

SHANNON ELDERON

University of Cincinnati

## The Shaping of Storied Selves in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*

*Postmortem retrospectives of David Foster Wallace have too often painted him in broad strokes as either a postmodern trickster, enthralled with literary gamesmanship and irony, or, perhaps more commonly, as an apostle of the earnest and the straightforward. This essay attempts to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of Wallace's relationship to sincerity and irony through a reading of his final work, The Pale King, alongside key statements from interviews and published essays. The most well-developed sections of The Pale King portray characters for whom a commitment to sincerity can be just as much a danger as a commitment to irony. For these characters, moving toward adulthood means leaving childish fixations on sincerity behind and calling upon new parts of themselves that may be accessible only through performance, pretense, and artifice.*

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The relationship between sincerity and performance in David Foster Wallace's fiction is a vexed one, and it has been much commented on. In the popular imagination, he is often misread in one of two (diametrically opposed) ways. The first is as a supreme ironist, a writer who even in his unfinished final novel, *The Pale King*, was enthralled with postmodern games in a way that a reader looking for something more straightforward might find, as Adam Kirsch wrote in a 2011 review in *The New Republic*, "disappointing." The second (and probably more common) reading of Wallace is as proselytizer for sincerity, for what he called in his essay "E Pluribus Unum" (often read by critics and fans as Wallace's articulation of his own fictional project) "single-entendre principles" (81).<sup>1</sup> But, as Jon Baskin pointed out in a 2009 career-spanning Wallace retrospective, Wallace himself saw that the sincerity/performance binary was a trap. (Baskin writes that Wallace's writing "confirms our suspicion that [...] our obsession with fraudulence and authenticity has acquired the configuration of a neurosis.") In this essay I will examine how the most fully developed sections in *The Pale King* depict characters who begin in the place of "neurosis" or "obsession" with sincerity that Baskin describes but who emerge from their narratives altered and otherwise. The characters I will focus on, IRS employees Meredith Rand and Chris Fogle, ultimately set aside concerns about sincerity and authenticity, questions that the novel suggests rest on a naïve picture of a prelinguistic "true self" that can be discovered given

the right amount of navel-gazing and expressed given the right amount of earnestness. Instead, both Rand and Fogle become reconciled to the importance of art(ifice) in the construction of shapely stories. They move, that is, from what Wallace referred to in several interviews as an “expressive” orientation to a “communicative” orientation.

In a 2011 article titled “Where Can Aesthetics Go?,” Charles Alteri suggested that art may be defined as a means of “compos[ing] modes of attention” (84). This definition of art informs my present reading of *The Pale King*, which sees it presenting a picture of selfhood that leaves behind the fraudulence/authenticity binary that so many of Wallace’s readers have noted. Instead, the self in *The Pale King* is pictured as emerging through an engagement with the art(ifice) of narrative, which involves the “composing [of] attention” in ways that can transform both narrator and narratee. Though my focus will be on *The Pale King* and to a lesser extent on Wallace’s short story “Good Old Neon” (collected in 2004’s *Oblivion*), I will draw on remarks from essays and interviews that span the length of his career to support my argument that readers do *The Pale King* a disservice if they stop short at noting its concern with “boredom” or “attention.” Rather, I will suggest, it is a text interested in investigating narrative art(ifice) as a means of “composing attention,” and in using this investigation to move away from a paralyzing obsession with sincerity. Sincerity is, in fact, of limited use for the characters in Wallace’s later fictions; instead, characters find that moving toward adulthood requires they call upon new parts of themselves that may be accessible only through performance, pretense, and artifice.

