



Cleveland State University
EngagedScholarship@CSU

[ETD Archive](#)

Winter 1-1-2020

Although of Course they End Up Constructing their Selves Performative Gender Identity In the Pale King

Kevin Tasker
Cleveland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive>
How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Tasker, Kevin, "Although of Course they End Up Constructing their Selves Performative Gender Identity In the Pale King" (2020). *ETD Archive*. 1278.
<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/1278>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Archive by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

ALTHOUGH OF COURSE THEY END UP CONSTRUCTING THEIR SELVES

Performative Gender Identity in *The Pale King*

KEVIN TASKER

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

University of Illinois: Springfield

Winter 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

MAY 2020

We hereby approve this thesis

For

KEVIN TASKER

Candidate for the MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH degree

For the department of

English

and

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

College of Graduate Studies by

Thesis Chairperson, Dr. Jeff Karem

Department & Date

Thesis Committee Member and Director of Graduate Studies, Dr. Adam Sonstegard

Department & Date

Thesis Committee Member, Dr. James Marino

Department & Date

January 31, 2020

Student's Date of Defense

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Sonstegard, Dr. Karem, and Dr. Marino for their guidance throughout the process of developing and writing my thesis. Dr. Sonstegard's acute review of the project in its infancy proved invaluable as I shaped my subsequent inquiries. Dr. Karem's intricate notes on individual sections of the resulting chapters deepened my understanding of the novel's symbolic structure as well as helped me place it more firmly within the historical continuum of gender identity. Dr. Marino's astute observations on the text's commentary on class/gender enhanced my view of the work as a whole.

I would also like to thank my girlfriend Elizabeth for her thoughtful, honest feedback and my parents for their unwavering support not only during the thesis process, but over the course of my entire academic journey.

ALTHOUGH OF COURSE THEY END UP CONSTRUCTING THEIR SELVES

GENDER IDENTITY IN *THE PALE KING*

KEVIN TASKER

ABSTRACT

The Pale King is a fragmentary work which many critics understand as primarily an examination of boredom. This is an interpretation put forth by Wallace's editor, Michael Pietsch while attempting to unify the disparate components of the text as it remained after the author's untimely death in 2008. As Pietsch argues in the 2011 edition's introduction, "David set out to write a novel about some of the hardest subjects—sadness and boredom" (ix). Though boredom is indeed a theme throughout the book (and one which Wallace addressed while writing it (D.T. Max 281), *The Pale King* may also be read as an examination of gender identity in America in the latter half of the twentieth century. David Foster Wallace is not often thought of as a writer preoccupied with gender, yet it vexed him throughout his career, evidenced by his depictions of femininity and masculinity (frequently at odds with one another) in *Infinite Jest*, *Oblivion*, and most importantly, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Wallace's use of reconstructed gender identities in *The Pale King* represents his most profound and patriarchy-defying depiction of the subject.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. MATERNAL MASCULINITY	5
III. A DIFFERENT VIEW OF FOGLE.....	18
IV. A MOVE TOWARD (MASQUE)ULINITY	27
V. THE COURTSHIP PLOT DISMANTLED.....	40
VI. CONCLUSION.....	54
WORKS CITED	57

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, left unfinished at the time of his death in 2008, is a hilarious, disturbing collection of vignettes and related data that, for the purpose of simplicity, we will call a novel. While Wallace's authorial persona within *The Pale King* urges us to read it as a "vocational memoir" (70), Stephen Taylor Marsh is apt when he writes that "Wallace deploys an autobiographical narration that undermines and obfuscates the self in favor of other-disclosure...performing...self-sacrifice to highlight the profundity of others' discursive experiences" (118). In other words, Wallace inserts himself (or a form of himself) into the novel and frames it as a memoir so that he may explore his characters' experiences, instead of his own, in intimate detail. The result is sincere, affecting book. It is also a byzantine adventure containing depictions of amphetamine psychosis (429), a supernatural visitation (383), an ungodly-frightening infant (393), and a chapter consisting—apart from a scattering of mordant asides—almost entirely of characters turning pages (310). As Wallace died before he could speak publicly on his intentions with the novel, modern scholars have been left largely in a state of puzzlement, attempting to divine meaning solely from the many fragments he left behind.

Critical attention paid to *The Pale King* has thus far fallen into two camps: one analyzing the novel's preoccupation with civic duty/identity and the other analyzing the novel's treatment of boredom as a potential mechanism for transcendence. According to the novel, "if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish" (438). This evidently includes levitation (498). The former critical camp is exemplified by Marshall Boswell and the latter by Robert C. Hamilton. Both strains of criticism explore ways in which the novel's characters reach (or fail to reach) epiphanies through their ostensibly soul-deadening service at the IRS. Both the civics and the boredom frames focus mostly on male characters, the former on IRS manager DeWitt Glendenning Jr., and the latter mostly on "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle. While these arguments are somewhat effective, they do not address the novel's many female voices. Nor do they seek to understand how Wallace uses some of his male voices to critique dominant forms of American masculinity. To understand the novel more fully, we must veer from this examination of *The Pale King's* genre to its examination of gender.

Though gender has been a means for critics to explicate Wallace works like *Oblivion*, *Infinite Jest*, and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*—which latter *The New York Times* deemed "a sort of bestiary of male selfishness," few critics have viewed *The Pale King* through such a lens. Of the few that have, Clare Hayes-Brady is most definitive in her understanding, arguing that Wallace's "hyperawareness of gender difference paradoxically paralyzes his authorial capacity for empathy, leaving oblique engagement with femininity the only available means of exploring gender issues" (132). In *The Pale King*, Hayes-Brady argues, characters like Meredith Rand are "wholly Othered" (136) due to their de-

sirable physical characteristics. Hayes-Brady's contentions are persuasive, but her analysis does not account for the nuanced depiction of gender (re)construction within *The Pale King*.¹

Indeed, Wallace uses this novel to explore ideas of gender awareness, control, and identity, eventually providing true agency to many of the women within the text and condemning the men who attempt to rob them of that agency. This thesis will explore the ways in which characters in *The Pale King* engage with gender roles/identities in four distinct ways, two of which are exemplified by men and two by women. First, we will explore Leonard Stecyk's construction of a powerful "maternal masculinity" that challenges his era's dominant hyper-masculine power structure, then we will explore "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle's covert casting of his mother as a disempowered woman through his performance of dizzyingly narcissistic self-aware masculinity. Next, we will delve into Toni Ware's performance of what I term (*masque*)*ulinity*—a form of aggressive performative masculinity—in order to prevent herself from succumbing to the advances of a legion of predatory men. Finally, we will examine Meredith Rand's sense of feminine self-creation as she rejects the male gaze and uses her narrative to systemically dismantle elements of the traditional Western courtship plot. Through my examination of these four characters'

¹ It is important to note at the outset that Wallace's abusive treatment of women in his personal life lends a definite complexity to this representation. His relationship with the writer Mary Karr was particularly disturbing. Megan Garber, in an article entitled "David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius," cites a 2018 tweet in which Karr wrote, "[Wallace] tried to buy a gun. kicked me. climbed up the side of my house at night. followed my son age 5 home from school. had to change my number twice, and he still got it. months and months it went on." Garber is correct in her assertion that "Karr's #MeToo stories were not so much an open secret as an open revelation. They were not hiding in plain sight; they were, worse, strategically ignored. They were the collateral damage of a culture that prefers uncomplicated idols." My understanding of *The Pale King* as a nuanced and, in many cases, empowering portrait of women/femininity is *not* a means of excusing Wallace's deplorable actions. These actions must, in fact, be kept in mind as we explore the text; the writer and the world in which he lived never entirely separate from the one he died creating.

created and re-created identities, I will show that David Foster Wallace was striving, with what turned out to be his final novel, to interrogate damaging gender norms and, frequently, to subvert them.

CHAPTER II

MATERNAL MASCULINITY

To begin, we may ask ourselves what exactly is gender? Gayle Rubin defines it as “a socially imposed division of the sexes” (782). This is a simple yet profound definition, illuminating both the constructed and binary aspects of the concept. Men and women only *become* men and women through societal context and in their relationships to one another. Naturally, national identity is a factor in gender understanding. David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* is a novel consumed by the question, “what makes an American man a man in the latter half of the twentieth century?” En route to the IRS regional examination center in Peoria, IL where much of the book takes place, Claude Sylvanshine observes some bedraggled men carrying their children. These men appear to Claude “essentially soft...desperate in a resigned way, their stride not quite a trudge, their eyes empty and oversold with the weary stoicism of young fathers” (13). This is a portrait of manhood unceremoniously crushed. Such portraits of crushed or broken men abound in *The Pale King*. Facing an unwanted pregnancy with a young woman he doesn’t love, for instance, a teenage Lane Dean Jr. comes to the realization that “he was not a hypocrite, just broken and split off like all men” (42). It is safe to say, in fact, that most of the novel’s

male characters are crushed or broken and thus unable to express themselves adequately or carve out meaningful identities. It would seem that for many of these men, this personal crushing or fragmenting stems not from societal or familial obligations, however, but from the weight of their neuroses. These impulses seem, to a large degree, to be instilled in them by the gender-demands of patriarchal society. This is especially the case with poor Leonard Stecyk.

In a novel so replete with troubled male characters, this pathologically cheerful and dependable young man stands out because of the rage he creates in other men. Leonard draws their ire for both his good deeds and the manner in which he performs them. As a boy, he is such an indefatigable helper, for instance, that he inspires his “devout Mennonite” elementary school principal to fantasize about “sinking a meat hook into [his] bright-eyed little face and dragging [him] facedown behind his Volkswagen Beetle over the rough new street of Suburban Grand Rapids” (32). This unbridled male rage is something Leonard regularly encounters growing up, Wallace perhaps using him to show the potentially catastrophic result of a male enacting an alternative form of masculinity within American society of the late 1960’s. Because Leonard *is* performing in a masculine manner, particularly when he reaches high school and intervenes to save an intolerant teacher’s life following a hideous thumb-severing accident (419). The trouble is that his (that is, Leonard’s) masculinity is overtly-feminized and so challenging to the stranglehold of his society’s dominant masculine ideology. The society of Leonard’s childhood was based on specific gender roles. Men were to be ultra-masculine, women submissive. Leonard does not fall easily into this reductive binary.

His most disruptive and personality-catalyzing action, saving the rather deplorable Mr. Ingle, is presented through a third party in the novel, showing how alternative forms of masculinity are frequently invisible or obscure. Wallace embeds the thumb incident within a small frame narrative. The reader only learns about it through the work of the aforementioned Claude Sylvanshine, a “fact psychic” who has been tasked with plumbing the mental depths of his superior, DeWitt Glendenning Jr. and comes across it entirely by mistake (416). That Claude is never able to connect the incident to Leonard himself is significant as it further others Leonard from his male peers. Would the REC members have known of his heroism, perhaps they might have respected him more. As it stands, the thumb-incident is not revealed to be integrated into Leonard’s own narrative of personal development at the IRS and is so dismissed as “not relevant” (416). Indeed, after describing the incident as figuring into the “psychic development that transformed L. M. Stecyk into one of the most brilliant and able Services administrators in the region” (416), the narrator admits that even Leonard himself has forgotten it. It is “buried deep in [his] unconscious” (416). The incident is worth exploring in detail, however, as it represents one of *The Pale King*’s most scathing critiques of gender ideology. To understand it fully, however, we must understand the historical context in which it occurs.

