"WHAT AM I, A MACHINE?": HUMANS, INFORMATION, AND MATTERS OF RECORD IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S "THE PALE KING"

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A Measure of Disorder

In his book-length study of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burn notes that the beginning of the novel "sets up a tension between an excess of information and unexplainable selfhood that is elaborated throughout the rest of the book" (40). Focusing on Hal Incandenza, the more linguistically voracious of the novel's two protagonists, Burn writes, "no matter how expansive your vocabulary, or how careful your description, a list of words is not enough to make a self" (40). For Burn, much of *Infinite Jest*'s circular narrative unwinds so that its characters—particularly Hal, but also, for instance, Kate Gompert, whom Burn points out is at least once referred to as a "data cleric"—have multiple opportunities to locate and try to retain authentic selves in the face of a flood of external input, whether drugs, entertainment, or other easily obsessed-over stimulation.

This article proceeds from Burn's convincing contention that many of *Infinite Jest*'s most commonly discussed themes all derive from the timeless question of *Hamlet*'s opening line: "Who's there?" (40). My reading of *The Pale King* assumes that the unfinished, posthumous novel builds on thematic concerns established in *Infinite Jest*. Beyond Hal Incandenza's scarily urgent quest to prove that he "is in here"—that he is more than a body surrounded by heads—*Infinite Jest*'s characters constantly and necessarily struggle to identify the most fundamental signs of their own interior selfhood, of proof that they exist, even as they embark on external challenges such as beating addiction in a halfway house or making it to the Show, the prevailing entertainment-infused

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euphemism for professional tennis among Enfield Tennis Academy's young athletic prodigies.

The Pale King, overtly concerned with the meaning and consequences of all-pervasive boredom, asks many of the same questions concerning the self and the subject, and it does so, I will argue, in a different ontological arena than the one in which *Infinite Jest* is set. *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, which, in the late twentieth century, often takes the shape of data, information, entertainment, or some cross-section thereof. At first glance, the avalanche of data that greets new IRS examiners like Lane Dean seems to be nothing but "numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about" (379). However, in keeping with the way *Infinite Jest* persistently positions information in an antagonistic relationship to both humans and subjects, many of the details that *The Pale King*'s data clerics handle turn out to be a barometer of the self or lack thereof. As the Compliance Training Officer proclaims to a room full of agents, "[i]nformation per se is really just a measure of disorder" (342).

Claude Sylvanshine, an agent whose head "pops up" at this aphoristic definition of information, had, "at age eight...data on his father's liver enzymes and rate of cortical atrophy, but he didn't know what these data meant" (341). Information in *The Pale King* does not merely threaten to obscure humanity, as it did in *Infinite Jest*. It also actively and in some cases aggressively works to replace humanity, as in the unusually explicit case of Sylvanshine's father, who, through his bodily disorder, becomes an unintelligible pile of data, or the IRS agents, who "are all," a supervisor tells them, "if you think about it, data processors" (340). I rely on the work of Wallace scholar Paul Giles and his reading of N. Katherine Hayles's influential *How We Became Posthuman* in my attempt to show that *The Pale King*'s characters possess an ambivalence in the face of these information avalanches that is at times healthy and at other times consuming. Though it varies from character to character, it seems that the existential dread and uncertainty that is often the primary consequence of these information onslaughts becomes the most threatening obstacle Wallace's agents face. Given Wallace's track record for thoroughly exploring paralyzing self-consciousness and its attendant despair, this may not come as a surprise.

Additionally, I argue that despite the multiple examples of humans in danger of becoming machines, and the characters' varying reactions to this contemporary vulnerability, the book's singular structure overrides the fears and anxieties that appear throughout the narrative, suggesting through its very existence that humans and information can and do coexist naturally, in some kind of millennial harmony. The novel is obviously unfinished, taking on its final, published form thanks to the efforts of Wallace's longtime editor Michael Pietsch. But the manuscript's notes, directions, and precise presentation suggest that elements of its incomplete composition that were previously ascribed

to chance, and to the tragedy of Wallace's death, might in fact not only be deliberate but cues to consider the possibility that *The Pale King* might exist in some generic limbo—not quite a novel or a pure work of fiction but obviously not a book of facts either.

What follows attempts to position *The Pale King* as a kind of technological prequel to *Infinite Jest*, one that suggests that with the right political-philosophical tools, we might still be able to retain a traditional, liberal-humanist selfhood in the face of informational avalanches. If *Infinite Jest* documents uniquely contemporary dangers associated with an information overload, *The Pale King* asks a variation of questions originally posed in Wallace's 2005 commencement address to Kenyon College—questions of how to be aware of our surroundings, and how best to choose what to give ourselves to, but with a much keener eye for our own more mechanical water.