### Sincerity as Paralyzing Paradox

Several of Wallace’s earlier works take up questions of sincerity and performance, and it is worth mentioning them to set a context for what Wallace does in *The Pale King*. *Infinite Jest*, Wallace’s 1996 magnum opus, uses the phrase “sincerity with a motive” to refer to both what the old-timers in Alcoholics Anonymous have learned to fear and what Orin Incandenza does when he seduces women (369, 1048). Orin seems a precursor of several of the male “interviewees” in Wallace’s 1999 story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Like Orin, whose pose when seducing women is described as “pathologically open and sincere” (*Infinite Jest* 1048), the men in *Brief Interviews* use sincerity for a selfish purpose, and this pose is shown doing emotional damage both to the women the pose is adopted for and the men themselves. The collection’s final interviewee describes a seduction strategy of “deploy[ing] a sensitive-slash-pained expression and quote-confess[ing]” to a woman that he had approached her with ulterior motives but now felt that “something about her [. . .] made it somehow impossible to deploy anything less than total honesty” (291). For these men, sincerity is a weapon, something to be “deploy[ed]” against others; for other Wallace characters, sincerity is figured as something more like a trap. The nameless narrator of the short story “Good Old Neon” (which opens with the statement “My whole life I’ve been a fraud”) describes his life as a series of performances. His despair stems from his conviction that “in reality” he “seem[s] to have no true inner self” and that he is “condemned to [. . .] being nothing but a sort of custodian to the statue” of his self-performance (“Good Old Neon” 160). To conclude that these characters suggest that an obsession with authenticity and fraudulence has “acquired the configuration of a neurosis” seems sound.

These examples alone should give pause to commentators who rush to uphold Wallace as an unambiguous proponent of directness and sincerity. It would seem more accurate to say that Wallace’s fiction often illustrates André Gide’s epigrammatic remark that “[o]ne cannot be sincere

and seem so" (Gide, qtd. in Magill 231). Adam Kelly suggests as much in a refreshingly nuanced evaluation of what he terms Wallace's "sincerity project." Kelly argues that "[i]n Wallace's fiction the guarantee of the writer's sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation—sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation" (143). Kelly arrives at this interpretation in part by evoking Derrida's idea of the secret as that which is characterized by "structures of difference and deferral" (143). This analysis provides a much-needed counterweight to those critics who see Wallace's deployment of pretense and indirection in his work as a mark of the failure of a "purported commitment to directness and show-off-free fiction" (Lingan). Kelly uses this interpretation as support for an argument that Wallace's fiction is marked by a dialogism or a "call for a two-way conversation" (Kelly 145). This emphasis on dialogism is congruent with what Nicoline Timmer calls the "post-postmodern" model of selfhood put forth in *Infinite Jest*, a model of self as what philosopher Daniel Dennett called a "center of narrative gravity" (Dennett 418, qtd. in Timmer 85). For both Kelly and Timmer, the self in Wallace depends on dialogue. Kelly and Timmer both emphasize the way in which, for Wallace's characters, stories are changed or, better, *charged* (with meaning) by their listeners or narratees (this is what Kelly refers to as "dialogism" and Timmer as the "relational" aspect of self-construction). Using Timmer's helpful notion of the "post-postmodern [...] self as language user [or] storyteller" (41), I want to emphasize not so much the relationship between narrator and narratee as the relationship between narrator and *narrative*: that is, the ways in which, especially in Wallace's later works, stories change their tellers.

It is this two-way relationship between story and self that seems to me to be *The Pale King's* true subject, one that can potentially provide a way out of the paralyzing paradox of sincerity (the way in which attempts to represent oneself as sincere are by definition impossible). A helpful place to start in understanding what *The Pale King* is up to is § 9, the so-called Author's Foreword. This section, which announces that the novel is "basically a nonfiction memoir" (73), takes the obsession with performance to its logical extreme before explicitly dismantling the foundation on which our obsession with sincerity rests. The narrator begins by insisting to a comically excessive extent on his own sincerity: One two-sentence paragraph reads, "All of this is true. This book is really true" (67). A footnote adds, "[E]verything that surrounds this Foreword is essentially true" (67). Two pages later, the narrator says yet again, "Here is the real truth: What follows is substantially true and accurate" (69). The voice here reads as a blend of the sort of corporate argot that makes claims to straightforwardness and the seductive sincerity pose that Orin and the men in *Brief Interviews* "deploy." Indeed, the purpose of this Foreword, the author writes, is to "be 100 percent overt and forthright" about the "unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader" that dictates whether a reader reads a story as "true" or not (73). This contract, the author writes, is