Marshall Boswell astutely notes that unlike other Wallace novels that exist in alternate realities not unlike our own, *The Pale King* “takes place in a carefully reconstructed historical past” (464). For Boswell, the main action of the novel is set in the early 1980’s in order for Wallace to explore changes in perceptions of American civic identity. Wallace, Boswell contends, accomplishes this exploration chiefly through a speech made by Glendenning Jr. The relevant American social shift, according to Glendenning, occurred

when U.S. citizens of the early 1980's began to expect "the government to take care of the civic functions that used to be everyone's share responsibility" (472). Once individuals lost their sense of duty to the system, "the IRS... [became] the enemy: the national symbol of the government as repressive parent that individual Americans need to defy" (473). According to Boswell, those called to serve in the IRS push back against this national trend, reclaiming their more meaningful (i.e. less individualistic but much richer) identities.

Wallace also uses the "carefully reconstructed past" as a vehicle for exploring his characters' responses to gender norms. Luce Irigaray notes that "all the social regimes of "History" are based upon the exploitation of...women" (801). An ideological byproduct of this exploitation is the damaging association of femininity with powerlessness. The section of *The Pale King* containing Leonard Stecyk's thumb-incident is set in the late 1960's. This is era classically conceptualized as a time of immense social upheaval (various progressive social movements including the Gay Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Liberation Movement of course began to gain serious national traction at the end of the 60's). The '60's were, however, as Wallace shows, an era wherein prejudice was still a defining principle in rural America and performance of the dominant form of masculinity was required for social survival. To be a man in middle-America in the 1960's meant to be capable of violence and scornful of "feminized" inferiority.

Leonard inadvertently transgresses the masculine norm by doing things like wearing an apron he carefully embroidered (416) to Industrial Arts class, an act which is not perceived as masculine. He is thus targeted, spending his high school career being ruthlessly

tormented by his male peers, his classmates even going so far as to collectively “[urinate] on him after knocking him to the [locker room shower’s] tile floor, which ritual they called a Stecyk Special” (416). Though several of his classmates are “expelled” or “suspended” for similar violent actions (416-17), the utter pervasiveness of the attacks strikes the reader as indicative of a culture of toxic masculinity (though it would not, of course, have been called this at the time). It seems as though Leonard is denied even a single meaningful male friendship in his youth. In fact, other than his father, who does seem to respect him, virtually every man he encounters belittles him.²

Once one is coded as other in a dominant hyper-masculine schema, Wallace seems to suggest, one is to be forever seen this way. Such is the work of ideology. Male power, in this schema, needs to be constantly reinforced through bullying of the “feminized” other. Eventually, Leonard is so thoroughly ostracized that even his strengths are lacquered with a negatively-coded femininity. His tenth-grade Industrial Arts teacher, Mr. Ingle admits,

² His relationship with his mother is defined primarily by her absence. She spends her time in the narrative completely immobilized as, we are told she “has a terrible accident while cleaning the oven and is rushed to the hospital” (31). The specifics of the accident are left opaque save for a fleeting reference to a “defective valve or circuit” (31). Is it conceivable that the mother was attempting suicide in a rather Plathian manner and Leonard compartmentalized this act as “an accident” due to his perennially optimistic outlook. The “accident” could also be a comment on the perils of subjugated femininity, the mother’s paralysis occurring in the oven, the heart of the domestic sphere. Further, she is left with absolutely no agency after it occurs; we are told that she “needs to be turned and her limbs manipulated twice a day” (35). In any case, the event galvanizes Leonard’s helper persona, setting him off on a spiral of altruistic acts including making banners, calling the gas company to report the defective valve, turning the lights of the home on and off when his father is visiting his mother in the hospital, and so on (31-32). This barrage of activity is numbing to the reader and presumably to Leonard as well. It prevents him from seeing his mother in her paralyzed state. The narrator tells us that while he is “beside himself with concern and says constant prayers for her stabilization and recovery, he volunteers to stay home and relay calls” (31). In other words, he cowers behind his wall of goodwill gestures such that he can act adjacently to his mother’s pain, not confront it head-on. Making banners takes much less bravery than sitting before a physically ailing loved one. It will not be until the incident with Mr. Ingle that Leonard’s courageous identity is formed. As a child, he wears his helpfulness as a distancing mask.

for instance, that Leonard's "drafting and measurement specs were... exceptionally (almost effeminately, he felt), neat and precise" (417). This sense of perceived effeminacy links Leonard to an essential weakness and therefore serves as the major device of othering employed by Mr. Ingle and his vicious ilk.³

While Clare Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace's "characterizations [of women] are frequently archetypal, almost stereotypical" (148), he sometimes represents men as stock characters as well, particularly when they are being used as foils for his protagonists. Toxically macho Mr. Ingle embodies practically every cliché about a so-called "man's man." He has his students make "cigar boxes" (148) because he favors them.⁴ He expresses the withering anti-intellectualism so often associated with hyper-masculine figures, deriding Leonard and another student named Moss as "'mathlete' pansies" (148). He is angry when Leonard accidentally lets his cigar-box-in-progress slip off his belt-sander, blaming the young man's "loose or insufficiently masculine grip" (417). Ingle seems, in short, to be little more than a grim-faced, cigar-chomping representative of that golden age of clean-cut gender binaries—the time when girls took Home Economics and boys Industrial Arts and there was no place for boys like Leonard.

Wallace uses Leonard to challenge this simplistic division, allowing him to develop agency in a male-dominated space. The fact that he does this by blending masculine and

³ Per D.T. Max, Wallace himself struggled with being seen as effeminate as, "when he moved to Illinois he placed a special order from a Bloomington store for T-shirts with dark squares on the front meant to hide what he saw as his flabby chest" (319). As mentioned, for those that wish to go looking for it, there is never a lack of Wallace's own experience permeating his work. The anxieties especially seem to form a connective tissue between character and creator.

⁴ We'll follow Dr. Freud's infamous example and leave well enough alone when it comes to thinking about why indeed Mr. Ingle might be interested in cigars—mostly because there isn't enough textual evidence to support a fully-formed repression-reading. Alas.

feminine signifiers is particularly noteworthy. Clare Hayes-Brady contends that throughout his work, “Wallace signals successful masculinity by direct speech, physicality, agency, and presence, and successful feminine identity by absent centrality, disembodiment or disguise, linguistic fluidity, and manipulation” (142). When he saves Mr. Ingle, Leonard expresses direct physicality, agency, and presence, seeming to conform to the masculine criteria above, and yet he is presented as indisputably feminine.

To begin with, after Mr. Ingle severs his thumb, Leonard rushes to his side and assesses the extent of his injury using “the five-point Ames Scale from Cherry Ames RN’s 1962 *First Aid for Industrial Injury*” (419).⁵ Cherry Ames was a fictional nurse whose adventures were authored by Helen Wells and Julie Campbell Tatham between 1943 and 1968. This intertextual nod to a figure emphasizing feminine acumen seems to imply that Wallace was attempting, with Leonard, to agitate the binary of masculine/active and feminine/passive so prevalent in the late 1960’s in Middle America. Leonard uses Ames’ methodology to determine that “digital pressure around the wrist did not alone control the bleeding” and then to “[fashion] a deft two-knot tourniquet” (420) to stop the bleeding. He accomplishes this and applies “just a hint of Edwardian flourish to the top’s four-loop bow” which the narrator tells us “was even more amazing given that Stecyk constructed the special knot with slippery scarlet hands that also supported a man’s half-fainting weight” (420). This direct positive assessment of Leonard’s skills under pressure (so to speak) reinforces the blending binary of masculinity and femininity. The “Edwardian *flourish*” is a creative but unnecessary maneuver and yet Leonard is lauded by the narrator for performing it. While it is not often productive to speculate on what a character

⁵ The thumb severing lends itself, once again, to a Freudian reading as Mr. Ingle is, by the loss of his digit, “castrated” in front of his students, removing his masculine power in the process.

might or might not do in a hypothetical situation (the text is the text, after all), it is not a stretch of the imagination to say that the flourish itself stands in opposition to the (presumed) workmanlike knot Mr. Ingle would use to make a tourniquet. Aesthetics very likely wouldn't enter into the man's mind. If they did, Ingle would probably laugh them away as so much distracting "womanliness". Leonard's flourish, on the other hand, is a source of power. There is no irony in the narrator's claim that his technique is "amazing." This is striking given Wallace's substantial use of irony as a means of characterization. Leonard is not only in command enough of the situation at hand to save a life, he does so by imbuing the act with unnecessary beauty. With the flourish, he renders suffering and horror into art.

As an indicator of personal growth, the flourish is meaningful for Leonard. The boy's aesthetic ambitions have been a source of great ridicule throughout his life. Largely, the ostracism he receives as a result of the care he pays to each individual creation is unwarranted. On occasion, however, his unselfconscious urge to create meaningful or beautiful objects became essentially predatory as the boundaries of care/consideration and personal space are broken. For instance, Leonard distresses a teacher so much with his recommendations for her classroom that she has a mental breakdown and must be hospitalized, but not before "brandishing blunt scissors at [him]" (34). His response is to inundate her hospital room with endless glitter-bomb letters "folded into perfect diamond shapes that open with just a squeeze of the two long facets inside" (34). This relentless stream of carefully-made mail is not, we gather, the work of a truly sympathetic heart because Leonard is not self-aware enough to understand that it would be best to simply leave the harried teacher alone. It is not until the moment in Industrial Arts when his sense of self-mandated, over-

stressed aesthetic value intersects with violence that he becomes truly “amazing” and not merely a hindrance to others. Leonard’s socially-productive identity is, we may say, forged by both blood and (elegantly tied!) bow.

The following sequence holds an even more pronounced depiction of Leonard as a powerfully disruptive figure as it shows him as both tender and masculine. After Leonard has staunched the blood flow, his now quite pallid IA teacher loses consciousness. The shop’s other boys look on (still in a state of paralysis which we’ll explore momentarily) as Leonard, in a blood-soaked rendering of the Pietà, “gently lowers him—it, the big man’s head—to the floor with one hand while the other held the tourniquet in place at the upraised wrist” and the narrator tells us “there [was] something both dancierly [sic] and maternal and yet not one bit girlish about the sight which reverberated within the souls of a few in strange days and even weeks after” (420). Wallace’s distinction between maternal and girlish here is worth exploring as it represents a sharply contrasting binary within the exploded binary of masculinity and femininity. What does it mean to be “maternal” but not “girlish”? There is necessarily an empowering of the mother within this frame and an inherent disempowering of girlhood. To “mother,” Wallace seems to argue, is to soothe but also to *control*.⁶ Girlishness is but empty effeminacy and so eschewed by the shop goons as well as by Mr. Ingle. Leonard, bloody and poised, is “motherly” within this passage, completely supporting Mr. Ingle physically and answering the earlier call in “high-pitched diminutives for ‘Mother’” (420) that filled the IA room as he first went

⁶ Interestingly, Wallace saw the work of the fiction writer as maternal. In the essay *The Nature of Fun*, he touts Don DeLillo’s notion that creating literature is a lot like birthing and caring for a grotesque, cerebrospinal fluid spewing infant, stating that “the whole thing’s all very messed up and sad, but simultaneously it’s also tender and moving...the damaged infant touches and awakens what you suspect are some of the very best parts of you: maternal parts, dark ones” (194).

about his rescuing business. In taking command of Mr. Ingle while the other boys do not, Leonard has moved from a symbolic status of other to a symbolic status of mother (which biological men cannot literally be, of course), paradoxically reclaiming his own masculinity by acting when the “tough” (normatively masculine) boys cannot.