Riding the Crest

A hilarious, profound exchange on a broken elevator in *The Pale King*'s nineteenth section begins this way: "There's something very interesting about civics and selfishness, and we get to ride the crest of it" (130). The statement tentatively introduces the ideas floated over the course of the next twenty pages' political debate, but it also works as an autonomous encapsulation of Wallace's complex stance toward America's political foundations. Ultimately, principles of the European enlightenment that are articulated in Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, as DeWitt Glendenning, director of the Midwest Regional Examination Center, here congratulates himself for pointing out, as they are presented in *The Pale King* are at a critical, late twentieth-century impasse.

I want to focus on the word "selfishness," which contains a double valence. The first sense of the term—devotion to one's own advantage at the exclusion of regard to others, to paraphrase the OED—is what Glendenning clearly intends here, but this denotation is the antithesis of the Rousseauian social pact that is referenced throughout *The Pale King*. The social contract as it exists without "everything that is not essential to it...comes down to this: 'Each one of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an individual part of the whole'" (Rousseau 61). What Rousseau outlines here is exactly what the agents fear is suddenly, scarily obsolete: "We don't think of ourselves as citizens—parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities" (Wallace 130). From where the agents stand, US citizens' refusal to give themselves over to a civic collective impedes and threatens to revoke their very citizenship.

This is where the second sense of "selfishness" comes in. If the first meaning is written all over consumerist culture, the second is its much more malignant consequence. I contend that Wallace uses the word "selfish," rather

than a more precise or political synonym like "entitled," because he wants to communicate the idea of an incomplete or malformed self; something that's not quite a self, but self-*ish*. If this seems farfetched, we might consider the fact that the Peoria processing center at which all of the characters work is situated on "Self-Storage Parkway" (27), which should serve as evidence that the concept of the self is important enough to explicitly manifest throughout the novel, and that Wallace was not afraid to pun on it. The two significations of the word are intimately connected. By "abdicating our civic responsibilities to the government" (130)—responsibilities that, as Rousseau claims, are "in the first place, [that] every individual gives himself absolutely" (60)—many of these characters are left with a gaping void that often manifests as loneliness or personal dysfunction, both concrete correspondents to a primarily self-ish existence.

Glendenning voices a paradox that perpetuates this state of affairs when he says, from his dual position as citizen and government worker, "As citizens we cede more and more of our autonomy, but if we the government take away the citizens' freedom to cede their autonomy we're now taking away their autonomy" (130). By waiving their responsibility and thrusting it on their government—by expecting the government, which Glendenning points out "*is* the people...but we split off and pretend it's not us" (134-35) to give of *it*self—individuals abdicate their prerogative to give themselves to the collective. Paradoxically, it is by not giving themselves that the citizens lose part of themselves.

To disown these civic duties and thrust them onto the government, one still sacrifices one's self to the collective that Glendenning here calls "some threatening Other" (134), but does so incorrectly, almost forcing an infringement on one's rights and, ultimately, whole being. By refusing to participate in one of the fundamental covenants of democracy (sacrifice of the self to the benefit of the collective), Americans do not just invite but catalyze some near but still-unspecified form of tyranny, by forcing their government to take from them that which they have the power to give.

If the American TPs, as the agents refer to average taxpaying citizens, refuse to give themselves to their government, and indeed resent the very suggestion that they might perform such a sacrifice, to what do they offer themselves, their attention, and their respect? This is another question that hangs over at least the latter half of Wallace's career, but one potential answer that *The Pale King* suggests is, ultimately, nothing. Rousseau puts it most plainly when he writes of slavery: "To speak of a man giving himself in return for nothing is to speak of what is absurd, unthinkable; such an action would be illegitimate...because no one who did it could be in his right mind. To say the same of a whole people is to conjure up a nation of lunatics..." (54).

When Glendenning, in the same winding conversation, says "I think Americans in 1980 are crazy. Have gone crazy. Regressed somehow" (*Pale King*

135), it is to the unthinkable insanity of a "whole people" who have given their very selves in return for nothing that he refers. The character identified only as X's well-intentioned but inaccurate paraphrase of the assessment—"The quote lack of discipline and respect for authority of the decadent seventies" (135)—is met with this funny, exasperated threat: "If you don't shut up I'm going to put you up on the roof of the elevator and you can stay there" (135). If the problem were merely a lack of respect, it might be one with an easy solution.

Instead, Glendenning seems to be motioning toward something like the paradox of self-inflicted slavery that might be Americans' undoing, an unthinkably destructive political maneuver that is uniquely postindustrial and, in this novel, dependent on machines and information. After considering Paul Giles's essay "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," I will examine three separate IRS employees, all of whom face Rousseau's void-like nothingness in different yet related ways, to try to reveal the connection between this self-destructive impulse and the social landscape of late twentieth-century America.

