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# Pale King or Noonday Demon?

*Acedia, The Pale King, and David Foster Wallace's Moral Vision*

David J. Michael  
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Centre for Languages and Literature  
Lund University  
Supervisor: Paul Tenngart

## **Abstract**

This essay argues that acedia is a helpful concept in illuminating the fiction of the American author David Foster Wallace, particularly his unfinished novel *The Pale King*. Following a brief biographical sketch of Wallace, the essay explores the development of the term acedia—which means something along the lines of apathy, sloth, and listlessness—and the two types of acedia: personal acedia and the broader form of cultural acedia. Boredom, which is intimately connected with acedia as well as one of the explicit subjects of *The Pale King*, is examined in parallel to acedia. Next, the essay moves to an exploration of Wallace's aesthetic and moral vision to demonstrate how acedia ties into Wallace's attempts to turn, from the prevailing irony of his postmodernist forbearers, to an ethic of sincerity. Finally, acedia is employed as a lens for a close reading of *The Pale King*, and it is argued that Wallace's solution for dealing with acedia is attention.

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## I. Introduction

On September 12, 2008, the writer David Foster Wallace hung himself at his home in California. He was forty-six years old. To call Wallace the greatest American writer of his generation has become something of a commonplace statement bordering on the trite. Setting aside questions of that ever-elusive idea of literary greatness, it nevertheless seems entirely reasonable to say that Wallace was his generation's most influential author working in the English language. He was also one of the most ambitious.

Wallace sought to capture the whole of what it meant to be alive in America at the turn of the millennium. His writing brought together celebrity, entertainment, addiction, loneliness, boredom, and solipsism. His unmistakable style was a mix of low American idiom and high style, his sentences sometimes unraveling into paragraphs. For much of his work, he used footnotes and endnotes, which allowed him to tell multiple stories at once and to stuff his fiction and non-fiction with asides and extra information. He said it was "almost like having a second voice in your head" (Max). His magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* was 1,097 pages long, almost 100 of which were dedicated to endnotes. The use of footnotes and endnotes was more than a clever trick, though. It was mimetic of the flood of information that characterizes our age, and the notes allowed Wallace to highlight the daily torrent of facts and "info," but also to momentarily corral it.

Three years after Wallace died, his publisher Little, Brown released *The Pale King*. Subtitled "An Unfinished Novel," the book was cobbled together from a manuscript and corresponding notes that Wallace left behind. It is not so much an unfinished novel as a pastiche of a novel and can be read as a series of interrelated short stories. *The Pale King* is Wallace's attempt to look at "Why we recoil from the dull," which is "a powerful impediment to attention" (85). After focusing on the numbing effects of entertainment and drugs in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace began to think about boredom, "a hugely important problem and yet none of us talk about it" (Burn 128). Wallace thought that for his generation to grow up, they would have to deal with boredom, a painful reality once one removed the distractions of consumer entertainment.

The book is set in Peoria, a mid-size American town in Wallace's home state of Illinois, and it follows a group of low-level IRS workers tasked with examining individual tax returns and

determining which returns should be audited.<sup>1</sup> Nothing really happens, plot-wise. And though the novel was unfinished, according to Wallace's notes nothing was supposed to happen. But to say that the book is about boredom is a simplification. One character writes about experiencing "boredom beyond any boredom," and for Wallace, boredom is affiliated with anxiety, and in some cases, despair (377). The concept of acedia is a more accurate term for thinking about the boredom in *The Pale King* and the malaise that marks many of the characters in Wallace's other works.

Acedia is a notoriously difficult term to define, and over the last 1600 years its meaning has gradually expanded. Its history and usage will be examined in length later on, but for now it suffices to say that acedia is a concept developed largely by monastic hermits in fourth century Egypt and is something akin to sloth combined with despair—a kind of high-grade existential boredom. It is also rarely invoked in literary analysis, though its cousins—boredom, malaise, and ennui—are constants. One possible reason is that it is not exactly in vogue to blend theology with literature, and even less so to talk about "sin," which is how acedia was initially perceived. The term "acedia" occurs, to my knowledge, only once in Wallace's work. It is, however, a major focus in his oeuvre. The thesis of this essay is that the concept of acedia, both personal and cultural, plays a vital role in David Foster Wallace's moral vision and in *The Pale King* in particular.

There have been several pieces that examine the trajectory of Wallace's career. Some—particularly essays by A.O. Scott, D.T. Max, and Stephen Gross as well as a book by Marshall Boswell—do so with great skill. However, as of this writing, most of the pieces have not taken into account *The Pale King*, and none have used the concept of acedia to examine Wallace. In this essay, I will give an overview of Wallace's career, tying together his fiction, nonfiction, and interviews to provide a sketch of what he hoped to achieve with his art. After that, I will provide a survey of acedia and boredom before moving into a close reading of *The Pale King* through the lens of acedia.

An unfortunate side effect of Wallace's suicide is that most of what is written on him is marked by a sort of low-level grief. This is understandable. Jonathan Franzen has called Wallace

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<sup>1</sup> For you Europeans, that is the Internal Revenue Service, an enormous government agency in charge of taxes. It is like the Swedish Skatteverket, only like a million times larger, and, in my mind, much less friendly. In a clever marketing scheme, Little, Brown released the book on April 15, which Americans refer to with no small amount of disdain as "tax day."

a “contract” writer; Wallace’s work required a commitment from readers, a commitment that would be rewarded with pleasure and knowledge. To have made that commitment, to have spent the countless hours required of his writing, is to have made an attachment to the work and—post-structuralist protests aside—the author himself. Wallace’s work made readers feel less lonely, and when he died, readers felt like they had lost a friend. This is reflected in the essays that have been published since his death. There is a warmth in them that is able to highlight the beauty and depth of Wallace’s work in a way that is unusual with today’s standard literary criticism that labors under the impression that a cold, sterile tone and a handful of biting critiques elevates the criticism to the level of science. The whole “murder to dissect” thing is actually pretty accurate.

Above, I used the word “unfortunate” for two reasons. First, there is a fair amount of saccharine eulogizing, some of which borders on the absurd. Take the proclamation of Greg Carlisle, the author of a massive book guide to *Infinite Jest*, delivered in the keynote of the first conference on Wallace’s work: “I think a world in which Wallace is a household name would be a more mindful, passionate, and compassionate world” (20). Wallace’s project was so ambitious it was bound to fall short in some areas. Comments like Carlisle’s, however, go beyond warm eulogizing and beatify Wallace, ossifying his potential for meaningful communication and insulating his work against any deserved criticism.

The other unfortunate aspect is that Wallace’s life inevitably bleeds into his work, and as a result we read his pieces through the lens of his biography. A writer in *The Harvard Book Review* notes that that the “perhaps unavoidable side-effect of a literary suicide is the compulsion on the part of readers and critics to comb through the writer’s oeuvre in search of an articulated question” (Keenan). Wallace wrote about loneliness, sadness, and often about suicide, so the opportunities are endless. The obvious question that arises in this essay is: Did Wallace, who suffered from depression, also suffer from acedia? It is possible. Most writers complain at one time or another of acedia’s symptoms. Acedia and depression, while they often overlap, are two different things. But it is not for us to answer this question, and this essay will restrict itself to depictions of acedia in Wallace’s work.

It does seem that more distance—or at least more restraint—will be needed in Wallace scholarship. And yet, I am a firm believer that a writer’s life can contribute to an understanding of the writer’s work. This holds especially true for Wallace, whose history, both personal and intellectual, sheds a great deal of light on his compositions, particularly *Infinite Jest*. Some of the

best literary criticism in recent memory has been in the form of literary biography: Ellman's biography of Joyce, Mendelson's biographies of Auden, and Joseph Frank's magisterial series on Dostoevsky. Here is Wallace commenting on Frank's marriage of aesthetic and social/ideological critique in his Dostoevsky biographies:

Of course, contemporary literary theory is all about showing that there's no real distinction between these two ways to read—or rather, it is about showing that aesthetics can pretty much always be reduced to ideology. For me, one reason that Frank's overall project is so worthwhile is that it shows a whole different way to marry formal and ideological readings, an approach that isn't nearly as abstruse and (sometimes) reductive and (all too often) joy-killing as literary theory. (*Lobster* 256)

This essay will blend elements of ideological, narrative, and biographical critique in order to facilitate a reading of *The Pale King* that takes seriously the idea that what Wallace is in fact describing is often acedia.

Before continuing, a brief note on citations is in order. *The Pale King* was released in paperback in April 2012. Included in the new edition were four previously unpublished scenes. However, the pagination in the paperback version—at least the British version—does not align with the Little, Brown hardcover first edition, which I used here. Thus, in the couple of instances I cite the paperback version, I employ “Unpublished” in the citation.

Finally, since this thesis is being composed for a European university, a note on American exceptionalism. David Foster Wallace is a decidedly American author. He wrote explicitly and singularly about the American experience, and he only traveled abroad on a few brief occasions. I realize, then, that there is a fair chance this essay will come off as insular; however, the problems Wallace diagnoses as quintessentially American are very much prevalent in Western Europe, where they are occasionally far worse because of what I can only describe as an Old World Cultural Snobbery which refuses to acknowledge their existence, i.e. to acknowledge that European culture might be just as vapid as U.S. culture.<sup>2</sup> But by and large these problems do seem to find, if not their origin, then their fullest expression within contemporary America.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Among the plethora of U.S. television shows syndicated and devoured by Swedes is one called *Good Christian Bitches*. I need not belabor the point.

<sup>3</sup> This sort of broad statement is a bit risky. As Wallace told a rather snide French interviewer, “it's also dangerous to try to characterize a whole nation as ‘a place where people are not very interested...’ because then, by the question's logic, the only artistic vocations that Americans pursued would be commercial film and television, popular music and video games” (Burn 152).

## II. Acedia: The Noonday Demon

I have proposed that acedia is a useful interpretive concept for David Foster Wallace's work, particularly *The Pale King*. To make this evident, I will first give an account of acedia and then examine its relationship to its cousin, boredom.

Acedia is generally associated with boredom, ennui, and lethargy. But as the scholar Andrew Crislip has shown, it has been used more broadly, sometimes to describe seemingly opposite states. However, defining acedia is a complicated task. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "indifference, listlessness, apathy." Crislip cites a French monk who writes that acedia is "so pregnant with meaning that it frustrates every attempt to translate it," while Crislip himself says "the very persistence of the term 'acedia' betrays the fact that none of the modern or medieval glosses adequately conveys the semantic range of the monastic term" (145). A history of the concept might be helpful in untangling its meanings.

The root of acedia is the Greek *kedos*, which means to care about (Svendsen 50). With the negative prefix, acedia thus meant something like a lack of care. The term is a minor one in early Greek thought; while it plays an important role in Athanasius's *Life of Anthony* as well as in the thought of Origen, not until the fourth century is it developed in the writings of Evagrius (c.345-399), a monk and desert hermit.<sup>4</sup> Evagrius helped articulate the monastic concept of the eight bad thoughts, which were related to the Platonic tripartite division of the soul and the forerunner to the seven deadly sins. Of these eight thoughts—gluttony, lust, greed, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride—the most dangerous was acedia. It was to be feared because it could function as gateway to other bad thoughts but also because it meant a rejection of the created world and the joy that a person was supposed to take in God. Evagrius thought acedia was literally demonic, the affliction of the noonday demon (*daemon meridianus*), a phrase he takes from the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The demon, Evagrius thought, attacked monks between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Here is Evagrius describing acedia in his treatise *The Praktikos*, a handbook for monks in their battle against the bad thoughts: "First of all, he makes it appear that the sun moves slowly or not at all, and that the day seems to be fifty hours long. Then he compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is

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<sup>4</sup> Evagrius may have taken his thoughts on acedia from other hermits such as Macarius, however his is the first extant account.

from the ninth hour [3 p.m.], to look this way and that..." (99). The immediate restlessness that the monk feels is accompanied by a disdain for his present situation and a desire to leave the community. Evagrius writes that the monk besieged by acedia experiences "a dislike for the place and for his state of life itself, for manual labour, and also the idea that love has disappeared from among the brothers and there is no one to console him." The demon's ultimate goal, as Evagrius sees it, is to "to have the monk leave his cell and flee the stadium."

Part of my task is to prove that acedia as initially conceived of by Evagrius and later developed through history, is indeed applicable to twenty-first century moderns. While this is more difficult to do on a broader, cultural level, it is not so difficult when discussing individuals. I suspect that readers will be able to empathize with another of Evagrius's descriptions of the monk besieged by acedia:

When he reads, the one afflicted with acedia yawns a lot and readily drifts into sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to reading for awhile; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings. Later, he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep, but not a very deep sleep, for hunger then rouses his soul and has him show concern for its needs. (85)

The tedium and boredom that Evagrius describes here are well-known symptoms of acedia. It was something with which most of the desert hermits, with their relatively solitary existence, struggled. As will be seen in my examination of *The Pale King*, these symptoms are ever-present in the modern economy, reliant as it is on clerical jobs.

Evagrius's Latin-speaking disciple, John Cassian, who founded a monastery in France, further developed the concept of acedia and passed it on to the West. With Cassian, acedia came to be associated both with sadness and with laziness and torpor. His remedy was manual labor and physical activity.

Let me pause here to say a word about "sin." The hermit's conception of bad thoughts is not the same as the slightly more modern notion of sin. Bad thoughts were states of being that were detrimental to a sense of fullness and thriving. These states of being could lead to bad actions; however, the monks, in their diagnostic talk of bad thoughts, did not have the "concept of sin as an individual's commission of a bad act or omission of a good one" (Norris 30). But the subtlety of the monastic conception of bad thoughts eventually lost purchase, particularly as the Church gained the power to absolve sins. This is why after Cassian, acedia, which is not so much

an action as a state of being and therefore more difficult to discuss in the context of sin, comes to play a diminished role in moral theology.

Jeffrey Toohey notes that starting with Cassian in the fifth century, the concept of acedia became internalized, moving within the sufferer. No longer an actual demon—an external source—it is thus “‘medicalized’ or even pathologized” (114). That might be an overstatement, but it is true that while early monastic commentators pegged acedia as at times being psychological and at other times somatic, the physicality of the affliction comes to be emphasized more. In the *Institutes*, Cassian compares acedia to a fever:

...*acedia*, which we may term weariness or distress of heart. This is similar to dejection, and is especially trying to hermits, and a dangerous and frequent enemy of those who dwell in the desert. It is especially disturbing for a monk at about the sixth hour. It is like some fever which seizes him at set times and which brings the burning heat of its attacks on the sick man at usual and regular intervals. (qtd. in Toohey 114)

When Gregory the Great transforms the eight bad thoughts into the Seven Deadly Sins, acedia is not included. It becomes a subset of sloth.

Until well into the middle ages, acedia was thought to be a monastic affliction, “a hermitic sub-species of common sadness” (Svendsen 50).<sup>5</sup> It does play an important role in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where it is characterized by a lack of love or a misguided love. It has been argued by some that the reason Dante finds himself in the wood in midlife is that he suffers from acedia.<sup>6</sup> In *Inferno*, he comes across *accidiosi*, who are stuck in a mire and whose throats are filled with mud. Virgil has to interpret their song for Dante:

We chose to be sad,  
In the sweet air enlivened by the sun,  
And our hearts smouldered with a sullen smoke:  
Now we are sad instead in this black filth. (8.121-124)

Rather than feeling the proper love towards the created order, they felt only anger. When in *Purgatorio* Dante asks Virgil of the sin of a group of people on a terrace of sloth, Virgil replies, “The love of the good, defective/ Without its duty” (17.85-86). Acedia also finds its way into Chaucer. In “The Parson’s Tale,” which is not so much a story but a homily, the Parson discusses acedia and its effects: “Of Accidie comth first, that a man is anoyed and encombred for to doon

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<sup>5</sup> This view—which is too narrow—is still held by some. Lars Svendsen writes that “acedia was for the few, whereas boredom afflicts the masses” (Svendsen 49-50).

<sup>6</sup> C.F. Norris pp. 201-203; Williams

any goodnesse” (54.686). From acedia stems despair, tardiness, and laziness. The Parson recommends fortitude and perserverence.

Though the concept of acedia finds traction among the laity, the medicalization that Toohey asserts began with John Cassian continued until by the Renaissance acedia had all but been replaced with melancholy.<sup>7</sup> Whereas acedia, according to Aquinas, lies somewhere between the physical and the spiritual, melancholy is physical and was thought to be caused by an imbalance in bile. A medical historian notes “By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, psychiatrists defined acedia as a mental condition of sadness, mental confusion and apathy, bitterness of spirit, loss of liveliness, and utter despair” (Norris 20).<sup>8</sup>

Though it had crept into medical usage and was still present in historical theology, acedia had faded from common usage. Kathleen Norris notes that the 1933 version of the Oxford English Dictionary lists “accidie,” the Anglicized version, as obsolete, and it is not even included in the 1951 *Webster’s Dictionary*. *Webster’s* is by no means the authority on English, but still, it gives a pretty good idea how far into disuse the term had fallen among the general public. The term, however, found renewed use among intellectuals describing the malaise and despair following the World Wars (e.g. see fig. 1 and fig. 2). A supplement to the OED published between 1972 and 1986 notes that the obsolete tag should be removed (Norris 2).