But what of the paralysis that infects the other boys? This adds another layer to Wallace’s critique of a certain form of domineering but hollow masculinity. Beneath the IA boys’ cruel performance, there is, the text seems to argue, little more than impotency. The narrator tells us that “it was strange. These were tough boys. They fought freely, took beatings from stepdads and older brothers” (421). They are, in other words, resigned to their culture of male-on-male violence. Leonard enters this world by reacting to it in a maternal way, saving the life of one of their own, doing so not through combat with the aggressor, but by lending aid and comfort at a crucial moment when they themselves are unable to act. The boys believe themselves to be masculine because of the signifiers of “toughness” outlined above, but Leonard displays a “toughness” that has nothing to do with fighting. It is a “toughness” that actually has a lot more to do with love. Caring, generosity, the putting aside of prejudices: all of these qualities Leonard expresses as he moves to save Mr. Ingle.

There is an ironic “toughness” in the tenderness he shows the teacher, cradling his head as he lowers him to the floor (420) despite the fact that the older man has ruthlessly ridiculed him. This is something the boys who perceive themselves as tough have much difficulty understanding. There is an aspect of “coolness” that goes along with the “toughness.” In the dominant masculine ethos of this era, to be able to undergo violent treatment and remain calm was seen as desirable. Tenderness was not. As the narrator

tells us, “for the brightest among [the “tough” boys], their idea of what toughness was, of the relations between coolness and actual value had now been somewhat fucked with” (421). So how do they cope? The text presents some retreating into television by allowing their experiences to be filtered through the TV show *Lost in Space*.

Wallace’s personal TV obsession is well-documented. Once upon a time on *Charlie Rose*, he himself called television his “artistic snorkel to the universe.” His characters very often view TV in a similar fashion. Here, some of the “tough” boys try to make sense of the thumb-incident (and specifically their non-reactions to it) by comparing it to “*Lost in Space*, which was a popular show at the time” (421). *Lost in Space*’s popularity, the novel suggests, is as important as its content. *Lost in Space* details the adventures of a *Swiss Family Robinson*-esque clan setting out to colonize a new Earth-like planet only to be thrown off course by male sabotage. As *The Twilight Zone* did for an earlier generation, the show would come to signify a feeling of profound disorientation for teens of the late 1960’s because it established a reliable semiotic system for mediating reality. The “tough” boys cannot countenance the fact that effeminate/powerless Leonard has acted when they themselves could not and so they retreat to the established language of television to express their confusion. It is easier to do this than it is to explore the very thing that makes Leonard’s response so powerful: genuine emotion.

Wallace therefore uses the *Lost in Space* reference as a means of highlighting the debilitating relationship which mass media culture can create with its audience. Popular TV shows like *Lost in Space* are tools of hegemony. They force the “tough” boys into a specific understanding of their world, becoming the lens (or snorkel) through which the

thumb incident must be mediated. Comparing Leonard's response to the injury to *Lost in Space* renders the difficult, emotionally-taxing work of responding to it unnecessary.

Wallace suggests that the "tough" boys are primed to be *Lost in Space* (as it were) before they are introduced to the ideologically-rebellious Leonard. Their conception of masculinity (and, by extension, selfhood) is married to violence. As referenced, they express themselves through acts of violence (see: the bear trap set outside of the vice principal's office (417) because they find this to be valorizing within the framework of masculine power. The reliance on violent displays to create a sense of lasting power is, Wallace implies, the work of very fragile psyches. The ongoing masculine performance masks a crisis of self, evidenced by the "tough" boys' immediate paralysis at the sight of the blood geyser blasting out of Mr. Ingle. Viewing the incident via *Lost in Space*, however, obviates the need for true reflection, at least for most of the "tough" boys. Indeed, Leonard's display of maternally tender toughness is remembered in detail by only one young man, an unnamed "Voc Ed hard boy who would serve in a military operation in the Plaine des Joncs region of Indochina twenty months later" (421). This young man remembers Leonard's heroism when he sees a "fat-body draftee" successfully reform a splintered platoon (421). The language Wallace uses to show this epiphany is telling. The narrator states he was thinking "of the fact, again, that what they'd then thought was the wide round world was a little boy's preening dream" (422). Leonard's sense of boundless altruism is romanticized in the tone of the passage which seems incongruous within a war zone. The words are pleasing to the ear—this "wide round world," this "preening dream"—and they seem to represent Leonard's own aesthetic care under duress, recalling the tourniquet he tied with that amazing "Edwardian flourish." The soldier knows that Leonard's behavior

is not the norm, however. The boy's grace and courage are viewed as part of a collective "dream," not the bleak reality of the world. Still, Leonard's action conjured a flash of optimism. This may be a humble victory, but it is proof positive that the young man's agitation of his era's binary of masculinity/femininity was salient.

CHAPTER III

A DIFFERENT VIEW OF FOGLE

As mentioned in the previous chapter's analysis of Leonard Stecyk, David Foster Wallace often uses *The Pale King* to ask what it means to be an American man. Or, put a different way, how do American men perform their masculinity? The answer Wallace seems to suggest is that men perform it in very different ways, some of which are more damaging than others. With "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, Wallace interrogates a sort of introspective masculinity that allows men to perform deep awareness, but not necessarily to embody it. Fogle's section is the book's longest and it is rife with digressions. David Letzler argues that Wallace often uses such seemingly extraneous material to "achieve a state of near-objective pointlessness" (132). Eventually, however, according to Letzler, the work of ferreting meaning from extreme narrative overload strengthens the reader's ability to "order and retrieve information" (146). Fogle's repetitive and plodding chapter in *The Pale King* appears to serve a different purpose, however. The sheer length of his unspooling story smacks of incredible narcissism. In fact, it feels appropriate to say that his sense

of self-absorption works to delegitimize the epiphanies contained within the narrative. It is laudable, for instance, for Fogle to admit that he was, in his youth, “the worst kind of nihilist. The kind who doesn’t even know he’s a nihilist” (154). He has developed enough self-awareness to understand his teenage ambivalence as the character flaw that it was, and yet he doesn’t seem aware enough to understand that whomever has asked him to explain how he arrived at the IRS probably doesn’t care much about the way the snow looked as he reported to his job posting (240) or hold a burning desire to hear about his fascination with the podiatrist’s rotating sign outside his college dorm room window and how said sign factored into his decision of whether to study or to slink off for drinks with his roommate (163). The most significant oversight that Fogle commits however—at least for our purposes—is the repeated casting of his mother as a powerless figure. Fogle lionizes and seeks to understand his dead father, marginalizing his mother in the process. Wallace is perhaps arguing that within this specific form of masculinity, in which the man works to explore himself (and his father) in exhaustive detail, he may simultaneously construct an identity for the women in his life that is, at best, uncharitable and, at worst, an attempt at hegemonic domination.

Though his attitude toward his mother has not been analyzed in detail, Fogle himself has been the subject of much critical attention. To Robert C. Hamilton and Marshall Boswell, Fogle is one of the most important, even heroic, figures in *The Pale King*, representative of the novel’s philosophical core. Hamilton contends that Fogle’s long section is an “extended spiritual biography” (171) on the order of William James. Hamilton sees Fogle’s entry into IRS service as an act of devotion, the service becoming, for the young examiner and his cohorts, “a moral equivalent of religion” (175). After spending his

youth in frivolity and languor, Fogle moves from being a drug-abusing “wastoid” to becoming a disciplined IRS examiner. The catalyst for that change is his witnessing a dramatic lecture from a substitute Jesuit priest in college wherein he is “called to account” (233). To Hamilton, the “pragmatic, non-universal nature” (169) of this experience resembles William James’s definition of a “conversion experience” which is defined as “the process...by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified...whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about” (qtd. in Robert C. Hamilton 171). Marshall Boswell similarly argues that “Wallace pointedly portrays Fogle’s transformation from wastoid to IRS examiner as a conversion experience, even a religious one” (474). While it is true that Fogle does seem to transcend his “wastoid” status and find a sense of meaning in his life through the IRS (though, admittedly, we don’t see much of the work he actually ends up doing there), he does so without giving credit to his mother for her role in his progression. This complicates these critics’ rather hagiographic portrait of Fogle. Indeed, Fogle’s fractured relationship with his mother may be viewed instead as another entry into the vast collection of troubled (and troubling) relationships between men and women in Wallace’s work.

Clare Hayes-Brady notes that Wallace’s female characters are often related to the reader via the men in their lives, writing that “Wallace’s women, who wield the influence if not the power [in his works], form the silent shifting center around which his representations of masculinity can locate their stable orbits” (132). Mrs. Fogle does not fit squarely into this reading. Her story is related by her son Chris, but she is not the center around which his orbits. In fact, he seems to reject her outright. His relationship with her

does not exist in a vacuum, however. It is influenced by his/their relationship with the Feminist Movement of the late '60's/early 70's. Fogle seems dismissive of feminism. He recalls his mother and her friends being excited about "feminist tennis Billy Jean King beating what seemed to be an old feeble man player on television" (157) Fogle, in this passage, calls King's victory against this unnamed man (pretty obviously Bobby Riggs) into question by highlighting his age and lack of athletic prowess. Thus, he removes power from both King and the movement she represented. Fogle's descriptions of his mother's peers at her feminist bookstore are equally problematic, describing them as "a new circle of strange, mostly over-weight women who were all in their forties" (173). The focus on the women's weight is telling, Fogle more interested in objectification than understanding.

Later, when he reveals that his mother had difficulty coping with his father's death, he blames the Feminist Movement directly, stating that "her grief was unresolved conflicts... over their marriage and the identity crisis she'd had... none of which she really got to deal with at the time because she'd thrown herself so deeply into the women's lib movement" (172-73). Fogle comes to understand the Movement as a distraction which prevented his mother from processing his father's death in a way that Fogle himself deems adequate. This is surely a way for him not to see his mother as an earnestly-involved woman with political and personal interests separate from his own, but as a broken shell orbiting a deceased man.