based on the presumptions of (a) my veracity, and (b) your understanding that any features [...] that might appear to undercut that veracity are [...] not meant to be decoded or 'read' so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together, so to speak, in today's commercial climate. (73)

The Foreword, by this point, has begun to empty out the concept of "truth." It has certainly illustrated the way in which trying to access sincerity or truth directly is a project doomed to failure. It supports, in other words, Kelly's claim that, in Wallace's fiction, sincerity is a "secret

that must always break with representation” (143). And it begins to suggest the opposition between expression and communication that will reappear in later sections.

### Communication versus Expression

In several interviews, Wallace made a distinction between “communicative expression” and “expressive expression” (see this comment from a 1997 interview: “The biggest problem I have is converting [college students] from ‘expressive writing’ to communicative writing [Fry 75]). In a 2000 interview with John O’Brien, Wallace described this as a “fundamental difference that comes up in freshman comp” that involves “getting it into your nerve endings that the reader cannot read your mind” (114). His ensuing remarks, however, suggest that this is a problem applicable to more than just undergraduates: “we’ve all probably sat next to people at dinner or on public transport who are producing communication signals but it’s not communicative expression. It’s expressive expression, right?” (114). While the distinction between communicative writing and expressive writing has a specific use for composition scholars, the above quote suggests that Wallace may have conceived of these terms more loosely. This looser conception of the communication/expression distinction is helpful in understanding how *The Pale King*’s characters position themselves in relation to sincerity and performance.

To provide a crude outline: Wallace seems to be concerned in statements such as the above with the difference between those who seek to communicate their “true selves” with minimal adornment (“expression”) and those who seek to shape their communications in specific ways for an intended audience (“communication”). This clearly can be related to Kelly’s argument that much of Wallace’s fiction evinces a concern with dialogism. It also sheds light on how Wallace seems to have understood what it means to “grow up,” a subject he treated frequently in his later work. In *The Pale King*’s § 46, for example, Meredith Rand notes that one of the dangers of being in a psychiatric ward is that

you gradually start to feel like you have permission to say whatever you’re thinking [. . . which] at first feels kind of liberating and good; there’s this feeling like no more smiley masks, no more pretending, which feels good, except it gets kind of seductive and dangerous, and actually it can make people worse [. . .] some inhibitions are good. (477)

The danger she speaks of is, essentially, the danger of an overly “expressivist” orientation. Wallace struck a similar note in his 1999 essay “Authority and American Usage,” which used the publication of a new edition of *Garner’s Modern American Usage* as a springboard for a discussion of the relative merits of linguistic prescriptivism and descriptivism. Wallace devotes a good deal of space in this essay to taking apart arguments made by descriptivist grammarians such as Steven Pinker that rules of English usage “are, at best, inconsequential decorations” (Pinker, qtd. in “Authority and American Usage” 93). Wallace’s reply to such arguments is in keeping with his suspicion of expression that does not adequately take into account its communicative purpose:

[With regard to] confusing clauses [. . .] it simply seems more “considerate” to follow the rules of correct English [. . .] just as it’s more “considerate” to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date. Not just more considerate but more *respectful* somehow—both of your listener/reader and of

what you're trying to get across. [...] Another way to state this objection is that something's being "decorative" does not necessarily make it "inconsequential." (93–94)