What Am I, a Machine?

Drawing on the work of N. Katherine Hayles, whose *How We Became Posthuman* details a shift away from the prevailing liberal humanism of the past two centuries, Paul Giles speaks of a recently arrived phenomenological arena in which "computation, rather than possessive individualism or biological organism" is deemed the "ground of being" (329). For Giles, much of Wallace's work fits firmly under the posthumanist umbrella, which, he notes, "as Hayles emphasizes, does not mean the end of...humanity; rather, it takes issue with comfortable liberal assumptions about the sovereignty of the human subject" (329).

In 2012, the year after a surprisingly charismatic computer defeated two human prodigies in a *Jeopardy!* tournament, posthumanism as Giles and Hayles describe it might seem to have necessarily ambiguous beginnings. Is it a critical-theoretical response to an outdated set of beliefs and practices, or is it simply a way to formally articulate the experience of our increasingly computerized day-to-day existence? Wallace's tentative division of humans and machines in *The Pale King* seems to suggest the latter. Giles's swift dissection of the posthumanist elements that flourish throughout Wallace's body of work turns on a contradiction in terms that begins with the essay's title and gets reinforced throughout the piece—namely, the idea that something called "sentimental posthumanism" could exist as an abstract idea, let alone a set of thematic and stylistic principles to be developed over the course of Wallace's career.

For Giles, Wallace's texts "reflect a condition of confusion where...the... distinction between human and non-human is becoming ever less self-evident" (328), but they ultimately "[seek] to open up spaces within [abstract] grids of

information technology where emotion and identity can be explored" (341). In other words, he concludes that Wallace simultaneously affirms and questions the centrality of the human subject. Wallace writes posthumanist fiction that retains and affirms humanism at the same time it acknowledges and grapples with twenty-first-century social and cultural milieux that are hostile to that same humanism. *The Pale King*, set during the dawn of our current, post-industrial information age, traces the beginnings of the way humans give themselves to computational tasks. One of the questions this trajectory opens up is whether the rote tasks and machine-like existence that many of the characters begin to take on are an instance of the agents giving themselves *to* such self-ish existences (in place of Glendenning's body politic), or a sinister symptom of the technology itself. Much like it was during the elevator debate, the question is one of agency.

This is a particularly difficult problem, since the novel's superficial treatment of the collapsing distinction between humans and machines is ambivalent or even contradictory at times. In §14, an initiative aims to "humanize...the Service...[and] help citizens understand...that [the agents are] not hostile or machines" (100), while later on, an agent identified only by the SSN 928514387 says he likes his work because "it's like you're a machine that knows it's running well and doing what it was made to do" (115). Chris Fogle, a character whose entry into the Service marks the culmination of a spiritual awakening, partly describes his early, recreational drug experiments as ushering in "a sort of emergence...[a]s though I was a machine that had suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over" (182). In notes published in the book's appendix, Wallace clearly intends this division to be one of the book's central thematic concerns: "Big issue is human examiners or machines" (545). All of these examples point toward an increasingly dubious categorical distinction, but none address the question of process, of how people might become machines. The next three sections I examine all offer competing visions of what this process might look like, and how threatening it may be.

The story of Lane Dean, a brand new husband and returns examiner, indicates that self-ish-ness can be thrust upon a person by requiring him to perform work that explicitly asks him *not* to think, and that being coerced into becoming a cyborg[1] is now a viable threat. Lane's struggles concern first family and then work, and in his separate sets of problems, we find an antagonistic distinction between liberal humanism and posthumanism. Ultimately in line with what Adam Kirsch, in an article for *The New Republic* called "The Importance of Being Earnest," points out are "a number of conservative tropes" that "Wallace takes obvious pleasure in rehearsing," *The Pale King* suggests that the capacity to ethically engage in situations is what might barely rescue humans from mechanization. This morality sometimes takes the form

of earnest Midwestern value systems that Wallace seemed alone among his contemporaries in embracing.

We first meet Lane in what is essentially a pastoral retelling of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" that was originally published under the title "Good People." Lane and his young, newly pregnant girlfriend Sheri sit atop a picnic table "at the one park by the lake" (Wallace 36), letting the specter of a probable abortion hang between them while they mostly fail to discuss it. Throughout the story, a quiet sentimentalism builds to the edge of incredibly tense personal tragedy, all the while employing borderline-cliché imagery and dialogue. Kirsch notes that the way Lane finally comes to decide to marry Sheri and support her decision to have the baby (all while acknowledging to himself that he does not love her) is to "[ask], literally, what would Jesus do," and he posits that with this question, Wallace is "daring you to roll your eyes." As important as the method by which Lane comes to reconcile himself to a potentially loveless marriage is the fact that the section ends on notes of extreme uncertainty:[2] "Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do?...What if he is just afraid, if the truth is no more than this, and if what to pray for is not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes as she says it and trust his heart?" (42-43).