There is a duality inherent in his thinking, however, as Fogle simultaneously derides the Movement while constructing a narrative in which he puts himself at the center of his mother's involvement in it, telling us the anecdote of his mother's intervening with

school administrators when he was having difficulty reading, and then extrapolating to contend that some of her subsequent “consciousness raising and involvement in the women’s lib movement probably...dates to...her experience fighting the school district” (160). This localization of his mother’s desires within his own experience seems indicative of deeply narcissistic tendencies. Fogle wishes to control his mother’s story. Whatever actions she takes outside of his own influence should, he apparently believes, be wholly disregarded. His sense of self-identity is intimately tied to this sense of control.

He uses self-awareness throughout his chapter to grant himself a reprieve should his retelling of his story not meet his unseen interlocutor’s standards, stating, “I don’t know if this is enough. I don’t know what anybody else has told you” (162). This self-awareness belies insecurity. It is a rhetorical device designed to incite sympathy—another tool in the narcissist’s toolkit. Later, he assures us he knew that “there was more to my life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity” (187). Fogle is ever-groping for our sympathy.

His paranoia at a loss of control is perhaps most evident in a brief interlude in which he describes smoking pot with his mother and her partner Joyce wherein the two women share memories of their childhoods (166). Fogle tells the reader that while he can recall but a single childhood memory of a catcher’s mitt, his mother “remembers more of my childhood than I did” as if she’d “seized or confiscated memories that were technically mine” (166). Fogle often speaks about how much of his life he doesn’t remember. In fact, he begins his chapter by saying, “to be honest, a good bit of it I don’t remember. I don’t think my memory works in quite the way it used to” (154). He then provides the rather strange hypothesis that the IRS is to blame for this loss as “it may be that this kind of

work changes you...it might actually change your brain” (154). This seems unlikely, but whatever the cause of Fogle’s perceived amnesia (habitual amphetamine use perhaps?), it is clear that he resents his mother for her own ability to retain information, particularly information about him. An understanding of self, Wallace seems to argue, works as a form of existential currency. To remember the past is to retain power over it, to mentally recall and shape experiences is to master them. Fogle feels as though he has given up part of himself to his mother because she remembers more of him than he does. This is something which he cannot abide.

He thus retaliates against his mother, mostly by contrasting her with his father, whom he holds in high regard. Troublingly, he sometimes objectifies her, telling us at one point that she was “the somewhat sort of lanky type of older woman that seems to become almost skinny and tough with age...becoming ropy and sharp-jointed...I remember sometimes thinking of beef jerky when I would first see her...she was quite good looking in her day, though” (160). Fogle’s focus on his mother’s physical appearance, particularly her devolution from desirable-to-deteriorated undermines her credibility as a person, reducing her to an object to be gazed up and assessed with either arousal or pity. It is a binary understanding of female worth that detaches Fogle’s mother from her admirable mission of becoming an entrepreneur (i.e. opening a bookstore) and finding love/ happiness outside of the heteronormative family unit by starting a new life with Joyce. Fogle is threatened by his mother’s power and thus seeks to diminish it through this reductive maneuver.

As he denigrates his mother, he elevates his father, whom he says was “very smart but somewhat unfulfilled, like many men of his generation” (167).⁷ Fogle’s father represents a version of what Audre Lorde would call the *mythical norm*, “usually defined [in America] as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (855). He is white, comfortable financially, and male. It clear that while he says he once thought of the man as “barely alive, as like a robot or slave to conformity” (167), Fogle idolizes him. In fact, Fogle might add “ability for recall” to Lorde’s list of mythical traits, as he notes with seeming astonishment and admiration that his father “remembered everything” (165). In the power-schema in which memory equates to identity/worth, his father is held up as a paradigm.

Further, the power his father holds over him seems welcome as it informs his life’s trajectory, fitting tidily into the narrative he chooses to relate to the reader in which he moved from a directionless zombie to a hard-working, focused examiner. When his father catches him smoking pot with his feet on the coffee table and mindlessly watching *The Searchers* with his “wastoid” friends, Fogle feels a burst of deep empathy for his father, telling us, “I could actually feel what he must have been feeling” (171). He never aligns his consciousness with his mother in this heartfelt way, despite stating that “she [was] sympathetic and believed in [his] potential” (156) when his father admonished him for his lack of direction early in life.

⁷ Fogle naturally blames his mother for this lack of fulfillment, at least implicitly, as he tells us his father had to immediately find any available job after the Korean War because he was already married (167). In Fogle’s estimation, his mother removed his father’s sense of choice for a meaningful career path. One suspects the truth is more complicated, but Fogle’s myopic gaze on the issue doesn’t allow him to see the nuance of his parents’ relationship.

Further contrast can be seen when he praises not only his father's wardrobe, but his physical body in it, stating, "he looked good in a suit—like so many men of his generation, his body almost seemed designed to fill out an support a suit" (173). Elsewhere, he tells us that he "used to spend time imagining what [his] father looked like when he was alone...his facial expression and eyes...when he was by himself in his office at work" (159). This sort of praise/fascination is far different from the negatively-coded objectifying he gave his mother. It adds to his father's mythology as a Man of Power. He is a man whose moral and physical bearing are an idealized model for being.⁸ His mother, on the other hand, Fogle hardly sees as an autonomous being at all, frequently referring to her in relation to her partner, the construction "my mother and Joyce" appearing multiple times throughout his narrative (156, 159, 165, 166, 206, etc.). This pairing works to subtly undercut his mother's sense of strength as a singular being.

He also rather callously relates that Joyce eventually moved on from his mother (careful to note that she left her for a man) in the same lengthy sentence in which he catalogues her (that is, his mother's) post-accident detachment from reality (and obsession with bird feeders and various "bird-supplies"), ending up commenting (not without a certain level of irony given his own static state-of-being at this time in the text) that "at a certain point you have to just suck it up and play the hand you're dealt and get on with

⁸ Now and then Fogle implements bits of Freudian psychology, as when he tells the reader his father had a "dominant superego" (174). Were we to perform our own such analysis on young Fogle, we could say he aligns very well with Freud's idea that a young boy will "exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere" (438) before advancing to the Oedipal Stage of development and "a straightforward sexual object-cathexis towards his mother" (438). We could posit that Fogle's distaste for his mother's identity stems from the fact that it pushes her further from his Oedipal grasp.

your life” (207). Wallace, in these passages, seems very much to be showing a callow neglect on behalf of men like Fogle, who, despite being able to open themselves up to spiritual awakening, are still capable of cruel ambivalence toward women. This cruelty manifests itself in Fogle in his construction of his mother as someone lacking internal life and thus inevitably shattered by her ex-husband’s death. It is another way of reducing her, displacing her into a role of bystander in his narrative, a means for him to bolster his sense of control. His emotions, he believes, are the most vital and most real. His mother’s are more or less irrelevant to him. He relates them in the same rote way as he would relate details of the clothes that he wore during his so-called “unfocused period” (154). This dismissive attitude is not immediately clear to the reader, who is swept along through Fogle’s various experiences, but therein lies its insidious power.

Fogle’s ambivalence or even hostility toward his “rebellious” mother could be described as a tool of ideological oppression, though he would never admit it directly. Instead, he uses his control of the narrative to construct a portrait of her as an outsider that is eventually yoked to his dead father forever, left in a state of psychological decay in their old domestic sphere. This information is buried in the avalanche of data which Fogle includes about himself, however. While the result seems haphazard, it is evidence of rhetorical cunning. Wallace’s structural gambit is the use of careful focalization to direct our attention. Embedded within the seemingly random bits of information is a desire to obscure and diminish his mother while raising his father to a heroic or mythologized status, Wallace thus using Fogle to critique a form of masculinity which necessarily subverts women while aligning itself covertly with patriarchal power.

CHAPTER IV

A MOVE TOWARD (MASQUE)ULINITY

David Foster Wallace does not often explore adolescent sexuality and identity in his work. When he does, he focuses primarily on males, such as the unnamed protagonist of the story, “Forever Overhead,” who spends the entire narrative lingering on a diving board. Mary K. Holland opines that in this story, Wallace “depicts with great tenderness and sensitivity, [the] boy’s inner experience standing perched at the cusp simultaneously of his body’s and mind’s sexual awakening” (112). Female adolescent Toni Ware is also struggling with her burgeoning sexual identity, but her circumstances do not afford her the sort of introspective silence offered to the boy. As a young woman from a low socioeconomic background, she is denied the freedom of such suspended animation. Her struggle to enter what Holland, in discussing the diving board boy, deems a new physical as well as “social body” (114) is in fact a violent, disorderly one, owing to the inherent vulnerability of her gender and class status within her patriarchal society. While the boy on the board is given time to reflect, Toni is depicted as in near constant motion. The boy, protected by his cozy suburban shell, can safely observe the world around him. Toni enacts surveillance. The boy becomes a man relatively effortlessly (pesky physical changes

notwithstanding) whereas Toni must perform a form of constructed masculinity in order to survive. We will call this performative identity (*masque*)*ulinity* as it is a subversive mask over Toni's self enacted through acts of both ritualized masculine violence and self-imposed erasure. Toni's performance is made apparent because, as Jack Halberstam argues, masculinity itself inherently "conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege" (2) but only becomes "legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (2). In his depiction of Toni's (*masque*)*ulinity*, Wallace rejects the normative (and therefore invisible) masculinity exemplified by the diving board boy. In fact, Toni's performance is much more akin to that of the violent "tough boys" (421) who tortured young Leonard Stecyk, yet it is rendered visible due to her gender. To fully understand Toni's plight and subsequent identity-formation, we must put her story into context.

Before she is even introduced, her initial section of *The Pale King* is poisoned by gender inequality. The opening narrative pan across the rural New Mexico landscape and the lowly trailer park it contains includes a reference to the park's "boys and *their girls* [making] strange agnate forms on pallets" (ital. mine 53). The sense of ownership of the female body which becomes more devastating as the section continues is foreshadowed here. The girls belong to the boys. Further, the term agnate is most applicable to a male line of succession, placing the dominance of the park's women within a larger historical framework. The later "labial tear" (53) in the side of a trailer also foretells the destruction of the female form to come, to say nothing of the killing of the nameless wife and children by their husband as they watch television (53). The narrative pan finally culminates with a numberless group of teenagers watching a couple have sex in a car, an act which

has become, the reader gathers, something of a ritual in the trailer park (54). The disparity of reactions to this scene is telling.

While the boys' reactions seem purely voyeuristic, some girls among the group see "something like...death" (54) in the movements of the car itself.⁹ This underscores the sense of unsettled femininity in this landscape. Toni Ware ultimately, in a shattering instance, comes face-to-face with both her own reflection and her mother's face within the heaving car, her expression superimposed over her mother's. This moment may be read as a postmodern refiguring of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage of development in which the child, in finding itself distinct and vulnerable from the mother "[assumes] the armor of...an alienating identity" (444). Toni recognizes her own separateness or estrangement from her mother (she is automatically othered by gazing in from outside of the car), and yet she is simultaneously overlaid onto the older Ware. Indeed, near the end of section 8, we are told that "the girl's blessing and lot [was] to know their two minds both as one" (65). Through this intersection of mother/daughter, Wallace creates a living palimpsest of at-risk womanhood. But his portrait of women in duress doesn't end there, eventually bringing Ware's grandmother into the narrative as well.

