 2.5 times that paid for a work of fiction. The simple truth is that I, like so many other Americans, have suffered reverses in the volatile economy of the last few years, and these reverses have occurred at the same time that my financial obligations have increased along with my age and responsibilities; and meanwhile all sort of US writers – some of whom I know personally, including one I actually had to lend money to for basic living expenses as late as spring 2001 – have recently ht it big with memoirs, and I would be a rank hypocrite if I pretended that I was less attuned and receptive to market forces than anyone else. (81)

The “cultural present” that *The Pale King* attempts to evoke is one that has not only moved beyond the cultural concerns of irony, entertainment, and advertisement that saturate “E Unibus Pluram,” but which articulates twenty-first century doubts about the formal or aesthetic possibilities of the novel in the grim language of author-advances and the demands of the market. The author-persona’s discussion of “market forces” here, privileging the author-market relationship, is especially damning (albeit ironically so) in the context of Wallace’s earlier paeans to the author-reader relationship.⁵

⁵ See, notably, the early novella “Westward the Course Empire Takes Its Way,” which stages a similar authorial intervention, answering John Barth’s refrain “For whom [is the funhouse fun?]” with a direct address to the reader: “You are loved” (GCH 373).

What might we make of David Wallace's seemingly ironic inversions of the actual David Foster Wallace's core values? The passage above retains an aura of parody, in its deadpan articulation of financial motivations that most memoirists would prefer to avoid addressing.⁶ At the same time, David Wallace's discussion here raises important questions about the cultural phenomenon of the memoir and its effects on writers of poetry and literary fiction. The years surrounding *The Pale King*'s "cultural present of 2005" was, indeed, a period of precipitous growth for the memoir, when sales of the genre between 2004 and 2008 grew by a remarkable 400% in the American market (Yagoda 7). These years represented as well a period in which many writers of literary fiction and poetry turned to the popular genre, with already established writers like Joan Didion, Nick Flynn, Bill Bryson, and Mark Doty turning away from their primary genres and toward memoir.⁷

The most famous instance of a literary writer turning to memoir is undoubtedly James Frey, whose *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) – which was discovered to have been heavily fictionalized following massive sales and critical laurels – has more or less become

⁶ The subject of parody here, may, in fact, be an oddly specific one. The unnamed recipient of this personal loan, who, "[d]espite his sudden celebrity and windfall" has yet to reimburse the fictional David Wallace (83n23), might be Jonathan Franzen, who was conceivably struggling in 2001's tanking economy before the publication of his breakthrough novel, *The Corrections*; the blockbuster success of *The Corrections*, which sold "720,000 copies in its publication year" alone ("Best and Worst" n.pag.), would undoubtedly have bolstered the advance Franzen would have received for his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* ca. *The Pale King*'s "cultural present of 2005" (TPK 82). Cf. Marshall Boswell, who suggests that the reference may be to Dave Eggers ("Author" 27n8).

Wallace's discussion of author-advances are important, as well, for its indirect citation of Karr's *The Liars' Club*. Along with Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Karr's breakthrough memoir was significant for taking "residence on the *New York Times* bestseller lists for a year or so each [and ringing] in a period in which publishers opened up their checkbooks and paid big (usually too big) bucks to ordinary people with troubled youths" (Yagoda 231-232).

⁷ The publication dates of these memoirs-by-writers paint a useful picture for understanding the 2004-2008 in which a post-*Oblivion* Wallace would have focused on *The Pale King*: Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (2005), Bryson's *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (2006), Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007), Doty's *Dog Years* (2007). Similarly, Karr's second memoir, *Cherry*, was published in 2000, and her first memoir, *The Liars' Club*, was re-issued in a special ten-year anniversary edition with an author's preface in 2005.

synonymous with the genre. Less commonly known is that the manuscript for *A Million Little Pieces* was originally shopped around as a novel, receiving rejections from seventeen publishers in total, including the one that would later purchase the book – with a rumoured advance of \$50,000 – when Frey described it as a memoir (Barton n.pag.). Revelations that Frey had fictionalized important events from his memoir, such as the time he spent in prison, set off a cascade of similar exposés and related lawsuits (Yagoda 23-25).⁸ As well, and more importantly for this thesis, this scandal raised questions about the memoir genre’s deployment of novelistic conventions and, indeed, its relationship to fiction more generally. *The Pale King*’s discussion of the “subliminal contract for non-fiction” and “[t]he feeling of betrayal or infidelity that the reader suffers if it turns out that a piece of ostensible nonfiction has made-up stuff in it” (75, 75n9) undoubtedly indexes this nadir of the memoir-genre, which saw Oprah Winfrey lambasting a crestfallen James Frey on live television for his narrative embellishments. Yet the novel being set “on the first day of spring, 2005” places it slightly ahead of this crisis in faith (TPK 68),⁹ making the Frey incident one instance of “something big *threaten*[ing] to happen [without it] actually happen[ing]” that Wallace planned for the novel (“Notes and Asides” 546).

The Pale King, a pretend vocational memoir, thus takes place before the consequences of narrative embellishment (public humiliation, loss of contracts) were

⁸ Frey’s memoir was found out to have “wholly fabricated or widely embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw ‘wanted in three states’” (“A Million Little Lies” n.pag.). Around the same time, J.T. Leroy – another writer of popular memoirs – turned out to be the pseudonym of the novelist Laura Albert, who had fabricated the entire persona (Rich n.pag.). Intriguingly, these fraudulent memoir scandals had little effect on the popularity of the genre, as sales grew steadily in the years after the Frey and Leroy incidents (Rak 10).

⁹ Wallace’s choice of two earlier fabrication scandals – involving “Kosinski’s *Painted Birds* [and] that famous Carcaterra book [*Sleepers*]” – marks the fictionalized “vocational memoir” of *The Pale King* with a particular kind of irony (TPK 75n9, 72).

codified with the Frey incident. And yet, one might argue that fictionality has always been a central component of the memoir, especially in light of the influence of Tobias Wolff, whose impressionistic poetics allowed for subtle deviations from the historical record (Yagoda 231).¹⁰ As with the novel's discussion of author-advances and market considerations, David Wallace's humorous mention of *The Pale King's* use of "narratological devices" as concessions to demands from the publisher's legal counsel thus raises important formal questions about the parameters of the popular genre, especially during the mid-2000s in which *The Pale King's* authorial address takes place. Indeed, questions about the fictionality of memoir are raised by David Wallace's framing of *The Pale King* – whose pages add up to what is incontrovertibly a novel – as a "vocational memoir" (TPK 72). But as this thesis hopes to show, the inverse proposition – involving the *memoiristic possibilities of the novel* – is equally, if not more, important to *The Pale King*.

Chapter Summaries

This thesis situates *The Pale King's* engagement with memoir in terms of Wallace's late-career experimentations. Chapter one begins by tracing, in Wallace's late-period works, a deep interest in *form* as a broad concept denoting everything from the dictionary entries of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* to the literary forms that are quoted in *The Pale King*. Reading section nine's author's foreword as a structural device that interrupts the novel's ongoing fictional conceit, the chapter then offers a reading of *The Pale King* as enacting an

¹⁰ A surprising amount of covert fictionalization appears in memoir. Karr's *The Liars' Club*, for instance, takes place in Leechfield, a fictionalized version of Karr's Texas hometown ("Art of Memoir" n.pag.). Other memoirs, like Stephen Elliott's *Adderall Diaries* (2009), thematize their own probable unreliability: "I had based my identity on a year spent sleeping on the streets and the four years that followed. It wasn't much of a foundation. He [Elliott's father, who began publishing negative reviews of Elliott's earlier autobiographical work on the internet] was questioning my story, telling anyone who would listen that I had made up the whole thing, my entire life. . . . I wondered how much I had mythologized my own history, arranging my experiences to highlight my successes and excuse my failures. How far had I strayed from the truth?" (66).

anacoluthon, a rhetorical figure that Paul de Man finds at work in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, and which finds precedent in the *Brief Interviews* story "Octet." The figures of interruption enacted at the level of structure in *The Pale King* will be read in terms of Rousseauvian modes of confession that mark the contemporary memoir, in which formative experiences from one's past are recounted and arranged from an affective vantage of retrospection. Chapter one then discusses the limits of retrospective remembering by turning to another important precedent in *Brief Interviews*: "The Depressed Person," which lies in special relationship to Elizabeth Wurtzel's depression memoir, *Prozac Nation* (1994). Drawing on recent work in the field of affect theory, this chapter argues that Wallace was a writer interested in diffuse, uncertain – "inarticulate" and "unshareable" – feelings over the more readily narrativized emotions of the memoir-genre's historical concern.

In this way, Wallace's engagement with memoiristic confession can be broadly understood as an attempt to find fictional forms commensurate to "inarticulate" and "unshareable" feelings. Chapter two delves into the specifics of Wallace's interest in the representation of emotional experiences with close-readings of *The Pale King*. This chapter begins by discussing section twenty-two's Fogle novella as a "shame memoir" that moves away from the contemporary memoir's focus on discrete emotional experiences while ultimately adhering to its modes of confession. Here, Jonathan Franzen's *Discomfort Zone* will provide a valuable point of reference for understanding the operation of shame in Fogle's account of conversion. The chapter will then move onto the second David Wallace account that appears in *The Pale King*. With its frequent asides about the conventions of the memoir-genre and its notoriously long description of a traffic jam, section twenty-four is important for understanding David Foster Wallace's interest capturing diffuse feelings in

new fictional forms. Furthermore, this section will help us understand the political stakes of Wallace's interest in inarticulate feelings, and will lead to the conclusion of this thesis, which places Wallace's interest in negative, non-intentional feelings like depression and anxiety in dialogue with the late-author's less ambiguous and more widely discussed claims about civics, attention, and daily experience.