These questions are all left unanswered, but somehow still instill a sense of comfort and closure, especially when one contrasts them with Lane's query-free work life. The inability to ask questions like these is what ultimately threatens to undo Lane in §33. In the park, they serve as proof that Lane is "good people," a term that, in addition to its vernacular meaning, suggests a fundamental, functional humanity, a humanness that falls squarely in line with liberal humanism's sovereign self and that, in this novel, is opposed to a cybernetic, partially mechanic existence. Good people are not self(-)ish. Sheri and Lane are good people because they are capable of even conceiving of a "right thing," something that seems out of reach for Lane's already-defeated coworkers.

The opening of §33 finds Lane sitting "at his Tingle table in his Chalk's row in the Rotes Group's wiggle room" (376), working through a day's worth of returns in a monotonous routine that "made the routing desk at UPS look like Six Flags" (377). If we contrast Lane's first day at the processing center with his interior monologue at the park, it becomes clear that Wallace injects his precarious humanity with a much more threatening quality than he does the potentially fatal boredom. Unlike the episode with Sheri in the park, which ended with a kind of comfortably uncertain, carefully weighed conclusion, Lane's capacity as "IRS rote examiner" (377) now makes him guardian of a different kind of truth—rigid, lifeless data that leave no room for interpretation or engagement.

Indeed, in the slew of information Lane now faces, uncertainty occurs not in the data itself but in the physical medium on which it is collected: "Crosschecking W-2s for the return's Line 7 off the place in the Martinsburg printout where the perforation if you wanted to separate the thing's sheets went right through the data and you had to hold it up against the light almost and sometimes guess..." (377). Lane records each return's minutiae and errors, issues that he deems "almost unbelievably meaningless and small" (381). But as boring as the work may be, it is his inability to engage with it that threatens to doom him to a somehow subhuman existence. His job as a processor—as, essentially, a sentient computer—becomes dangerous when it precludes some element of interpretation or wonder, of human qualities that Wallace positions not as social luxuries but as biological necessities.

Showing a still-intact capacity for this kind of wonder, Lane tries, in a Thoreau-like way, to "envision the inward lives of the older men to either side of him, doing this day after day. Getting up on a Monday and...knowing what they were going out the door to come back to for eight hours" (377). Compare his vision of the men outside of their work to the brief attention the narrator gives these minor characters, through which we learn that "[n]either man...seemed to fidget or move except to reach up and lift things onto the desk from their Tingles' trays, like machines, and they were never in the lounge during break" (381). Lane's ostensible reason for constructing the men's afterwork lives is to ascertain how someone so terminally bored can have any sort of interior life, but his true motivation is to try to deny the prominent evidence that these men are no longer even men, not beings capable of any type of extraprofessional activity. Their limited physical activity has been mechanized, ensuring their only movement meets the minimum requirements of a literal paper pusher. Their absence in the break room supports the frightening possibility that anything beyond base, rote functionality—i.e., anything human—has been eliminated from their existence.

This elimination is a consequence of the work, not an inborn personal defect. In a defense of his stylistic tendencies that also implicitly condemns the repetitive work of the examiners ("I am about art here, not simple reproduction" [259]), "David Wallace" reminds the reader that "[w]hat renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile...is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment...to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another" (259). Emotionally uninterpretable data, like the kind the examiners work with, is dangerous because it does indeed turn them into data-swapping computers. It removes the possibility that they might choose which information deserves their attention, and it makes it impossible to, as Wallace put it in *This is Water*, the published version of his speech to Kenyon College, "exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think" (52).

Lane's coworkers seem the culmination of a dystopian version of the "machines [who have] learned to think" that James Gleick, in *The Information*, writes Alan Turing and Claude Shannon dreamed of. While the two scientists discussed the nearly limitless potential for thinking machines, Turing, according to Gleick, exclaimed, "No, I'm not interested in developing a *powerful* brain. All I'm after is just a *mundane* brain..." (205). The mundane brains on either side of Lane Dean square with much of what Wallace was interested in and seemed to fear late in his life and career. *This is Water* lays out a way to live on a setting other than our default autopilot, and to be aware enough of our surroundings to engage with them emotionally and spiritually, but returns employees remain on their default settings, or get downgraded against their will to a newly redundant default.