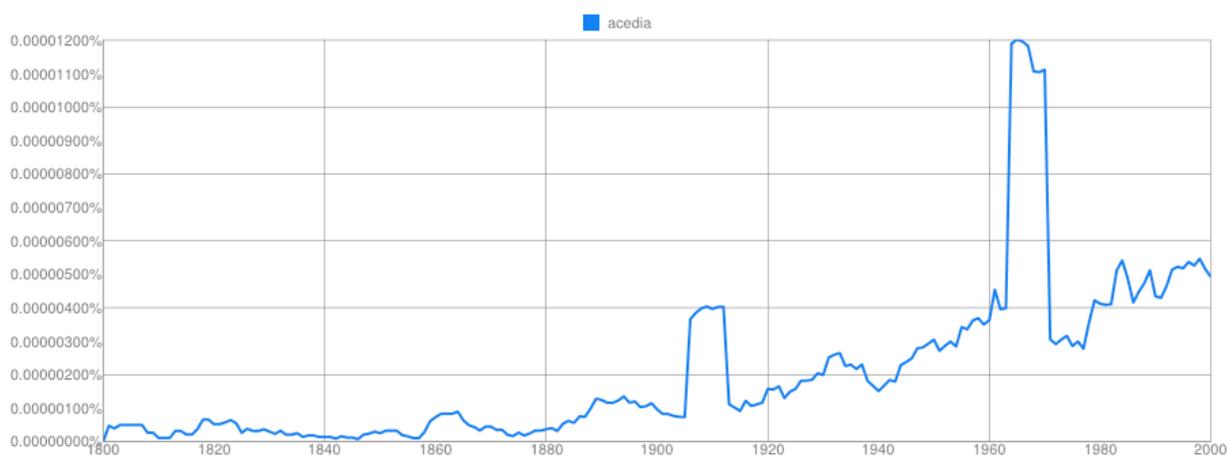


Figure 1: Google N-Gram illustrating the rise in use of the word “acedia,” 1800-2000

<sup>7</sup> Thus at this time we have Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Dürer’s engraving *Melancholia I*.

<sup>8</sup> We should be clear, however, that acedia is not the same thing as depression. Depression is a psychiatric ailment, where acedia lies somewhere in the realm of a psychological state and a vice.



Figure 2: Google N-Gram illustrating the rise in use of the word “accidie,” 1800-2000

In 2008, Kathleen Norris published *Acedia & me*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller and received a plug from Oprah's magazine.<sup>9</sup> A recent *New York Times* column discussed acedia and technology. But on the whole, acedia, while invoked with increased frequency, is still largely forgotten.

### **Cultural Acedia: Acedia as Modern Malaise**

Aldous Huxley's essay, “Accidie,” originally published in a magazine but later collected in his 1923 anthology *On the Margin*, is indicative of the re-surfacing of acedia as a concept. Huxley states that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, acedia “became a literary virtue, a spiritual mode” (21), though it went under different names. With Romanticism in the nineteenth century, “Accidie in its most complicated and deadly form, a mixture of boredom, sorrow and despair, was now an inspiration to the greatest poets and novelists, and it has remained so to this day” (22). A strange progression, Huxley notes, from a sin to the symptom of a disease to the muse of much of the characteristically modern belles-lettres.

Noting that the rise of acedia is “a spiritual event of considerable importance,” Huxley asks why this occurred. His answer, a rough sketch of two pages, places the rise of acedia at the failure of the French Revolution and then proceeds, in the remaining page and a half, to trace the history into the modern era—machines, capitalism, cities—before finishing with the disillusionment in the wake of World War I. Huxley wrote this piece shortly after WWI but it is prescient in a haunting, novelist-as-canary-in-the-mineshaft sort of way: “Other epochs have

<sup>9</sup> Swedish readers may be familiar with Karin Johannisson's *Melankoliska rum* (2009), which contains a chapter on acedia.

witnessed disasters, have had to suffer disillusionment; but in no century have the disillusionments followed on one another's heels with such rapidity as in the twentieth, for the good reason that in no century has change been so rapid and so profound" (25).

Attentive scholarship it is not, but Huxley's essay is important in that it links acedia with twentieth-century disillusionment. The cultural and intellectual history of the twentieth century is by now a familiar one. It will do to emphasize that Huxley is tracing the spread of acedia—or the “mal du siècle” as Huxley refers to it—from the arts to the general culture, even if the word acedia was not invoked in that sphere. Here Huxley does us another service in pointing out that acedia is not only a personal affliction—it can be a cultural affliction as well.

Huxley ends his essay with the rather cynical notion that “we can claim with a certain pride that we have a right to accidie: with us it is not a sin or a disease of the hypochondries: it is a state which fate has forced upon us.” There is the sense here (“certain pride”) that our acedia is actually clear-sightedness and that it is the most conducive state for the arts. Above I used the word affliction, but Huxley refers to a state of being. I will return to this thread when discussing Wallace's aesthetic vision, but for now I will say that I agree with Kathleen Norris, who specifically identifies a modern form of acedia as our “negative pose of ironic detachment” (47).

What we have, then, are two species of acedia: personal acedia, which is something akin to sloth, apathy, malaise—each of which could be viewed as a symptom of liminal acedia—and cultural acedia, which is a state of disillusioned detachment or broader apathy. Both entail a lack of care or desire, as in the original sense of the word.<sup>10</sup> Wallace's work would take up both.

### **An Interlude on Boredom**

*The Pale King* is explicitly concerned with boredom. A full-blown taxonomy of boredom is beyond the scope of this essay, but a rough sketch tracing its origin, development, and relationship with acedia will prove helpful for my reading of *The Pale King*.

Boredom is an even more amorphous concept than acedia. There is not one boredom but many, and all of them are difficult to pin down, particularly now, when boredom is invoked as a sort of catchall word. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her literary history of the word, writes: “No single definition can compass the meanings of so culture-bound a term, a word that in less than

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<sup>10</sup> Here is Kierkegaard providing a strong example of personal acedia in *Either/Or*: “I do not care for anything. I do not care to ride, for the exercise is too violent. I do not care to walk, walking is too strenuous. I do not care to lie down, for I should either have to remain lying, and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. *Summa summarum*: I do not care at all” (qtd. in Norris 16).

two and a half centuries has accrued multifarious ideological associations and complicated emotional import” (14). Further, boredom is usually felt as a lack of something, and providing an account of a lack is difficult.<sup>11</sup> For the moment it is enough to differentiate between the two types of boredom, which most commentators refer to as simple boredom and existential boredom, both of which find their way into *The Pale King*. Simple boredom is result of external situations—our surroundings do not give enough stimulation. We tend to think of this as childish boredom, though it is certainly not restricted to children. Existential boredom is more difficult to define, but it draws comparisons to melancholy, acedia, and ennui. It will not do, however, to completely separate simple and existential boredom. They seem to exist on a continuum, and there is a great deal of overlap.

It may surprise the reader to learn that the first recorded use of “bore” does not occur until 1768 when, in a private letter, Earl Carlisle uses the word in reference to some Frenchmen, as in it is too bad that some of his friends “are to be bored by these Frenchmen.” The Oxford English Dictionary puts the first recorded use of the noun “bore” at 1778 and, in reference to a tiresome person, 1812. The first citation of “boredom” is dated 1864, a mere 150 years ago (Spacks 13).<sup>12</sup>

Of course there are previous examples of boredom in history—the Latin *taedium vitae* is often mentioned—but boredom did not gain any thematic force until the modern era (Svendsen 21). Spacks posits four potential reasons for the rise of the word in the eighteenth century. Around this time, work and leisure become increasingly separate spheres. Without romanticizing too much, we could say that prior to this, particularly within smaller communities, work and leisure bled into one another. With the rise of market capitalism and urbanization, working hours are parceled off from leisure. There arose a whole group of amusements and entertainments to cater to people’s leisure.<sup>13</sup> Unfulfilled free time leads to boredom. It is no surprise that the first cited occurrence of the word “interesting,” in the modern sense, occurs in 1768 (Spacks 114). Patricia Meyers Spacks puts it well: “The interesting (in its modern version) and the boring

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the similarities with the etymology of acedia as a “lack of care.”

<sup>12</sup> The French word *ennui* finds its way into English at the end of the seventeenth century, but this has a different shade of meaning. Ennui, Spacks notes, “implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate. Ennui belongs to those with a sense of sublime potential, those who feel themselves superior to their environment” (12).

<sup>13</sup> This delineation of work and leisure time was concurrent with the rise of social morality. Writers and critics at this time expressed a fair amount of concern over how people spend their leisure time.

imply one another. Without the concept of engagement, disengagement has no meaning. Interesting means not boring; the boring is not interesting” (116).

A second potential reason is the decline of Christianity. Boredom could be described as time lacking meaning (or, in some of the more complex, existential variants which we will turn to momentarily, time without meaning). Christianity teaches that time is always filled with meaning, not to mention that it places certain demands on the believer with respect to the believer’s response to the world. One theologian phrases it this way: “Where faith, for good or bad, is a tremendous drive toward relationship and contains all the energies that we associate with the life of wishing and longing, boredom moves in just the opposite way” (qtd. in Spacks 21).

The decline of orthodox Christianity is concurrent with the development of the notion of individual rights, and above all the right to the pursuit of happiness. Implicit in this language is the notion that it is possible, even probable, that we will find happiness. But if we are constantly pursuing happiness and measuring it, unhappiness—or at least a lack of happiness—becomes more pronounced and we need a vocabulary for measuring it.

This assessment of emotional states goes hand-in-hand with the rise of inwardness that occurs during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This story is beyond the scope of this essay except to say that the rise of inwardness, of introspection and subjectivity, creates more space for boredom, which is experienced as an intensely personal phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Here is a particularly bleak assessment by the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen: “The more strongly individual life becomes the centre of focus, the stronger the insistence on meaning amongst the trivialities of everyday life will become. Because man, a couple of centuries ago, began to see himself as an individual being that must realize himself, everyday life now appears to be a prison” (27). The inner life is imbued with meaning—or at least should be—and boredom becomes a useful tool in measuring shortcomings of personal meaning.

Earlier I mentioned that simple boredom is caused by a perceived lack of external stimulation. This is a contemporary view. It was not always perceived this way. Previously, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, those who admitted to boredom were thought to have a dearth of inner resources. (Keep in mind these essayists are not using the word “boredom” or its cognates since it was not in widespread use yet, but they are clearly talking about the same thing.) Thus,

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<sup>14</sup> c.f. Charles Taylor’s magisterial *Sources of the Self*

boredom is accompanied by moral opprobrium. There is a noticeable absence of that which could be described as boring in the letters of middle and upper class women. Women at the time felt the pressure to lead interesting, engaged lives—even if social customs imposed boredom upon them. Boredom was conceived as an aspect of the masculine world.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, boredom becomes an issue of social class, and essayists attribute it to various groups: the working class, the *nouveau riche*, businessmen, and so on (Spacks 22). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, boredom becomes referred to as being caused from without. It also becomes increasingly inversely paired with the interesting.

The demand to make oneself interesting has only increased in recent decades. In his essay “E Unum Pluribus,” Wallace writes that television reinforces the idea “that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical but *rooted* in the phenomenon of watching” (26). Television strengthens this myth and makes it look easy because the actors are “absolute *geniuses* at seeming unwatched” (25). But these people are not “your normal, hardworking, quietly desperate species of American.” They are more attractive, for starters. And their lives as viewed on television are fiction. The characters they portray are meant to create and maintain interest. When they fail to do this, the show is canceled and replaced by something new, since novelty begets interest. The idea that our lives should be watchable, or fascinating, has become a widespread phenomenon, something to which many people publicly admit. Thus we curate our social media pages to make our lives look and sound interesting. Ironically, the voyeuristic quality of modern technology “makes us passive observers and consumers, and less and less active players. This gives us a meaning deficit” (Svendsen 29). Svendsen says boredom can be conceived of as a lack of meaningful time. Thus, “watchableness” actually increases rather than fights boredom.

The burden of being interesting is also accompanied by the idea that we have a right not to be bored. Anything that bores us, people included, are somehow inadequate. Boredom retains the 19<sup>th</sup> century sociological quality while again taking on a moral quality. The difference is that the judgment is not directed at the subject but at the object. When we describe situations as “boring,” it is always a negative evaluation. It is an even more negative assessment to describe a person as “boring.” Though boredom is not always perceived as negative, a point that I will return to below.

It is necessary to say a quick word on existential boredom, which may be familiar to readers through the works of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and others. Existential boredom is also a modern phenomenon that seems to arise during the Romantic period, perhaps slightly before. Its causes are generally described as internal rather than external, which is to say existential boredom is not a matter of a lack of stimulation but of personal meaning. It is an internal emotional state. As such, it is not as closely linked to the concept of “interesting.”

In existential boredom, there is the potential for great loneliness. As Svendsen says, this is because “one cannot find any foothold outside oneself, and in profound boredom one does not even find a foothold inside oneself.” Existential boredom also lacks the appeal of melancholy, which is not a lack but an emotional state that is often portrayed as charming and conducive to artistic expression. Existential boredom is deadening. In this way it is very close to acedia.

But a clear separation between simple boredom and existential boredom (the latter of which has received far more attention in literature) is misleading. If you have ever worked a mind-numbingly boring job, you can attest that simple boredom often does not remain contained in the hours from nine to five. It oozes out and creates larger problems of time and meaning. Nor do I agree with the contemporary wholesale dismissal of simple boredom as owing to external stimuli. There is something to be said for the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century view, espoused by Johnson and later by Victorian commentators, that boredom indicates a lack of resources, namely attention, an idea which is very important in Wallace’s moral vision.

### **Connecting Boredom and Acedia**

Admittedly, there is a fair amount of terminological slippage going on here. That is because these concepts do bleed into one another. Boredom, in one form or another, always seems to accompany acedia (though the inverse is not true). Sometimes boredom is the result of acedia, other times boredom leads to an onset of acedia, and other times the two are the same thing. Svendsen refers to acedia as a pre-modern form of boredom.

There are differences, of course. Svendsen argues, “A crucial difference is that acedia is first and foremost a moral concept, whereas ‘boredom,’ in the normal sense of the word, more describes a psychological state” (49-50). Svendsen, whose *A Philosophy of Boredom* reads like an endorsement for an updated existentialism, is willing to accept a dualistic split between morality/spirituality and psychology, a split which I personally think is not convincing though it

is certainly understandable given his school of thought. Acedia is very much a psychological state, even if it is also a vice.

Another difference is that boredom can be a good thing. Yale University Press recently released *Boredom: A Lively History*, which argues that boredom is an evolutionary good. Steve Jobs, the late Apple co-founder and tech demigod, told an interviewer that boredom was really important for stimulating his creativity. Joseph Brodsky gave the following advice to graduates of Dartmouth College: “When hit by boredom, let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is: The sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface” (12). This is not dissimilar from Huxley’s invocation of acedia as a muse. Boredom as a stimulant is not a new concept, though. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ever-quotable Nietzsche wrote about “thinkers and all sensitive spirits” who require boredom to set them in motion, for it is “that disagreeable ‘windless calm’ of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds” (qtd. in Spacks 2). Boredom, as a lack, contains the possibility of opening up space for something to fill the void. In the case of Nietzsche and presumably Steve Jobs, genius is supposed to fill that void. Unlike boredom, acedia is never a good thing. It could, however, preclude certain worse evils, as the writer Donald Barthelme, who was deeply influential for Wallace, notes in “January”: “I tried to locate its positive features. For example, it precludes certain kinds of madness, crowd mania, it precludes a certain type of error. You’re not an enthusiast and therefore you don’t go out and join a lynch mob—rather you languish with your head in your hands” (qtd. in Norris 320). Despite their differences, I think it is important to view acedia and boredom in the same class, particularly when we talk about boredom on a wider scale—as an affliction of society.

So why am I focusing on acedia instead of boredom? Michael Pietsch notes that with *The Pale King* Wallace “set out to write a novel about some of the hardest subjects in the world—boredom and sadness” (ix). This combination of boredom and sadness is a feature of acedia. Speaking of acedia allows us to address a combination of the restlessness of simple boredom and the malaise of existential boredom—while adding something of a spiritual component, which is important in Wallace’s aesthetic vision. Further, acedia entails an absence of care, not only for an experience, as in simple boredom, but care for one’s self or for others. Wallace would repeatedly invoke the virtues of paying attention, which is synonymous with caring about something, as a method of overcoming boredom but also leading an ethical life. Finally, the postmodern

cynicism that so characterizes Western society—which we will examine in the next section—can be traced, at least in part, to a widespread acedia. When Wallace talks about that cynicism and boredom, he is talking in part about acedia, whether he knows it or not.

### III. Wallace's Vision

Having outlined the concept of acedia, my goal is now to examine Wallace's aesthetic vision and the strong ethical and moral currents running through his work so that we can see how acedia is related and in turn can illuminate *The Pale King*. But first I'll give a brief biography of Wallace, since it seems likely Swedish readers are not familiar with his career.<sup>15</sup>

#### The Author

David Foster Wallace was born in February 1962 in Ithaca, New York, where his father James was completing his dissertation at Cornell. Soon after Wallace's birth, his father took a post teaching philosophy at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and the family moved to nearby Philo, which Wallace would refer to as “a tiny collection of corn silos and war-era Levittown homes whose native residents did little but sell crop insurance and nitrogen fertilizer and herbicide and collect property taxes from the young academics at nearby Champaign-Urbana's university” (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* 3).

Two points on Wallace's upbringing seem to be mandatory in any discussion of him.<sup>16</sup> One: Wallace grew up in a highly literate family—his mother was an English teacher—where everyone read voraciously and words were a constant topic of conversation. Two: Wallace was by his own admission also a “near-great” junior tennis player from the age of twelve to fifteen, ranked seventeen in his region at one point (*Supposedly* 3). He claims that it was not so much a factor of athletic prowess as an understanding of geometry and the angles of tennis. Wallace notes that around the time he peaked as a tennis player, “I discovered definite integrals and antiderivatives and found my identity shifting from jock to math-wienie,” (*Supposedly* 14). When he went away to Amherst College, his father's alma mater, he majored in philosophy and found that he excelled in logic. He thought he would go on to pursue a career in it. At twenty,

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<sup>15</sup> Those readers who are familiar with Wallace's biography may want to skip to page nineteen.