Chapter 1: The Aesthetics of Divestment and Its Limits

“No one threw forms away. Hid, yes, but not destroyed or discarded.”

– *The Pale King*

Figures of Interruption in *The Pale King* and “Octet”

Surveying Wallace’s fiction, one perceives a strong interest in standardized forms: filmographies in *Infinite Jest*; documentary interviews and futuristic dictionary entries in *Brief Interviews*; emails and legal memos in *Oblivion*; newspaper articles and lists of medical terminology in *The Pale King*. Indeed, this interest takes on a self-reflexive character in Wallace’s unfinished novel, as we see mid-level tax accountants struggling to wade through tax-return forms in buildings that, owing to some misunderstanding in the contractual process about “form specifications,” was built with an “elaborate and obviously expensive facade” resembling “a blank IRS 1978 Form 1040” (TPK 281). The productive ambiguity of the word *form* likely motivated Wallace’s choice to excerpt Frank Bidart’s “Borges and I” for *The Pale King*’s epigraph: “We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed.” Wallace’s late-career interest in forms thus centers as much on the oblique possibilities of the misuses of forms as the narratologically straightforward incorporation of recognizably non-fictional forms. That *The Pale King*’s interest in “forms” extends to literary forms is significant as well – had he finished it, *The Pale King* would have been the most formally diverse among Wallace’s novels, with several of its sections performing literary quotations on both thematic and formal levels. Originally published as a standalone piece in *The New Yorker* (“Good People”), section six features, for example, a Christian couple quietly contemplating abortion, thereby taking up the themes of

Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" in Wallace's own long and tortuous sentences; while the opening of the novel, recognizable in shape and prosody as a prose poem, was published as part of a sequence of short texts called "Peoria" in the literary journal *TriQuarterly*.

There is, indeed, a certain conspicuousness in *The Pale King*'s abrupt jumps in style from section to section, as we move between not only forms outside of fiction (the newspaper article of section four; the parable-form of section ten; the list form of section eleven) but also forms from Wallace's own bibliography (notably, the anonymous interviews format of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in section sixteen, replete with headings), as well as forms Wallace seems to have invented for *The Pale King*, seen in sections two and fifteen, in which seemingly irrelevant facts intrude on the narrative in a collage of declarative sentences, playing out the novel's idea that one of its characters, Claude Sylvanshine, is a "fact psychic" (TPK 118).¹¹ It is, however, as much the transitions *between* forms as the individual forms themselves that defines the organization of *The Pale King*, whereby the turning of the page onto a new section often requires a kind of resetting of attention onto a new literary style or a recognizable form like the newspaper article. And yet, *The Pale King*'s juxtaposition of styles is not quite the Jamesonian notion of pastiche, the neutralized "imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" that, as part of postmodernism's broader decline of style and subjectivity, has been "amputated from the satiric impulse" (17). The quotations of styles in *The Pale King* are anything but gratuitous, as can be seen in the

¹¹ Andrew Warren finds this "spontaneous data intrusion" a distinctive model of narration in *The Pale King*, comparable to *Infinite Jest*'s use of jargon and distinctive use of free indirect discourse (398). Warren's reading of the Sylvanshine sections draws on Wallace's own associations of fiction with silence and non-fiction with "Total Noise," articulated in the late essay "Deciderization 2007." See the conclusion for my discussion of "Deciderization."

Sylvanshine sections' employment of collage to work out the novel's broader interest in the boundary between fiction and non-fiction.

At the same time, *The Pale King*'s engagement with form remains distinct from Wallace's incorporation of literary influences into his own work. We might consider here the example of William Gaddis, whose untagged, polyvocal dialogues are used for the Molly Notkin party scene of *Infinite Jest* and, indeed, within *The Pale King* itself, the civics discussion taking place in the broken down elevator in section nineteen, or the anonymous monologues making up section fourteen's transcript of a documentary film. *The Pale King*'s formal debts to Gaddis should, however, be distinguished from section six's engagement with Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," which functions more as an autonomous cultural referent (in story and theme) than stylistic influence.¹² This latter type of self-conscious quotation, in fact, becomes a narrative concern in *The Pale King* when the author-persona interrupts the progress of the novel with a belated "author's foreword" that takes place twenty years after the events described in the novel.

In the foreword, the author-persona David Wallace attributes the latter type of interest in form to his collegiate study and worship of his literary heroes. The level of candor achieved in that section, published as the ninth in Pietsch's arrangement, derives from the sense of an author breaking through a layer of aesthetic conceit (made up of formal references like the Hemingway story) in a confessional gesture. It is significant that *The Pale King* stages this moment of revelation belatedly, with a late foreword. Indeed, the placement of the "foreword" remains the only concrete clue we have about how David Foster Wallace

¹² Such quotations might remind us of Wallace's mobilization of genre films and B movies in *Infinite Jest* – in particular, its extensive summary of James Orin Incancenza's fictional film *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*, a "supposedly ironic lampoon of the avenging cleric-splatter-films of the late . . . '90s" (IJ 704).

might have ordered *The Pale King*, with the author-persona noting, in a footnote appearing near the beginning of the section, that the foreword appears “seventy-nine pages into the text” of *The Pale King* (67n2). The effect of this belated foreword is that the first seventy-eight pages of *The Pale King*, recounting events from 1985-1986 in sections written in different styles, appear without context. Only with the sudden intrusion of section nine’s “foreword” does the structural organization of *The Pale King* become explicit, thereby carrying out “Wallace’s plan[s] for the novel to have a structure akin to that of *Infinite Jest*, with large portions of apparently unconnected information presented to the reader before a main story line begins to make sense” (Pietsch, “Editor’s Note” viii).

With its address to the reader, section nine situates *The Pale King* within the humorous conceit of being a nonfiction memoir written by a someone who, “like so many other nerdy, disaffected young people of that time [1985-1986] . . . dreamed of becoming an ‘artist’,’ i.e., somebody whose adult job was original and creative instead of tedious and dronelike” (73). It is this adolescent dream – the subject of so many artist memoirs published in the 2000s, not the least of them Jonathan Franzen’s *The Discomfort Zone* (2003) – that explains *The Pale King*’s insistent fictionality and preoccupation with literary form:

My specific dream [in the 1980s] was of becoming an immortally great fiction writer à la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec, &c.; and many of the notebook entries on which parts of this memoir are based were themselves literally jazzed up or fractured; it’s just the way I saw myself at the time. (73-74)

The earnestly transhistorical view of fiction implied here is, indeed, one of the signal features of the artist-memoirs published around David Wallace’s “cultural present of 2005” (80). The

or between each pair of writers is a pointedly inclusive disjunction, placing postmodernist Gaddis alongside the concrete Sherwood Anderson; realist Balzac alongside Oulipean Georges Perec. *The Pale King* does, then, enact a neutered form of pastiche, but explains it in terms of a young person's desire to be an artist. The novel's variegated structure might therefore be read as a sign of this young writer's naïveté – one that is implied in the quartet of writers that David Wallace lists above as examples of his former heroes. The central significance of the foreword, then, is its lurching re-orientation of the novel's "present," such that the events of 1985-1986 are seen from a forelengthening perspective of 2005. In its discussion of fictional genre, *The Pale King*'s foreword thus marks a point where the novel briefly steps outside of fictionality.

The Pale King's gesture of stepping outside, which evinces an interest in shape, structure, and ordering, might be understood in terms of Frank Bidart's prose poem that the novel excerpts as its epigraph. Importantly, Bidart's "Borges and I" brings Wallace's last novel into the orbit of Jorge Luis Borges' story of the same title. Indeed, *The Pale King*'s interest in the distance between author and form reminds us of Borges' original story, which contemplates the near-"hostile" relationship between the everyday life of an author-figure and a distanced, third-person "Borges" that the piece's "I" feels is responsible for his literary pieces: "Little by little," says the speaker, "I am giving over everything to him ["Borges"], though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things" (Borges, "Borges and I" 324). Frank Bidart's version of "Borges and I" is an extended reflection on Borges' "Borges and I," with Bidart's ironic title placing it one step away from Borges' original story about stepping away from fiction's "falsif[ications] and magnif[ications]":

When Borges' "I" confesses that Borges falsifies and exaggerates it seems to do so to cast aside falsity and exaggeration, to attain an entire candor unobtainable by Borges.