The "decorative" aspects of communication that he refers to here (loosely, an attentiveness to the rules of Standard Written English) move communication away from the expressive end of the continuum (the end closer to a baby's cry) and toward the communicative end (the end closer to the kind of well-shaped prose that would take into account how its form would support its content and affect its listener). Gideon Lewis-Kraus, writing for *Bookforum*, concisely summarizes what I'm calling Wallace's anti-expressivist stance: "Wallace may have been tormented by self-consciousness," he writes, "but he understood that to totally not give a shit, to leave sick impulses unmonitored, was to risk asociality and violence." Lewis-Kraus reminds readers that one of Wallace's most extensive treatments of "unabashedness" can be found in his essay on pornography, 1999's "Big Red Son." Adulthood, as Wallace conceived of it, seems to entail moving away from an idea that one should express one's "true self" and toward a greater engagement with art(ifice) and performance, forces for "composing attention" and thereby shaping the self.

We can see this most clearly in Meredith Rand's story as it is related in *The Pale King's* § 46. The narrator describes Rand at the outset as "allergic to performance," hyperconscious of the ways in which others put on shows for her benefit (470). The story she tells, like Chris Fogle's in § 22, describes a younger version of herself as suffering from a cynicism that stemmed from an expressivist orientation (from, in other words, her allergy to performance). This younger self was hospitalized for being what she calls "a cutter," and while in the psychiatric hospital she met an attendant who would become her husband. Rand tells her interlocutor (Shane Drinion, a fellow IRS employee) that the problem that led to self-mutilation was that she "start[ed] to see [herself] as a piece of meat," valuable primarily for the effect she had on men (484). This was, she says "scary, because [...] it also feels like a box; you know there's more to you inside you because you can feel it, but nobody else will ever know" (484). Rand's problem, in other words, bears similarities to the narrator's in "Good Old Neon": she feels that other people do not know her true self.

What her future husband tells her is that this allergy to performance, this obsession with sincerity and authenticity, is fundamentally immature. "Immature," Rand explains, "in the sense of waiting or wanting some magical daddy or rescuer to see you and *really know and understand you*" (*Pale King* 498, emphasis added). This is the dream of expressive communication that others will be able to read my mind with minimal work on my part to shape language into meanings that they can understand. Ed (the hospital attendant who will become Rand's husband) tells her, she says, "basically that I needed to grow up" (496). And the story she tells Drinion implies that she did achieve a new level of maturity, or at least thinks she did, by her final encounter in the hospital with her husband-to-be. She says that Ed told her on this night that "it was showtime" (503), and he asked her to recount for him what she has learned from their talks. Rand told him (she says) that she has learned that "it doesn't matter" why she cuts herself, because "all that matters is not to do it" (506). In other words, she has learned that performance ("showtime") matters more than questions of motive or truth or sincerity. Instead of constantly questioning what is beneath the surface of her own or others' behaviors, she has decided, she says, that "in reality everything was the surface" (499).<sup>2</sup> The way out of the "obsession with fraudulence and authenticity" that Baskin identified as a "neurosis" requires that Rand *engage* with performance instead of retreating into the fantasy that "100 percent overt and forthright" communication (read: expression) of some sort of pre-linguistic "true self" is possible. There's a symmetry between the content of this lesson and

its delivery: Narrating this conversation to Drinion, Rand says that “[what she told Ed, her future husband] was all true, I really had learned it, but I was also saying it all for him, because it’s what he wanted me to say” (507). The lesson she’s learned is that she needs to focus on performance (we could also call this craft or artifice) rather than on investigating her own or others’ intentions or motives, and she *delivers* this message as a performance (“for him, because it’s what he wanted me to say”). She moves from an expressivist orientation (a conviction that people can or should strip away their masks and express their “true selves”) to a more communicative one, one in which she crafts a story (the account she gives Ed) despite her own uncertainties and mixed motives (“secretly I was totally freaking out,” she says [507]).