<sup>16</sup> As John Jeremiah Sullivan has pointed out, the standard bio bit on Wallace is tough because in the background is his story “Death is Not the End,” in which Wallace presents a nice little parody of exactly what I am doing now: “The fifty-six-year-old American poet, a Nobel Laureate, a poet known in American literary circles as ‘the poet's poet’ or sometimes simply ‘the Poet,’ lay outside on the deck, bare-chested, moderately overweight, in a partially reclined deck chair, in the sun, reading, half supine, moderately but not severely overweight, winner of two National Book Awards, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Lamont Prize, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Prix de Rome, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship, a MacDowell Medal...” and so on (*Brief*).

however, Wallace began to struggle with depression, which he attributed to a declining interest in philosophy. He took a year's leave of absence and went home to Illinois where he sought psychiatric help, briefly drove a school bus, read a lot, and started to write fiction. When he returned to Amherst, he took a creative writing course. He went on to write both philosophy and English theses, graduating *summa cum laude*. His philosophy thesis, which focused on free will and the philosopher Richard Taylor, would be posthumously published by Columbia University Press. His English thesis was an initial draft of what would become his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, published while he was still an MFA student at Arizona. It sold 20,000 copies its first year, and Wallace received a fair amount of attention (Max).

By 1987 Wallace had graduated from Arizona and had taken a temporary job teaching at Amherst. He grew increasingly depressed, though. In a letter to his agent, Bonnie Nadell, he wrote, "My ambitions at this point are modest and mostly surround staying alive" (Max). In 1989, Norton published *Girl with the Curious Hair*, a collection of short stories and the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," a patricidal homage to John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse." The book had taken almost two years to come out because of the publishing house's fears of litigation since Wallace had used celebrities such as David Letterman as characters. When it did come out, it did not receive much attention.

By this time, Wallace had decided that fiction writing was not worth the toll on his emotional life, and he enrolled in a PhD program in philosophy at Harvard. All the while, he suffered from drug and alcohol dependency and severe depression. In 1989, he withdrew from classes and was hospitalized and eventually institutionalized before finally finding his way into Granada House, a recovery home in Boston. His time there, along with his experience as a competitive youth tennis player were the basis for *Infinite Jest*, a staggering work that is something akin to a complex mathematical proof—maddening, frustrating, elegant, beautiful, and ultimately breathtaking in the simplicity of the truth it conveys. The book, which we will return to at length in the next section, was a commentary on America's obsession with entertainment, on sadness, and on addiction.

In the spring of 1993, he accepted a job teaching English at Illinois State in Bloomington-Normal. It was here that he finished the rest of *Infinite Jest*. It was published in February 1996 and was immediately hailed as the novel of a generation and Wallace as the best writer of his generation. He was only thirty-four. Walter Kirn wrote in *New York Magazine* that with *Infinite*

*Jest*, “the competition has been obliterated. It is as though Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL or Wittgenstein had gone on *Jeopardy!*” (Burn 53). Within months he was given a McArthur Genius grant.

Several books followed *Infinite Jest* including two anthologies of non-fiction, two books of short stories, and a history of the mathematical concept of infinity. But since 1997, he had been at work on his third novel, a book that he referred to his editor as “something long,” and “a long thing” (Pietsch v). Wallace chose as his new book’s overt subject that which children associate with adults, and adults with boredom: taxes. The book was harder to write than he had imagined. A few of the chapters were published as short stories, but Wallace struggled to finish it. He told Jonathan Franzen that he needed to compose “a 5,000 page manuscript and then winnow it by 90%, the very idea of which makes something in me wither and get really interested in my cuticle, or the angle of the light outside” (Max).

One day in the spring of 2007, Wallace experienced terrible stomach pain after eating at a Persian restaurant. His doctor thought it might be an effect of the anti-depressant Nardil, which Wallace had been taking for about twenty years. Wallace thought the drug might have been clouding his emotions and affecting his writing. He and his wife agreed that he would go off the anti-depressant. It did not go well. Wallace’s doctors tried other combinations of anti-depressants, but nothing seemed to work. In mid September of 2008, he hung himself.

After Wallace died, his widow, Karen Green, and his longtime agent, Bonnie Nadell, went through Wallace's garage office together. They found, on his desk, the stack of a manuscript, twelve chapters and nearly 250 pages long (Pietsch vi). They also found hundreds of pages of the novel, notes and drafts of chapters. Green invited Michael Pietsch, his editor at Little, Brown, to fly out to California to take a look at the writing. Pietsch returned to New York with a duffel bag and two grocery sacks full of material. What he assembled is *The Pale King*.

### **The Angry Child of Literary Postmodernism**

Wallace’s work was deeply indebted to the postmodernists, and it is possible to read it as not only an extension of this tradition but also an ongoing argument with it.<sup>17</sup> A quick bit of historical context is perhaps necessary. The high modernists jettisoned the 19<sup>th</sup> century focus on sincerity in favor of a focus on authenticity. They elected to probe the inner depths of the self

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<sup>17</sup> My apologies for inflicting the term “postmodern” on the reader, a term that has been used so often and in such varied contexts that it is all but devoid of meaning. When I employ it here, which I will attempt to do sparingly, I am referring to the post WWII literature that attempted to take modernist techniques and ideas to the extremes.

and to do away with the narrative conventions they had inherited, which they viewed as artificial. Among other things, this entailed a rejection of mimetic fiction, the dismissal of traditional literary devices such as plot, and an open acknowledgement of the derivative nature of fiction. The new techniques they initiated—stream of consciousness, for instance—were intended to get at deeper level reality. But what if reality is merely comprised of linguistic constructs? Marshall Boswell puts it succinctly: “modernism, in addition to exploring the full range of epistemological doubt, also sets artistic development on a road to death, affirming an endpoint that is, in the final analysis, a zero-point. . . . All of which begs the question, What is one to do next?” (11). Wallace’s predecessors—Barth, Pynchon, Gladdis, etc.—had inherited this problem from Modernism. Their method of getting beyond the supposed “Death of the Novel” is typified in John Barth’s 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.”

Barth’s argument is that literary techniques had been largely exhausted. He comments that Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony could not be written today—it would be a laughable reliance on outdated forms—unless “if done with ironic intent by a composer quite aware of where we’ve been and where we are” (69). He references the Borges story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” a story in which the hero composes several chapters of Cervantes’s story, “the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary of writing original works of literature.” With this story, according to Barth, Borges has recognized literature’s dead-end and turned it back on itself to create an original work of art. This is what Nabokov does with *Pale Fire*, and what Barth says he was doing with two of his own novels, *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat Boy*, “novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author” (72). The form may be farcical, but it does not make the books less serious or somehow less about life, Barth thinks. Their self-awareness marks them off, though, from “naïve” novels—i.e. those characterized by realism—that employ conventional but outdated tactics to achieve a mimetic effect. But metafiction, which Wallace argues was deeply influenced by the self-conscious watching of television, was just an iteration of Realism, which it had set itself against: “If Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself see it” (*Supposedly* 34).<sup>18</sup> In essence, postmodern authors self-awarely wrote for and to critics, adding a dimension of reflexivity that could also be interpreted as a disregard for the general reader.

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<sup>18</sup> Here is a pertinent example picked from Barth’s story “Lost in the Funhouse”: *En route* to Ocean City he sat in the back seat of the family car with his brother Peter, age fifteen, and Magda G —, age fourteen, a pretty girl and

Barth's model of literature is deeply reliant on Derrida, who views language as a self-referential, closed circle. That is, there is no link between signifier and referent. Language exists as a sort of chain of meanings. But in turning language into a closed system, post-structuralism destroys the subject. Postmodern authors, in portraying literature as a closed system, leave out the reader. Though Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, employs metafictional techniques to examine its own status as fiction, it would attempt to go beyond metafiction's closed, self-referential circle.<sup>19</sup> He attempts to do this within the novel by employing the ideas of Wittgenstein to criticize the stance of the postmodernists.<sup>20</sup>

In his posthumous *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes that we think of language in terms of games. The problem of endless meanings is avoided because participants in the game agree on a meaning based on the context. Since a game is dependent upon more than one person (there are no private languages, asserts Wittgenstein), Wallace thinks this an argument against the solipsism of the postmodernists. Wallace wants to claim that literature is an open system, and he does this through his characters' self-realization through communication with others and also by leaving the plot of *Broom* open-ended, thereby playing a game with the reader. One scholar has noted that instead of the hermetic, self-reflexive worlds of metafiction, *Broom* "proposes a communal approach to communication...one that operates not between word and object, or Self and Other, but between two equal and interactive participants, a dynamic carried over onto the novel's relationship with its own reader" (Boswell 22).

Though the main character of *Broom* is female, Wallace told one interviewer that the story was a coded autobiography, "the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who's just had this midlife crisis that's moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction . . . which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6°F calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct" (Burn 41).

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exquisite young lady, who lived not far from them on B — Street in the town of D —, Maryland. Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality.... Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means" (77).

<sup>19</sup> When Penguin purchased the rights to *Broom*, Wallace wrote to his editor at the time, Gerald Howard, telling him that the book is not "realistic, and it is not metafiction; if it's anything, it's meta-the-difference-between-the-two" (Max). Later he would refer to it as a "post-structural gag" (Burn 41).

<sup>20</sup> Wallace was highly conversant with critical theory, which dominated the academy when he went through university. He was also steeped in the tradition of postmodern fiction, characterized, as it were, by self-reflexivity. It is unsurprising, then, that he thought about his own work in regards to theory. During the editing of *Broom of the System*, his editor had suggested several changes to the book. Wallace responded with a seventeen-page letter using literary theory to explain why he would not make those changes.

*Girl with the Curious Hair* is decidedly more postmodern than *Broom*. The final story, “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” is a riff on John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse.” The story follows three solipsistic writing students in a workshop of a professor Ambrose—the name of a character in Barth’s story—who, like Barth, has authored a book called *Lost in the Funhouse*. I will spare you the block quotes to prove it, but needless to say there is some serious kill-your-idols business going on. Earlier I used the word patricidal to describe “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” a term that is often invoked in discussions of this piece. In his 2000 survey of Wallace’s career, A.O. Scott, who is both admiring and critical of Wallace, takes the example of “Westward” and rightly says that Wallace suffers not so much from what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence but rather “panic of influence.” Wallace, too, was later critical of the work: “In “Westward” I got trapped one time just trying to expose the illusions of metafiction the same way metafiction had tried to expose the illusions of the pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that came before it. It was a horror show. The stuff’s a permanent migraine” (Burn 40). Even if Wallace fell short of his ambitions, he would continue to develop the techniques he would introduce in *Girl* in his hope of moving past postmodernity’s entrapments of unfaltering irony and self-reflection.

### **The Movement Towards an Ethic of Sincerity**

Wallace’s clearest articulation of what he hoped to do with his fiction—as well as a strong diagnosis of cultural acedia—can be found both in a 1990 essay he wrote on television and fiction and a lengthy 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. “E Unum Pluribus,” originally published in 1993 in *The Review of Contemporary* and then republished in the 1997 non-fiction collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, is an examination of television’s influence on American fiction. It was also an attempt to chart a new course for young American writers.

Wallace notes that television’s shift from the syrupy over-sincerity of shows like *Leave it to Beaver* to a marked irreverence that equated itself with authenticity and rebellion parallels a shift in American perceptions of the role of art, “a transition from art’s being a creative instantiation of real values to art’s being a creative rejection of bogus values” (59). Exploding these bogus values, the over-sentimentality and myths of postwar America, was necessary, Wallace thinks, and irony was a terribly efficient wrecking ball:

The rebellious irony in the best postmodern fiction wasn't just credible as art; it seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics called "a critical negation that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems" [the quote is from music critic Greil Marcus]. Kesey's black parody of asylums suggested that our arbiters of sanity were often crazier than their patients. Pynchon reoriented our view of paranoia from deviant psychic fringe to central thread in the corporo-bureaucratic weave; DeLillo exploded image, signal, data and tech as agents of spiritual chaos and not social order. Burroughs's icky explorations of American narcosis exploded hypocrisy; Gaddis's exposure of abstract capital as deforming exploded hypocrisy; Coover's repulsive political farces exploded hypocrisy. (66)

The problem was that these authors had labored under the false impression that "etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom" (67). Irony could offer nothing to replace the values that it had displaced. "This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values, and it's our job to make them up, and we're not doing it," Wallace told McCaffery (Burn 18). The art of the Sixties "hasn't left anything to rebuild with besides this ethos of jaded irony and self-aware nihilism and acquisitivism." The techniques had been passed down to authors in Wallace's generation, but they were desiccated. Irony had become an easy way out, a shorthand for thinking, and an armor against criticism, "the song of a prisoner who's come to love his cage."

The techniques of metafiction were dead on the page because television had appropriated them. TV had become wildly self-referential and ironic—and very good at it. It is the perfect medium for irony, Wallace claims, because it uses both picture and sound, and irony is most often a discrepancy between what is seen and heard (*Supposedly* 35). In television's commercialized grasp, irony and revolt become cynicism. Because television trains viewers to laugh at endless put-downs of characters, it has the effect of making viewers more cynical and guarded. Wallace references a commercial for one television show that invites viewers to "Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV" (41). By ironically acknowledging itself, television congratulates the viewer for getting the irony, for being able to see through the veneer and recognize what is happening—copious hours spent watching a piece of furniture—while inviting the viewer to do more of just that. By mocking itself, television absorbs ridicule while providing instant gratification to the viewer.<sup>21</sup> And it does so in a way that is entirely public and yet

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<sup>21</sup> The analogy that comes to mind is the child that does something wrong, then tells on himself to avoid punishment.

intimately private, like someone winking at you in a crowd but everyone getting that same wink at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

Wallace cites a study that claims the average American watches six hours of television per day, a figure now outdated and no doubt high, but nonetheless his point is that if you spend six hours alone being exposed to slick cynicism, it is not good. Nor is such familiarity with television good for writing. In the essay Wallace takes aim at some of his contemporaries who were working within a school that he called “Image Fiction.” Image Fiction attempts to take the 2D world of Television and pop and expand it to 3D, to fill it out into art. Unfortunately, it fails. The irony that image fiction appropriates from the Beats and the Postmodernists is ineffective in transfiguring TV. Why? Television has already appropriated and therefore neutered these techniques: “television has been absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy, mass marketed entertainment” (52). It is immune to Image Fiction’s critiques, which come off as superficial as a result.

The essay has been accused of broad, curmudgeonly judgments against television, and there is a bit of merit in that assessment. Wallace, however, was clear that he did not think television, or irony, was bad—just that it was guilty of “immoderate success” (68); the point of the essay was not simply to criticize television but to suggest different approaches to writing fiction in light of television’s cultural influence. Nor was he guilty of nostalgia for earlier ages. He told one interviewer that he thought now was “the best time to be alive ever and it’s probably the best time to be a writer. I’m not sure it’s the easiest time” (Burn 61).

The most important part of the essay occurs toward the end, when Wallace introduces what we will call an ethic of sincerity:

The next real “literary rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles.... The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how *banal*.” (81)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This is not limited to television, or meta-fiction. It is a common entertainment technique. It is how video games work, for example—do this simple thing, and you get a reward, merit to feel good about yourself, even though it is actually quite easy and millions of others will achieve the same task.

<sup>23</sup> In his essay on Dostoevsky, he writes admiringly about Dostoevsky’s freedom to talk openly about what we might call life’s “Big Issues.” This was nigh on impossible now. The novelist who attempted to “would be (and this is our own age’s truest vision of hell) laughed out of town” (*Lobster* 273).

I think it is important to emphasize that Wallace's comments cannot be applied to the whole of contemporary literature. He is talking about a particular niche, namely high-concept, avant-garde literature. Certainly there are—and were at the time of Wallace's writing—many authors whose fiction was not plagued by metafictional techniques or irony. But these were the fictions that Barth coolly dismissed as “naïve.” Wallace is not advocating a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, but he wants fiction to be able to be cutting-edge and employ sincerity.

Whatever his hopes for an ethic of sincerity, Wallace would not take that precise route, at least as he described it in the quote above. Perhaps his self-reflexivity and self-consciousness would not allow it. He was concerned with how his work would be perceived by present-day readers, who were fully saturated by the culture of irony. Most of his statements about sincerity or morality—stuff that smacks of a certain old-school naïveté—are abutted by clarifications or assurances that he is, in fact, not trying to be moralistic. Here, for instance, is the most famous quote from the McCaffrey interview:

Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough.

The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still are human beings, now. Or can be. (Burn 26)

It is an attractive claim, but it sounds sort of Pollyannaish, and Wallace knows it. He immediately qualifies the statement: “This isn't that it's fiction's duty to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans; I'm not trying to line up behind Tolstoy or Gardner. I just think that fiction that isn't exploring what it means to be human today isn't good art.” And yet this comes off as didactic. Wallace admits so much in the TV essay, though it is soft-pedaled. The writer's job, Wallace says, is to “remind the reader of how smart the reader is. Is to wake the reader up to stuff that the reader's been aware of all the time” (Lipsky 41). Here again is his attempt to maintain an open system with the reader, a dialogue. Reading that quote, I was reminded of Kierkegaard, whose belief was that he could not force a reader to agree with him, but he could bring the reader to a point where the reader had to choose. “[A]n illusion can never be destroyed directly,” he wrote, “and only by indirect means can it be radically removed” (24). But Kierkegaard was doing moral philosophy. Wallace is a fiction writer.

The path that Wallace's work ends up taking in response to the problems of meta-fiction and irony was to ironize irony, thereby exposing it and opening the way for naïveté and earnestness. A.O. Scott gets it right: “Wallace, then, is less anti-ironic than (forgive me) meta-

ironic. That is, his gambit is to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth. Janus-faced, he demands to be taken at face value.”<sup>24</sup>

Wallace’s techniques are not without serious complications, which Scott is getting at in the quote above. Wallace becomes almost trapped in a hall of mirrors. There is a performative aspect to sincerity. So if Wallace is concerned with sincerity, is he really sincere? If he is just meta-fictionalizing meta-fiction, is that merely clever bullshit? Occasionally his fiction finds itself in these feedback loops.