Whereas the diving board boy's history is so culturally normalized (i.e. a nigh-mythical middle class male upbringing) as to not bear a lengthy narrative investigation, Wallace creates in the Ware clan a female heritage which runs counter to the traditional male lineage (the aforementioned "agnate") of the trailer park and thus of American patriarchy

⁹ Birth and death are intimately joined with automobiles for Toni, whom, the reader is told, was "begat in one car and born in another" (59). Her mother also dies atop Toni within a car (442). Cars represent gendered violence as well. At the end of section 8, the truck with a camper shell attachment belonging to one of the Wares' tormentors (in which Toni's mother later dies), takes on an ironic symbolic import, its shell labeled "LEER" (60). This is, of course, the brand of the shell, but it also marks the truck as a synecdoche for the vile man inside, forever gazing upon the Ware women with malicious intent.

writ-large. Throughout section 8 of *The Pale King*, three generations of Ware women are depicted creating strategies with differing degrees of efficacy against the relentless onslaught of male aggression and attempted domination. Toni Ware's grandmother and mother are both controlled by men, the former through a complex delusion regarding Jack Benny and the latter through physical/emotional manipulation. It is only Toni who, in constructing a persona of (*masque*)*ulinity*, actually emerges from the terror relatively unscathed—though she is not without a certain sense of internalized misogyny, evidenced by her unwarranted attack on a female convenience store employee later in the novel (513) which we will explore in due time.

To understand Toni's importance as a figure of female revolt, it is important to first examine her grandmother and mother's journeys in some detail. We will begin with her grandmother. Much in the way Toni's own painful bildungsroman is made more traumatic than the diving board boy's by her social status and gender, the eldest Ware's story repeats and revises a notion from an earlier Wallace novel and complicates it with these additional layers of social critique. She (that is, the grandmother) is a mentally-ill woman whose delusion centers on Jack Benny, "a rich man whom the grandmother had come to believe was insane and sought *global thought control* by a radio wave of a special pitch and hue" (ital. present 57). Wallace's interrogation of class and gender are readily apparent here—the old woman distressed by the fact that Benny is a man and also wealthy.

Ideologically-speaking, many rich men (particularly those on TV (or, these days, on the internet)) do have the means of perpetrating "thought control" by influencing trends, belief structures, etc. Often, they do so insidiously, without the public's direct awareness. Horkheimer and Adorno's lament against the culture industry emphasized this as early as

1944 when the duo argued that creators of American mass entertainment sought the “control of the individual consciousness” (1242). That notion is merely being taken to the extreme in this section of *The Pale King*, likely for the purpose of satire. The anxiety of a great televised other invading the domestic sphere and proceeding to wreak havoc there a theme familiar to Wallace.¹⁰ In *Infinite Jest*, government officer Hugh Steeply recounts that his father was once so obsessed with the show *M.A.S.H.* that he experienced a “gradual immersion... [a] withdrawal from life” (640), the elder Steeply eventually developing delusions both “inconceivably complex and wide-ranging” (644). The difference here is that while Steeply’s angel-in-the-house mother (“Mummykins”) was “uncomplaining throughout” (645), Ware’s grandmother has no such support system.

As a woman of a low socioeconomic background she is left without agency and so feels she must take personal action to secure her home. Her ambition is a laudable one, but the circumstances of her class do not allow her succeed. Over time, she bolsters the boundary between her own domestic sphere and the public, paradoxically trapping herself within even as she seeks to protect herself.¹¹ Were she to have been able to get free of her home, she could have perhaps received medical care to mitigate her mental illness. Instead, the reader is told that she uses hubcaps to create on her trailer’s outer walls a “lethal field which jammed radios all down the block” (58). Importantly, the grandmother must rely on “itinerant *men*” (57) to complete this bizarre work. She has been entombed within her home by her delusion regarding a predatory man, yet lacks the social utility to

¹⁰ Wallace’s own fixation on The Tube is well-documented. Per biographer D.T. Max, throughout his life, TV was the late writer’s “drug of last resort” (101).

¹¹ For another example of this theme of tactic-as-trap in the text, see Meredith Rand’s “prettiness thing” transforming her into “a kind of machine that gave you an electric shock every time you said “Ow!” (500)

mount a tactical defensive maneuver without relying on other men, thereby deepening her alienation.

Further contrast between the disenfranchised eldest Ware and privileged men is evident within *The Pale King*. According to Marshall Boswell, central to the novel is “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle’s “quasi-religious narrative grounded in the work of American pragmatist William James” (465), the young “wastoid” moving from a disaffected status to one of existential security (even inspiration) through finding his calling within the IRS (474). Toni eventually finds her way into the IRS service as well, but her journey is not presented in such grandiose terms. Her grandmother, on the other hand, is completely denied anything resembling such an opportunity. While his gender and class status allow Fogle to meander through life on nihilistic cruise control while his father “ponies up the check for the next college” (156), the grandmother cannot even leave her trailer, let alone pursue a spiritual quest, Wallace perhaps commenting on systemic inequalities across gender and class lines.

Somehow, however, Toni’s grandmother conceives a daughter. The grandfather remains absent, never alluded to within the novel. This absence informs the relationship between grandmother and mother. Without someone to mediate their interactions, the two women become enmeshed in the eldest Ware’s delusion, Toni’s mother having few meaningful interactions outside of the electrified trailer. In fact, the reader is told the single photo taken of Toni’s mother as a child was taken only when she was thought close to death from croup and was snapped by a male neighbor, “the child’s...eyes looking up at the man with the camera in trust, as if this made sense” (62). The grandmother once again

utilizes an outside man for her own purposes, this time to ensure the symbolic preservation of her daughter. This use of an outside other is a faulty stand-in for an actual human relationship, Wallace seems to argue, Toni's mother never discovering the potential for love or reciprocity in a lasting relationship due to her mother's inability or unwillingness to enter into one. In fact, in one curious moment, the mother is actually left pining for "Jack Benny's face" (60) giving the impression that in a closed system like the electrified trailer, the face of the oppressor may be perceived as a source of potential succor. In fact, the ideological draw of the other-Benny implanted early may have been the chief influence that drove the mother to seek out male symbols of devastation later on.

While the grandmother leaves her daughter open to the control of the other-Benny, she does, in her own deluded way at least, try to protect her as well. The two engage in a ritual of playing dead to protect themselves against "Jack Benny or his spiral-eyed slaves" (64). The ritual consists of lying "with blank eyes open while the [potentially trailer intruding] men holstered their ray guns and walked about the house and looked at them" (64). Clare Hayes-Brady argues that Toni must erase her own sense of human complexity to create a sense of power, a prevalent theme in Wallace's other works, writing that "Toni's feigned death contains perhaps the most visceral instance of violent discomfort and self-awareness [in Wallace's fiction]...playing a convincing corpse [and thus] absolutely [objectifying] herself, to the point of rejecting selfhood to save it" (137-38). It seems that the act is a way of *retaining* power as well, however, in the sense of preserving a female heritage, the death enactment passed among the Ware clan as something like a defensive talisman, binding them in their revolt against violent men. Indeed, it ultimately helps save Toni's life (442).

Toni's mother does not perform the death play well enough to survive the novel, though it seems her inability to triumph has less to do with the failure to maintain this act than it does her ability to understand and resist destructive men. The reader is told, "the mother's conception of men was that she used them as a sorceress will dull animals" (61). This position is naïve, leading the mother into one tormented relationship after another. This serves to jeopardize hers and Toni's lives. The mother's means of communicating could be partially to blame. She performs maternally for the men, talking to them "like babies" (61). This is a way of giving the men power, though the mother doesn't recognize it as such. Mary K. Holland explores a sequence in *Brief Interviews* in which a woman saves her own life by engaging with her rapist/would-be murderer by soothing his inner-narcissistic child (Holland 120). The difference between that sequence and this one is that Toni's mother is not truly enforcing intimacy with the men whom she treats like infants. Infantilizing is not true intimacy in the same way that asking a strange man to take a photo or attach hubcaps to a house is not having a relationship. The mother believes she is in control, that the men are her "*familiars*" (61), therefore gravely underestimating them. She is thus objectified by the men, her intelligence and feelings disregarded as they "treat [her] like a headless doll" (61). When the mother finally flees (62), it is too late.

Toni herself is assaulted several times in the novel. We are told drugged and "pressed" by two boys in "Houston" (55). Later, in a parking lot, she is groped with "absent dispassion" by one of her mother's boyfriends (63). Despite these moments of degradation and abuse, she begins to develop a relationship with men which assimilates her grandmother's and mother's successes and failures into a more powerful identity than each was

capable of, eventually performing *(masque)ulinity*. This performance, as we will see, rejects so-called “epic” male masculinity as defined by Jack Halberstam. Halberstam argues that male signifiers of “epic” masculine power like James Bond are actually powerless when “you take [their] toys away” (4) whereas Bond’s handler, the unapologetically butch M, is visibly masculine with no adornments. M’s body, devoid of feminized signifiers, becomes a source of living power which Bond’s, once he is stripped of his gadgets and guns, is not. Toni’s *(masque)ulinity* does M one better, outsourcing her body into an object, “the mere head of a doll” (55) which accompanies her for much of her early life, so that she will be read solely through her actions. In inscribing Toni’s sense of self through her actions alone, Wallace might well be arguing that the body cannot be the sole source of performative power against hegemonic/physical control. Toni objectifies herself, we might say, to erase her own body. This seemingly counterintuitive measure ironically gives her a sense of freedom by allowing her to use her mind and not her body as a weapon. As we are told “unlike her mother or the bodiless doll, she was free inside her own head” (60). As we will see, her acts of violence likewise rely more so on careful planning than they do physical aggression.

Her bodily outsourcing/erasure also lets her create a symbolic reciprocity between herself and the men which her mother and grandmother cannot form. Per Halberstam, “masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege” (2). Toni’s erasure creates an alternative form of exchange between herself and her aggressors which challenges the notion that masculinity necessarily traffics in women. The abuse visited upon her foremothers was never returned to the source, the women sublimating their fear and frustrations into neurotic fixations

(the electrified trailer) or naiveté (assuming power over the abusive men) instead of responding in kind. Toni's acts of retributive violence establish her as an equal to the men who would (or do) harm her as they place her in direct conversation with them. The undetectable nature of the attacks only elevates her sense of power.

Throughout section 8, Toni is only witnessed committing one vicious act, "beating broken glass into power" and then mixing it into a hamburger for a predatory man to consume (58). The man then succumbs off the page, the narrator merely telling us he "[re-turned] no more" (58). Aside from this, Toni's acts aren't related to the reader directly—her involvement must be inferred. The acts are instead presented instructively, subtly signaling Toni's power. Toni does not need to be present within the novel or even in the narration for us to understand the extent of her one-woman campaign of revolt. We are told the following things: "asbestos cloth cut carefully into strips one of which placed in the pay dryer when the mother of the would-be assailant had deposited her load... caused neither the boy nor mother to be seen anymore" (59) and "a soup can of sewage or road-kill... when placed beneath the blocks... of a store-bought porch attachment would fill and afflict that trailer with a plague's worth of soft-bodied flies" (59) and "a shade tree could be killed by doing a short length of copper tubing into its base a handsbreadth from the ground" (59) and "the trick with a brake or fuel line was to use strippers to whet it to almost nothing instead of cutting it clean through" (59). For most of these instructions, Toni remains invisible, hijacking the narrative through her own absence. This could be described as a form of transfigured free indirect discourse. Instead of the narration showing Toni's thoughts outside of direct quotation, we are made to see her intent through action (mostly) divorced of referent. Toni is both speaking to us and not. She operates in the

text's white space, or behind the signifiers. Wallace thus seems to imply that female agency in patriarchal society must be established through carefully staged acts and erasures both.