I don’t mean to suggest that Rand’s narrative treats performance as a force of unqualified good. The “author notes” included with the published version of *The Pale King*, along with some cues in the text, suggest that Rand’s subsequent marriage is an unhappy one and that by the time of her conversation with Drinion she has retreated into the same dynamic of emphasizing her physical beauty and then resenting others for not seeing past it that she describes as her original problem. For example, she often interrupts her own narrative to voice her suspicions about Drinion’s true thoughts or motives, even pausing toward the end of their conversation when it “suddenly occur[s]” to her that “Drinion might be one of those [. . .] people who could seem to be paying attention while in fact allowing their attention to wander hill and dale all over the place” (501). It’s important to note, though, that the text presents the act of Rand’s narrating her story as remedying. Toward the conclusion of her monologue, she “puts out her cigarette without any of the previous stabbing aspect [with which she had put out earlier cigarettes], almost sort of tenderly” (508). While her talk with Drinion begins haltingly, threatening to sputter out at a number of points, by the end she and Drinion have both become absorbed enough in the narrative that Rand does not notice him levitating, only realizing later that by the time she’d finished her story “the display of different kinds of hats on the rear wall [behind Drinion] was [. . .] completely obscured [. . . i.e., by Drinion’s levitated torso]” (504–05). Driving home afterward, Rand thinks that the only experience comparable to the sort of absorption she experienced while talking with Drinion occurred with her family’s cat when she was a girl; she could sit for “long periods of time stroking the cat,” during which time “she felt totally aware and alive, and at the same time [. . .] it was like she forgot her name and address and almost everything else about her life for ten or twenty minutes” (494). The narrative she has crafted for Drinion has been a performance, a “showtime” of its own, but it has also become something more than *mere* performance. It’s become art, something that can, as Wallace formulated it in an early essay, “transfigure” (“Fictional Futures” 53).<sup>3</sup>

### The Self as Substitute

This transfiguration is needed, *The Pale King* suggests, because there is always something “other” about the self. The problem with the expressivist paradigm, then (as with the fetishization of sincerity that often follows), is that it presupposes that an individual can access and fully know his or her own true self. But, as the narrator of *The Pale King’s* Author’s Foreword admits (in an aside that only seems tangential), “[a]s all mature people know [. . .] it’s possible for very different kinds of motives and emotions to coexist in the human soul” (81). The self, in other words, is not singular. We are never quite the people who we think we are.

The lengthy § 22, IRS employee Chris Fogle’s account of how he came to the service, is striking in the extent to which it foregrounds the “otherness” of the self through an emphasis

on performances and substitutes. Like Rand's, Fogle's story is a conversion narrative whose conversion results from a scene that is performed. This scene, for Fogle, occurs at DePaul University, in a review session for an accounting class that he inadvertently sits in on despite his not being enrolled in the class. Fogle is in some ways pretending to be something he is not by sitting in on this class in which he is not a student. Likewise, the teacher leading this review section is pretending to be something he is not: The text takes pains to remind us that he is a *substitute* professor (*Pale King* 215). The text goes to some lengths to emphasize the way in which this unnamed substitute *performs* the role of a professor, as in the following passage:

His business suit's trousers were double pleated, which added to the impression of box-like solidity. Also, he had good posture [...]—upright and square-shouldered without seeming stiff—and as he came briskly in with his accordion file filled with neatly organized and labeled course materials, all of the room's accounting students seemed unconsciously to shift and sit up a little straighter at their little desks. (217)

This is a description of a performance, one whose effectiveness is proved by the audience's reaction ("sit[ing] up a little straighter at their little desks").