Regardless of whether or not his metafictional trappings hinder his art, the point here is that Wallace diagnoses in Postmodernism a marked cynicism, a jaded irony in American culture and arts that had ceased to do any real work and, both in the arts and general culture, had become merely disinterested posturing. This disinterested irony, as Kathleen Norris said, can be thought of as a sort of cultural acedia. It would come to play a large part in *The Pale King*.

### **Entertainment, Acedia, and Infinite Jest**

The ideas expressed in “E Unum Pluribus” found their full fictional expression in *Infinite Jest*, a novel that sought to resist the passive consumption of contemporary U.S. society and its commercial art while discussing the loneliness and solipsism of Americans. The novel, with its 1,079 pages, is not just difficult from the perspective of length. As I mentioned in the introduction, there are almost 100 pages of endnotes, some of which contain their own endnotes. The book is not arranged chronologically, and there are countless characters. It is deliberately difficult, in this regard. Wallace wanted readers to work with *Infinite Jest* in a way that would force them to develop new skills as readers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Take “Octet” from his 1999 collection of short stories *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. It is a series of pop-quizzes and reminiscent of Walker Percy’s *Lost in the Cosmos*. Quiz 9 begins, “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer.” The piece goes on to explain that there is not actually eight quizzes as the title of the series would lead you to believe because several of them didn’t work out and then becomes a behind-the-scenes look at Wallace’s concerns that the series will look like “a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P. metatext.” The frustration is, of course, that he is writing metatext about writing metatext and using it to address the problems of metatext and the fourth wall and readerly expectations. In a sense, he is insulating himself from criticism, doing exactly what metafiction does, only taking it one step further. That is a simplified explanation, and I think there is much more going on here, but I sympathize with Zadie Smith, who says that the first time she read “Octet,” she threw the book across the room.

<sup>25</sup> 1,000 pages is a lot to ask of a reader, but there does seem to be a genuine concern for the reader that comes through in Wallace’s interviews. Here is a characteristic quote, replete with back-pedaling and self-consciousness:

Wallace had written the book to figure out why his generation of Americans, despite more education, money, and opportunities than any in history, “feel empty and unhappy” (Lipsky 82). It is a book about addiction, namely Americans’ addiction to entertainment and their addiction to drugs, of which, Wallace thought, were methods of escaping the self. He told David Lipsky that “the things that ended up for me being most distinctively *American* right now, around the millennium, had to do with both entertainment and about some kind of weird, addictive, um...wanting to give yourself away to something. That I ended up thinking was kind of a distorted religious impulse.” The book is truly polyphonic and has many threads, but for simplicity’s sake we could say that it has three main plots. The first plot follows the students and staff at the Enfield Tennis Academy, particularly Hal Incandenza, a gifted tennis player and lexical prodigy who has been fed mnemonic steroids by his mother and is in the process of memorizing the OED. Hal’s father, who started the school, was an accomplished scientist who turned his interests to avant-garde filmmaking and drinking Wild Turkey before committing suicide by sticking his head in a microwave shortly after producing a film—also called *Infinite Jest*—a film so entertaining that anyone who watches it loses the desire to do anything else but watch the film. Eventually the viewers die of exhaustion.<sup>26</sup> The title of the film and the book comes from the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, a play whose protagonist searches for a sense of self, and which Wallace references frequently throughout the book.<sup>27</sup> Like Hamlet, Hal is a character in search of a self while attempting to come to terms with his father’s death. Hal is trapped in his own skull and—much like the metafiction of Wallace’s predecessors—unable to escape a cycle of self-reflection. He self-medicates by smoking marijuana on a daily basis. Eventually—probably after consuming a drug called DMZ—he loses the ability to speak. With Hal, Wallace

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“Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something. To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. Even now I’m scared about how sappy this’ll look in print, saying this. And the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don’t seem to have yet” (Burn 51). Whatever our opinions on the length of *Infinite Jest*, there is a definite difference in attitude compared with other maximalists. Barth said that among his ambitions “in writing the *Sot-Weed Factor* was to perpetrate a novel so thick that its title could be printed horizontally across its spine” (63).

<sup>26</sup> The book’s setting seems like something out of Pynchon. It takes place in the near, slightly skewed future (much of it taking place in 2009), in a world in which the United States had absorbed Canada and Mexico to become the Organization of North American Nations. Corporations subsidize years (Year of The Depend Adult Undergarment, Year of the GLAD, Year of Tucks Medicated Pad). A portion of Quebec has been turned into a dumping ground for America’s toxic waste, hence the Quebecois separatists.

<sup>27</sup> Hal’s father’s production company is called “Poor Yorick’s Skull,” for instance.

explores the difficulty of finding what we might call a wholeness of self, or to borrow a term from pop psychology, self-actualization.

As Marshall Boswell has pointed out, most of the characters suffer from *despair* as Kierkegaard described it in *Sickness unto Death*: “not wanting to be oneself; or on an even lower level: not wanting in despair to be a self; or lowest of all: wanting a new self” (qtd. in Boswell 137). Paradoxically, this feeling of despair, which is quite similar to acedia if not a symptom of it, is characterized by a solipsistic irony, a distancing from the self that allows for hiddenness from others.

One of the book’s seminal passages focuses on Hal, who is reflecting on one of his father’s avant-garde films. The passage, which I would argue is one of the seminal in Wallace’s oeuvre, deserves to be quoted at length because it bears heavily not only on Wallace’s vision of sincerity but also on our topic of acedia:

It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of Weltschmerz, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip — and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. Forget so-called peer-pressure. It's more like peer-hunger. No? We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young. The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from goeey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent (at least since the Reconfiguration). One of the things sophisticated viewers have always liked about J. O. Incandenza's *The American Century as Seen Through a Brick* is its unsubtle thesis that naïveté is the last true terrible sin in the theology of millennial America. And since sin is the sort of thing that can be talked about only figuratively, it's natural that Himself's dark little cartridge was mostly about a myth, viz. that queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive. Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself

anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, goeey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia. (694-695)

Here, contained in a single, sprawling paragraph, are the themes of that Wallace returns to again and again in his work. What is particularly important for our purposes here is the link between entertainment and ennui and anhedonia. Wallace is putting his thumb on a slick disinterestedness that bleeds into a loneliness and ennui, which is actually acedia. Hal suffers from personal acedia, but he also marks the cultural acedia of the age, which emanates from art, which “treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool.” This is a biting indictment of the ethos, which Huxley was cynically praising. But as Hal notices, this attitude is not confined to the arts but spills over into the general population, particularly among young people who look to arts as a barometer of what is hip. This is what Wallace refers to in the television essay as “the numb blank bored demeanor...that has become my generation’s version of cool” (*Supposedly* 64).

A second plot follows a group of Quebecois separatist terrorists (in wheelchairs) who are attempting to get a hold of the lost film *Infinite Jest*, which they hope to use as an attack against the United States. The plot is important and weaves much of the story together, but it is more in the periphery and seems to be an excuse for both gags and for Wallace to talk about America’s infantile self-absorption.

The third plot follows former thief and recovering Demerol addict Don Gately, a volunteer at the Ennet House recovery center, a halfway house for recovering addicts which is just down the hill from the Enfield Tennis Academy. Though Hal is the central character of most of the book, *Infinite Jest* comes to settle on Don Gately, who is portrayed as a hero for his fight against addiction. At the end of the book, when hospitalized for a gunshot wound, he refuses painkillers for fear of relapsing into addiction. Wallace himself had just gone through his recovery program when writing the book, and his thoughts on addiction and drug-abuse shine through. The book is something of a paean to the twelve step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and to the power of sappy clichés like “one day at a time,” which Wallace proposes actually have a lot of truth in them.<sup>28</sup> From his interview with Lipsky: “And a lot of the AA stuff in the book was

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<sup>28</sup> In a 1994 review of tennis player Tracey Austin’s biography, Wallace questions our suspicion of athlete’s reliance on clichés: “What if, when Tracy Austin writes that after her 1989 car crash, ‘I quickly accepted that there was nothing I could do about it,’ the statement is not only true but *exhaustively descriptive* of the entire acceptance

mostly an excuse, was to try to have—it's very hard to talk about people's relationship with any kind of God, in any book later than like Dostoyevsky. I mean the culture, it's all wrong for it now.... No, no. Plausibly realistic characters don't sit around talking about this stuff" (82).

Wallace uses the AA as a counter for the intellectual self-reflection of Hal, who can never communicate his feelings except through the mask of irony, and who is "marooned in [his] skull" (Burn 22). A common slogan at the AA meetings says "My best thinking got me here." Characteristically, Wallace pokes fun at the naïve slogans of AA while at the same time embracing them as well as the openness and honesty of the AA members. The anti-irony of the groups is a counter to the cynicism and irony that plagues most of the book's characters.

The point that I have been building to is that what Wallace is talking about in *Infinite Jest* could be thought of as acedia, that much of what he thinks characterizes the contemporary U.S. could be characterized as acedic, and that American acedia is very much related to the entertainment culture and drug addiction that people use to distract themselves from their acedia. One member of AA asks "Why is the truth usually not just un- but *anti*-interesting?" (358). Thus, the shift of Wallace's focus from entertainment to boredom is natural. In *The Pale King*, he writes, "living people do not speak much of the dull. Of those parts of life that are and must be dull. Why this silence? Maybe it's because the subject is, in and of itself, dull...only then we're again right back where we started, which is tedious and irksome. There may, though, I opine, be more to it...as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size" (85). America's dependence on entertainment is part of its aversion to boredom, a lack that can force us to confront some unpleasant truths. With *The Pale King*, Wallace would examine boredom and acedia while gesturing at possible solutions to not only boredom but also the problem of the encaged self.

#### **IV. *The Pale King* and Acedia**

I have been following a few separate threads up until now, outlining the concept of acedia while tracing the career of David Foster Wallace and arguing that much of what he was responding to in American culture was characterized by a kind of widespread acedia. Now I will turn to *The Pale King*, where these threads intertwine. Through a close reading, I will try to highlight how an

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process she went through? Is someone stupid or shallow...? Or is that person maybe somehow natively wise and profound, enlightened in the childlike way some saints and monks are enlightened?" (*Lobster* 155).

awareness of cultural and personal acedia can inform our reading of *The Pale King*. Then I will look at the concept of attention, which Wallace proposed as a solution to the problem of acedia.

### **The Book**

When David Lipsky spent several days on the road with Wallace during the book tour for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace told him that “this idea that pleasure and comfort...are really the ultimate goal and meaning of life,” was killing his generation (160). Something would have to change. When Lipsky asked what that meant, Wallace, a good year before he started writing it, sketched a roadmap for what he hoped to do with *The Pale King*:

My guess is that what it will be is, it’s going to be the function of some people who are heroes. Who evince a real type of passion that’s going to look very banal and very retrograde and very... You know, for instance, people who will get on television, and earnestly say, “It’s extraordinarily important, that we, the most undertaxed nation on earth, be willing to pay higher taxes, so that we don’t allow the lower strata of our society to starve to death and freeze to death.” That it’s vitally important that we do that. Not for them, but for us. (161)

These themes—passion, banality, heroism, and taxes—would form the underpinning of *The Pale King*. A note Pietsch attached at the end of the book sketches the “Embryonic outline”:

2 Broad Arcs:

1. Paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs.
2. Being individual vs. being part of larger things—paying taxes, being “lone gun” in IRS vs. team player. (545)

In the same way that the novel would be a mid-career work for Wallace, who was transitioning into middle age, it would dramatize what it might take for his generation to grow up, and it follows a group of young low-level IRS examiners known as “wigglers,” some of them struggling to adapt to the demands of adulthood.

The book derives its name from a brief passage in which an unknown administrator is referred to as “the Pale King,” though it could also be an allusion to the 19<sup>th</sup> century expression “the Pale King of Terrors,” a name for the melancholy fear of death (Sullivan). Though it is, of course, fiction, the book purports to be a memoir. “Author, here,” he writes at the start of the ninth chapter. “Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona” (66). What follows is a tortuous explanation of why the “Author’s Foreword” is coming nine chapters into the book (legal reasons) and why he came to work at the Peoria IRS office in 1985 (suspended from college for writing other students’ papers for money). “All of this

is true,” he assures readers (67). “The only bona fide ‘fiction’ here is the copyright page’s disclaimer which, again, is a legal device.”

It is a hilarious chapter in which Wallace repeatedly denigrates his publisher for its caution. It is also characteristic Wallace, who never fully extricated himself from the trap of meta-fictionalizing meta-fiction: “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 this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher” (67). Irksome, indeed, although Wallace’s tone is less combative and more playful than in his previous jousts with meta-fiction. But the explanation of the legal finagling behind writing the memoir is more than just a clever ruse.

If I might use the phrase, these passages are textually mimetic. In *How Fiction Works* the critic James Wood noted that “Wallace is good at becoming the whole of boredom; a necessary achievement” (33). Wood illustrated the point with one of Wallace’s short stories, but the point is even more salient for *The Pale King*. It is a necessary achievement.<sup>29</sup> He effortlessly adopts the bureaucratic voice of the tax documents, thereby forcing the reader to confront the tedium facing the characters and inducing some pretty serious boredom in the reader.<sup>30</sup>

The effect is working on a larger level, too. One of Wallace’s manuscript notes said that *The Pale King* was to be filled with “shifting POVs, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities” (viii). In *Contemporary Narrative*, Fiona J. Doloughan notes that “the presentation of events in an ordered sequence or via analepses (flashbacks) or prolepses (flashforwards) can affect a reader’s interpretation of the ‘logic’ of the story and its motivating force” (20). The tax examiners in *The Pale King* exist in a world without a meaningful relationship to time. Time seems to have stopped for them while they are confined to their desks examining tax returns. *The Pale King*’s non-linear structure mimics their world. The reader, who Wallace notes may be

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<sup>29</sup> Writers have an unspoken contract with readers. The writing should interest the reader, and the reader—that most precious gift to a writer—holds the power to walk away if the contract is violated. Because the novel is unfinished, it is impossible to say how far Wallace would have pushed his readers and whether the final product would have held enough narrative momentum to carry it through the boring passages. I think it achieves that now, though barely. It must be said that at times the book is painfully slow reading. Eight pages in the narrator gives instructions for an isometric exercise for “the deskbound” which improves alertness while toning muscles. (Sit up straight. Squeeze buttocks for eight seconds. Release.) It is foreboding, as if Wallace is telling the reader, “Here. Do this. You will need it.”

<sup>30</sup>The bureaucratic tone even creeps into the chapters on the character of Toni Ware, otherwise written in prose reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy. Instead of calling Ware’s mother a liar and a negligent mother, Wallace writes “The mother’s relational skills were indifferent and did not include truthful or consistent speech” (55).

“totally flummoxed and bored” is brought into dialectic with text, and, in her boredom, forced to confront what lies behind boredom (69):

To me, at least in retrospect, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it’s because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that’s where phrases like ‘deadly dull’ or ‘excruciatingly dull’ come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that’s dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly with our full attention. (85)

John Jeremiah Sullivan comments that Wallace is “doing something theological in his novel.... He was using the [IRS] in the way Borges used the library and Kafka used the law-courts building: as an analogy for the world.” In the book, the video *Your IRS Today*, a later-scraped attempt at a promotional/recruitment video in which examiners are interviewed about their work, refers to the IRS as “nation’s beating heart,” pumping lifeblood to the other body parts of the American nation. Wallace offers “a verbatim transcript” of the remarks made by the Director of the Peoria REC: “‘If you know the position a person takes on taxes, you can determine [his] whole philosophy. The tax code, once you get to know it, embodies all the essence of [human] life: greed, politics, power, goodness, charity.’ To these qualities,” Wallace says, “I would respectfully add one more: boredom. Opacity. User-unfriendliness” (82).<sup>31</sup>

Wallace says he landed at the IRS at a time when it was undergoing some serious changes. One of the questions in the background is whether IRS should function like a corporation or a guardian of civic virtue. As Wallace tells the story, the government made sweeping tax cuts thinking it could somehow maintain revenue. When revenue dropped, it had to figure out a politically viable way of getting revenue back. The plan was to have the IRS work harder to recoup the lost revenue by using audits to maximize profits. Readers will not be familiar with this, Wallace writes, because “the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull.” This is a good thing from the perspective of the IRS: “such qualities help insulate them against public protest and political opposition...abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy” (83). This small change of policy came to have enormous effects since the IRS is a sprawling bureaucracy, which functions like a “large

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<sup>31</sup> It is a cheeky if familiar move for Wallace to use the farcical to tackle the serious.

and intricately branching system of jointed rods, pulleys, gears, and levers radiating out from a central operator such that tiny movements of that operator's finger are transmitted through that system to become the gross kinetic changes in the rods at the periphery" (86). At the periphery are those examiners sitting in examination centers like Peoria. Some think this is a good thing. One unnamed examiner remarks, "Now it is easier, we are looking for something, what will cause ER, not just how many returns can one put through. This helps us pay attention" (117). But others are worried about losing their jobs to computers, who could maximize profit. This is the eighties, after all, and computers were coming into their own, though in *The Pale King* they are still giant mainframes. Replacing human examiners with computers is a major plot thread that is never developed, but one of the main characters, Claude Sylvanshine, is sent to Peoria to do reconnaissance for an incoming administrator named Merrill Errol Lehr. We never meet Lehr, and it is unclear if he ever arrives at Peoria, though it is suggested in some of Wallace's notes that the novel would have something to do with Lehr arranging a competition between the most able examiners and computers to prove that computers were more efficient.