This "I" therefore allows us to enter an inaccessible magic space, a hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty earlier denied us, where voice, for the first time, has replaced silence. (Bidart, "Borges and I" 9)

Bidart's take on "Borges and I" is important for describing "candor" in negative relationship with literary form; that is, as a "hitherto inarticulate space of intimacy and honesty" that is revealed by "cast[ing] aside falsity and exaggeration." *The Pale King's* foreword performs a sort of "casting aside" of a layer of fiction covering the events of 1985-1986, to attain the candor, intimacy, and honesty described by Bidart. In rhetorical terms, the ninth section of *The Pale King* enacts a kind of anacoluthon, a figure that involves "a shift, syntactical or other . . . between the first part of [a periodic sentence] (protasis) and the second part (apodosis) . . . [The figure] designates any grammatical or syntactical discontinuity in which a construction interrupts another before it is completed" (de Man 298n12). In describing *The Pale King's* shape as an anacoluthon, I invoke Paul de Man's interpretation of the figure – in particular as he sees it in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and Rousseau's later writings about the *Confessions* in the *Fourth Rêverie*.¹³ For

¹³ Rousseau holds an especially important position in the history of the memoir. Modern histories of the memoir invariably begin with Rousseau's consolidation of, among others, Augustinian religious confession and the Künstlerroman-genre for explaining the "development of personality" through the processes of "relating (or, as Rousseau said, confessing) shameful events" from one's past (Rak 5). A 2005 interview that Wallace gave to *Le Nouvel Observateur* suggests that Wallace had been reading, and admiring, Rousseau while working on *The Pale King*: Rousseau is listed alongside Saint Paul, Camus, and Dostoevsky as those possessing abilities "to render so fully, passionately, the spiritual urgencies they felt as, saw as reality . . . [Such writers] continue to fill me with an awe that is almost despair: to be able to be such a person! But what are envied and coveted here seem to me to be qualities of human beings – capacities of spirit – rather than technical abilities or special talents" (Interview with Didier Jacob 157).

de Man, the figure of anacoluthon marks points in which Rousseau's autobiographical writings slip from "the reported guilt" of the past to the present's "guilt of reporting," which de Man associates "with [Rousseau's] act of writing the *Confessions* and, by extension, all writing" (290).¹⁴ In the case of Wallace's last novel, the intrusion of the present into the past is literal, as the events of 1985-1986 (recounted in the unprofitable literary styles of fiction) are peeled back by an apodictic "foreword" that situates the previous parts of the novel (what might be called the novel's protasis) *as* fiction.

The figure of interruption that connects *The Pale King* to Rousseau's ur-memoir can be seen at work in the memoir boom: a period of literary history in which gestures of abandonment function on multiple aesthetic, rhetorical, and logical levels. Figures of divestment or interruption, indeed, can be found at work in a surprising range of the contemporary memoir's subgenres: the goal of "getting clean" by abandoning or giving up drugs (the sobriety memoir); the depressive's attempts, pharmaceutical or otherwise, to shed the cognitive distortions of clinical depression (the depression memoir); the young writer's attempt to "find her voice" by paring clichés and redundant adverbs from her prose (the artist-memoir). In this way, the poetics of the contemporary memoir involves the stripping away of layers of conceit to reveal some bedrock of formative emotion. In the case of memoirs written by already established writers of the relatively unprofitable genres of

¹⁴ Specifically, de Man finds anacoluthon at play in the famous stolen ribbon scene of the *Confessions*, described by Rousseau as an "unbearable weight of a remorse which, even after forty years, still burdens my conscience" (*Confessions* 86). When a sixteen year old Rousseau is discovered to have stolen a blue ribbon from the household in which he is a servant, he blames the theft on a servant girl, Marion, for whom the young Rousseau has feelings: "Marion was not only pretty. She had that fresh complexion that one never finds except in the mountains, and such a sweet and modest air that one had only to see her to love her" (*Confessions* 87). It is, however, the sudden appeal to chance in Rousseau's retrospective description of these events – "Je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit" ("I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself") – rather than his attachments to the servant girl that constitutes, for de Man, an instance of anacoluthon in the *Confessions* (288; de Man's translation).

literary fiction and poetry, the mid-career turn to the memoir-genre is, significantly, itself a kind of anacoluthon.

Yet, there are aesthetic dimensions to this turn to memoir as well, since one of the affective determinants of the rise of the memoir-genre was the sense that topics like familial trauma, addiction, and recovery were ill-suited for extant prose genres like the novel.¹⁵ Here, Didion provides us with an important example of an already successful literary writer turning to memoir exclusively for the rhetorical or aesthetic possibilities of the genre. In the introductory chapter to her grief-memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Didion describes an “increasingly impenetrable polish” that she saw obscuring her fiction, following the death of her husband: “This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only to myself” (8). The colloquial declension of the genre of memoir thus brings with it arguments about the perceived inability of literary forms (such as the ones played with in *The Pale King*’s 1985-1986 sections) to convey contemporary forms of trauma, at least with respect to memoir’s promises of recovery, healing, and learning.

The Pale King’s movement from fiction to nonfiction in section nine points to this historical doubt about extant forms. From section to section, there emerges a kind of meta-narrative for the structural organization of *The Pale King*, about a frustrated writer of fiction trying out and discarding a sequence of literary forms to convey something that resists

¹⁵ This perceived incommensurability is somewhat curious, since the memoir-genre is, at the formal level, indistinguishable from the novel-form. Yet, this idea is pervasive, and likely has something to do with the assumed (or guaranteed, by the publisher) truth-value of memoirs, and memoir’s relationship to the self-help genre. Consider, for instance, Karr’s statement, made in the tenth-anniversary preface to *The Liars’ Club*: “In our solitary longing for some reassurance that we’re behaving okay inside fairly isolated families, personal experience has the possibility to transform both the tellers of it and the listeners to it. Just as the novel form once took up the experiences of urban industrialized societies that weren’t being addressed in sermons or epistles or epic poems, so memoir – with its single, intensely personal voice – wrestles with family issues in a way readers of late find compelling” (xiv).

description by existing means. This is an idea that has an important precedent in Wallace's writing, namely, the *Brief Interviews* story "Octet," which might be read as a dress rehearsal for David Wallace's authorial intrusion in *The Pale King*. Nominally, the story is an "octet" of fictional scenarios or fact-patterns that invite the reader's moral judgment. Despite its title, the series actually comprises five quizzes: #4, #6, #6(A), #7, followed by a "Pop Quiz 9" that famously begins with the lines, "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces . . ." (145). The ninth pop-quiz is notable for the tortured tone of the narrator, second-guessing not only the motivations and efficacy of almost every formal feature of the series, but also the motivations and efficacy of this second-guessing itself:

These intranarrative acknowledgments have the additional advantage of slightly diluting the pretentiousness of structuring the little pieces as so-called 'Quizzes,' but it also has the disadvantage of flirting with metafictional self-reference – viz. the having 'This Pop Quiz isn't working' [. . .] within the text itself – which in the late 1990s, when even Wes Craven is cashing in on metafictional self-reference, might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever's reading them. This is an urgency that you, the fiction writer, feel very . . . well, urgently, and want the reader to feel too – which is to say that by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext. (145-6)

As Lee Konstantinou has observed, “Octet” is fundamentally a story that dramatizes the labour and work of a writer attempting to stage a “fourth-wall puncturing” that goes beyond the self-reflexivity of “traditional metafiction,” which Wallace associates with “the desire to be liked” and with attempts to make the “reader feel flattered” (“No Bull” 95). It is important to note, however, that the object of the labour and work of “Octet” is not only the transcendence of metafictional irony, but also an attempt to capture a facet of contemporary experience – a “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness” – that the story can only register indirectly, through its failed attempts at capturing it in its pop quizzes (BIHM 157). We see Wallace working through almost the same idea in *The Pale King*’s foreword, which, notably, falls on the ninth section of the novel.¹⁶ In this passage, the author-persona is speaking about the paradox arising from the foreword’s claim that *The Pale King* is, in fact, a work of non-fiction, notwithstanding the book’s copyright-page legal disclaimer characterizing the work (including the foreword) as fiction:

The book’s legal disclaimer defines everything that follows it as fiction, including this Foreword, but now here in this Foreword I’m saying that the whole thing is really nonfiction; so if you believe one you can’t believe the other, &c., &c. Please know that I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too – at least now that I’m over thirty I do – and that the very last thing that this book is is some kind of metafictional titty-pincher.

(TPK 69)

¹⁶ Unfortunately, it is unclear whether Wallace planned the foreword to appear as the ninth section, though his reference to the foreword beginning on the seventy-ninth page makes it possible. It is, however, certainly within the realm of plausibility that Michael Pietsch, aware of the similarities between “Octet” and the foreword, intentionally placed it in the ninth section of the novel. Speaking more broadly of the novel, Pietsch notes that Wallace did not leave behind detailed plans about the novel’s structural organization (“Editor’s Note” vi-vii).

This passage is notable for repeating, in almost the same context, “Octet”’s dismissal of “S.O.P. metafiction” as being “cute.” But if *The Pale King*’s basic pose toward self-reflexivity is the same as “Octet,” we can register subtle (but important) shifts in context and tone between the two works. Written at the end of the 1990s, “Octet”’s tortured, near-febrile struggles to stage an authorial appearance is marked by its opposition to the cute self-referentiality of not just the TV advertisers described in “E Unibus Pluram,” but also Wes Craven’s commercially successful *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 2* (1997), which deconstruct the horror-film by humorously employing the genre’s clichés. By contrast, *The Pale King* takes place in a 2005 marked by the rise of documentary confessionalism resulting from “web logs, reality television, cell-phone cameras, chat rooms . . . not to mention the dramatically increased popularity of the memoir as a literary genre” (TPK 81). In this way, the decidedly casual dismissal of metafiction in *The Pale King* evokes a literary-historical context no longer dominated by metafictional self-reference. But if the stakes of metafictional address are lessened in *The Pale King*, we find a strong suspicion toward the memoir-genre, catalogued by the author-persona next to commercial technologies of confession – a suspicion that pertains to the ability of the contemporary memoir to describe the “nameless ambient urgent” emotional experiences of Wallace’s long-standing interest (BIHM 157).

Unshareable Feelings in “The Depressed Person”

What are the emotional limits of memoir? As a confessional form, memoir is a genre centered on the representation of affective phenomena. And yet, one of the characteristics of the affective dynamics of the memoir-genre is a confusion about whether the emotions inhering in the form belong to the events being recounted (the “reported guilt,” to return to de Man’s words); the vantage of retrospection from which *all* memoirs proceed (the “guilt of

reporting”); or, indeed, within to the form itself, which might encode and transmit feelings to the reader. To be sure, this ambiguity is an important precondition for the readerly identifications that make memoir so popular a genre, poised at the edge of self-help. But there are limits to the genre of memoir too, recalled in David Wallace’s observation about how, in the twenty-first century, there seems to be “no longer any kind of clear line between personal and public, or rather private and performative” (81). It is the latter pair of terms, private and performative, that seems especially relevant to David Foster Wallace’s critique of the genre. If the memoir-form privileges certain types of affective experiences over others, one of the detrimental effects of the memoir boom might be that the dominance of memoir over other forms (especially the novel, evoked in *The Pale King* as an outmoded and unprofitable genre) threatens to impose performative limits on *private* forms of emotional experiences.