In addition to the human calculators that flank him on either side, the fact that a ghost, a haunting approximation of a man "with a seamed face and picket teeth" (382), visits a half-asleep Lane further signals the center's hostility toward coherent, intelligible selfhood. In the park, Lane and Sheri both are spiritually absorbed in their dilemma by the section's end, and the last sentence evokes a stylistic mode that seems, in its unabashed and almost excessive sentimentality, to exist partially in order to provide a human counterpart to the frighteningly soulless dynamics of Lane's office. In fact, Wallace inserts a unifying figure that explicitly connects §6 and §33. Early on we learn that other than Sheri and Lane, "the only other individual nearby was a dozen spaced tables away by himself, standing upright" (36). This "older individual stood beside his picnic table, he was at it but not sitting, and looked also out of place in a suit coat or jacket and the kind of older men's hat Lane's grandfather wore in photos as a young man....If he moved, Lane didn't see it" (37).

This "man in the suit and gray hat" (41) is almost certainly the wraith that appears to Lane in the office later on,[3] only here his humanity is possibly still intact. His staid appearance might foreshadow Lane's imminent, sober professionalism, a direct result of what transpires in the park (i.e., he takes the job to support Sheri and the child she decides to have). Yet the fact that he neither engages with Lane nor threatens him—but that his presence is still noted, in an otherwise anachronistically uninhabited pastoral landscape—suggests both Lane's potential fate and a silent, subtle affirmation of the deep humanity with which this section is imbued. The irony, of course, is that it is following *This is Water*'s prescriptions to a tee that puts Lane Dean, Jr., in danger of relinquishing the very humanity that made possible his family in the first place. Again there is the suggestion that external, environmental factors drive the existential dilemmas many of *The Pale King*'s characters face, since Lane seems the epitome of a "good," human person.

David Cusk's childhood tribulations are a less obvious but equally significant case study of the consequences of realizing that one's very humanity might suddenly be at stake. Cusk remains unnamed in §13, when the reader is

first introduced to him and his debilitating, humiliating condition. Though he reappears later on as an adult and IRS employee, the narrator in §13 refers to him only by the third-person pronoun, or, at best, as "this boy" (91), tagging him with an objectifying anonymity that hints at the way his humanity will soon be under siege. Though this section is primarily concerned with the boy's embarrassingly excessive sweating and his inability to control it, as well as the fact that his high school years were the period in which he "learned the terrible power of attention and what you pay attention to" (91), the particular language that communicates Cusk's plight betrays thematic threads that parallel Dean's and Sylvanshine's stories.

Through his disorder, and his desperate, largely unsuccessful attempts to treat it himself, Cusk is presented as more machine-like than human, a kind of terminally malfunctioning apparatus that bewilders its owner into bouts of self-loathing. The most insidious aspect of the sweating is not that Cusk cannot control it, or cannot stop it once it has begun; instead, it is that he can only partially (or barely) understand it. In this way, we might begin to see it not as some psychological or physiological impairment, but rather a mechanical malfunction, something that cannot be understood in terms of human breakdown:

> It was by far the worst feeling he had ever had in his life, and the whole attack lasted almost forty minutes, and for the rest of the day he went around in a kind of trance of shock...and that day was the actual start of a syndrome in which he understood that the worse his fear of breaking into a shattering public sweat was, the better the chances [of it happening]—and this understanding caused him more...inner suffering than he had ever before even dreamed... somebody could ever experience, and the total stupidity and weirdness of the whole problem just made it that much worse. (94)

As will hopefully become more clear in a moment, the description of the "stupidity and weirdness" of the episodes is an understatement we can chalk up to the characteristically conversational tone that Wallace's narrator takes here. In reality, the problem's "weirdness" is probably something closer to totally alien, terrifyingly foreign due to its complete hostility to any type of human intervention. Additionally, it is important that while the syndrome is defined by a vague connection to Cusk's thoughts and emotions (it can be exacerbated by natural fear), it is not directly or logically influenced by either. The disorder is removed from the realm of mental illness when it is ultimately separated from Cusk's consciousness. It exists on a much scarier, because much more unreachable, plane, a place where the disorder can torment him from some invisible distance, deep inside of himself.