In fact, the plot is almost non-existent in *The Pale King*, which probably would have been the case even had Wallace finished the novel. When sketching the outline for the book, Wallace wrote the book would be characterized by "Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (546). What plot exists details the lives of people struggling with boredom and acedia. "The memoir-relevant point here," writes Wallace, "is that I learned, in my time with the Service, something about dullness, information, and irrelevant complexity. About negotiating boredom as one would a terrain, its levels and forests and endless wastes. Learned about it extensively, exquisitely, in my interrupted year" (85). The ur-bureaucratic IRS provides a perfect arena for Wallace to tackle boredom, adulthood, attention, and, I would argue, acedia.

### **Acedia and Place in *The Pale King***

The monastic commentators on acedia emphasize its relationship to place. The monk feels a strong loathing for his cell and his community and desire to leave them. The acedia in *The Pale King* has a similar emphasis on place and landscape. Wallace chose to set the book in his native Illinois, in the town of Peoria, a town famous for being so typically Middle American as to be uninteresting.<sup>32</sup> With the exception of the opening vignette, most of the descriptions of locations

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<sup>32</sup> A reputation apparent in the famous question asked of movies, "But will it play in Peoria?"

in the book evoke a kind of terror or disgust. The Midwest is an area of extremes. The winters are long and hard and the summers are blazing hot with excessive humidity and no shortage of insects. The sunrise in the rural Midwest is “roughly as soft and romantic as someone’s abruptly hitting the lights in a dark room” (262). Sylvanshine’s first impression of the landscape is “uniformly featureless and old-coin gray and so remarkably flat that it was as if the earth here had been stamped on with some cosmic boot” (24). The “general color and texture” of the sky

created the specular impression of being in the center of some huge and stagnant body of water, an oceanic impression so literally obliterating that Sylvanshine was cast or propelled back in on himself and felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him, the knowledge of his being surely and direly ill-suited for whatever lay ahead, and of its being only a matter of time before this fact emerged and was made manifest to all those present in the moment that Sylvanshine finally, and forever, lost it.

Under the mirror-like sky, Sylvanshine comes face-to-face with emptiness and horror. There is a certain irony in setting the story in the midst of the American farm-belt, placing a bunch of office drones in the middle of farmland and asking them not to farm but to do the least physical—but no less demanding—work possible. In the sole passages set outside the Midwest—those describing the Southwest childhood of a character named Toni Ware—the environs are cruel. We read of “fires in the gypsum hills to the north, the smoke of which hung and stank of salt” (54). Wallace describes “The sun overhead like a peephole into hell’s own self-consuming heart,” a description which sounds similar to Evagrius’s description of the noonday demon, the sun never moving (56).

The IRS Peoria Midwest Regional Examination Center is no less inviting. Wallace situates the building on “Self-Storage Parkway,” a road that forms a ring around Peoria’s desiccated downtown with its “ruined-looking” skyline (267). Owing to engineering and bureaucratic muddles, the traffic on Self-Storage Parkway is a clotted disaster of urban planning. Many wigglers take IRS shuttles from the IRS subsidized apartment complex called “Angler’s Cove”—all the vehicles have been seized from non-compliant businesses, and the result is an amusing fleet of IRS vehicles including several ice-cream trucks which occasionally play their calliope music—and there are a couple of passages detailing the excruciating crawl through strip-malls and auto-dealerships. Parking is another ordeal, and navigating the ill-conceived lots is described as a “maddening Sisyphean so-near-and-yet-far stasis” (279). The building itself is “Roughly L shaped,” (there are two buildings connected by transoms that became unbearably hot during the

summer) but the inside of the L, the front, is facing away from the road which Wallace compares to the arrogance of a pre-Vatican II priest facing away from the congregation. Due to a typing error in the contractor specifications, the building's facade is a giant IRS form 1040, 1978 version.<sup>33</sup> The color scheme on one of the building's levels is "searing white and matte gray," which seem like the synesthetic colors for the word "boredom" (297). One examiner complains of the "constant ripping metallic dental sound" coming from a printer in a nearby cubicle. All the details are heightened to increase a sense of bureaucratic constriction bordering on horror. Peoria's REC, notes Claude Sylvanshine is "a kind of caul of boredom. Boredom past boredom" (368).<sup>34</sup> This is not, itself, indicative of acedia, but these details of place conspire to create a basal level dread within the workers—and the readers—that set the scene for acedia.<sup>35</sup> The same can be said for the simple boredom, which is a constant companion of the IRS workers.

### **The Work of the Examiners and Acedia**

There are not many pages devoted to the actual work of the examiners. Chapter twenty-five, however, does give a real-time description of a room full of examiners. It is roughly three pages of double columned print of this: "Matt Redgate turns a page. R. Jarvis Brown turns a page. Ann Williams sniffs slightly and turns a page. Meredith Rand does something to a cuticle" (310). The claustrophobic feeling increases when Wallace notes that the temperature in the room is 80 degrees. Most of the work is insignificant, correcting errors—e.g. a missing signature on a tax return—for which nothing is really at stake. It is the mindless oiling of small cogs in the bureaucratic machine. Claude Sylvanshine refers to the men at the Peoria REC as "Shells of men" (368).

Another instance of the examiners at work occurs when Wallace's character ("Author, here")—because of a computer glitch mistaken for another David Wallace, a senior officer—is given a personal tour of the REC. At one point, his guide opens up a door on a room of about 150 examiners, all working with a "silent, motionless intensity" (290). The silence is both "sensuous and incongruous: For obvious reasons, we tend to associate total quiet with emptiness, not with large groups of people." The experience is jarring for Wallace's character, and he uses

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<sup>33</sup> The U.S. Individual Tax Return Form

<sup>34</sup> Sylvanshine was apparently part of a spectacular failure at an IRS office in Rome, New York, which involved a work overload so great that the examiners resorted to stuffing tax returns on top of removable ceiling tiles. The NY office is described as having "manic torpor," which seems a fitting description of the combination of anxiety and sloth that can accompany acedia (51).

<sup>35</sup> It must be said that *The Pale King* does not reduce all of life to boredom, lack, or acedia. For all the sadness present, it is a very funny book.

the anecdote to muse on concentration and deskwork. Wallace notes that the only other place he had witnessed such concentration was in television or books, as if one were to read, “He sat down and spent the morning writing this chapter of the thesis.” But in reality, Wallace observes, “concentrated deskwork doesn’t go this way,” particularly “if the task at hand was dry or repetitive, or dense, or if it involved reading something that had no direct relevance to your own life and priorities, or was work that you were doing only because you had to” (291). Rather, it goes haltingly, in fits and starts, “brief intervals of concentration” broken by distractions, often self-induced, “because sitting still and concentrating on just one task for an extended length of time is, as a practical matter, impossible.” The examiners in the room, however, gave off none of the signs of fidgeting:

One sensed that these were people who did not fidget, who did not read a page of, say, dull taxpayer explanation about the deduction of some item and then realize they’d actually been thinking about the apple in their lunchbag and whether or not to maybe eat the apple right here and now until they realized that their eyes had passed over all the words (or, given the venue here, perhaps columns of figures) on the page without actually having read them at all—with *read* here meaning internalized, comprehended, or whatever we mean by really reading vs. simply having one’s eyes pass over symbols in a certain order. Seeing this was kind of traumatic. (292)

Wallace’s character says that he had always been ashamed about how little he actually got done when he sat down to read, “about how easily I got bored when trying to concentrate.”

Concentration plays a big part in the work of the examiners, and distraction is a constant assailant. In the airport on the way to his new posting in Peoria, Claude Sylvanshine sees a teen picking at his acne “with a concentration that wasn’t at all like the absent face-picking and feeling at parts of the face that accompanied concentrated work in the service” (10) On the plane as he is trying to study for his CPA exam, Sylvanshine tries the soothing concentration technique of imagining an idyllic scene, ideally one with a body of water. He sees “a jagged primary-color array,” what you might see “if you’re poked in the eye and then close your eye in pain” (13).

Chapter eleven is a human resources memo, a list of the maladies associated with examinations postings in excess of three years. “Localized and General anxiety” are some of the most common. Several of the maladies involve paralysis. Another, formication, is the sensation of prickling on the skin, as though insects were crawling on it.<sup>36</sup> There are also amnesia and

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<sup>36</sup> The name comes from the Latin for the word “ant,” which has a certain irony that will become apparent to the reader in the next section.

fugue states, which, among other things, entail a loss of the self.<sup>37</sup> Acedia, as theologians such as Thomas Aquinas noted, is not merely an ailment of the mind and soul. It has a physical component.

Much of what we learn comes from the allegedly transcribed interviews taken from *Your IRS Today*. Readers are not privy to the questions, though, as Wallace returns to the one-sided interview technique of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* in which only the response is recorded. Some of the transcriptions have nothing to do with taxes. One discusses the uses of sugar in a cake. The total transcription of Interview number 947676541 is merely: “I have an unusually high tolerance for pain” (114). But what emerges from the interviews is a sense of tedium. For this reason, none of the examiners wear watches. One examiner recounts his idea for a “realistic” play. There would be one man on stage, at a desk. There is no dialogue. Every so often, the examiner will turn a page or make a note. Originally, there was to be a clock on the wall, but the examiner decided against this. The audience grows restless, and as they begin to think about how boring and terrible the play is, they start to get up and leave. “Then once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start.... Except I could never decide on the action, if there was any, if it’s a realistic play” (106).

Another examiner says the work gives him a satisfactory feeling after he completes every tax return. “The thing here is that the returns never stop. There’s always a next one to do. You never really finish” (115). (Wallace tells readers that the Peoria REC examines roughly 4.5 million tax returns every year.) Another discusses staring at something without really paying attention to it. His father, a bookkeeper did this, and now he finds himself doing it. “Something goes out of you—you can feel your face merely hanging loose, with no muscles or expression. As if your face, like your attention, belongs to someone else” (116-117). The most haunting of the interviews is a short anecdote about a dog, a German shepherd that the examiner had as a child. His father had placed the dog on a chain, but the dog never attempted to escape or even go out to the end of the chain: “Out of dignity, this dog pretended like he chose this one area to stay in that just happened to be inside the length of the chain. Nothing outside of that area right there interested him. He just had zero interest,” so that the chain became irrelevant. “He had a power to him. All of his life on that chain. I loved that damn dog” (117). The connotations are obvious.

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<sup>37</sup> Also the fictional disease “Krendler’s syndrome,” a reference to cannibalism, culled from the movie *Hannibal*.

Much of what the examiners experience is simple boredom. What are interesting to me are the abounding references to horror, terror, and dread that bubble up from the boredom of examining tax returns. This combination of boredom with fear and distress is certainly indicative of acedia. In the opening pages, Sylvanshine connects tedium with fear, stress, and woe: “Surely fear is a type of stress. Tedium is like stress but its own category of woe” (15). He wonders if there is a mental trick to avoid focusing on the fear of failure, and then becomes afraid it is possible everyone except him knows the trick. Sylvanshine is a character who is paralyzed by possibility, and his paralysis in turn further paralyzes him: “He tended to conceptualize some ultimate, platonic-level Terror as a bird of prey in whose mere aloft shadow the prey was stricken and paralyzed, trembling as the shadow enlarged and became inevitability” (14). Later in the book, an examiner named Shinn is standing at the curb of the IRS subsidized apartments, waiting for the transport vehicle to take him to the REC. He imagines the birds’ chirping might be actually be their screaming at each other, things like “‘Get away’ or ‘This branch is mine!’ or ‘This tree is mine! I’ll kill you! Kill, Kill!’” The narrator tells us “the thought came from nowhere” and “made his spirits dip” (372). In a training session, “an inaudible scream resounded inside” the character of David Cusk, an entry-level examiner who suffers from panic attacks. In the same training session, the narrator reveals that one of the trainers keeps a revolver in her purse: “she had promised herself a bullet in the roof of her mouth after her 1,500th training presentation, which at current rates would be July 1986” (332). Though many, the instances of acedia Wallace describes in the day-to-day work of the examiners are often brief, sprouts of despair pushing through the mundaneness and hinting at deeper stores of acedia.

### **Lane Dean: The Clearest Instance of Personal Acedia**

*The Pale King’s* most obvious examples of acedia occur in the chapters dealing with a character named Lane Dean. The first time we encounter him is in the sixth chapter, which was originally published in *The New Yorker* as the short story “Good People.” The chapter takes place in a park where Lane, then studying accounting in community college, is having a discussion with his girlfriend Sherri, over whether she will go through with the abortion that is scheduled for later in the day. They are Christians, and because they are unmarried, the pregnancy was not supposed to have happened in the first place. Sherri is reluctant to have the abortion, and Lane, trapped in indecision, is weakly trying to convince her to go through with the procedure that he himself

feels badly about. When Sheri knocked on his door the morning of the appointment, “a terrible blankness had commenced falling through him” (39).

He is repeatedly described as feeling “frozen.” He shows “frozen care and caution” to Sherri, pretending that he does not know “what it was that was required...He pretended that not saying aloud what he knew to be right and true was for her sake” (38). The decision whether to have the child is not his to make. But Sherri clearly wants to have the child. Lane’s decision is how to respond to her, but he is torn. Sheri is mature in life and serious in her faith. Lane, who is “desperate to be good people”, is “starting to believe he might not be serious in his faith. He might be somewhat of a hypocrite, like the Assyrians in Isaiah, which would be a far graver sin than the appointment—he had decided he believed this” (38). Lane knows that “What love commands of her” is to have the child. Sherri has a proper care of love, whereas Lane is guilty of *acedia*, the refusal of commitment, “The love of good which comes short of its duty,” as Virgil says to Dante.

Wallace includes a powerful metaphor for Lane’s *acedia* as he sits next to Sherri, contemptuous of his inability to muster courage. Though we are twice told that Lane does not believe in hell as a lake of fire, sitting there he

could see the edge or outline of what a real vision of hell might be. It was of two great and terrible armies within himself, opposed and facing each other, silent. There would be battle but no victor. Or never a battle—the armies would stay like that, motionless, looking across at each other and seeing therein something so different and alien from themselves that they could not understand, they could not hear each other’s speech as even words or read anything from what their faces looked like, frozen like that, opposed and uncomprehending, for all human time. Two hearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way. (41)

It is a beautiful chapter, and it is also classic Wallace. He both praises and gently mocks Dean’s naïveté, his asking, “What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do?” It would be easy for us as readers to roll our eyes, but Wallace here writes with a sincerity, earnestness, and elegance that repels our cynicism.

The sixteenth chapter is set outside the Peoria REC on a mid-morning break. Lane, now graduated from community college and working for the IRS, and two other men are standing on a cement slab outside an exit door, the sort of place that smokers usually choose for their breaks, though none of these men are smoking. The narrator notes that the heat is already starting to settle on the day. From the fields comes the sound of locusts whirring. One of the men picks at a

growth on the inside of his wrist while the other tells a banal story about how that weekend, he and his wife went over to another couple's house for dinner. Lane does not know these men but he stands there, listening, because he has not yet found "a desirable, diverting place to go during breaks" (122). The narrator tells us that Dean "feels like running out into the fields in the heat and running in circles and flapping his arms" (123). As Wallace is narrating this, he frequently drops into free-indirect style, narrating from Dean's voice: "Being in conversation makes the time pass differently; it's not clear whether it's better or worse." The chapter, which is only a few pages, alternates between Dean's thoughts and the man's story, so commonplace that it barely interests the reader and certainly is not enough to distract Dean, who feels "desperate" that the break is sliding by, that after these fifteen minutes he will go back to examining tax returns for another two hours before lunch. He does not need to look at his watch to know how many minutes have passed; he feels it acutely, like he has an internal break clock. Lane becomes fixated upon the man's growth and is almost envious of whoever's desk is next to the man's. That examiner would be able to distract himself from tedium by looking at the growth. The angst, which is palpable for the reader, threatens to break into full-blown despair, and Dean wonders whether the locusts, like Shinn's birds, are actually screaming instead of chirping.

Chapter thirty-three focuses on Dean's failed attempts to pay attention to the examinations. It reads like a real-time description of an *acedia* attack.<sup>38</sup> The work—examining individuals' tax returns for errors and falsifications—is "boredom beyond any boredom he'd ever felt" (377). He notices that his desk's blotter has teeth marks in it, like someone had bent down and pressed their teeth into it for a long time and feels like he can relate, wondering how the older men get up every day knowing this is how they will spend eight hours. Their faces are "the color of wet lead in the fluorescent light," light which Wallace's character calls "the kind of light that makes people want to kill themselves" and which Lane Dean notices does not cast a shadow, a description reminiscent of the noonday sun of which Evagrius writes (303). At first Dean is able to push himself to do several returns without looking up at the clock, an action he knows will make time seem to move more slowly. For Dean, a Christian, his *acedia* has a spiritual component to it. After looking up at the clock and noticing that not as much time has passed as

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<sup>38</sup> Pietsch called the third Lane Dean chapter the novel's "fullest-flowering," "as densely woven and tightly-wound as anything [Wallace has] written" (Sullivan). The finished novel, he thought, might contain many more such chapters.

he anticipated, he prays the “Jesus Prayer”: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me poor sinner” (377). But there is no mercy.

As the chapter opens, Dean, attempting to soothe his addled concentration, imagines a calm beach scene. Only an hour later, the beach has turned to “a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts” (376). The frozen beach is evocative of the way Dean is described in the “Good People” chapter; however, the image of the frozen troops in Hell is now insufficient:

He felt in a position to say he knew now that hell had nothing to do with fires or frozen troops. Lock a fellow in a windowless room to perform rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down, and nail a clock to the wall where he can see it, and just leave the man there to his mind's own devices. Tell him to pucker his butt and think beach when he starts to get antsy, and that would be just the word they'd use, *antsy*, like his mother. Let him find out in time's fullness what a joke the word was, that it didn't come anyplace close. (379)

To ward off acedia and encourage righteous thoughts, Evagrius exhorts the monks to, “Call to mind also the present state of things in hell (9). In Lane Dean’s case, he considers suicide for the first time in his life, imagining different high places from which to jump. This yearning for suicide is sinful, he thinks, but he cannot help entertain it.