The kinds of emotions privileged during the memoir boom have to do with the narratological features of the contemporary memoir, which seems primarily interested in emotional experiences that adhere to classical narrative structures like shame, grief, and addiction. These emotions are particularly amenable to the episodic form of memoir, wherein a sequence of formative emotional experiences, separated by long periods of time, can be arranged to describe the memoirist working through obstacles. For literary writers, the act of memoir-writing is *itself* a narrativizable – indeed, memoiristic – experience. Consider, for instance, Karr’s description of the salutary effects of sharing personal trauma in her ten-year anniversary introduction to *The Liars’ Club*:

The surprise bonus came after *The Liars’ Club* (and later, its sister *Cherry*) became public: As taboos on subjects vaporized in my family, the level of

candor in my clan got jacked way up. . . . As certain facts that had once scalded our insides got broadcast, we got oddly used to them. Call it aversion therapy, but the events seeped in a little deeper. We healed more, though that had never been the point. Our distant catastrophes became somehow manageable. Catharsis, the Greeks call it. (“Introduction” xii).

For Karr, the cathartic possibilities of memoir lie in the genre’s ability to articulate (and render into narrative) subjects that have remained silent in the confines of the family, thereby revealing an important value of the performative overtaking what would otherwise be totally private experiences. The articulation of private trauma allows for the reader’s catharsis as well. As Karr observes about fans wishing to share their own “unlikely family sagas” with the memoirist, “I’m chosen for such a confidence because people think I’ll empathize, and it’s not hyperbolic to claim I always do” (“Introduction” xiii).

In this way, the cathartic abilities of memoir lie in the genre’s ability to articulate and narrativize traumatic or shameful personal experiences. To be more specific with terminology, we might even say that the memoir-genre is primarily interested in emotions rather than other, less intentional affective states like feeling or moods.¹⁷ Crucially, however, the memoir-genre’s adherence to traditional narrative structures, which has led it to engage primarily with emotions – “modes of affects in which the ego has to position itself as a

¹⁷ The precise differences between feeling, emotions, moods, and other affective phenomena are highly contested in the recent body of theoretical works in affect theory. These critical debates, however, have led to a broad consensus about the differences between feelings and emotions, with the latter being more closely tied to beliefs, action, and personal identity. Charles Altieri provides a robust summary of the broad differences: “Feelings quicken and animate the psyche, while emotions involve it in caring about how it will engage certain states of affect over time. We adjust to feelings or we let them direct out attention toward some quite particular momentary satisfactions. With emotions, the imagination not only participates in what it engages but also functions synthetically. When we identify a state as an emotion, our imaginations represent feelings as components within larger complexes, with the complexes usually taking the form of attitudes developed to deal with dramatic situations” (72).

psychological unit in relation to the conditions that move it,” and so closely tied to the memoirist’s identity or self-understanding at the moment of writing (Altieri 72) – also makes the genre equally unsuitable for diffuse affective experiences like clinical depression. Let me turn here to Ann Cvetkovich’s discussion of the narratological limits of the depression memoir, a subgenre that rose to prominence around the time of the “antidepressant revolution of the 1990s,” with William Styron’s *Darkness Visible* (1990), Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* (1994), and Lauren Slater’s *Prozac Diary* (1998) (Cvetkovich 93). Cvetkovich’s account is important for formulating the narratological problems of the depression memoir in terms that indirectly evoke the memoir-genre’s privileging of emotion over feeling:

These memoirs and others like them are largely structured around some version of a drugs-saved-my-life narrative and hence consolidate a medical model. As a writer suddenly felled by depression at the peak of his career, Styron captures the feel of depression as something that cuts him off from normal relations and work, but he presents it as a largely mysterious visitation, and the process by which drugs and therapy alleviate it remains vague. . . . Wurtzel shares all the lurid details of her emotionally chaotic childhood, adolescence, and college years, and Prozac comes in to save the day in her conclusion. (93-4)

If emotions are amenable to the memoir-form because they relate to one’s self-understanding as a “psychological unit,” depression is significant for being presented, within these memoirs, as a “mysterious visitation” obstructing one’s “normal relations and work,” and so irreconcilable within emotion’s domain of personal identity. In this light, the usual narratives of emotion taking place in the memoir (e.g. the five stages of grief or the twelve steps of

recovery) are substituted by narratives involving medical treatment, with the miraculous “Prozac ending” functioning as a kind of *deus ex machina*.

One of the most intriguing characteristics of the depression memoir, indeed, is the odd sense of flatness in the subgenre’s description of psychological pain. Unlike other types of memoirs like the artist-memoir, in which the writer’s present emotions come to structure recollected scenes, the depression memoir is significant for involving an affective experiences that seem both medically and narratologically difficult (if not impossible) to write about from the vantage of the “Prozac [or happy] ending.” In terms of both its 1990s conception as an external force that alienated the individual from his or her identity, as well as the aesthetic difficulties that attend attempts to describe it, depression is therefore an affective experience squarely in the domains of mood and feeling, and outside the domain of the conventional memoir. The representational challenges of depression lie at the heart of the *Brief Interviews* story “The Depressed Person” – important not only for being one of Wallace’s few extended meditations on depression, but also for laying the groundwork for the author’s discussion of memoir’s limits in *The Pale King*.

First published in a 1998 issue of *Harper’s* magazine, “The Depressed Person” presents a post-*Infinite Jest* Wallace taking on hard-to-describe affective experiences as the subject of fiction. The extensively footnoted story about an unnamed “depressed person” has a somewhat odd place in Wallace’s oeuvre. In all of Wallace’s writing, it is the only extended account purely about the experience of clinical depression, which the author never discussed publicly during his life. But although the story was frequently cited in the various obituaries that followed Wallace’s suicide, the piece itself has ended up in an odd place in the critical understanding of Wallace’s work. For D. T. Max, “The Depressed Person” is “revenge

fiction” that Wallace wrote after being snubbed by the memoirist Elizabeth Wurtzel (241). As the author of *Prozac Nation* (1994), Wurtzel is undoubtedly an important point of reference for “The Depressed Person.” Yet, to read Wallace’s piece merely as a savage portrait of “self-absorbed” celebrity is to miss out on the story’s fidelity to non-emotional affective experiences, which makes it an important precursor to *The Pale King* (Max 241).

“The Depressed Person” is best understood in terms of Wallace’s interests in describing a “terrible and unceasing emotional pain” that is characterized, according to the story’s opening, by the “impossibility of sharing or articulating” it (BIHM 37). The criteria of inarticulateness and unshareability are particularly important for placing depression outside the confessional domain of memoir. Wallace’s longstanding interest in diffuse, hard-to-describe feelings begins with *Infinite Jest*’s psychiatric patient Kate Gompert, whereby Wallace’s discussion of her depression in terms of anhedonia – a “probably mostly indescribable” pain that Kate Gompert “knows . . . simply as It” (IJ 696) – anticipates similar descriptions of unrepresentable feelings that we find not only at the beginning of “The Depressed Person,” but also (as discussed above) in “Octet,” as the “queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman sameness” that the narrator struggles to convey through metafictional projection (157). For the depressed person, the urgency of her pain and its ineffability continually bring her call on her friends, whom she imagines as staying on the phone “only out of the barest and most abstract human charity, all the while rolling their eyes and making faces and looking at the clock and wishing that the telephone call were over” (58n5). Significantly, the recurring topic of the depressed person’s one-way complaints to “her so-called ‘Support System’” is her longtime therapist, whose conception of “‘*totally honest and*

uncensored sharing” the depressed person sarcastically intones back to her exhausted friends (58n5; ital. original).

In this way, Wallace’s story thematizes the indescribable pain of depression as the irrevocable obstruction of all communication. Rather than the philosophical problem of solipsism that interested Wallace at the very beginning of his career, communication’s foreclosure in “The Depressed Person” is an exclusively social problem pertaining to the protagonist’s pained doubts about her friends (the ““Support System”” evoked throughout the story in square quotes), as well as her mistaken assumptions about her therapist who, partway through the story and without warning, commits suicide. The brutal model for communication in “The Depressed Person” is the protagonist sarcastically (and without the hope of mutual understanding) relaying, to her friends, what she thinks is an empty idea of “*totally honest and uncensored sharing*” proffered by a well-meaning therapist quietly suffering from her own depression. It is tempting to read “The Depressed Person”, especially when one considers it a revenge piece about Wurtzel, as a story condemning the depressed person’s self-absorption. For Mary K. Holland, ““The Depressed Person” essentially engages with narcissism and “its attending threat of blocked empathy for the other through the dilemmas of the fractured self and representation, resulting in a tone so multilayered that its final intention remains indeterminable, easily misread, or both” (116). I broadly agree with Holland’s assessment of the story’s volatile tone, as well as her notion that “The Depressed Person” is fundamentally about the obstruction of emotional identification¹⁸ – especially

¹⁸ Here, the failed identification is “emotional” in the sense that emotions are narrativizable affective experiences involving personal identity. If, as I discussed above, depression is unsuited to memoir due to the genre’s tendency to retrospect from the vantage-point of some “happy” (or medicated) ending, it is precisely the fact that the “depressed person” is identified as such – i.e., as an unnamed person suffering from depression, who experiences depression as a constitutive emotional experience, rather than someone who *has* suffered from

between the depressed person and the therapist, whereby the former is blocked from communicating what she feels to be the subjective experience of her psychological pain, while the latter suffers in literal silence within the story, eventually succumbing to the condition that the depressed person did not know was shared. But Holland's suggestion that the depressed person "deal[s] with her narcissistic need[] not by sincerely engaging herself in others' present lives, but simply by asking them, from the solipsistic safety of a telephone conversation or therapy appointment" assumes a kind of naïve bad faith that the story as a whole takes great pains to negate (Holland 116).