The narrator goes on to describe Cusk's coping methods for his ailment, which, notably, "he thought of...as *attacks*, though not from anything outside him but rather from some inner part of himself that was hurting or almost

betraying him, as in *heart attack*" (96). The image is of one part of a whole gone haywire, a stubbornly dysfunctional cog in a larger machine it usually helps run. The coping methods themselves are also important: "His main way of dealing with being constantly primed and preoccupied with the fear of it all the time at school was that he developed various tricks and tactics for what to do if an attack of public sweating started..." (97). Cusk's only defense against the thing that threatens to unwind his mental and emotional stability are "tricks and tactics," workarounds that depend on luck insofar as they are, by their nature, partly unreliable. Because of the unknowably alien nature of his affliction, he has no real tools with which to attack it. Instead, he relies on makeshift maneuvers (such as running to the next classroom at a precise pace that guarantees him a spot away from the furnace, but is not fast enough to induce between-class sweating) akin to banging on an errant TV set, or blowing on a broken game cartridge. Cusk's pathetic pain management system never moves beyond ill-conceived strategies that are self-defeating in their absurd complexity and ultimate unreliability.

Additionally, at least one of these tactics almost makes explicit the inhuman nature of Cusk's strange condition: "This was one of the tricks—to cough or sniff and feel uncomfortably at his glands if he feared an attack, so if it got out of control he could hope people would maybe just think he was sick and shouldn't have come to school that day. That he wasn't weird, he was just sick. It was the same with pretending he didn't feel well enough to eat his lunch at lunch period....That way, people might be more apt to think he was sick" (97). This desperate desire to appear "sick" requires the reader to make a distinction between "sick" and "weird," and to determine why one is to be preferred over the other.

I hope I have already supplied a believable answer: the idea that if we can extrapolate "weird" to encompass foreign, alien, and even inhuman, then it becomes obvious why "sick" is a more attractive alternative. If Cusk's classmates buy his coughing and sniffing, he has a chance of appearing to suffer from a mundanely human malfunction. Otherwise, he is something else, something more sinister in its mystery. The uncomfortable, almost tragic image that concludes the section confirms that it is the possibility of being fundamentally, ontologically different—of being a malfunctioning machine—that Cusk so fears, rather than just the sweating:

> ...[he] faked being sick at Easter so he could stay home...and [try] to jump-start an attack in the mirror of his parents' bathroom instead of driving with them to Easter dinner...he felt a bit sad about it, as well as relieved, plus guilty about the various lies of the excuses he gave, and also lonely and tragic...but also creepy and disgusting, as though his secret inner self was creepy and the attacks were just a symptom, his true self trying to literally leak out—though none of all this was visible to him in the bathroom's glass, whose reflection seemed oblivious to all that he felt as he searched it. (99)

In the way that Cusk immediately cycles through a litany of emotions, Wallace subtly reinforces the thin line between person and machine. On the one hand, these human feelings might theoretically counteract Cusk's implied fear of becoming mechanical, but in their misfiring appearance and overwhelmingly chaotic deployment, they once again recall the way inhuman machines can suddenly—and, at least to the layperson, mysteriously—implode. The language also explicitly suggests that some other, creepy "inner self" is constantly on the verge of escaping through Cusk's external, ostensible humanity.

While Cusk himself is one of many examples of people slouching toward posthumanism, other agents must contend with less abstract instances of machines' looming dominance. In a section in which Claude Sylvanshine and Reynolds Jensen, Jr., discuss the potential for UNIVAC and IBM computers to begin replacing human agents' duties, Sylvanshine repeatedly describes employees' physical appearance to Reynolds, insisting that the relevant details of potential employees like Julia Drutt Chaney are the fact that she is a "[b]ig, big woman. Large" (357), or that Gary Yeagle has "Tolkien-like eyebrows" and a "very intense smile he feigns into trying to make it look like a wicked grin or grimace by drawing these incredible brows down" (358). When he describes a "[c]risp little woman, dry tight little face" with a "[s]weater over her shoulders like a cape" (363), Reynolds chides him for the seemingly irrelevant excess information: "He's running to Region a lot already? You wait till now to include this and when you do it's an aside on the secretary's sweater?" (363)

The way Sylvanshine weaves the important information through the fabric of seemingly mundane human details resonates with storytelling techniques that Wallace will employ elsewhere in the novel, which I will discuss shortly. Additionally, though, the compulsive listing of physical traits and personal characteristics highlights the very humanity that is at stake in the two men's staffing decision, something Reynolds does not seem to grasp at first. Indeed, his exasperated reaction to all of this comes in the form of a valid complaint and important question: "Hey Claude, seriously, is there some process by which you decide I want to hear aesthetic appraisals?...Don't strain now, but think about it and tell me the process by which you decide I have to wait through incidentals on dress and carriage before I hear material that's going to help me do my job here" (360).

Sylvanshine's reasoning for reciting bodies and their material accessories seems obvious when the task is to decide how to delegate work between a new batch of agents and two singular machines. Sylvanshine, who shares his first name and last initial with Claude Shannon, the father of information theory and data's first great disciple, works to underscore the workers' humanness, something that, at the processing center on Self-Storage Parkway, can no longer be taken for granted. So when Sylvanshine asks, in the section's last words, "What am I, a machine?" (370), it is clear that while the question is intended as a lament about being overworked, it also doubles as a genuine

inquiry, one that hangs unanswered at the top of a mostly blank page as well as throughout the unfinished novel.