Lane Dean’s vision of hell is countered by his earlier epiphany of love and commitment for his then-girlfriend and now-wife. There is a reason, then, that he is working a mindless job, and it is not simply because life is meaningless or inherently boring. It is because he loves his family and needs to support them. That love, though, is not enough to ward off acedia. At work, he pictures them, “because they were why, they were what made this worthwhile and the right thing and he had to remember it but it kept slipping away down the hole that fell through him” (380). But his acedia is not limited to work. At home he is restless, “unable to look at anything for more than a second or two” (380). One of the fragments included at the back of *The Pale King* reveals that since starting at the REC, “Dean has become less fervently Christian...while Sheri has gotten more so” (541-542). Kathleen Norris notes “Acedia’s genius is to seize us precisely where our hope lies, to tear away at the heart of who we are, and to mock that which sustains us” (44). Her assertion would seem to hold true for Lane Dean.

Dean’s experience is described in terms of a lack, and the reader feels the palpable emptiness and despair. As he tries to focus, “unbidden came the thought that *boring* also meant

something that drilled in and made a hole” (378). He feels “a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor.” When he attempts to revisit the beach scene in his mind, the sand has turned to cement and the water is barely quivering, like Jell-O, a thought that leads Lane Dean to think of ways to kill himself with Jell-O. When he closes his eyes to pray, instead he “was just looking at the strange reddish dark and the little flashes and floaters in there, that got almost hypnotic when you really looked at them” (378).

He “imagined himself running around on break waving his arms and shouting gibberish and holding ten cigarettes at once in his mouth like a panpipe. Year after year, a face the same color as your desk. Lord Jesus” (379). He knows, however, that on break he will sit and count the seconds till he must go back to work again. “And again and again and again.” There are several Sisyphean images in the chapter. When Dean looks at the clock, he imagines its second hand has awareness and knew that “its job was to go around and around inside a circle of numbers forever at the same slow unvarying machinelike rate, going no place it hadn’t already been a million times before” (381). The scent of hair oil brings to mind a barbershop pole, which “seemed to spiral eternally upward but you could see when the shop closed and it stopped it really didn’t” (384). Thinking the experience feels like a bad dream, Dean remembers the dream he had the first night on the job, a dream “of a stick that kept breaking over and over but never got smaller.”

The descriptions of Dean bearing down and attempting to complete return examinations is strikingly similar to the description of the acedic monk in his study, which I quoted earlier. While the monk counts folios, Dean counts the number of tax returns he has completed. Both fall asleep at their work, but it is a restless sleep. When Dean falls asleep at his desk, he is dreaming the desk photo of his son shows the child growing to old age before the skin melts away leaving only a grinning skull. When Dean wakes up, he is being visited by one of the ghosts that haunt the building.<sup>39</sup>

Apparently examiners are visited by both phantoms and ghosts. The phantoms are hallucinations that appear from “the strain of trying to remain alert and punctilious in the face of extreme boredom” (314). A phantom is differentiated from a ghost in that it takes the opposite form of the particular examiner it is visiting, i.e. “Hypermasculine wigglers get visits from

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<sup>39</sup> Wallace was fond of magical realism. *Infinite Jest* has the ghost of Hal’s father, not to mention giant, feral hamsters, and the ghost that visits Lane Dean is one of the instances of it in *The Pale King*. The other involves a character that floats when he pays concentrated attention.

simpering queens in lingerie and clotted vaudevillian rouge and mascara, nancing about,” whereas “Devout wigglers see demons,” obviously similar to the noonday demon. There are only two ghosts. One is Blumquist, an examiner who died at his desk but whose death went unnoticed for several days. He just sits with the examiners silently. The other, Garrity, was a mid-twentieth century inspector at the mirror company that existed where the REC building now sits. His job was quality control, and Wallace says that before he hung himself, he held mirrors up to his face to examine them for flaws—“three times a minute, 1,440 times a day, 356 days a year, for eighteen years” (316).<sup>40</sup>

When Garrity shows up on Lane Dean’s desk, he does not identify himself but just launches into a monologue devoted to the history of the word “boredom,” which, as we noted earlier, does not appear until the mid eighteenth century. “They don’t ever say it, though.... They talk around it. It’s too manifest. As if talking about the air you’re breathing, yes?” (382). Lane Dean, the ghost says, is getting a “man-sized” taste of boredom, the sort of experience that enabled the word to invent itself (385). The ghost’s exposition is brilliant in its fluid, light-hearted exposition of the overlapping meanings of those many terms we now place under the broad umbrella of “boredom.” The ghost runs through a list of boredom’s relations: malaise, ennui, lethargie, “and for a time it seems conjoined somewhat with melancholy, saturnia, *otiositas*, *tristitia*—that is, to be confused with sloth and torpor and lassitude and eremia and vexation and distemper and attributed to spleen, for example see Winchilsea’s *black jaundice*, or of course Burton” (383).

In the middle of his monologue, we have acedia: “No word for the Latin *accidia* made so much of by monks under Benedict. For the Greek *ακηδία*. Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for a violent death.” But why are we talking about acedia when the ghost gives the history of the word “boredom?” Earlier I noted that acedia and boredom often overlap. Further, the simple boredom that Dean experiences has an existential component, a despair that gnaws its way from the periphery into the center of his mind. Perhaps the most obvious reason, though, is that Lane Dean experiences the situation as spiritual. It is no accident that the ghost uses the phrase “soul murdering” to refer to the boredom Dean is experiencing (385). Note here

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<sup>40</sup> For the importance of mirrors in Wallace’s work and their relationship to Lacanian psychology, c.f. Boswell pp. 128-132.

that Lane Dean's prayers are also stifled by pointlessness and tedium and that he too longs for a violent death. Boredom without time limits becomes acedia. If we are bored, in say a class, we can always take comfort in the fact that the class will eventually end. Lane Dean's vision of boredom is boredom without end.<sup>41</sup> When the ghost leaves, Lane Dean looks up at the clock and sees that "no time had passed at all, again" (385). Like Evagrius's monk who suffers from acedia, "the day seems to be fifty hours long."

The monologue is amusing not only because Dean is too paranoid to say anything to the ghost—whom he thinks is actually the phantom of repetitive concentration—lest his colleagues think he has gone crazy but also because he has no clue what the ghost is talking about. When the ghost references Pascal's fourth *Pensée*, Dean hears him say "*pantsy*" (383). The situational irony—the reader, unlike Lane Dean, should get most of the references—allows Wallace to poke fun at Lane Dean's lack of sophistication. But even if Lane Dean was able to understand the history of what he is feeling, if he could understand the ironic academic rundown, it would not save him. As Wallace said of irony and the postmodernists, etiology and diagnosis do not point to a cure. Knowing one is imprisoned does not necessarily lead toward freedom.

### **Adulthood and Cultural Acedia**

As noted earlier, Wallace was interested in dramatizing the move to adulthood from a culture of indefinite adolescence, a culture dependent on entertainment for distraction from the pain of being human. The condition that Wallace diagnoses is best thought of as cultural acedia, which we first looked at through Huxely's essay. Borrowing a phrase from St. Paul, Wallace told Lipsky that his generation needed "to put away childish things and discipline ourself [sic] about how much time do I spend being passively entertained? And how much time do I spend doing stuff that actually isn't all that much fun minute by minute, but that builds certain muscles in me as a grown-up and a human being?" (86). That is, his generation needed to grow up and to abandon the cultural acedia in which it was mired. But the view of adulthood that comes through in his works, particularly *The Pale King*, is ambivalent, both gesturing towards the adult responsibility while recoiling in terror at the boredom that attends it.

Boredom was linked with adulthood in Wallace's stories previous to *The Pale King*. In "Forever Overhead," the story of a thirteen-year old boy's attempt to jump off the high diving

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Toohey's point here, that boredom may be good for us in that it can help us avoid harmful situations, has some credibility.

board (mirroring the plunge into adulthood), the boy looks at the adults in line with him and is amazed by their boredom: “You are in line. Look around. Look bored. Few talk in line. Everyone seems by himself. Most look at the ladder, look bored. You almost all have crossed arms, chilled by a late dry rising wind on the constellations of blue-clean chlorine beads that cover your backs and shoulders. It seems impossible that everyone could be this bored” (*Brief*).

In the short story “The Soul Is Not a Smithy,” originally intended as a chapter of *The Pale King* but published in *Oblivion*, the narrator recollects that from the age of seven he experienced “nightmares about the reality of adult life” (103), all of which opened on a room the size of a football field filled with rows of men sitting at large metal desks. The men’s faces were “puffy and seamed with adult tension and wear and appearing to hang slightly loose,” their expressions both “stuporous and anxious, enervated and keyed up — not so much fighting the urge to fidget as appearing to have long ago surrendered whatever hope or expectation causes one to fidget” (108-109). The dreams, which began to materialize just on the border of being awake and asleep, reveal a horror of adulthood. “The dream’s bright room was death,” the narrator says, and the faces of those men “were the face of some death that awaited me” (109). He traces the dreams to his father, an actuary whose eyes, when he returned every evening, “appeared lightless and dead, empty of everything we associated with his real persona” (103-104). The narrator says that he knew of childhood boredom then, “the fidgety type...that is more like worry than despair,” but he had no idea of adult boredom, “the far different and deeper, soul-level boredom” of his father’s job (105), a phrase Wallace used when an interviewer asked about the story:

I think that in a country where we have it as easy as we do, one of our big dread vectors is boredom. I think little edges of despair and soul-level boredom appear in things like homework or particularly dry classroom stuff. I can remember the incredible soaring relief when certain teachers said we were going to watch a movie in grade school. And it wasn’t just a hedonistic “oh-we’re-going-to-have-fun.” It was a relief from some kind of terrible burden. (Burn 128)

In *The Pale King*, Wallace’s editor included what are likely a few pages from a draft of “The Soul Is Not A Smithy” (both have a brother playing the piano at 5:42pm when the father is to return home from work). The narrator of this chapter dreams of rows of people at their desks, their faces displaying the “placid hopelessness of adulthood. The complex regret” (253). At the edge of this dream are drone-like office workers bustling about with small tasks, “their faces blankly avid, filled with the mindless energy you see in bugs, weeds, birds” (253). These characters in the dream have a likeness in the Peoria REC “cart boys,” those mostly college-

student workers tasked with picking up examiners' finished returns. One unnamed character says the summers he spent working at Peoria as a cart boy put him in a position to understand adulthood. He tells the interviewer that "the world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy," (437) and the key to dealing with bureaucracy is "the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human." If we take Wallace on his statement that fiction is about what it means to be human, and if today's "world of men" is saturated with soul-crushing bureaucracy and tedium, then one of the things he is trying to do with *The Pale King* is figure out how to be human in an age of boredom.

Patricia Meyers Spacks points out that from the 18th century onwards, there is a tendency among writers to turn boredom into a class issue. Writers pointed out boredom as a failure of classes other than their own (x). Wallace's treatment is broader. Boredom is a characteristic of modern American life. He is also willing to turn the lens on his own generation, culture, and class. Thus, almost all of the characters we meet in *The Pale King* are young. They are all in Wallace's generation. In the eyes of these young workers, the older IRS workers have an almost mythical status to them. With their hats and conservative suits, the IRS men hearken back to an even older generation, which Wallace's character notices when he shows up for processing: "I remember remarking even then that it was strange to see men in their adult prime wearing the business-type hats that normally one saw only on much older men of a certain background and station" (264). They are unconcerned with society's stylistic demands or impervious to any need for hipness. They also have a mystifying quality to them. For the character of Chris Fogle, his father was an enigma to him as a child: "I used to spend time imagining what my father's face looked like when he was alone—I mean his facial expression and eyes—when he was by himself in his office at work at the City Hall annex downtown" (159). But there is also a foreboding angst. One examiner says that the eyes of those examiners who have been doing rote for thirty years have a burnt out, empty look from "thirty years of looking at forms, crosschecking forms, filling out the same memos on the same forms" (103). On the plane Sylvanshine sees businessmen as "fish thrashing in the nets of their own obligations" (18). There are also young fathers carrying infants in papooses, "the men appearing essentially soft or softened in some way, desperate in a resigned way, their stride not quite a trudge, their eyes empty and overmild with the weary stoicism of young fathers. Reynolds would not call it stoicism but acquiescence to some large and terrible truth." The question of weary stoicism vs. acquiescence is a recurrent

one in Wallace's examinations of masculine adulthood, pretty much all of which have the character of awed horror.

One of the main chapters in which Wallace explores the themes of cultural acedia and adulthood is set in a stuck, dark elevator at the REC. The chapter consists of a conversation, on civics, between the men in the elevator. Dialogue tags are sparse, but most of the dialogue takes place between the Director of the Peoria REC, DeWitt Glendenning Jr., and a character named Nichols. The chapter opens with Glendenning—whose character Wallace had conceived of as the champion of the IRS as a civic guardian rather than a corporation—remarking that Americans “infantilize” themselves: “We don't think of ourselves as citizens—parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities. We abdicate our civic responsibilities to the government and expect the government, in effect, to legislate morality” (130). And yet, Glendenning argues, Americans hate the government for enforcing the very rules they cede to it. The IRS is the worst face of the government, “the rapacious creditor, the stern parent” (134).

This infantilization started in the sixties, Glendenning says, an era that raised “people's consciousness in a whole lot of areas, such as race and feminism” but was also the start of “selfish individualism—the Me generation,” which thought that one's highest duty was unto oneself (132). Americans, Glendenning continues, have adopted a corporate attitude. Corporations are “revenue machines” whose only obligation is unto itself and its shareholders. Corporations are not culpable, *per se*. Rather, it is the consumers who are guilty for adopting the attitudes of corporations, “That our ultimate obligation is to ourselves.” Corporations, with their advertising, lead us to believe that profit is the goal and that responsibility is “something to be enshrined in symbol and evaded in reality” (131). This is contrasted with the IRS, which at times takes on a heroic stoicism. Elsewhere, a character says that the IRS acts as “an antidote or antagonist to people's natural selfishness” (“Unpublished” 551). The “Service” reminds Americans “that they are a part of something larger than themselves or their families, and that they owe this larger collective tribute.” One unnamed character, perhaps Glendenning himself, says in an interview that from childhood he had imagined IRS workers as “those certain kinds of other institutional heroes, bureaucratic, small-*h* heroes,” such as police officers, firefighters and even clergy—those workers who take care of all the “selfish, glitzy, uncaring, ‘Me-First’ people”

(127). The behind-the-scenes type who does not share in the glory but keeps the system going. In many ways, Glendenning's speech sounds like some of the arguments in "E Unum Pluribus," Wallace's essay on television and meta-fiction, only they have been recast in the language of corporations and taxes. There is the by-now nearly hackneyed discussion on the role of advertising in duping consumers into a faux rebellion that is really widespread conformity. It is possible to read this as a whole-hearted endorsement of libertarian principles or a conservative ode to the United States. It is not. In one of the notes at the end of the book, Glendenning is described as an ineffectual man "lost in civic idealism" (541). With the word "idealism," which here has connotations of naïveté, Wallace characteristically distances himself from coming across as moralizing. And yet, Wallace *is* questioning what effects a generation's total apathy—what I have been calling cultural acedia—has for democracy and freedom, as well as how it shapes individual morality.

The underlying component of acedia becomes clear when Nichols posits there is something metaphysical beneath American consumer attitudes of late:

I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose....Our smallness, our insignificance and mortality...the thing that we spend all our time not thinking about directly, that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that everyday we've lost on more day that will never come back and our childhoods are over and our adolescence and the vigor of youth and soon our adulthood, that everything we see around us all the time is decaying and passing... whoever imagined that there was a more truthful way to put it than "die," pass away," the very sound of it makes me feel the way I feel at dusk on a wintry Sunday. (143)

The obsession with production, Nichols says, may just be to distract us from "the horror of personal smallness and transience," which enables a solipsistic view that the individual is the center of the universe. Here again there is the language of horror and dread, the language of acedia.

### **Chris Fogle's Monologue on Cultural Acedia**

Chapter twenty-two, which is narrated by the so-called "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, is *The Pale King's* most explicit handling of the cultural acedia that Wallace diagnosed through *Infinite Jest*. Here, too, drugs and entertainment play a major role. Chris Fogle's nickname is apropos; the soliloquy is from the promotional/recruitment video *Your IRS Today*, and Fogle, who is supposed to be telling the story of how he became interested in working at the IRS, takes 99

pages to answer the question (roughly one fifth of the book), though Wallace later tells readers it was “actually heavily edited and excerpted” (257). It reads like a stream-of-consciousness trip down memory lane. Fogle also has the uncanny ability to count words as he speaks and reads. His monologue is occasionally broken by his reflecting on how many words he has spoken—a playful jab at meta-fiction.

Fogle begins by giving a lengthy appraisal of his “unfocused period” before he joined the IRS (156). He bounced around a few different colleges, never completing anything. Three times he dropped out to work different jobs, but he notes that he “couldn’t handle the boredom of the jobs, which were all unbelievably boring and meaningless,” so he would quit and try another job or enroll in college again (155). “I was pretty much of a wastoid,” he says (154). “I had trouble just paying attention,” he tells the camera. “I never did anything, but at the same time I could normally never sit still and become aware of what was really going on” (157).