By novel's end, Toni's performative identity is astonishingly multi-faceted. As a young woman, we are told that she has honed "twenty different voices" (510). This represents not a fragmentation of self, but an enhancing of it, Toni becoming a veritable heteroglossic genius with a diverse array of personality-pantomiming weapons at her disposal. Mikhail Bakhtin writes that "language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary" (288). Toni embodies this notion, using the flexible shape of language to influence as many different types of listeners she can. For a downtrodden American woman in the latter half of the 20th century, to survive is to let the self evolve, the novel shows, and Toni is very much a survivor.

Toni's growth into her (*masque*)*uline* persona is not without a sense of collateral damage, however, the author perhaps suggesting that complete removal of one's self from ideology is never possible. This is foreshadowed early in section 8 when Mother Tia, the trailer park's clairvoyant, fears the "Evil Eye" (56) when Toni looks at her. Much later in *The Pale King*, Toni is involved in a bizarre incident at a Quik-n-EZ convenience store. Here Toni encounters Cheryl, a woman with a "country mother presentation" (513) whom she indicts as aligning with a certain "complacent solipsism" (514) for failing to detect that Toni is mirroring her own vocal patterns exactly. She then applies a clot of her own mucous to her lapel and blames the woman for wiping it on her (516). Though the reader is told that Toni performs this action "merely to pass the time" (514) as her order

of copper tubing is assembled at a nearby hardware store, it seems that Toni is actually using the woman as a locus of revenge.

Cheryl perhaps represents Toni's mother: a patriarchally-hobbled, easily-destroyable woman. This would indeed explain why the woman is depicted as wearing a bandana "slave style" (513). In victimizing this person, Toni may be attempting to symbolically administer a blow to her own mother for dragging her along a virtual Möbius Loop of male-inflicted horror in her youth. This petty vengeance smacks of internalized misogyny, particularly since Toni reports the mucous attack to a male manager and casts herself as a living parody of a gravely, outlandishly put-upon woman (515). This performance complicates Toni's rise to power within the novel, showing that even though her *(masque)ulinity* has allowed her to escape the agony of her early life, she has not escaped male influence entirely unscathed. She is left with a "plasticized flatness" (514), suggesting that she has forfeited some of her humanity in order to achieve personal power with her *(masque)uline* persona.

As she does perpetuate some of the damaging aspects of masculinity, it may be said that Toni merely re-inscribes masculinity through her rejection of male normative performances of it. This does not completely diminish the power of her adoptive persona, however. In the same way Leonard layered his maternally masculine performance over his society's bullying ultra-masculinity, Toni's *(masque)ulinity* is forced over her own society's destructive masculinity, absorbing aspects of it in the process. As ideology is inescapable, neither Toni's nor Leonard's attempts to wrest control from socially-dominant men are completely successful. Yet each attains greater personal freedom as a result of

their performances. Certainly these acts should be lauded more than Chris Fogle's passive performance and subsequent "transcendence." In depicting their struggles, Wallace finds the true emotional core of *The Pale King*, inviting the reader to consider that while socially-constructed gender performances always overlap and inform one another, such performances may create power for those who are able to fashion their own even, or especially, in dire circumstances.

CHAPTER V

THE COURTSHIP PLOT DISMANTLED

Like Toni Ware, Meredith Rand interrogates and systemically dismantles norms of gender identity. The dismantling occupies much of her prolonged tête-à-tête with Shane Drinion in section 46 of *The Pale King*. In fact, the placement of the tête-à-tête and its relative length in relation to the book's other chapters (with the exception of Fogle's chapter, the length of which, as mentioned, is indicative of the young examiner's blatant narcissism), seem to suggest its status as Wallace's culminating argument on gender relations within the novel. Meredith begins the conversation by unpacking male perceptions of the male gaze, attempting to explore Drinion's understanding of female objectification by asking him to describe the way he believes a lascivious coworker would react if Meredith deemed him "interesting" (451). Meredith seems to glean from Drinion's reply that he is safe to converse with on the subject of gender perception/identity, given that he appears to exist somehow outside of the binary of masculine/feminine.¹² This allows her to

¹² If there is an "ideal neurotic" male to be found in *The Pale King*, it well might be Shane Drinion. Nearly all of the other psychically-troubled male characters in the book are plagued by fixations that have inherently detrimental results. Drinion's most unusual trait (i.e. his levitating), however, exists below his level of awareness "since it is only when his attention is completely on something else that the levitation happens"

provide for Drinion (as well as for the reader) a deconstruction of the standard western courtship plot. In this plot, the heroine (Meredith) is a self-mutilating teenager being analyzed by a future husband, Ed, whom she admits to initially find “gross... scary, repulsive, like a corpse, or somebody in one of those pictures of people in stripes in concentration camps” (500). This is not the stuff of treacly, patriarchally-influenced courtship plots in which sexualized/weak women are courted by dashing, powerful men. Instead, Meredith’s embedded narrative deftly reshapes tropes of the courtship plot with her subsequent revised plot acting as a source of personal power.

Meredith Rand, depicted as so “wrist-bitingly” (447) attractive as to derail most conversations by her very presence, has been subject to some critical scrutiny. Clare Hayes-Brady argues that her beauty is linked to her status of otherness within the novel, stating that her ability to “immediately [alter] the dynamic of any male conversation into which she enters... [is partly a product] of her unknowability” (136). Further, Hayes-Brady poses what she calls Judith Butler’s “trap of female literary representation” (136), questioning whether or not Meredith is constructed as a coherent subject or merely a figure whose sole purpose is the reifying of gender norms. By making Meredith an outsider, Hayes-Brady ultimately argues, Wallace “manages at once to beg the question and to offer an imperfect answer” (136). It seems, however, that Wallace is more calculated in his

(485) and so it is not debilitating like Cusk’s sweating (93), nor does it present a challenge impossible to complete like the unnamed boy’s “goal... to be able to press his lips to every square inch of his body” (407). He is inspired by what Robert C. Hamilton calls his “love for—systematic and tedious attention” (178). While his attentiveness could be seen as a negative in that it appears to render him rather automaton-like (Meredith spends a lot of their time together in the tête-à-tête instructing him on how to have a normal adult conversation), he is nonetheless able to evidently impart it onto others, making Rand feel “removed from any kind of environment at all” (472). His attention is enthrallingly powerful. He can impact the world instead of just receding into his own repetitive fixations.

construction, allowing Meredith to dismantle gender norms using her own words and expressions to create a sense of her own humanity with Drinion, thus granting her immense narrative as well as personal power. Still, it is perhaps no accident that behind the table where the tête-à-tête takes place, there is a pinball machine upon which “a beautiful Amazon in a Lycra bodysuit is lifting by the hair a man whose limbs appear to gyrate in time with the syncopated lights of the obstacles and gateways and flippers” (458). This pinball glyph may be symbolic of the course of the tête-à-tête itself: Meredith holding Drinion in her control to order to make him understand the difficulty of being a desirable woman in then modern-day America.

As they sit across from one another at Meibeyer’s, the unofficial Friday Happy Hour spot for “a percentage of Pod C’s revenue officers” (444), Meredith gradually relates the story of her courtship with her husband, Ed, and in so doing, she explores many examples of gender inequality related to what is eventually referred to as her “prettiness thing” (499) and the fact that her beauty renders her a living “monopsony” (481).¹³ To under-

¹³ While Drinion is open to listening to Rand’s unpacking of gender roles (as much as he can given his own empathetic limits (see previous footnote), the novel presents many male characters who do not confront their socially-proscribed gender identities, content to withdraw into familiar zones of masculine privilege and reassurance. A humorous but quite telling detail in the initial description of the various groups or cliques of REC employees’ after-work drinking rituals is that the “Bell Shaped Men can be found nearly every evening at Father’s, which is right there on Self-Storage Parkway . . . its function is less social than intubatory” (Wallace 444). Conly Wouters asserts that *The Pale King’s* characters “constantly struggle to locate themselves in the face of an excess of material that they can be sure is not the self” (448) and are thus frequently in danger of forming something that is not the genuine article but instead rather bleakly “selfish” (450). As Wouters wisely observes, the REC itself is located on the ironically-named “Self-Storage Parkway” (27). Many of the IRS employees go to work to be housed, not to be enlightened. It seems crucial that Wallace sends some of his male examiners to Father’s to be “intubated,” depicting their mutual consumption of alcohol as literally life-sustaining. The name of the bar is significant, seeming to place these men (and *only* men) into something of a symbolic male womb where it is highly unlikely that they will be drawn into meaningful discussions of gender.

stand Meredith's lament, we must ask the question, how do gender signifiers and desirability intersect? The answer is highly subjective and based largely on cultural/historical context.

As Simone de Beauvoir puts it in *The Second Sex*, "woman," and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact" (qtd. in Judith Butler 520). Perceived physical beauty is a positive status-signifier for twentieth century American women because it aligns with a culturally-positive value (*theoretically* an increase in objectification-potential should equal an increase in desirability should equal an increase in opportunities to claim power). Manifestation of physical beauty, at least for our purposes, is most critical when considered with regard to the female gender. Judith Butler argues that there is no authentic gendered self: all human interactions and presentations are performative, feeding or rejecting social norms. She writes that "discrete genders are part of what "humanizes" individuals within contemporary culture [and] those who fail to do their gender *right* are regularly punished" (ital. mine 522). But beyond merely performing a gender "right" (that is—displaying socially-accepted traits far too vast to enumerate here) one may, shall we say, "excel" at their gender performance. Beauty in women "excels" within the dominant framework of Meredith Rand's era by not only *enacting* but *epitomizing* positively-coded physical signifiers. Though, as always, things are not that simple. The signifiers of what is perceived as beautiful/what is perceived as ugly are mostly fashioned after patriarchal notions of desirability which often inhibit women much more than they actually empower them.

Meredith addresses this duality in her tête-à-tête with Shane Drinion, challenging the socially-coded notion that being pretty in high school is a girl's "ticket to popularity and

being accepted and all the things that are supposed to be the opposite of loneliness” (472). Though she is perceived as desirable by men throughout her life and admits this is a “form of power” (472), she describes the experience as one of grueling self-conscious misery. Her beauty was an affliction because no one in her adolescent life could understand that she was more than a beautiful object. Her recourse was to pay such close attention to her external self that she had no energy left to become a “real” person underneath (as Butler reminds us, there is no true “real” beneath, just different, perhaps less damaging performance). In other words, she spent her entire adolescence forced into a role of purely negative, self-scrutinizing gender performance.