All of This is True

Before trying to account for the larger significance of the human/machine dichotomy that recurs throughout the narrative, I want to briefly suggest that the topology of the novel, the Midwestern landscape as it is described at the outset of the story, symbolizes a relatedly tenuous distinction. The first section, written in the second-person imperative and ending up as a kind of lush plea to stay human and aware, begins with a description of a place "[p]ast the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat" (3) before hitting an abrupt colon and breaking off into a list of "shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print...vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek" (3).

Already in the novel's first sentence, Wallace has synthesized the epochal shift that both precedes and runs concurrent with many of the characters' internal struggles to locate a human subjectivity. After the first few lines, the sudden introduction of what is essentially a bulleted list of natural fauna—i.e., the organism as datum—suggests that our technologically driven, human-organized present has somehow already superimposed itself on an eternal environment, one with a "shapeless" horizon that has existed the same way forever.

The "very old land" (3) contrasts sharply with "the shush of the interstate off past the windbreak" (4), yet the fact that traffic sounds are audible from this vast, isolated expanse of plains points toward an affirming coexistence of, on the one hand, land that seems to go on forever, and on the other, densely populated highways, full of either people or information. Finally, the firmly gentle imperative to "[l]ook around you," and the insistence that "[w]e are all of us brothers" (3), immediately recalls and foregrounds themes that constantly run through Wallace's fiction and nonfiction: the continual, dual, and sometimes related struggles of staying aware of your surroundings and of connecting to other human beings, both clearly the concerns of a humanist. In both its form and its content, the brief prose poem (originally published as "Peoria" in *TriQuarterly*) that opens *The Pale King* serves as a clear example of how the contradiction inherent in the idea of "sentimental posthumanism" might play out in the real world, and its quietly affirmative poetic consonance belies the anxiety—and in some cases, outright terror—of the rest of the novel, after the human players enter the picture.

One of the book's only other depictions of scenery or landscape serves as the reader's introduction to Toni Ware, a victim of multiple sexual trauma who eventually comes to work for the Service. §8 recounts her violent childhood travels with her mother, and it begins in an exhaustive manner that echoes §1's laundry list of natural data:

> Under the sign erected every May above the outer highway reading IT'S SPRING, THINK FARM SAFETY and through the north ingress with its own defaced name and signs addressed to soliciting and speed and universal glyph for children at play...and then hard left along the length of a speed bump into the dense copse...along the north park's anafractuous roads..skirting the corrugate trailer where it was said the man left his family and returned sometime later with a gun and killed them all as they watched *Dragnet* and the torn abandoned sixteen-wide half overgrown by the edge of the copse where boys and their girls made strange agnate forms on pallets.... (53)

The human tragedy embedded in all of this factual input might easily be glossed over due to the run-on quality of the passage, and the noticeable lack (even for Wallace) of punctuation. The tragically mundane murder that people at least associate with this location fades into the landscape, becoming a directional landmark rather than an event unto itself. On the one hand, this seems like an extreme example of §1's poetic conflation of uninhabited landscape and inevitable human intervention and destruction. The murder occurs in the trailer, but the trailer becomes a single point on a map of interconnected points of interest that encompasses highway entrances, bugs, and "saplings' branches" (53). But it also portends, early on in the story, a way to conceptualize the book as other than a novel proper (and other than an unfinished novel proper, whatever that may look like), as foreign as that may at first seem.

The passage that opens §8, almost by some stylistic sleight of hand, folds human drama and tragedy into the middle of one of many lists, not only surrounding the event with unrelated data but transfiguring it into mere data itself. This might prefigure the way Toni Ware will end up in the numerical comfort of the Service after a lifetime of violence and abuse. Additionally, however, the embedded quality of the murder is the first hint that *The Pale King*'s treatment of posthumanism goes further than merely exploring the similarities and sometimes-overlapping trajectories of humans and machines. It also attempts to tell very human stories in a form we might assume to be hostile to such stories. It shows how human lives and constructed subjectivities are merely data, too, and how, perhaps surprisingly, the two modes of existence are not mutually exclusive. Instead, one can both encourage and elicit the other.