Fogle relates how, when he was at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he and his roommate, a wealthy kid from the suburbs posing as a free-spirited rebel whose “blatant project and displacement was part of the nihilist hypocrisy of the whole period,” had a nightly ritual where they would look out their window at the podiatrist office across the street, its sign a giant rotating foot (164).<sup>42</sup> At eight p.m., when the power to the sign was switched off, they would wait until it stopped rotating. If it was facing away, they would go to the library to study. If any part of it was barely facing them, they would go to the bar. The ritual of the foot “was really just an excuse not to study or do our work and instead be wastoids” (185), a term Fogle uses often. “Everyone I knew and hung out with was a wastoid, and we knew it. It was hip to be ashamed of it, in a strange way. A weird kind of narcissistic despair. Or just to feel directionless and lost—we romanticized it” (164). Fogle’s inability to care about anything is characteristic of acedia, but so is the general atmosphere that he describes. This is the cultural acedia that Huxley, too, romanticized, though it seems that in the mouth of Huxley, an artist, there could be something romantic about it. Here it is pathetic. Later in the chapter he says the “wastoid” mentality of the era, “which Jimmy Carter was ridiculed for calling ‘malaise’...was, in reality, not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening, in fact, or sad” (223). Fogle suspects that rather than inflecting a

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<sup>42</sup> Fogle now reflects that his roommate probably felt the same about him, though he was not aware of it, and even if he had been, he would probably “have just turned it into some kind of hip, nihilistic joke,” (164) though he notes that he would not have used the word nihilism at the time “without trying to make it sound cool or like an allusion” (185). Here is Wallace again playing the same riff as in “E Unum Pluribus” and *Infinite Jest*.

hip pose, he may actually have been “the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who isn’t aware he’s a nihilist. . . . My essential response to everything was ‘Whatever’” (154). This is almost certainly an allusion to Melville’s “Bartelby the Scrivener,” the story of an office clerk who answers every request from his superiors with the pithy “I would prefer not to.” The character of Bartelby is the prototype for the acedic clerk.

A good portion of the chapter is devoted to his experience with drugs, which Fogle says were very much part of the college scene in the seventies. Readers are subjected to the exhaustive cataloguing of drugs that Wallace employed throughout *Infinite Jest*, which could double as a drug reference manual. Fogle eschewed cocaine (which made him jittery) and downers (which made him fall asleep), instead preferring various amphetamines, such as Ritalin, which “made sitting and studying for long periods of time possible and even interesting, and which [he] really, really liked,” but his drug of choice was Obetrol, a stimulant popular for weight-loss, which made him more aware (158-59). On Obetrol, he would say things like “*I am in this room,*” that is, he would pay attention to things that were otherwise mundane. “What it felt like,” Fogle says, “was a sort of emergence, however briefly, from the fuzziness and drift of my life in that period. . . . It also had to do with paying attention.” The drugs, however, were not helpful for genuine attention. He would become fixated on how the wall was painted. Or he paid attention to himself paying attention, falling into the same recursive loops that Hal had in *Infinite Jest* or that Wallace used to try to out meta-fictionalize meta-fiction (182). “This was attention without choice,” he says (188). Fogle notes that when he came off his Obetrol highs, he would have a headache and only dimly remember his newfound awareness, which “basically meant waking up to how unaware I normally was” (186). But the experience of Obetrol gave him a glimpse at something that he was lacking:

That there were depths to me that were not bullshit or childish but profound, and were not abstract but actually much realer than my clothes or self-image, and that blazed in an almost sacred way—I’m being serious; I’m not just trying to make it sound more dramatic than it was—and that these realest, most profound parts of me involved not drives or appetites but simple attention, awareness, if only I could stay awake off speed. But I couldn’t. (187)

Ultimately, he thinks it led him into the IRS: “It had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it’s a choice” (187). Fogle notes that he now thinks of Obetrol and other such drugs as “more of a kind of signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware

and alive in daily life” (186), though later in the book it is hinted that he was still taking amphetamines to concentrate and because of this lost his job with the IRS.

Fogle’s father, a cost-systems analyst for the City of Chicago, has the ability to pay attention. He is able to recall names, dates, and places: “that sort of close attention and total recall was part of his job”(165). Fogle’s father provides a contrast with Fogle’s generation (which Fogle notes is being funded by its members’ parents), or as his father refers to it, “This thing America hath wrought” (168). Fogle’s father was an institutional man who was slightly bent forward at the waist, “the posture of someone whose daily work means sitting very still at a desk and working on something in a concentrated way for years on end” (175). While Fogle’s generation flitters about, living a prolonged adolescence, his father, like most in the generation before him, did not have that luxury. Fogle’s father and mother married just after high school, before his father was deployed to Korea. As such, his father only graduated from technical college before getting a job, despite wanting more education: "The point is that he was very smart and somewhat unfulfilled, like many of his generation" (167). He often used the word "tedious" when talking about work (169). Wondering why his father spent all his free-time reading, Fogle hypothesizes that his father was bored with his job and lonely after his wife divorced him. "I think books and intellectual issues were one of his escapes from boredom" (168). But Fogle's father displays fortitude and perseverance against boredom. Fogle reflects that his father may not have ever asked himself questions like “*Do I like my job? Is this really what I want to spend my life doing? Is it as fulfilling as some of the dreams I had for myself when I was a young man serving in Korea and reading British poetry in my bunk in the barracks at night?*” (191). Rather, his mentality was “there are certain things that have to be done and you simply have to do them,” a mentality Fogle thinks is part of “the generation gap.” Perseverance was one of the traits that Evagrius exhorted the monks to in their battles with acedia. We do not see enough of Fogle’s father to know whether he suffers from personal acedia, but it would seem that his perseverance was a bulwark against the cultural acedia of his son’s generation.

But the description of Fogle’s father is not completely flattering. Fogle describes him, “like most men of his generation” as “both high-strung and tightly controlled, a type A personality but with a dominant superego, his inhibitions so extreme that it came out mainly as exaggerated

dignity and precision in his movements.”<sup>43</sup> Still, with the portrait of Fogle’s father, Wallace provides a sympathetic look at the authority against which his generation was rebelling.

Fogle thinks of his awakening in 1978—the year after his father was caught in the doors of a train and killed as it left a subway station, which he narrates with gruesome detail—as “the year I ‘found myself’ or ‘put away childish things’,” echoing Wallace’s comment to Lipsky (172). This occurs in the final review in an Advanced Tax class at Chicago’s DePaul University, a class that Fogle, in his lack of attention, wanders into accidentally.<sup>44</sup> The Advance Tax class was renowned for its difficulty as well as for its no-nonsense professor, whom Fogle says is one of the last remaining Jesuit professors on campus.<sup>45</sup> But Fogle is so absorbed in reviewing the *Federalist Papers* for the American Political Thought course he is supposed to be in that he does not notice his error until the professor walks in. (Fogle tells readers that he later found out this professor was a substitute and that this explains why he was wearing not a priest’s collar but a conservative wool suit with a hat and impeccably shined shoes, i.e. an old-school accountant’s professional attire.) Fogle stays in the class because he is so taken with the substitute’s presentation, of which he understands nothing but which is devoid of hip irony, the kind that Fogle is accustomed to in his humanities classes. It “had a kind of zealous integrity that manifested not as style but as the lack of it” (219). He possesses an indifference to how he is perceived, not a “nihilistic” indifference, but a “credibility” that commands authority and respect.

As the bell rings, the substitute says that the students probably expect him to deliver a few end-of-the-semester remarks. What he gives them is basically a homily. It is important for our purposes because it contains both Wallace’s views on freedom and the kernel of Wallace’s solution to acedia and boredom—attention. The substitute acknowledges that as many of them prepare to take their CPA exams, they will likely feel doubt over their chosen profession and will fantasize over other options.<sup>46</sup> He tells them that as they commit to what Fogle refers to as the

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<sup>43</sup> There seems to be a link between carriage and level of seriousness. The character of Shane Drinion, who seems to be un-boreable, has “a precision and economy of movement about him” (452).

<sup>44</sup> Fogle describes two buildings at DePaul that were “literally almost mirror images of one another,” and he wanders into the wrong one (189). It is no accident that Wallace uses the concept of mirroring to describe someone finding himself. In one of the previously unpublished scenes added in the paperback edition, an unnamed character experiences a similar reawakening while seeing his reflection in a shop window. Again, for the importance of mirrors in Wallace’s work and their relationship to Lacanian psychology, c.f. Boswell pp. 128-132.

<sup>45</sup> DePaul is actually a Vincentian school, though it is unclear whether the error is Wallace’s or Fogle’s. Loyola University is Chicago’s Jesuit university.

<sup>46</sup> CPA being short for Certified Public Accountant

“vocation” of accounting, they will experience that commitment as “the death of childhood's limitless possibility” (176, 228).<sup>47, 48</sup> But he tells them they are standing on the cusp of something greater: “Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today...heroism.... True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world” (229-230). This sort of steady perseverance is esteemed repeatedly throughout the book. Early on, the narrator tells us that Claude Sylvanshine “tended to do his deskwork in a kind of frenzy as opposed to the slow, austere, methodical disposition of truly great accountants” (19). Later, in a strange chapter about a boy whose goal is to be able to kiss every part of his body, a chiropractor introduces “the adult idea of quiet daily discipline and progress toward a long-term goal” (396).

The enemies of heroism, the substitute continues, are “Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui” (231). The speech, which admittedly has its inspiring moments, disintegrates into a gag when he compares accountants to the cowboys of today, “Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data” (233). This is why, the substitute proclaims, accountants wear hats, just like cowboys. The substitute Jesuit’s speech was an epiphany for Fogle, who shortly thereafter heard an IRS recruitment advertisement and signed up. For Fogle, the IRS has been a salvific experience: “The truth is that most of what I really know about myself I learned in the Service” (165). It took the focus off of himself and gave him a context within which to grow into adulthood.

Here is Wallace, careful as ever not to get too moralistic, or rather, getting moralistic and then coyly undermining his statements. There are some powerful observations in Fogle’s monologue, but most of them are hidden in piles of excess information or have their credibility diminished by endless examples. The chapter following Fogle’s is one of the memoir chapters. Wallace tells us that Fogle “was actually on the money about one thing,” namely the way the

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<sup>47</sup> The theological connotations of “vocation” are undeniable.

<sup>48</sup> Here Wallace is echoing the philosopher Robert Nozick: “The problem of meaning is created by limits, by being just this, by being merely this. The young feel this less strongly. Although they would agree, if they thought about it, that they will realize only some of the (feasible) possibilities before them, none of these various possibilities is yet excluded in their minds. The young live in each of the futures open to them. The poignancy of growing older does not lie in one’s particular path being less satisfying or good than it promised earlier to be — the path may turn out to be all one thought. It lies in traveling only one (or two, or three) of those paths. Economists speak of the opportunity cost of something as the value of the best alternative foregone for it. For adults, strangely, the opportunity cost of our lives appears to us to be the value of all the foregone alternatives summed together, not merely the best other one. When all the possibilities were yet still before us, it felt as if we would do them all” (595-596).

mind remembers random, terribly specific details over time (259). It is Wallace, again distancing himself from what could be regarded as Fogle's sentimental pap. Further, Fogle is something of a solipsist. Meaning, for Wallace, is constructed in the dialectic between people, but Fogle is oblivious to the listener:

What logorrheic colleagues like Fogle failed to understand is that there are vastly different kinds of truths, some of which are incompatible with one another.... What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data onto one another.

The problem is that, in his story, Fogle cannot decide what to pay attention to. And yet, this discernment is one of the chief requirements of an IRS examiner. At one point, Fogle tells the interviewer that "rote exams requires a very sharp, organized, and methodical type of mental state, with the ability to concentrate for long periods of time, and, even more important, the ability to choose what one concentrates on versus ignoring" (180). Attention and the ability to choose what one pays attention to form an intricate part of Wallace's moral vision, and, I will argue in the next section, comprise Wallace's response to personal and cultural acedia.

### **Attention: The Remedy to Acedia**

In 2005, Wallace delivered the commencement address at Kenyon College.<sup>49</sup> The Kenyon speech was to help graduates navigate the "day-to-day trenches of adult life," but it serves as a concise summary of Wallace's moral vision and the themes he was working through in *The Pale King* (98). It comes to focus on freedom through attention, Wallace's solution in *The Pale King* for battling what I have been referring to as personal and cultural acedia.

Wallace takes the cliché of a liberal arts education as teaching one "how to think" and says that it "really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience" (53-54). He tells the graduates that they "do not yet have any clue what 'day in, day out' really means. There happen to be whole large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration" (63-65). One example he uses is being stuck in line at the grocery store after a long day at work. The default setting is to assume that situations revolve

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<sup>49</sup> The speech has since been published in an annoying graduation-gift edition, with one sentence per page, which explains these multi-page citations.

around ourselves and to take out our frustration on the annoying people in line or the lady working the cash register, “who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium and meaninglessness surpass the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college” (71). Here, however, the work of attention comes in:

But if you’ve really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things. Not that that mystical stuff’s necessarily true: the only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to *decide* how you’re going to try to see it. (91-94)<sup>50</sup>

To experience frustration or anger in the grocery store is understandable: “It’s the automatic, unconscious way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I’m 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” (81-83). But attention—to oneself, to other people, and to the world—is not only a way to escape tedium, it is also a defense against solipsism, “getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your head” (50). The point that Wallace is getting at is empathy through attention. Acedia, with its attendant apathy, is an impediment to paying attention, particularly paying attention the sufferings of other people. What Spacks says of boredom could just as well be applied to acedia, which “both causes and is caused by failure or inability to attend” (140). The solution to warding off acedia, then, is the conscious choice to pay attention.

As in the Kenyon speech, the importance of paying attention is a leitmotif throughout *The Pale King*. In the opening pages, Claude Sylvanshine, reflecting on how a pinched nerve hurts when he pays attention to it, thinks: “It was true: The entire ballgame, in terms of both the exam and life, was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not” (12). Later in the chapter, Sylvanshine tries “to pay close attention to his surroundings as a way to avert thought and anxiety” (21). But he cannot pay attention. Sylvanshine is a GS-9 (low rank) trying to pass his CPA. He has been trying for three and a half years, in part because he spends a lot of time thinking about how to most effectively study instead of actually studying. And when he does

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<sup>50</sup> As Daniel Turnbull has noted, Wallace is not talking about first-order morality, i.e. telling readers what actions they need to take. Rather, he is making a statement about what is required of a moral engagement with life (211). It is a question of perspective. Still, in several instances Wallace assures students he is not moralizing: “But please don’t dismiss it as some finger-wagging Dr. Laura sermon. None of this is about morality, or religion, or dogma, or big fancy questions of life after death” (127-128).

study, “Any one thing would set off a storm in his head about all the other things he hadn’t studied and felt he was still weak on, making it almost impossible to concentrate, causing him to fall even further behind” (9). A vicious cycle, he says it “was like trying to build a model in high wind,” comparison strikingly similar to how Wallace described writing *The Pale King*: “trying to carry a sheet of plywood in a windstorm” (Max).

Further compromising Sylvanshine’s ability to pay attention is that he is a “fact psychic.” He has a syndrome known as “Random Fact Intuition,” which means that pieces of information pop into his head. They are almost completely random and rarely if ever helpful i.e. “What Cointreau tasted like to someone with a mild head cold on the esplanade of Vienna’s state opera house on 2 October 1874” (118). This is obviously a problem for Sylvanshine, whose job as an examiner depends on maintaining concentration. But the fact intrusions are devastatingly distracting: “Most are like having someone sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in your ear while you’re trying to recite a poem for a prize” (120). Because of this, and Sylvanshine’s generally jumpy mind, the chapters with Sylvanshine are real stream-of-consciousness, strand after strand of information, a tapestry of words that calls to mind the unified dissimilarity of a rag rug.<sup>51</sup> It is like keeping Twitter open while writing a paper, only the Twitter feed has sound alerts, takes up the whole screen, is completely random, and chosen by someone else.<sup>52</sup> This is what Chris Fogle, referring to his attention on stimulants, calls “attention without choice” (188).

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<sup>51</sup> With *Broom*, Wallace had been accused by one reviewer of writing whatever came into his head. It is as if he is taking that critique and parodying it while simultaneously showing the impossibility of corralling the torrents of information we are subjected to everyday.

<sup>52</sup> Underlying *The Pale King*, and Sylvanshine’s character in particular, is the concept of entropy. Entropy here refers to the measure of disorder in a closed system though obviously not in the thermodynamic sense of the word: “As Dr. Lehl had explained it, entropy was a measure of a certain type of information that there was no point in knowing. Lehl’s axiom was that the definitive test of the efficiency of any organization structure was information and the filtering and dissemination of information. Real entropy had zippo to do with temperature” (12). (Sylvanshine, of course, has no ability to filter information.) As the substitute Jesuit says, “...the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation” (232). Though Wallace’s work itself strove to choral and order large tracts of information, it does not reflect particularly well on those who attempt this. There is the sense that the drive to choral and order information can also be a distraction against pain. In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately’s stepfather, an alcoholic, records every drink in a little notebook. This encyclopedic recording of his alcohol consumption does not prevent him from beating Gately’s mother. Nor does Hal Incandenza’s memorization of the OED help him to recover a sense of self. In some ways, information serves as a distraction, just like entertainment. J.J. Sullivan, commenting on the perpetual theme of loneliness that ran through all of Wallace’s work, calls it “a particular kind of postmodern, information-saturated loneliness.” As Wallace’s character says in *The Pale King*: “This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do. I can’t think anyone really believes that today’s so-called ‘information society’ is just about information. Everyone knows it’s about something else, way down” (85). A larger discussion on the ways that Wallace focused on entropy throughout the course of his career is beyond the scope of this essay. For an introductory account, c.f. Boswell pp. 51-62.