Wallace creates a deft binary between male and female gender performance anxiety by juxtaposing Meredith Rand with another neurotic personage, David Cusk. In a sense, her adolescent corporeal fixation is not unlike what Cusk experiences elsewhere in *The Pale King*. A prolifically perspiring person, Cusk has a reoccurring nightmare in which he is sweating in a classroom while picturing a “literal spotlight” (99) shining down on him. Wallace suggests that Meredith’s difficulty with her own identity is worse as a woman, however, as Cusk never actually enters a situation in which his sweating itself (or the paralyzing fear of a sweating attack) causes him to be outed as the frightening creature he seems to believe he is inside. Meredith’s appearance—her beauty—is always visible and thus always burdensome, particularly in adolescence.

Cusk and Meredith are also similar in that they each try to do something about their afflictions. As Conley Wouters states, however, “Cusk’s pathetic pain management system never moves beyond ill-conceived strategies that are self-defeating in their absurd complexity and ultimate unreliability” (457). Indeed, coughing a lot so that people will

just think he is sick and not see his true sweating problem (97) will nonetheless likely make Cusk an object of unkind curiosity among his peers, prompting questions like, “Why is that Cusk character so sickly all the time, do you think?” As mentioned, we do not see Cusk facing external scrutiny for his sweating, nor for his attempts to distract others by, for instance, performing cough-centric sickness, but we do know that his tactics are in no way curative, evidenced by the fact that the sweating-fixation follows him into adulthood, specifically into a compliance training session at the REC in which he feels the familiar “terrible wave of internal heat” as he imagines his “heart-stoppingly pretty...*fantasy woman*” (ital. mine 330) seated behind him. The solipsistic sweating-paranoia is intimately tied to gender perception in this passage. Like Meredith, Cusk’s ultimate fear lies in appraisal. He does not want to be subject to the female gaze as he has been conditioned to believe that attractiveness equals positive identity equals success. He is trapped within himself as well as within his cultural understanding of self-as-object and this causes his panic to endlessly flourish. Meredith, on the other hand, has rather heroically grown from her youthful fear regarding her beauty into a sense of self-awareness that is productive in that it goes beyond the framework of the self. She rejects the idea that she needs to perform conventional (desirable) femininity for the sake of others and she takes a dim view of others performing in her presence. She is, in fact, the narrator tells us, “allergic to performance” (468).

Meredith’s other personal accomplishments are myriad and show her depth of character beyond the suffocating confines of the male imagination. She is apt in her examination of cultural signifiers of female subjugation. She digresses at one point from her per-

sonal courtship plot to interrogate socially-coded notions of female submissiveness, particularly in the TV shows *Maude* and *Charlie's Angels*, telling Shane Drinion, "If her husband got mad and told her "Maude, sit," she'd sit, like a dog, and it got a big laugh on the canned laughter. Some feminism. Or *Charlie's Angels*, which was just totally insulting if you were a feminist" (476). Meredith's social observations go beyond gender roles as well, delving into a critical dismissal of what Michel Foucault would call the "Medical Gaze" as she bemoans the fact that the doctors at the Zeller mental hospital where she is sent for cutting, "even the ones who you could halfway see might be human beings were more interested in your case, not in you" (470).¹⁴ She calls into question the medical establishment's preoccupation not with actual clinical care or in finding a solution to a mental problem so much as "[seeing] everyone through this professional lens that was about half an inch across" stating that "whatever didn't fit in the lens they either didn't see or twisted it and squished it in so it fit" (475). Later, she tells Shane Drinion that "once things became institutionalized then it all became this artificial, like, organism and started trying to survive and serve its own needs just like a person, only it wasn't a person" (488). Her observations are astute—indicative of a level of awareness which many of the novel's other characters lack.

Her awareness also pays dividends in the sense that she does not fall into the faulty construct of work-as-individual-power. Conley Wouters argues that characters like Lane Dean Jr. struggle to succeed at mundane tasks, which "[threatens] to doom [them] to a

¹⁴ Per Foucault, surveillance is key. He states, "medicine made a forceful entry into the pleasure of the couple: it created an entire organic, functional, or mental pathology arising out of "incomplete" sexual practices; it carefully classified all forms of related pleasures" (41). This observation and classification from medical authorities created a discourse to maintain social control. Meredith Rand is highly aware and critical of this authority, natch.

somehow subhuman existence” (454). While Meredith Rand is seen among her peers in the ghastly page-turning chapter (310), which has received much critical interest for its dehumanizing/identity-erasing properties, she is not depicted as mindlessly working but simply “doing something to a cuticle” (310) instead.¹⁵ This may seem at first to be mere self-absorption until we consider the fact that she is the only character mentioned in the chapter who does not also perform a rote work-function (turning pages, opening drawers, selecting paper clips, and so forth). This differentiation does not other Meredith so much as elevate her above the status of existentially-haunted office drone working at an endless task (the REC work presented as nothing if not woefully Sisyphean for most characters throughout *The Pale King*). This response serves as a rejection of Robert C. Hamilton’s claim that the novel is solely an exploration of “transcendence *through* tedium” (ital. present 170). Instead of trying to force a sense of self-worth through her trivial work, Meredith opts out. While she doesn’t lock into her work to the extent that Shane Drinion does (i.e. no floating), nor is she as grandly-inspired as “Irrelevant” Chris Fogle by service at the REC, her self-growth is arguably more profound as she discovers it through rigorous and productive self-examination.

It must be mentioned that Meredith Rand arrives at her current state of productive self-awareness/insight and rises above her traumatizing relationship with the “prettiness

¹⁵ Where the cuticle thing gets extra intriguing is if we continue to follow *The-Pale-King-As-Loose-Auto-biography* thread in which book’s characters (or many of them) dramatize Wallace own neuroses. This is easy to see with Cusk, whose sweating mirrors Wallace’s own. Beginning in high school, the young Wallace “sweated a lot and was embarrassed by it” (Max 7). Hence, the infamous bandana. Rand may be Wallace too, albeit a more idealized form. In a letter to Jonathan Franzen, Wallace averred that instead of working full force on *The Pale King*, he would “get really interested in my cuticle” (qtd. in Max (289). Meredith inspecting her own cuticle shows that she, like her creator, recedes into self-awareness in order to avoid her duty (in this case the banal work at the REC), and yet she is still very aware of/receptive to the outside world and others’ intentions within it. Wallace never completed what he set out to do when writing *The Pale King*, but he gave Rand her life-changing epiphany in the form of larger awareness. She is someone who can thrive both within the self and without.

thing” only with the help of a man. Ed Rand could therefore be read as something of a male white knight arriving just in time to rescue poor helplessly-gorgeous Meredith Rand from the crushing effects of a patriarchal system of which he himself is obviously a representative. How to reconcile this in light of the fact that Meredith seems now to be a champion of her own life, an owner of a distinct sense of meaningful awareness? Is her epiphany somewhat delegitimized owing to its male source? Or do Ed and Meredith work in a reciprocal relationship with one another?

Ed Rand’s intentions with the young, suffering Meredith initially seem fairly predatory given her fragile mental/emotional state when they first encounter one another on the Zeller ward. There’s also the age difference to consider (Ed is significantly older). And the fact that Ed is not a medical professional so his dispensing of psychoanalysis to Zeller patients is in itself problematic. Gender performance dynamics also play a strong role in the courtship even before it begins. Like other male characters in the novel (Drinion among them), Ed Rand rejects macho masculinity to great effect. Meredith states that he was “pale...[and] he looked delicate, like somebody old...he was so pale and got tired easily; he couldn’t move very fast” (470). This is certainly not the mark of the hyper-masculine man. He even stands counter to historical examples of brooding Byronic desirability à la *Jane Eyre*’s initial description of Mr. Rochester as possessing a “grim mouth, chin, and jaw” tempered by “a good figure in the athletic sense of the term” (Brontë 141). Ed Rand’s physique is anything but athletic. He is beyond unassuming physically, appearing ““sick”” (470). As we have already discussed David Cusk’s failed attempts to *perform* sickness to obviate ostracism, Ed Rand’s “productive” male sickness should be questioned. How does the sick man marry the desirable woman? For two reasons: a. he is

genuinely ill (suffering from cardiomyopathy), not performing and b. he does not want Meredith for his own egotistical gratification. His goal is not seduction but helping Meredith understand her problem and overcome it. Their courtship comes almost as an afterthought.

Ed's cardiomyopathy is key to Meredith's deconstruction of the western courtship plot. In depicting the physical effects this illness, Wallace draws an ironic parallel between desirability and disgust that runs counter to the narrative proscribed by patriarchal ideology in which men and women are judged by their ability to perform physical beauty and thus inspire interest in others. In the world of *The Pale King*, the romantic elements of the courtship plot have been replaced by analysis and the accompanying sexual allure with the vulnerability of mortality. Ed's condition renders him unusually gaunt, Meredith tells Drinion, and so he was often maligned by the other girls on the Zeller ward who "called him the corpse... or ... the grim reaper" (474). Even Meredith herself, as mentioned, highlights just how much her future husband resembled a dead body on occasion. Yet, she says, "he was funny, and he really talked to you" (474). It is this talking, this genuine human interaction that solidifies the bond between Ed and Meredith. We may think of Ed's masculinity as an alternative to hyper-masculinity: drained of virility yet suffused with the power of insight.

The temptation may still be to read Meredith's self-awareness as programmed into her methodically by Ed as part of a gambit of seduction, as she often relates to Drinion how he (Ed) frequently told her things about herself, reinforcing the new aware-identity, as in "how lonely I was, and how the cutting had something to do with the prettiness and feeling like I had no right to complain but still being really unhappy at the same time... [as]

not being pretty seemed like it would be the end of the world” (485-86).¹⁶ Indeed, as their time together progresses, Meredith grows attached to Ed in an unhealthy way, telling Drinion, “I felt like I almost sort of needed him, and except for my dad and a few other friends when I was little I couldn’t even remember how long it had been since I felt like I really cared and needed someone” (492). Later, she even relates how she thought about “doing some cutting I didn’t even really feel like doing” (497) so that the doctors would let her stay in Zeller and spend more time with Ed. And yes, she inevitably marries him. Never one to provide easy answers to the intriguing problems he creates in his work, Wallace leaves the part of the relationship between the Rands that occurs post-Zeller off the page. The reader does not see how insight and awareness translate into the romantic attachment that typically factors into a healthy marriage. Drinion, in fact, is left in a state of total disorientation when Rand abruptly truncates her narrative (508-09). In fact, it is curious that while she is exhaustively detailed about the work of awareness-building she and Ed engaged in during her time in Zeller, she relays a summary of how they began their post-courtship phase in terse, even detached detail, stating “He didn’t die... his apartment building was like ten minutes from my house” (509). Drinion and the reader are left in limbo.