The stance that both Fogle and the substitute lecturer take toward the value of sincerity over performance may appear on a first reading to be wildly contradictory. Fogle observes in several different places that the substitute's presentation was "undramatic," "dry in the way of people who know that what they are saying is too valuable in its own right to cheapen with concern about delivery," "formal [...] but not artificially so, like a natural extension of who and what he was" (*Pale King* 219, 228). The substitute appears in Fogle's judgment "a hundred percent indifferent about being liked or seen as cool or likable by the students" (227). Yet Fogle also emphasizes the effect this (non)performance has on the class members ("the class's upperclassmen all paid [...] attention to his every word and gesture" [226]). When describing the substitute's posture as he concludes his lecture, Fogle states that "it was not a pose" but in the very next sentence says that he remembers wondering if "maybe the sub had *mastered that trick* in Uncle Sam posters and certain paintings of seeming to look right at you no matter what angle you faced him from" (228, emphasis added). The reader will almost inevitably grow a bit confused. Was the substitute lecturer distinctive because he was not putting on a performance, or because he was putting on one of the most effective performances Fogle had ever witnessed?

To further complicate this question, the substitute begins to address precisely the issue of performance and audience awareness in the speech he gives to the students. "Gentlemen," he says to these accounting students, "welcome to the world of reality—there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you" (*Pale King* 229). Fogle acknowledges this seeming contradiction in his narration, calling it an "obvious paradox" that "despite how attentive and affected by his remarks about courage and the real world I was, I was not aware that the drama and scintillance I was investing the substitute's words with actually ran counter to the words' whole thrust" (232). His conclusion ("[i]n retrospect") is that "this seems like further evidence that I was even more 'lost' and unaware than I knew" (232).

But Fogle's dismissal here should not be accepted too simplistically. His description of this unusual final review session unambiguously suggests that this substitute delivered a lecture about the importance of forgetting about audiences in a manner that was unusually dramatic and audience-aware. The substitute is on a stage, with the students the "hushed and solemn" audience members (*Pale King* 228). It's worth noting, too, that though the long-term effect of the lecture is

to direct Chris Fogle to a career in the IRS, the lecture's immediate effect is to make Fogle attend in a new way to his appearance: "The first thing [he] can remember doing" over the ensuing holiday break is "getting a haircut" and then buying a suit (233). References to performance and role-playing can also be found in some of the lecturer's direct statements, as when he tells his audience that they must "prepare to wear the hat" (233). Hats, which carry obvious connotations of performance, pretense, and role-playing, appear often in Fogle's narrative; as a young man, he says, he and his "wastoid" friends believed that "[h]ats were things to make fun of" (159), while his father, by contrast, wore a hat that he "prized" and for which he "owned a special hat block" (201).

My point here is that the substitute's lecture is not a straightforward celebration of sincerity, earnestness, "single-entendre principles," or "100 percent overt and forthright" communication. The substitute does, it's true, encourage students to leave behind their concern with applause and audiences, but he does this through a highly crafted performance and an affecting narrative. He concludes this narrative by telling the students that they are "called to account" (*Pale King* 233), a phrase that suggests a call to responsibility but also a call to narration and storytelling. As the narrator reminds the reader in § 9's Author's Foreword, an account is always in some ways a performance, necessarily partial and not to be taken as a pure expression of some sort of unadulterated self that exists prior to socialization. This is the Derridean logic of supplementarity, which posits that there is no essence that pre-exists the supplement or substitute. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Discourse," which agitates for a way of understanding all meaning-making as a system of deferrals, Derrida writes that "the entire history of the concept of structure [...] must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center [...] the substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it" (353). The substitute lecturer in § 22 seems in some ways to represent *form* itself, in the sense of artistic or fictional forms—the suggestion being that while form involves artifice, there is no world outside of forms to which we could retreat. In *The Pale King*, substitution is not a matter of fraudulence so much as a necessary condition of storytelling and, therefore, a necessary condition of becoming an adult.<sup>4</sup>

### The Narrated Self

The power of narratives to change their narrators is suggested in *The Pale King's* epigraph, a line from the Frank Bidart poem "Borges and I": "We fill pre-existing forms and when we / fill them we change them and are changed." Similarly, in § 46, a footnoted comment from the narrator notes that the change that occurs in Meredith Rand "*as she tells her story*" is that she looks "abruptly older or more drawn," akin to how the narrator imagines she will look at forty, with "a face that is made and not just stamped out at random" (*Pale King* 473, emphasis added). Narrative is what effects this change from "stamped out at random" to "made," through its ability (to again use Alteri's phrase) to compose our attention in new ways.