Rather, it is precisely the depressed person's knowledge of the "limitations of one-sided methods of communications" that precludes the possibility of her escaping what Holland describes as her narcissism (Holland 116). As with other stories in *Brief Interviews*, we see this thematic argument play out at levels attention beyond that of the sentence, reaching, indeed, almost the level of structure. If the numbered and dated "brief interviews" appearing out of order throughout Wallace's second short story collection play out a kind of structural argument about the mundane and disturbingly common nature of self-aware misogyny, "The Depressed Person" operates on a similarly dilated mode of attention, with the extremely long, sparsely punctuated, and syntactically counterintuitive sentences tempting the reader to skim or skip ahead (an effect that is compounded by these sentences' appearance in the footnotes, which overtake the story in a number of places, forcing the reader to read ahead several pages until the footnote's termination and flip back to the main text, giving the illusion of regression).

depression – that might perversely make "The Depressed Person" a "true" depression memoir, or at least one that avoids the pitfalls Cvetkovich identifies in the 1990s subgenre.

In addition to long, multi-page footnotes, “The Depressed Person” registers and attempts to convey the affective particularities of the protagonist’s psychic pain via parenthetical qualifiers of the form “(i.e.)” following pronouns. On a practical level, these qualifiers are necessitated by the fact that nobody in the story is given a name and are described merely in relation to the protagonist, as “the therapist” or “the friend.” These redundant qualifiers are the depressed person’s struggles encoded in linguistic form, literally rendering not only the protagonist nameless, but those around her as well, robbing them of personal experience and defining them merely in relation to the depressed person. Perhaps more brutally, the parenthetical qualifiers are intentionally frustrating formal features that register the depressed person’s redundant and paralyzing doubts, thereby threatening to render the reader one of the “secretly bored or repelled” friends that the depressed person fears is “desperate to get away from her as quickly as possible” (BIHM 53).

These off-putting formal features of “The Depressed Person” intentionally avoid the comedy and formal elegance characterizing Wallace’s better received “difficult” fictions like *Infinite Jest*. But it is the story’s acute sensitivity to the depressed person’s pain that seems missing in both Max’s reading of “The Depressed Person” as a savage portrait and Holland’s reading of the story as a cautionary tale about the dangers of narcissism. Indeed, a comparative reading of different drafts of the story gives us hints about Wallace’s intentions with the parenthetical qualifier. The first passage comes from the version originally published in *Harper’s*, and the second passage is taken from the version published in *Brief Interviews* one year later. Both describe the aftermath of the therapist’s suicide:

By this stage in the grieving process, the depressed person’s emotional agony had so completely overwhelmed her vestigial defense mechanisms that

whenever a member of the Support System finally said that she was dreadfully sorry but . . . (“The Depressed Person” 63)

By this stage in the grieving process following the therapist’s possible death by her own (i.e. the therapist’s own) hand, the depressed person’s feelings of loss and abandonment had become so intense and overwhelming and had . . . (BIHM 62)

Wallace’s additions to the opening phrase suggests that the primary function of these qualifiers is, in fact, to impede the progress of the story. Furthermore, this particular instance of the qualifier is significant for registering the un-expressed but ambient fear throughout the story that the depressed person was, in some way, responsible for the therapist’s death. It is, however, the particular *modality* of this fear – the unnecessary clarification of the phrase “her own,” as if it were possible that the therapist’s death might have been the depressed person’s fault; balanced against the more earnest expression of doubt registered in “possible,” as if the depressed person were also in denial about the therapist’s suicide – that suggests not only a great deal of sympathy, on Wallace’s part, for the depressed person, but also a broader interest in the representation of these almost unshareable, almost inarticulate feelings.

Any sympathetic reading of “The Depressed Person” brings with it an immediate temptation to render a story about the importance of empathy or the hazards of reading like one of the “bored or frustrated” friends of the depressed person, feeling like they “had other more urgent or interesting things to do” (BIHM 44). Certainly, the story avails itself – quite powerfully – to such moral readings, especially in light of the author’s suicide. And yet, it is important not to lose sight of the story’s representational interest in debilitating and mundane affects, if only to better understand Wallace’s interest in boredom. Rather than *The Pale King*

– to which my argument will turn momentarily – it is an essay that Wallace wrote within months of publishing *Infinite Jest* that gives full context for understanding Wallace’s interest in inexpressible affects. Speaking of the “inarticulable” nature of religious experience, Wallace describes how listening to people discuss religious belief makes him “look[] at [his] watch or shift [his] feet, immediately and deeply bored” (“Quo Vadis” 8). But if these glances at the watch recall the therapist or the tired friend checking the time, the depressed person’s representational difficulties appear to have, for Wallace, something in common with uninteresting attempts to describe religious experience, “expressive of a heart’s special tangle, of a knowing and verbal self’s particular tortured relation to what is unknow- and - sayable” (“Quo Vadis” 8).

Chapter 2: Remembrance and Affect in *The Pale King*

In the difficulties it poses for retrospective description, depression is emblematic of all non-intentional affective states unsuited for the usually teleological genre of memoir. Wallace's interest in diffuse feelings comes to the fore in *The Pale King*, which features two long sections that engage with the tropes of the contemporary memoir. These sections continue Wallace's attempts to capture, in fictional (or merely non-memoiristic) forms, the mundane but ineffable feelings that elude the grasp of the episodic structure and narrative conventions of the contemporary memoir. The first section of *The Pale King* that this chapter discusses is the Chris Fogle novella – published as section twenty-two in Pietsch's arrangement – recounting the adolescent “wastoid” years of a tax accountant famous at Peoria's regional post for his abilities of concentration (TPK 185). The second section discussed – published by Pietsch as the twenty-fourth – is the second of David Wallace's “author here” intrusions into the novel. The long section recounts the author-persona's arrival at the Peoria examination center in 1985. Owing to a computer error, the budding writer on leave from college is mistaken for a high-ranking accountant “David Francis Wallace,” and most of the section recounts the funny outcome of this case of mistaken identity.

Considered as a pair, sections twenty-two and twenty-four attest to Wallace's interest in experimental, iterative processes for capturing inarticulate feelings. In the greater scheme of the novel, the two sections engage in a kind of one-way dialogue, with the author-persona making several asides, in section twenty-four, harshly criticizing the faults of the Fogle section. David Wallace's criticism of “Chris ‘Irrelevant’ Fogle” (an epithet revealing the central importance of relevancy to the author-persona's own account) is doubly significant for its meditations on memory and the memoir-form. The first of these asides appears as a

footnote near the beginning of the section, keyed to a date that the author-persona is unsure about: “I’m not going to waste time noodling about every last gap and imprecision in my own memory, a prime cautionary example of which is ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle’s vocational soliloquy” (257n3).¹⁹ The author-persona’s complaints about Fogle’s soliloquy introduces the problem of relevance to Wallace’s broader interest in fictional representations of memory. If the genre of memoir uses one’s self-understanding at the time of writing as a way to filter memory (thus resulting in a genre that privileges formative emotion), an important aesthetic problem of *The Pale King* is knowing what details of memory are relevant when one abandons emotion as the organizing aesthetic concept in favor of diffuse and unnarrativizable feelings.

The concept of relevance, indeed, is something that seemed to have interested Wallace near the very end of his life, as seen in his discussion of the importance of “paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way” in “Deciderization 2007: A Special Report” – Wallace’s editor’s foreword to Houghton Mifflin’s 2007 edition of the *Best American Essays* series (BFN 313). Wallace’s description of feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of essays he has had to sort through to fulfill his duties as editor is important for indexing the general explosion of non-fiction of the 2000s; a state he describes as

an undifferentiated mass of high-quality description and trenchant reflection
that becomes both numbing and euphoric, a kind of Total Noise that’s also the
sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and

¹⁹ The phrase “vocational soliloquy” resonates with David Wallace’s earlier characterization of *The Pale King* as a vocational memoir. The organizing conceit of Fogle’s section twenty-two is, in fact, that it is an interview conducted and recorded for the purpose of “extract[ing] from Chris Fogle the formula of numbers that permits total concentration” (“Notes and Asides” 541).

rhetoric and context that I know I'm not alone in finding too much even to absorb, much less to try to make sense of or organize into any kind of triage or saliency of value. (BFN 301)

David Wallace's complaints, in *The Pale King*, about "Chris 'Irrelevant' Fogle" should therefore be read in relation to the actual Wallace's struggles with ascertaining "saliency" in a massive field of information. If Fogle is redeemed from his nihilistic "wastoid" adolescence after hearing (or at least in part after hearing, in the long account) the substitute Jesuit teacher's galvanizing lecture about the accountant's role in the "heroic frontier now [lying] in the ordering and deployment of . . . facts" (TPK 232), David Wallace seems to find fault with the ways in which Fogle's account remains encumbered by information's "Total Noise" at the formal level, in its over-inclusive attitude toward detail. Importantly, however, David Wallace articulates his critique of the Fogle memoir with respect to *The Pale King*'s broader criticisms about the conventions of memory:

Pace his overall self-indulgence and penchant for hand-wringing, § 22's 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle was actually on the money about one thing. Given the way the human mind works, it does tend to be the small, sensuously specific details that get remembered over time – and unlike some so-called memoirists, I refuse to pretend that the mind works any other way than it really does. At the same time, rest assured that I am not Chris Fogle, and that I have no intention of inflicting on you a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought I happen to recall. I am about art here, not simple reproduction. (TPK 259)

Section twenty-two and section twenty-four thus constitute iterative attempts (by the actual Wallace, working at the level of *The Pale King*'s structure) to move away from memoiristic modes of confession (centered around formative emotions) and toward a fictional one that properly engages with diffuse feelings. Both section twenty-two and twenty-four, in this way, should be read in relation to their engagement with "small, sensually specific details" – or inarticulate feelings with a verisimilitude of memory – that likely would be forgotten or left out of a conventional memoir, in its sequencing of formative emotional experiences toward a happy ending.