In an editor's note preceding the novel, Michael Pietsch writes of the challenge of stitching together a work whose degree of incompleteness is ultimately "unknowable" (viii). Pietsch describes the "hundreds and hundreds of pages of [a] novel in progress, designated with the title 'The Pale King'"

(vi) that Wallace's widow and agent discovered in his garage shortly after his death, as well as "a neat stack of manuscript, twelve chapters totaling nearly 250 pages" that Wallace had marked with the question, "For [Little, Brown] advance?" (vi). Despite its under-construction, piecemeal quality, Piestch notes that the manuscript's contents seemed to comprise "an astonishingly full novel...gorgeously alive and charged with observations" (vi).

Additionally, however, the editor found a noticeable lack throughout the scattered manuscript, one that I want to argue is intentional and important. According to Pietsch:

> Nowhere in all these pages was there an outline or other indication of what order David intended for these chapters. There were a few broad notes about the novel's trajectory, and draft chapters were often preceded or followed by David's directions to himself about where a character came from....But there was no list of scenes, no designated opening or closing point, nothing that could be called a set of directions or instructions for *The Pale King*. As I read and reread this mass of material, it nevertheless became clear that David had written deep into the novel, creating a vividly complex place.... (vi-vii)

For a writer as painstakingly precise as Wallace, a "perfectionist of the highest order" (ix), according to Pietsch, it seems not just unlikely but impossible that this complete absence of generic formal trappings of a novel is due to oversight or accident, especially when what Bonnie Nadell and Karen Green found of the manuscript was so carefully preserved and presented. Instead, the conspicuously absent set of "directions or instructions," of starting points or narrative landmarks, may be a larger-scale example of the data-narrative melding I argued for earlier in the passage from §8.

Rather than a novel, it may be helpful to think of *The Pale King* as resembling something closer to an almanac, or a narrative compendium. If nothing else, I believe this would help account for some of the book's more opaque sections (such as §25, wherein nearly everyone "turns a page," but nothing else happens) not as mere illustrations of the pervasive boredom that blankets the IRS, but as matters of narrative record, or examples of novelistic datum. In the same way many readers and critics were able to see *Infinite Jest* itself as emulating many qualities of the fatally enthralling Entertainment that catalyzed that novel's plot, I contend that *The Pale King*, with its section headings instead of chapter titles, its "tornadic feel" that Wallace spoke of, and its "central story" that "does not have a clear ending" (viii) is meant to enact the increasingly sketchy binaries of information and organisms, humans and machines, that I have argued the novel is interested in thematically. I am not insisting, as the narrator David Wallace does, that the book itself be officially classified as something other than a novel, but I am suggesting that we should try to account for his insistence on *The Pale King* as "more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story" (67), and as something other than the "clever metafictional titty-pincher" (69) he goes out of his away to disavow.

There is a wonderful indeterminacy to the way this narrator classifies the book that, despite its apparent uncertainty, I believe is once again deliberate. If the book is "more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story"—i.e., it resembles a memoir more than a novel, but is not quite either one—then here the narrator-cum-"author" lends credence to the idea of the book as a kind of fictionalized record of truth, a "true" account of biographical information and personal trajectories of people that never existed. The comically insistent claims that "All of this is true. This book is really true" (67), as well as the absurdly complex explanation of why certain legal limitations force *The Pale King* to be marked and marketed as a novel, speak to a real belief that the book might exist in some liminal space between fact and fiction, record and novel.

Of course, this is not to say that anything in the novel is true. As obvious examples, we know that David Foster Wallace never worked as an IRS agent and that the claim that "the only US citizens...whose Social Security numbers start with the numeral 9 are...employees of the [IRS]" (66) is patently false. Instead, the ostensible confusion enacts, on a book-wide scale, a condition that many of its characters confront throughout their own personal narratives. In crafting a tornadic document that mirrors a tax return form in its labyrinthine layout and disjointed, swappable collection of narratives (not to mention a sizable element of complete structural chance, which Michael Pietsch admirably confronted when he ordered these sections), Wallace pushes the novel firmly into data-driven territory, an area usually reserved for cold facts and humanless input. This compression, however, is one borne of a hopeful, humanist impulse. *The Pale King* is full of characters who fear and struggle with information's exponentially unfolding presence. Its form, though, illustrates a way lived experience can become objective data, and vice versa. *The Pale King* sustains this unlikely combination for its 538 pages, overriding its characters' anxieties to suggest that cohabitational harmony between consciousness and information, machine and human, is both possible and productive.

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NOTES

[1] Here I intend to convey a selective snippet of Donna Haraway's definition of *cyborg*: "a hybrid of machine and organism" (2269).

[2] Many of the sections examined in this essay end on question marks, which helps cultivate an aura of uncertainty. I would argue that this uncertainty, like nearly everything else Wallace does, is calculated and deliberate. It exists not to denote a failure to find answers, but as an acknowledgement of the primary quality of these characters' existence.

[3] He is also a clear allusion to a famous twentieth-century literary office drone, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

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