Meredith is careful throughout her tale to cast Ed as a humble servant of good, however, telling Drinion that due to his shortened life expectancy, “he said he’d been pretty

¹⁶ She also tells Drinion she was basically “primed to fall in love with [Ed]” as he had the skillset and occupational opportunity to help attractive but mentally unwell young women overcome their compulsions to, in her words, “starve themselves, [steal] clothes from shopping malls... [and keep] running away with older *black guys*” (ital. mine 487). The inclusion of dating “black guys” as inimical to healthy living normalizes whiteness and codes African Americans men as other; this is something that Rand, despite her awareness of gendered issues, seems unaware of. Wallace is commenting here, perhaps, on the fact that even the most attuned individuals are not entirely immune to dominant ideological assumptions.

sure he wouldn't ever see me again and be able to tell if he'd been any help, [so] he wanted to assure himself that he'd helped somebody a little before he died'" (506). Her portrait may be rather romanticized as Ed is not shown to have discernible flaws, other than his aforementioned physically repulsive characteristics (which Meredith evidently accepts in time). In fact Ed urged her, Meredith says, to see him as less like a person with flaws or even an internal life and "more like a mirror" (480) to her own neurosis. While this sentiment feels constructed (or performative), it does not appear that Meredith has been abused by Ed Rand. She has instead joined together with him in what appears to be one of the healthiest heteronormative relationships in all of Wallace's works.¹⁷

Wallace's male suitors are frequently depicted as toxically narcissistic, vicious, or ambivalent. In *Infinite Jest*, there's a male character, Orin Incandenza, who refers to the single mothers he seduces merely as "Subjects" (43). In the short story "Good Old Neon", the male narrator states that a former girlfriend once compared him to "some piece of ultra-expensive new medical or diagnostic equipment that can discern more about you in one quick scan than you could ever know about yourself—but the equipment doesn't care about you" (165).¹⁸ Ed doesn't merely scan Meredith as a Subject, he wants to understand who she is. He also stands out from the nefarious men in Wallace's most infamous book

¹⁷ It must be noted that Michael Pietsch includes a potentially depressing outcome for Meredith and Ed's relationship culled from Wallace's "notes and asides," in which Ed ultimately takes Meredith for granted and she thus ends up feeling both "trapped and miserable" in their marriage (545). One way to interpret Ed's gradual loss of interest in Meredith is to see it as a symbolic accompaniment to his cardiomyopathy. As his heart begins to wear out, so does his ardor. Despite the inclusion of this unpleasant possible ending, the main text leaves ample room for hope for Meredith and Ed. The grim ending itself remains somehow hopeful as well, however, as, per Wallace's notes, Meredith will nevertheless feel that her relationship with the ever-dying man ironically lets her feel both "safe and heroic" (545).

¹⁸ Conley Wouters' assertion that *The Pale King* contains "multiple examples of humans in danger of becoming machines" (448) can be easily applied to Wallace's entire body of work. The mechanizing of the self necessary removes emotional connection and is the root (or one root) of many of his characters' problems with finding love and/or true happiness.

concerning male and female relationships, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Mary K. Holland notes that *Brief Interviews* offers an “unflinching critique of narcissism as an impediment to empathy and sincerity, most often wielded by men in solipsistic “relationships” with women” (107). The burgeoning relationship between Ed and Meredith Rand reads like an antidote to the narcissism and toxic masculinity that permeate *Brief Interviews*. Ed’s appraisal of Meredith, while bracingly candid, is not menacing or manipulative. What’s more, according to her summary of their close quarters tête-à-têtes, he always *asks* her if she would like to “go intense” (478) in their discussions. He leaves the choice up to her, waiting for her to consent to deep-dive analysis. And while he necessarily judges her, he seems to do so for her own best interest, i.e. solely with the aim of helping her stop self-mutilating. This differentiates him from the male subjects of *Brief Interviews* who almost without exception use women for their own desires. Finally, he seems to believe that Meredith is capable of being loved by discovering self-love. Contrast this with, for instance, Hideous Man #20 who tells his unnamed interlocutor that “terms like *love* and *soul* and *redeem*...I believed could be used only with quotation marks” (Wallace 315). Love is only possible through un-cynical perception of one another, Wallace suggests.

Ed’s lasting influence on Meredith is positive. As she explains to Drinion, “being married is totally different than being seventeen and in total identity crisis and idealizing somebody that seems to really see you and care.” *She looked far more like herself now*. “But he was the first guy who told me the truth, that didn’t just start...performing” (ital. mine 504). As Meredith Rand reflects on her relationship’s arc and then brings herself back to the present moment, her identity is, in a sense, re-inscribed. Since there is never a

reliable way to tell where one's own performance ends and the "true" self begins, the fact that Meredith is looking "more like herself" upon reflecting on her relationship with Ed must be taken at face value. The fact remains, however, that she is no longer self-harming and she has a deeper awareness of the world. In our era of fractured relationships, Wallace seems to argue, this is the best that one can hope for.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

David Foster Wallace wrestled with the conundrum of how to encapsulate the transformative properties of boredom in *The Pale King* without making the text itself a brutal slog. One solution, according to his biographer D.T. Max, was to “overwhelm this seemingly inert subject with the full movement of...thought. [The] characters might be low-level bureaucrats, but the ripping tactility of [the] writing would keep them from appearing static” (281). The paradox of this is that if the book is too engaging line-by-line with bursts of astonishing prose, doesn't that then defeat the purpose of its existence? How to not bore with the boring? The novel's creation was, like most art is, a balancing act. And Wallace, sadly, was not able to keep the balance. His novel remained a selection of layers, some overlapping, some cast aside but not destroyed. Max notes that Wallace intended the book to be, among others, “emotionally engaged and morally sound, and to dramatize boredom without being too entertaining” (292). While the final product does work on this level, it is also a stunning statement on gender identity in American society. Perhaps its unfinished, open state resists the sharp, workmanlike qualities of classically

masculine authors like Hemingway, giving its very form an air of resistance to dominant gender ideology.

In either case, Wallace, in crafting the nuanced journeys of Leonard Stecyk, Chris Fogle, Toni Ware, and Meredith Rand, leaves the reader with portraits of how to live a life in opposition to stifling gender roles (and indeed how not to). Chris Fogle's journey, apart from being a quest of personal and spiritual fulfillment in IRS-centered service, may be seen as a masculine cautionary tale. His framing of his mother's own feminine/feminist identity is, as discussed, incredibly problematic. Leonard Stecyk's tale, while maternally-inflected to a winning degree, may also be seen as a warning or even as a photo-negative of the service-oriented mindset which gradually leads Chris Fogle to "salvation." Wallace himself, according to D.T. Max, saw little Leonard as woefully infected with the same spirit of the titular men of *Brief Interviews* who are "so busy worrying about pleasing their sex partners they get no pleasure themselves; being pleased is an indispensable part of giving pleasure, just as being helped is an indispensable part of being helpful" (50). Yet the visions of these men are not as completely condemning the way they were with earlier portraits of troubled masculinity such as those in *Brief Interviews*.¹⁹ One of the objectives of that book seems to have been to let vile men hoist themselves on their own petards. Here, Wallace gives foible-ridden men voices to, if not wholly redeem, then at least understand them.

Elsewhere, Wallace depicts Toni Ware and Meredith Rand rising above socioeconomic and patriarchal circumstances by forging new identities of resistance. Whereas

¹⁹ To say nothing of the nightmarish fate Wallace gives to serial womanizer Orin Incandeza in *Infinite Jest* (971).

many earlier Wallace female characters needed to create compliant personas (see, for instance, the woman who deters her rapist from murdering her in *Brief Interviews* by creating a deeply emotional connection with him while said rape is in progress (310), these women are able to act to save themselves. Toni's carefully-curated (*masque*) *uline* persona allows her to fight back against the advances of monstrous men. Meredith Rand's brave understanding of herself as worthy saves her from a cycle of self-abuse. Both Toni and Meredith's stories are powerful testaments to the capacity of women to rise above ideological and physical adversity. Though, of course, like the portraits of Leonard and Chris, they are colored by a striking duality. Toni's siege on the female store clerk (516) is an unfortunate side effect of the patriarchal conditioning she wasn't fully able to escape. Similarly, it is impossible not to see the irony in Meredith becoming "saved" from her fixation on self-mutilation through the intervention of a well-meaning man. These instances only serve to strength Wallace's creation of these characters as fully-rounded, non-idealized figures, however.

Wallace sought to understand relationships between men and women throughout much of his fiction, and *The Pale King*, even in its truncated form, is the closest he came to realizing a vision of resistance against damaging masculine norms. To analyze and deconstruct gender roles is difficult work, Wallace suggests, but he paints a far more optimistic portrait of female power as a result of this work than he did in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion*, or *Infinite Jest*. Even if one cannot escape the social ills of gender inequality manifested by prescribed performance, personal revolt and re-inscription are possible nonetheless.

Works Cited

- Abate, Michelle Ann. *Tomboys: A Literary And Cultural History*. Temple University Press. 2008.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. The University of Texas Press. 1981.
- Boswell, Marshall. "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*." *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing."* *New Essays on the Novels*. Ed. Marshall Boswell. Bloomsbury, 2014. pp. 209-226.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics. 2006.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol 40. No. 4. December 1988. pp. 519-531.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Vintage Books Edition. 1990.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 438-440.
- Garber, Megan. "David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius." *The Atlantic*. 9 May 2018. Web. 31 October 2019.
- Goodheart, Adam. "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men." *The New York Times*. N.y.t., 20 June 1999. Web. 26 May 2019.
- Halberstam, Jack. "An Introduction to Female Masculinity." *Female Masculinity*. Duke

- University Press. 1998. pp. 1-43.
- Hamilton, Robert C. "Constant Bliss in Every Atom": Tedium and Transcendence in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 70, Nov 4. Winter 2014. pp. 167-190.
- Hayes-Brady, Clare. "...": Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace." *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Ed. Marshall Boswell and Steven J. Burn. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. pp. 131-149.
- Holland, Mary K. "Mediated Intimacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men." *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J Burn. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. pp. 107-130.
- Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor. "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 1242-1246.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Women on the Market." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 779-811.
- James, William. *The Moral Equivalent of War and Other Essays*. Ed. John K. Roth. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 441-446.
- Letzler, David. "Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction: Infinite Jest's Endnotes." *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing."* *New Essays on the Novels*. Ed. Mar

- shall Boswell. Bloomsbury, 2014. pp. 127-147.
- Lorde, Audre. "Age, Rage, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 854-860.
- Marsh, Stephen Taylor. "Self-Sacrifice in the Autobiographical Narration of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Biography*, Vol 39. Issue 2. Spring 2016. Pp. 111-128.
- Max, D.T. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. Viking Penguin, 2012.
- Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. pp. 770-794.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Both Flesh and Not*. Little, Brown & Company, 2012.
- . *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Little, Brown & Company, 1999.
- . *Infinite Jest*. Back Bay Books, 1996.
- . Interview with Charlie Rose. *Charlie Rose*. 1996.
- . *Oblivion*. Back Bay Books, 2004.
- . *The Pale King*. Little, Brown & Company, 2011.
- Wouters, Conley. "What Am I, A Machine?": Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 44. Number 4. Winter 2012. pp. 447-463.