The Homogeneity of Affect in Chris Fogle's Shame Memoir

The Pale King continues Wallace's project of attempting to capture "inarticulate" emotional experiences in terms of the facticity of formal experimentation. As with "Octet" and "The Depressed Person," Wallace's overall project in *The Pale King* is one that registers these difficult feelings by dramatizing the failure of fiction to some aspect of lived experience. Indeed, as David Wallace's critique above shows, Fogle's account is dissatisfactory (within *The Pale King*'s broader engagement with the memoir) because of a kind of overcorrection, in Fogle's "self-indulgence and hand-wringing" about the "sensation[s] and passing thought[s]" that lay outside the normal purview of memoir. The Fogle section covers a life-event that is in many ways a standard trope of the memoir-genre – an adolescent's discovery of vocation – but approaches it with a level of entangled detail that makes it an almost parodic negative of the highly episodic genre, attributing his escape from adolescent waywardness to a series of loosely connected events that stand in unclear causal relation with each other: his discovery of the anti-narcotic Obetrol; Illinois's ratification of an poorly conceived progressive tax scheme; the death of his father, a state-employee, in a freak

train accident; the ensuing legal battles against the city; and, of course, Fogle's mistaken attendance of the final exam review of an advanced tax class.

The distended nature of Fogle's account continues the actual Wallace's critique of epiphany in the short story "Adult World": "In reality, genuine epiphanies are extremely rare. In contemporary adult life maturation & acquiescence to reality are gradual processes. Modern usage usually deploys epiphany as a metaphor. It is usually only in dramatic representations, religious iconography, and the 'magical thinking' of children that insight is compressed to a sudden blinding flash" (BIHM 177). But the affective basis for Fogle's obsessive need to root out the true cause for his conversion seems to be his continued belief, as an adult, in the irrevocable fecklessness of his former ways. Not unlike the depression memoir, the Fogle novella is a kind of perverse Bildungsroman in which the narrative end-point, the discovery of vocation, is paradoxically severed from the actual events leading up to the moment of conversion (in Fogle's case, because of the accountant's doubt about his adolescent self's capacities for change). This affective discontinuity suffuses Fogle's account with a shame that can only be retrospective:

I remember feeling the actual physical feeling of hatred of most commercial rock . . . I can still feel an almost bodily hatred. And believing that I and maybe one or two friends were among the very, very few people who truly understood what Pink Floyd was trying to say. It's embarrassing. (TPK 162)

The engorged nature of Fogle's account arises from the way in which shame retrospectively overtakes the remembered feelings of his shiftless adolescence. It is this affective disjunction – between Fogle's shame in the present and the partially remembered feelings of young "wastoid" Fogle – that accounts for his sense that he needs continually to seek out other

external causes to satisfactorily describe eventual conversion. As Fogle continues the above discussion,

Most of these almost feel like some other person's memories. I remember almost none of early childhood, mostly just weird little isolated strobes. The more fragmented the memory, though, the more it seems to feel authentically mine, which is strange. I wonder if anyone feels as though they're the same person they seem to remember. It would probably make them have a nervous breakdown. It probably wouldn't even make any sense. . . . I don't know if this is enough. I don't know what anybody else has told you. (162)

If the contemporary memoir, centered as it is around formative emotional experiences, takes on an episodic structure, presenting select scenes that tie into a broader narrative of redemption, healing, and so on, the Fogle section constitutes the exact opposite: an undifferentiated oral account relaying a series of events that stand in unclear relation to the natural endpoint to Fogle's redemption story. Each of the events of section twenty-two feature, to varying extents, the father's presence, with the present-day Fogle continually returning to his self-image seen from the father's vantage: "It is . . . possible that he did not like me very much. . . . It would, I imagine, be hard on someone not to be able to like your offspring . . . I know that even the slumped, boneless way I sat when watching TV or listening to music peeved him" (209).

To understand the oddities of Fogle's conversion memoir, it is worthwhile to examine shame's operation in the memoir boom more generally. Jonathan Franzen's *The Discomfort Zone* – an artist-memoir that, as discussed above, held personal significance for the actual Wallace – exemplifies a mode of confession particular to the memoir boom ca. 2005. *The*

Discomfort Zone covers Franzen's formative experiences at Swarthmore College as a German major on his path to becoming a novelist. (In this way, it is not entirely unlike David Wallace's descriptions of *The Pale King* as a memoir covering, however obliquely, his path to becoming a writer of fiction.) Unlike *The Pale King*'s section twenty-two, in which Fogle's chagrin continually intrudes into the recollected past, shame in Franzen's memoir remains strictly at the levels of irony and structure, and is disclosed by the memoir's rapid transitions between sections.²⁰

An important instance of such a transition occurs after Franzen's description of a transformative reading of Kafka's *The Trial*, which abruptly leads into scenes from Franzen's senior year, as he begins editing the college literary magazine and becomes romantically interested in a classmate. The collegiate Franzen's condemnation of Josef K.'s unwanted sexual advances on Fraülein Bürstner – in which Kafka's protagonist “rushe[s] over, grab[s] her, kisse[s] her on the mouth and then all over her face, the way a thirsty animal works its tongue over the long-sought spring water” (*Discomfort* 142) – is thus juxtaposed with the neutral description of Franzen's own decidedly more innocent attempts to win over his classmate. This is a rather subtle feature of the text – one that quietly invokes the adolescent Franzen's reading of *The Castle* (as being about Josef K.'s existential guilt) to describe Franzen's relatively conventional college years. Indeed, if retrospection – which, as David Wallace notes in *The Pale King*'s foreword, “is, after all, memoir's specialty” (85n26) – a priori necessitates affective interventions from the present, boom-era memoirs seem careful to confine the author's present-day emotions to the levels of irony and structure.

²⁰ This feature appears in even more intensified forms in Franzen's more recent non-fictional work, *The Kraus Project* (2014), which moves between translation, cultural criticism, and memoir.

It seems that Fogle's soliloquy takes the boom-era memoir's treatment of shame to its logical limit, so that the tax accountant's present-day shame crowds out all other affective experiences that might otherwise come through in his remembrance. In a way that recalls Franzen's juxtaposing transitions, Fogle's description of the "sudden, horrible, life-changing kind of event" of his father's train accident (TPK 172) is actually told with a kind of flatness and takes on the atmosphere of the scene immediately preceding this event, wherein Fogle's father returns early from a business trip and catches his adolescent son and friends loitering in their family home:

in short, my memory is of the scene being the worst confirmation of the worst kind of decadent, wastoid kids, and of my father slowly putting down his bag and case and just standing there, with no expression and not saying anything for what felt like such a long time, and then he slowly made a gesture of putting one arm up in the air and looking up and said, '*Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*,' and then picked up his overnight bag again and without a word walked up the upstairs stairs and went into their old bedroom and closed the door. (170)

Significantly, this mental image of the father's return is interrupted, as Fogle moves onto a brief digression about his father's character: "The memory, strangely, which is horribly sharp and detailed up to there, then totally stops, like a tape that's just run out" (170). Like Franzen's memoir, the description of Fogle's "terrible memory of looking up from the davenport and seeing myself through [the father's] eyes, and of his sad, sophisticated way of expressing how sad and disgusted he was" (172) becomes the privileged affect, overtaking the more dramatic scene of the train accident.

Despite the author-persona's complaint, in section twenty-four, of Fogle's propensity for "the regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought" (TPK 259), section twenty-two is therefore as much about the forgetting of more subtle, passing feelings as the intensity of Fogle's present-day shame. This absence of sensation – which, as a form of affect registered in the body, stands in for all "inarticulate" feelings belonging to the recollected past – is, indeed, announced by Fogle himself in the opening lines of the section:

I don't think my memory works in quite the way it used to. . . . For the most part, it's now almost as if I'm trapped in the present. If I drank, for instance, some Tang, it wouldn't remind me of anything – I'd just taste the Tang. (154)

The narrative logic of the Fogle section can thus be understood as an inversion of the associative sensuality of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. In place of the profusion of sensation that guides the recollections of Proust's narrator, the Fogle memoir is guided by a totalizing shame that expunges all other affects in the recollected scenes, thereby keeping the IRS accountant "trapped in the present," forever cringing upon his "wastoid" youth. In this way, Fogle's insistence on including as many details as possible (details that are, at the same time, stripped of all extemporaneous sensation and feeling by the homogenizing shame of retrospection) thus makes section twenty-two another of David Foster Wallace's fictional forms that dramatize the failure to capture fleeting and non-constitutive feelings.