In his sprawling monologue, Fogle says that in the IRS, he has learned “how disorganized and inattentive most people are and how little they pay attention to what’s going on outside of their sphere” (158). We are, after all, always paying attention to something, but, as Fogle notes, “most people are always feeling something or adopting some attitude or choosing to pay attention to one thing or one part of something without even knowing we’re doing it” (183). To pay attention connotes a measure of care, and choosing to pay attention to something indicates a level of commitment. The danger of boredom is that it is a roadblock to conscious attention: “Boredom in all its manifestations implies a failure of full attention, a cause or effect of the feeling” (Spacks xii).<sup>53</sup>

### **Attention and Freedom**

*The Pale King* links choosing to pay attention with freedom. We see this in Chris Fogle’s growing out of his own personal acedia and the cultural acedia that ensconced him. Before committing to his career in the IRS, he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted, but claims in a way, he was “too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn’t actually real—I was free to choose ‘whatever’ because it didn’t really matter” (223). He says that freedom of this kind, the freedom to do whatever you want, “is also very close, on the psychological continuum, to loneliness” (192). What he calls nihilism is acedia, a deep-seated apathy and indifference, a point which Wallace makes in “E Unum Pluribus”: “Indifference is actually just the ‘90s version of frugality of U.S. young people: wooed several gorgeous hours a day for nothing but our attention, we regard that attention as our chief commodity, our social capital, and we are loathed to fritter it” (*Supposedly* 64).

The antidote for Fogle is the same that Wallace proposed for Kenyon graduates—conscious attention reflected in choice and commitment: “If I wanted to matter—even just to myself—I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way” (224). The paradoxical restriction of what we normally think of freedom leads to actual freedom.<sup>54</sup> Attention generates freedom, as Iris Murdoch notes: “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at” (qtd. in Turnbull 212). In the Kenyon speech, Wallace connects freedom through attention with the care of other people when he tells

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<sup>53</sup> Not that full attention is always a good thing. Paying attention to the wrong things can have devastating consequences. The character of David Cusk, who experiences crippling panic attacks, pays attention to the slightest symptoms of panic and thereby induces more attacks: “It was in public high school that this boy learned the terrible power of attention and what you pay attention to,” opens the thirteenth chapter (91).

<sup>54</sup> Glendenning rephrases this in the key of civic idealism: “Real freedom is freedom to obey the law” (193).

graduates “The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom” (120-121).

### **Shane Drinion: The Characterization of Attention**

The only character in *The Pale King* who exhibits this sort of attention—and thus freedom from boredom and acedia—is Shane Drinion, whom we meet at a Friday happy hour at a pub called Meibeyer’s. The scene is an extended conversation between the “wrist-bitingly attractive” Meredith Rand and Drinion, an unobtrusive examiner nicknamed “Mr. X,” short for “Mr. Excitement” (447-448). Rand is apparently so attractive that the male examiners change around her, some becoming boisterous, seeking to gain her attention, while others becoming reserved and uncomfortable—the standard barroom behavior of men around beautiful women. The female examiners in turn react to the attention Rand receives. They either becoming seemingly diminished, jealous, or smugly knowing of the males’ buffoonery.

Shane Drinion is the only one unaffected, though Drinion does not seem to be affected by anything. He is a utility examiner (UTEX), meaning he gets moved from post to post depending on where he is needed, a somewhat ironic job since he is the least restless of any of the characters. He could be content anywhere. The narrator describes him as a great examiner but “a total lump in terms of personality, possibly the dullest human being currently alive” (448). “If he gave off a sound it would be like a single long tone from a tuning fork or EKG flatline,” which is an aural characterization of boredom (450). His face is almost expressionless, and could be “called pleasant in the way that certain kinds of weather are called pleasant” (449). He is the personification of the genuine, the totally un-ironic person. Wallace, using free-indirect style, dips into Rand’s conscious when he narrates “he has no natural sense of whether something [is] sarcastic or not” (457). When Rand comments that they look like they’re having a “tête-à-tête,” Drinion plainly replies, “That’s a foreign term for a private conversation” (450). He is so literal it is almost as though he is on the autistic spectrum.

The conversation takes place in June of 1985, and Drinion has just been posted to Peoria in April. The two have never exchanged words before this. After some small talk about their childhoods, Rand asks Drinion if he wants “to hear a sad story?...Everybody’s got their sad story. You want to hear part of mine?” (466-467). The story is that in high school, Rand cut herself as a way to manage her loneliness, which apparently stemmed from being so attractive

that no one valued her for anything besides her beauty. When she was admitted to the psychiatric ward, she met her husband, Ed, who was working as an aide on the floor. He was dying of cardiomyopathy, a weak man who had to put his “chintzy Kmart shoes up on the table” when they talked to keep his circulation moving. (He was, like Shane Drinion, decidedly unhip and un-ironic.) Rand says that he took a genuine interest in her that was not related to her beauty, which she knew because “he was basically a dead man....He wouldn’t have the physical energy to try to get in my pants even if he’d wanted to” (495). On the evening before Meredith’s discharge from the hospital, she and Ed are talking in the stairwell—he lying down so he can levitate his legs to improve circulation. Because it is her last evening, he cuts to the chase and tells her that her problem “was basically that [she] needed to grow up,” that she needed to “quit being childish, because it would kill [her]” (496-497). Ed remarks though that acting childishly is not the same thing as being a child, “because watch a real child play or stroke a cat or listen to a story and you’ll see it’s like the opposite” of what Rand was doing. Ed, making a similar point as Fogle’s Jesuit about “the death of childhood's limitless possibility,” tells Meredith that it is possible to leave the freedom of childhood behind but remain immature, “wanting to be distracted from what you’ve lost and fixed and saved by somebody.” Here again Wallace is making the point between attention (a lack of distraction) and adulthood.

But the wanting to be distracted from the pain of adulthood is not just Meredith’s problem. That is everyone’s problem, Ed says. Meredith’s variation on the theme is that she has insulated herself against growing up by being able to accuse anyone who attempts to care for her of being interested in her only for her looks, i.e. she will be able to hold onto the problem of her looks and pretend that that is the real problem; this, Ed says, is deeply unattractive to anyone who would actually look beyond her attractiveness, ensuring that the only people who *will* pay attention to her are those who want her only for her beauty.<sup>55</sup>

The story is actually quite compelling despite its banal sound in summary form. It is also a striking instance where Wallace’s biography looms over the text. When Meredith tells Drinion about electroshock therapy, it is impossible not to think of Wallace’s own experience. Her description of being put in suicide watch in a pink room with nothing but a drain in the floor is almost exactly what Wallace told David Lipsky of his own experience in suicide watch.

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<sup>55</sup> Note, again, the recursive nature of the psychologies of Wallace’s characters.

What is important about the conversation, for this essay, are both the way that Drinion pays attention to Rand's story and the little interchanges between portions of Rand's story, which is unnecessarily long and winding. Perhaps because she is self-absorbed or because she is sharing a rather personal story, she periodically pauses to comment on their conversation. Rand, who has had a few drinks, tells Drinion that he is "kind of tiring.... It's like you're both interesting and really boring at the same time" (461). But Drinion becomes interesting because of his ability to take interest in Rand. (There are all sorts of undertones going on with the word interest, which in its economic meaning has obvious allusions to the IRS as a corporation.) Drinion is described as easy to talk to, though "he possesses nothing that could be called charm or social grace or even evident compassion" (449). Meredith Rand cannot put her thumb on it, but Drinion is a good listener because he "gives whoever's speaking his complete attention" (448). When Drinion says that their conversation gives him a chance to "pay direct attention" to Rand, she asks, "Is liking paying attention the same thing as being interested in somebody?" (455-456) Rand's comment could be interpreted on a romantic level, but Drinion does not think that way.

He responds, "Well, I would say almost anything you pay close, direct attention to becomes interesting" (81), which is a close approximation of the narrator's statement in *Infinite Jest* that one thing people learn around a halfway house is "That boring activities become, perversely, much less boring if you concentrate intently on them" (203). There is hopefulness here that interest in the uninteresting can be cultivated through attention (Whereas paying attention to the interesting requires no effort: "It's almost always pleasant to pay attention to beauty. It requires no effort," Drinion tells Rand [*Pale* 456].<sup>56</sup>)

It is no accident that Wallace uses what Spacks points out is "a metaphor of economic exchange that reminds us once more of the process of evaluation going on. Paying attention provides the foundation for the interesting because it allows us to measure value" (124). Wallace is not so naïve as to try to resurrect the old definition of interesting—that which is worthy of interest as opposed to the modern meaning of that which arouses our attention or curiosity—or so moralistic as to assume that that which is important will hold our interest. "Sometimes what's

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<sup>56</sup> That certain things require less effort to pay attention to is a point that Wallace makes more than once. When introducing the promotional video *Your IRS Today*, he notes that good narrative is easy to pay attention to: "Some [interviewees] can actuate, forget the setting, the stilted artifice, and speak as from the heart. So that with these, briefly, the recording techs can forget the job's sheer tedium, the contrivance, the stiffness of standing still at machines that could run on their own. The techs are, in other words, engaged by the better ones; attention requires no effort" (103).

important is dull,” one character in *The Pale King* tells another who complains of the dullness of a conversation. “Sometimes it’s work. Sometimes the important things aren’t works of art for your entertainment” (138). Elsewhere, a cart boy tells the reader that the key to navigating the life “is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable....It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish” (438). Drinion, however, is the only developed character in *The Pale King* who achieves this, and achieves this while listening to a tragic if meandering story about a woman’s scarred past.

Wallace’s fiction is devoted to dramatizing the fullness—and brokenness—of characters such as Rand. One of the things that he was phenomenally good at was taking characters that at first seem one-dimensional and perhaps unworthy of attention revealing their intricate complexities and irreducible particularities through often-grizzly backstories. His writing, in turn, invites us to take a deeper look at those around us. In telling these backstories of people who, in the case of *The Pale King*, work a very boring job in a very boring place, Sullivan notes that “Wallace is working to prove to us that everyone’s complicated, that when people seem simple and dull, it’s we who aren’t paying attention enough, it’s our stubborn inborn tendency to see other people as major or minor characters in our story.”

Drinion is perhaps a model for readers, since he exhibits what amounts to charitable selflessness.<sup>57</sup> Given its unselfish nature, it is unsurprising that Drinion’s attention is contagious. Like most bars, Meibeyer’s is loud and has the whole gamut of distractions: televisions, pinball, video games, and loud music. But Rand, in retrospect, realizes that talking to Drinion brought her out of that distraction, “as if a sort of insulated container had formed around their table” (473). She theorizes it is because of how much attention Drinion paid to the conversation, though it is an attention devoid of any flirtation or romance. When she asks him if her story is boring, Drinion replies that boring is not the right word, that some repetitive elements merely require more interest, but that, in some way, these repetitions are interesting too because they reveal a “concern that what [Meredith is] imparting might be unclear or uninteresting and must get

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<sup>57</sup> Though not in a pious sense. He tells Rand that he merely has a hard time paying attention to more than one thing at a time: “if I’m watching someone and paying attention to them and thinking about what they’re like, I’m not paying attention to myself and what I’m like” (463). This is why, despite his lack of family (he grew up in an orphanage) or friends, he is not lonely.

recast...to assure yourself that the listener really understands you” (502). Patricia Meyers Spacks speculates that in the world where people lacked the concept of boredom, they “would tend to accept their condition in life as *given*” (9). This sounds remarkably similar to Shane Drinion, who does not experience boredom, who has no concept of it.

We know that Drinion is fully immersed in the conversation because, in a touch of magical realism, he levitates when paying full attention. Apparently one night someone came into the office and saw Drinion levitating, upside down, over his desk, focusing on a complex return. By the point in the conversation when Rand brings up her time in the psychiatric ward, Drinion’s bottom is hovering a few millimeters off his chair. Later, his bottom is a few inches off the chair, but Rand only notices that he seems much taller. Drinion himself does not realize he is hovering, since he only does it when he is fully immersed and therefore not paying attention to himself.

Through the character of Drinion, Wallace gestures towards attention as the cure for acedia, most-tellingly in one of the authorial notes that the editor included at the end of the book:

Drinion is *happy*. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift 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. (546)

This is quite similar to what Evagrius says of those monks who are able to overcome acedia: “No other demon follows immediately after this one: a state of peace and ineffable joy ensues in the soul after this struggle” (99). If there were to be a hero in *The Pale King*, it would seem that Wallace intended Drinion to be that hero. In one of the previously unpublished scenes, an unnamed examiner says of Drinion: “I love him; he taught me a great deal. The story I have to offer is his story, and I understand it as a love story” (551). But, Drinion aside, I do think that Wallace struggled with how to convey attention in his fiction. In one of the fragments published in the end of the book, Wallace writes, “They’re rare, but they’re among us. People able to achieve and sustain a certain steady state of concentration, attention, despite what they’re doing” (547). But the examples he gives are stale: an Asian student sitting motionless for an hour while reading in the library, a security guard standing watch outside a building for a whole day, a woman counting loops of twine on an assembly line. It is much easier to dramatize distraction and chaos.

## Attention and The Writer

The desert fathers' advice to each other for defeating acedia is quite similar to what *The Pale King* proposes: "Perform the humblest of tasks with full attention and no fussing over the whys and wherefores" (Norris 132). The monks also encouraged prayer, of course, but I think it is possible to adopt a broad view of prayer as attention. As the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil said, "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (116). That Wallace should emphasize attention is not surprising, because the life of a writer is not dissimilar from the life of a hermit. Both lives entail a degree of isolation and concentration, a remove from society that puts the writer at risk of loneliness, boredom, and acedia:

What writers have is a license and also the freedom to sit—to sit, clench their fists, and make themselves be excruciatingly aware of the stuff that we're mostly aware of only on a certain level.... And it's not a question of the writer having more capacity than the average person.... It's that the writer is willing I think to cut off, cut himself off from certain stuff, and develop...and just, and think really hard. Which not everybody has the luxury to do. (Lipsky 41)

Paying attention, then, is the task of the writer, but it also the writer's goal for the reader to pay attention.

As we noted earlier, Acedia and boredom arise from a lack of meaningful relationship with time. Creating fiction, in the case of writers, or giving oneself over to narrative, as in in the case of readers, is a defense against boredom.<sup>58</sup> "Writing fiction takes me out of time," Wallace said in an early interview. "I sit down and the clock will not exist for me for a few hours" (Burn 7).<sup>59</sup> Writing is a way to have a meaningful relationship with time, and occasionally, to obliterate it. It is not the act of writing itself but the act of attention that creates meaning; however, attention—whether it is attention to others, a task, or one's soul—is insanely hard to cultivate. But as Wallace reminded his audience at Kenyon, "The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the "rat race"—the constant, gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing" (123).

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<sup>58</sup> The narrator of "The Soul is Not A Smithy" uses the wire mesh embedded in the classroom window to create elaborate stories, each little square wire-delineated glass representing a different frame in a storyboard: "Obviously, the intense preoccupation was lethal in terms of my Listening Skills during second period Civics, in that it led my attention not merely to wander idly, but to actively construct whole linear, discretely organized narrative fantasies, many of which unfolded in considerable detail" (71).

<sup>59</sup> This is the fugue state that Wallace described in his youthful days of playing tennis: "a fugue-state I've decided that my whole time playing tennis was spent chasing, a fugue-state I associated too with plowing and seeding and detassling and spreading herbicides back and forth in sentry duty along perfect lines, up and back, or military marching on flat blacktop, hypnotic, a mental state at once flat and lush, numbing and yet exquisitely felt" (*Supposedly* 19).

## V. Conclusion

Over the course of this essay, I have sought to demonstrate that acedia is a salient if all-but-unnamed theme in the work of David Foster Wallace, particularly his unfinished novel *The Pale King*. This task has required me to differentiate two kinds of acedia: personal acedia, as we saw in the character of Lane Dean; and cultural acedia, which finds its most concrete expression in the malaise which Chris Fogle describes. While the concept of personal acedia is not often discussed in the general population, it is well researched and written about, particularly by historical theologians. I do hope that it will find its way into more discussions within literary studies because I think it has much to add to the conversation, particularly regarding post-Enlightenment Literature. As, W.H. Auden noted in 1927, “acedia and unabashed glorification of the subjective [have been] so prominent in the world since the Reformation (“acedia”). But cultural acedia—that apathetic cynicism—is not so often invoked by researchers, and acedia is most-often thought as an individual affliction. As Wallace’s work demonstrates, the concept of cultural acedia is pertinent, particularly in American attitudes over the last fifty years.<sup>60</sup> We see this in pop culture’s appropriation of postmodern irony, which I traced in the chapter devoted to Wallace’s vision and which comes to characterize the cynical apathy of that Wallace saw in his generation of Americans. The solution to acedia presented in *The Pale King* is paying attention, a solution in the tradition of the Desert Hermits.

I have emphasized this one aspect of Wallace’s work—personal and cultural acedia—and its manifestation in *The Pale King* in particular, to drive home a point. The inherent risk is oversimplification, the treacherous act of turning Wallace’s fiction into the stuff of self-help books or, even worse, placing it in the ominous bookseller’s category of “spirituality,” both classifications which his writing, with its technical and stylistic boldness, fights at all costs to resist. That being said, Wallace’s work is deeply engaged in ethics and morality. There is a spiritual, even mystical, component to it, as others like the scholar Marshall Boswell have pointed out. Given the nature of Wallace’s work, boredom and ennui are not expansive enough to adequately describe much of what Wallace perceived in American culture. The concept of acedia, however, with its psychological, physical, and spiritual connotations, is well suited to the task.

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<sup>60</sup> Thus, acedia as category in the study of American literature will prove particularly fruitful. The work of Flannery O’Connor (“The Enduring Chill”), Walker Percy (*The Moviegoer*), and Benjamin Kunkel (*Indecision*) immediately come to mind.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not point out the preliminary nature of this study. *The Pale King* was released only a year ago. In April of 2012, at a conference marking the release of *The Pale King* in paperback, the University of Texas's Ransom Center opened its archive of materials from the composition of *The Pale King*, adding to an already extensive collection of Wallace materials housed there. Later this year, D.T. Max will publish his biography of Wallace, the first to date, and Little, Brown will release a new collection of Wallace's non-fiction. There is now a wealth of material for scholars to pick through, and as they do so, new insights about *The Pale King* will come to light, including, perhaps, more research on the subject of acedia.

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