Anxiety, Passivity, and Traffic: David Wallace's Averted Gaze

In this way, *The Pale King* articulates two aesthetic criteria that shape David Wallace's own "memoir" in section twenty-four: (1) that the section should represent "the way the human mind works" and hew closely to "small, sensuously specific details that get

remembered over time” (259), while, at the same time, (2) being judicious about what details to include in order to avoid Fogle’s pitfalls of oversharing – a defect registered in section twenty-two as emotion’s erasure of feeling and sensation. David Wallace’s strong rebuke of Fogle, however, results in a very strange formulation of the concept of relevance. If the retrospective shame of section twenty-two belongs to the domain of intentional and formative emotions characterizing the memoir, the memoiristic components of David Wallace’s authorial intrusions – recollections, that is, of a novelist speaking of anything but his literary education, focusing instead on a “long-past year I spent in exile from anything I even remotely cared about or was interested in” (79) – seem assiduously to *avoid* the keystones of narratives of self-formation and epiphanic change, seemingly giving section twenty-four the same negative attribute (frustrating irrelevance) that David Wallace imputes to Fogle.

David Wallace’s critique of Fogle’s “irrelevance,” indeed, is openly flaunted near the start of the infamous traffic jam scene of section twenty four, which describes a hot, sweaty, and unbearably slow car ride the adolescent David Wallace shares with two other accountants in the cramped backseat of an AMC Gremlin “Service vehicle” (TPK 267). The slow-going nature of David Wallace’s description has inspired frustration and bewilderment in critics and readers alike. According to one critic, the author-persona’s “exhausting description of every inch of Self-Storage Parkway pushes the episode squarely into parody” (Warren 401). For a late-career Wallace who confessed, in private correspondences with Franzen, to feeling “tired” of the “various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic,” the traffic jam episode could indeed be read as the attempt of a writer trying to work out frustrations about his own writing (qtd. in Warren, 407n6). And yet, the scene – introduced by the author-persona as “the next salient detail” – is placed in the section in a

way that suggests great importance with respect to *The Pale King*'s broader themes (TPK 267). The relevance of the traffic jam, indeed, emerges in the episode's synthesis of information, memory, selection, and feeling – all central thematic concerns inhering in Wallace's last novel. The twenty-page description of the car ride appears with the following introduction:

As always happens with human minds inundated by excessive input, I've retained only flashes and incomplete clips from that day, which I'll now go ahead and recount some specifically selected relevant portions of, not only as a way to introduce the atmospherics of the REC and the Service, but also to help explain what might initially look like my passivity (it was more simple confusion) in the face of what may seem, in the clarity of hindsight, like an obvious case of misassignment or mistaken identity. It was not obvious at the time, though; and expecting a person to have immediately seen it, understood it as an error, and taken immediate steps to correct it is a bit like expecting someone to have noticed and fixed some incongruity in his surroundings at the very moment that a hundred flashbulbs suddenly went off in his eyes. (261-62)

This passage is significant for framing the section's interest in diffuse feelings (or "atmospherics") as an explanation for David Wallace's passivity when he finally exits the car and receives special treatment from IRS personnel who mistake him for the higher-ranking David Francis Wallace. If fecklessness and inaction were discussed in Fogle's soliloquy through the lens of retrospective shame, the David Wallace section seems more interested in replicating the precise configuration of affective particulars that incapacitated the young

author-persona's powers of action on his arrival at the examination center. Paradoxically, it is precisely the scene's *irrelevance* to David Wallace's present-day identity as a writer of fiction that allows for the section's registration of feelings that would otherwise be occluded by the writer's self-understanding.

This episode is notable for dragging on; and perhaps succeeding a bit too much in reconstructing the day's "atmospherics," as the author-persona recounts, in excruciating detail, his arrival by bus to Peoria's main terminal, his attempts to find a ride to the REC, and the cramped car ride he shares with two other IRS employees in the backseat. Although he remains unnamed, the hyperhydrotic young man quietly suffering between David Wallace and the higher-ranking official is David Cusk, whose adolescent struggles and humiliation with perspiration is recounted in full in section thirteen.²¹ At the formal level, the author-persona replicates the car ride's claustrophobia and anxiety by confining the section's narrative attention to the limits on perspective imposed by the car's seating arrangement; that is, his placement between David Cusk and the car's window, which determines the optical vantage of the remainder of the long car ride:

I could feel the corduroy of my suit getting sodden along the entire area of contact with the gremlin's patterned plastic seat, as well as along the hip and upper thigh that were mashed up against the human sprinkler next to me, who was by now radiating both heat and an acrid, panicky smell that made me turn my head and pretend to be concentrating hard on something in view beyond

²¹ David Cusk is another stand-in for the actual David Foster Wallace in *The Pale King*. D.T. Max recounts Wallace's own struggles with sweat and anxiety, which began in his high school years, in his biography: "To cover his [anxiety] attacks, Wallace walked around school with his tennis racket and a towel. He was sweating because he was just off the court – that was the idea he was trying to convey. He took extra showers. He was nauseated often before going to class (Max 12).

the window (which rolled down only halfway, due to some design flaw or obscure safety feature.) (270)

Although the intense claustrophobia of the section begins as David Wallace's physical discomfort in his seat next to Cusk, the narrative attention is one that follows David Wallace's averted gaze as he contorts his body away from the "heat" and "panicky smell" emanating from his fellow passenger and pretends to look through the faulty window, catching partial glimpses of the REC through the unmoving traffic outside. Contrary to expectation, the traffic episode is organized in such a way that David Wallace spends very little time describing his physical discomfort or David Cusk's actions during the car ride itself. Instead, all his worries appear at the very beginning of the car ride, with "the early part of the ride's chief excitement: A period of furious itching along the left side of my ribcage gave rise to fears . . . that the former boy on the bus's impetigo had somehow been pneumatic or contagious without direct contact" (269). In a characteristic move for Wallace, the section thus describes the author-persona's fear of contagion (directed at David Cusk) in relation to the bus ride that is already over, recalled as David Wallace remains seated in the silent car, "feeling utterly isolated at the same time that I was crammed in so closely with other people that we were all breathing one another's air the whole time" (269).

It is significant that the fear of contagion appears near the beginning of the car ride, which has the collegiate David Wallace noticing David Cusk for the first time, "already sweating prodigiously, and who kept surreptitiously wiping rivulets of sweat off his forehead and then wiping his fingers off on his shirt with a motion that looked strangely as if he were pretending to scratch himself under his sport coat rather than wipe off his wet fingers" (268). However, the claustrophobia of the car ride is registered indirectly, and, again, at the level of

form – that is, by the way in which the episode remarks on David Cusk’s presence at the very beginning of the ride and then immediately forces its narrative attention to the car’s other side, as David Wallace looks through the partially rolled down window to a

gauntlet of franchise retail and shopping centers and auto and tire and
motorcycle / Jet Ski outlets and self-serve gas plazas with built-in
convenience stores and national fast food brands

that David Wallace claims there is “no point in describing . . . since it’s now the same basic gauntlet around every US city – I believe the economic term is ‘monoculture’” (270-1). More than a contemplation of the homogenizing forces of consumer capitalism, the list of stores that sets off David Wallace’s freewheeling digressions is important precisely for the lack of difference between the terms, and by the way the unpunctuated list of identical sights registers the young author-persona’s focused attempt not to think about David Cusk profusely sweating onto him from the middle seat. Wallace’s feelings in the car – physical discomfort and a moderate repulsion to Cusk, relieved by focusing his sights out the window and thinking about traffic conditions – are hardly the constitutive moments of a life typically chronicled in memoir. But the moment is important in light of David Wallace’s present-day characterization of the boring, in section nine, as related to a “deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way” (85). The extensive description of the traffic jam can thus be read as David Wallace’s belated confrontation of boredom’s “ambient” pain at the level of form, even as the younger David Wallace described in the scene avoids it by looking out the window.

The anxiety over the AMC Gremlin’s approach to the Peoria IRS center derives from the way in which descriptions of bodily discomfort or sensation – or any extended

description of Cusk – are suppressed, as David Wallace gives a series of highly detailed explanations about the organization of the Peoria exurb, the spacing between traffic lights in the approach to the examination centre, the possible causes for the delays in road construction (that in turn have reduced the three-lane parkway to a single lane), and the psychological causes of traffic jams. By contrast to the relatively conventional Fogle section, which moves freely between scenes as the accountant remembers new details, the traffic jam of section twenty-four is significant for being a retrospective first-person account that is irrevocably stuck in David Wallace's position inside the Gremlin in 1985, as he "move[s] and twist[s] [his] neck awkwardly in order to make out the Exam Center's various features through the impediments of the car's required signs" (275). The narrative attention's strict adherence to David Wallace's restricted perspective from inside the AMC Gremlin arises from the fact that the scenes of section twenty-four are excerpts

from the actual notebook in which these impressions were [originally] recorded. I'm aware that I'm describing the access road from a distance but attributing to it qualities that became evident only as we got very slowly closer and closer and then were actually on it. Part of this is artificial compression; part is that it's next to impossible to take coherent notes in a moving auto. (276n25)

The notion that *The Pale King* is an *edited* version of the adolescent Wallace's notes, indeed, is an important one; especially in light of the oral qualities of the Chris Fogle soliloquy. It seems like Wallace here is trying to preserve Fogle's sensitivity to small details while avoiding the erasure of feelings like the frustration of not being able to make out details in the distance, too specific to recall in retrospect and ordinarily forgotten as soon as the

moment itself passes. At the same time, the conceit of the notebook situates the frustratingly limited perspective of the traffic jam within *The Pale King*'s broader engagement with memoir:

(. . . please keep in mind that I knew none of the REC structure's actual history of logistics on that initial day; I'm trying to stay faithful to the memory of that experience itself, although there is no avoiding a successive description of various elements that were, at the time, obviously simultaneous – certain distortions are just part and parcel of linear English) (283)

The author-persona's statements on the representation of memory are relegated to parenthetical asides or footnotes to the main text, suggesting a formal separation between the past and the "cultural present of 2005" that intruded on the novel with the anacoluthon of section nine (TPK 72). By contrast to Fogle's entrapment in the present, David Wallace's curious reluctance to add retrospective details evinces a desire to replicate the collegiate author-persona's limited vantage in 1985 or a desire, on the part of the present-day David Wallace, to be "faithful to the memory of that experience itself."

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Section twenty-four's mnemonic fidelity is important for considering the questions of ethics that arise in *The Pale King*. On a broader structural level, the traffic jam episode's suppression of Cusk serves to recall another section, placed earlier in the novel, describing in excruciating detail the "daily torment" that a teenaged Cusk faces in high school (TPK 98). Among the numerous tics and coping mechanisms that the teenager learns to deal with his sweat problem, the third-person account in section thirteen notes that Cusk

also began to cultivate a habitual gesture of brushing his hair back from his forehead, which he practiced in the bathroom mirror in order to make it look like just an unconscious habit but was really all designed to help brush sweat from his forehead out of sight into his hair in the event of an attack – but this too was a delicate balance, because past a certain point the gesture was no longer helpful, since if the front part of his hair got wet enough to separate into those creepy little wet spikes and strands, then the fact that he was sweating became even more obvious, if people were to look over. (98)

The description here is notable for prefiguring (or echoing, depending on where Wallace would have placed this section), in nearly identical language, the observations that David Wallace makes as he looks over his fellow passengers:

. . . between myself and an older GS-11 . . . sat a long-jawed younger man in a gray polyester sport coat and tie, maybe roughly my age, his feet on the medial hump and knees up almost to his chest, who was already sweating prodigiously, and who kept surreptitiously wiping rivulets of sweat off his forehead and then wiping his fingers off on his shirt with a motion that looked strangely as if he were pretending to scratch himself under his sport coat rather than wipe off his wet fingers” (268).

Part of the grim humor of section twenty-four is that David Wallace does, in fact, notice Cusk and also remarks right away that his carefully meditated and practiced gesture betrays his intentions to “make [the sweat flick] look like just an unconscious habit but was really all designed to help brush sweat from his forehead” (98). The reference to Cusk’s unconscious habit is, indeed, an important point of reference for section twenty-four, in understanding

both David Wallace's dispassionate, unsympathetic characterization of Cusk, but also for the collegiate author-persona's "feeling utterly isolated at the same time that I was crammed in so closely with other people that we were all breathing one another's air the whole time" (269). In this way, David Wallace notices Cusk's hand gesture in 1985 but does not fully countenance his suffering *until twenty years later* – as, that is, the author and compiler of *The Pale King* (and a fortiori the Cusk section as well). The excruciating details of the view outside – which the young David Wallace collects from a quite literally circumscribed perspective – are thus relayed in unfiltered form as part of the author-persona's way of balancing his "debt" to Cusk.

The notion of being "faithful to the memory of th[e] experience itself" (283) by foregrounding small and indescribable feelings (which, notably, arise from one's interdependence with others) is important for considering the politics developing in Wallace's later works. Indeed, the episode taking place on the Self-Storage Parkway might be read as a fictional elucidation of the "traffic jams and crowded aisles" that Wallace sees making up the spaces for ethical living in his 2005 Kenyon Commencement Speech (TW 77). In a talk that has found a very large audience since his 2008 suicide, Wallace claims that these "boring, crowded parts of adult life" are important occasions to "make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to" (TW 83, 77). As a solution to "operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world, and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities," the conscious marshalling of attention Wallace calls for involves "consider[ing] the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have harder, more tedious, and painful lives than I

do” (TW 83, 86). The negative representation of empathy in *The Pale King* is important, however, for revealing the affective particularities that complicate such attempts in everyday life; complications that, given the “[triumphant] academic setting” of a commencement ceremony of an elite liberal arts college pre-2008, do not quite come through (TW 46).²² *The Pale King* complicates the somewhat simple formulations of *This is Water* by presenting occasions for empathy that the individual, subjected to the affective/sensual “atmospherics” of the moment, fails to actualize (TPK 261).

This obstruction of empathy appears as well in the second Lane Dean Jr. section of *The Pale King*, which has the accountant, grown up from section six’s meditation on abortion, experience a “boredom beyond any boredom he’d ever felt” (377). The thirty-third section is particularly important for illustrating the ways in which self-evident values like empathy are rendered inaccessible in the ordinary milieus that seem to have interested David Foster Wallace near the end of his life. The reader “get[s] a little taste” of Lane Dean Jr.’s inarticulably dull workday as the accountant ponders his pinky finger, avoids checking the clock, and tries to imagine, in an attempt to transcend boredom, a calm day at a beach (382). But if the section’s mention of “his infant son’s photo in its rattly little frame where the front glass slid a bit if you shook it” seems only to foreground the mediated inaccessibility of the abortion scene’s galvanizing epiphany (380), Dean’s struggle with boredom reveals the force with which passing feelings distort and occlude past resolutions, much in the way that his mental image of the beach congeals against his will and “quiver[s] a little, like Jell-O that’s almost set,” and turn into “[u]nbidden” thoughts about “ways to kill himself” (380).

Returning to the question of empathy, what is most significant about section thirty-three is

²² “Triumphant” seems to have been edited out of the illustrated, hardcover edition published by Little, Brown; the term, however, is audible in recordings of the speech available online.

the way in which Dean tries to – or, more specifically, tries not to – imagine the subjective experience of his fellow wigglers likely experiencing similarly unshareable and inarticulate feelings while examining their own tax returns: “Try as he might,” states the section’s narrator, “[Dean] *could not help envisioning* the inward lives of the older men to either side of him, doing this day after day” (377; ital. mine). The negative formulation here – Lane “could not help envisioning” – registers, in an especially devastating way, the manner in which the affective particularities of boredom obstruct the empathetic potential opened up by its universality. Like the unmovable golden statues of David Wallace’s description at the end of section nine – “priceless . . . never guarded or secured, [and] safe from theft not despite but because of their value” – the condition for boredom’s enormous value appears (not without irony) to be its inaccessibility (84).

Conclusion: Boredom at the Frontier of Information

My discussion of Wallace's interest in "inarticulate" and "unshareable" feelings might seem to omit what is often described as *The Pale King*'s central concern. The notion that *The Pale King* is a novel that primarily engages with the problems and redemptive possibilities of boredom arose in large part from a cryptic note that Wallace left behind in his plans for *The Pale King*. Speaking of a character with incredible powers of sustained attention, Wallace wrote,

Drinion is *happy*. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. ("Notes and Asides" 546)

As we have seen in this thesis, however, *The Pale King*'s general treatment of affect is one that seems more interested in the particular ways in which the "happiness" of boredom's telos is denied. Notwithstanding the above passage, that is, Wallace seems to have been more interested in negative experiences like anxiety, frustration, and depression than the benefits of attention. A full accounting of boredom's role in *The Pale King* thus requires us to consider the possibility that, for Wallace, the significance of boredom was allegorical rather than affective per se – as, that is, boredom functioned a stand-in for the ways in which everyday "atmospherics" obstruct the path to self-evident value by rendering us passive in

occasions calling for sympathy, community, and even political action, much in the way of David Wallace sitting in the AMC Gremlin next to a suffering David Cusk (TPK 261).

An allegorical conception of boredom helps us read Wallace's description, in his editor's introduction to *Best American Essays 2007*, of the difficulty of paying attention in what he calls "nonfiction's abyss," or "the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, &c." (BFN 302-3). The political significance of being able to direct one's attention in this milieu – described in the Fogle soliloquy as the new "heroic frontier" (TPK 232) – emerges later on in the editor's introduction, where Wallace discusses how the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush would not have taken place "if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way" (BFN 313). Wallace's late-career articulation of the importance of attention has led to some important re-visitations to his earlier works like *Infinite Jest*. In a recent essay, for example, David Letzler reads *Infinite Jest*'s endnote system in terms of Wallace's enjoinders regarding information above – as, that is, a mass of text containing both irrelevant and valuable pieces of information designed to help "develop our abilities to filter information to their maximum capacities" (Letzler 321).

To be sure, Letzler's reading of *Infinite Jest*'s endnote system is extremely important for introducing, to the ways in which we read Wallace, modes of attention exceeding the scales of the quotable phrase or the long sentence and therefore attuned to broader concerns of structure. Yet, it seems as if readings of Wallace's fiction as aesthetic solutions to political problems miss out on the ways in which the negative feelings in Wallace's fiction qualify and at times complicate the conclusions reached in the essays. Rather, fiction seems to have

offered Wallace the occasion to develop, nuance, and at times trouble the conclusiveness of his essays. In that vein, Wallace's interest in inarticulate and unshareable feelings might remind us of Sianne Ngai's description of "ugly feelings" as being valuable precisely for being a "mediation between the aesthetic and the political. . . . as unusually knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments' . . . that not only render visible different register of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinct manner" (3). In their ability to account for human passivity, inarticulate and unshareable feelings that appear in Wallace's fiction share with Ngai's "ugly" ones a capacity to "read the predicament posed by a general state of obstructed agency" (3). In that sense, the seeming pessimism or negativity that we find at work in Wallace's fiction should be read as an important part of his politics, balancing (but crucially, also substantiating) the incisive political analyses and galvanic calls to arms that we find in Wallace's nonfiction.

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