Chris Fogle's account of his time using the stimulant Obetrol in college provides a good example of the text's interest in how narratives can compose attention and thereby change their narrators. Fogle's discussion of Obetrol takes up almost eight pages and consists primarily of descriptions of the ways in which Obetrol changes the power and direction of his attention. He notes that he is not "trying to give any pro-drug-abuse message here," but that his Obetrol use was "important" (*Pale King* 186). The private term he creates for his experiences on Obetrol is "doubling," a suggestive term for its connotations of performance and narrative-as-performance



(the distance between narrator and narrated that can never be bridged even in the closest of first-person accounts). Ultimately, Obetrol's allure for Fogle seems to lie in the access it gave him to new ways of narrating his existence. He peppers his description of the drug with lengthy italicized versions of the sort of self-narratives that he would spin while "Obetrolling," such as the following:

*This song is making me feel both warm and safe, as though cocooned like a little boy that's just been taken out of the bath and wrapped in towels that have been washed so many times they're incredibly soft, and also at the same time feeling sad; there's an emptiness at the center of the warmth like the way an empty church or classroom with a lot of windows through which you can only see rain on the street is sad, as though right at the center of this safe, enclosed feeling is the seed of emptiness. (183)*

The implication is that the drug makes him a more attentive and therefore more powerful narrator of his own minute-by-minute experiences. It's as if, Fogle says, "I was a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over" (182). Or "[I]like taking the train instead of actually driving yourself somewhere and having to know where you were and make decisions about where to turn" (185). Obetrol, in other words, allows Fogle to move from a machine-like orientation to one in which he can shape the direction of his consciousness ("mak[ing] decisions about where to turn"), the form that his story takes.

In fact, the shift from a narrative that is "stamped out at random" to one that is "made" can be seen in the way Fogle's narration changes between the beginning and the end of his nearly 100-page monologue in § 22. Fogle describes his earlier self as being "like a piece of paper on the street in the wind, thinking, 'Now I think I'll blow this way, now I think I'll blow that way'" (*Pale King* 154). This is a description of a self almost wholly lacking a sense of narrative. The form of his description of these early years is in keeping with this sense of storylessness: for six pages, he presents not scenes and cause-effect sequences, as he will later in his monologue, but a litany of sense-memories. His delivery is largely in fragments, as in the following representative excerpt:

Somebody named Howard K. Smith was also big in the news, I remember. You almost never hear the word ghetto anymore, now. I remember Acapulco Gold versus Colombia Gold, Ritalin versus Ritadex, Cylert and Obetrol, Laverne and Shirley, Carnation Instant Breakfast, John Travolta, disco fever, and children's tee shirts with the 'Fonz' on them. And 'Keep on Truckin' shirts, which my mother loved, where walking people's shoes and soles looked abnormally large. Actually preferring, like most people my age, Tang to real orange juice. Mark Spitz and Johnny Carson [. . .]. (158)

The form of the beginning of Fogle's narrative is essentially stream-of-consciousness. But his narrative changes in form when he begins to recount the events that led to his pursuing a career in the IRS. He himself notes that "[t]hings began to get much more vivid, focused, and concrete" at this time (172). His storytelling style from this point forward, although still subject to digressions, is no longer disjunctive. Though his monologue still covers quite varied territory, it is now infused with purpose (explaining his choice of coming to the IRS), which turns it from

a list of disconnected and as-yet-meaningless memories into a narrative. He first mentions his father's being killed in a public transit accident, for instance, by acknowledging that though it is not "directly connected to my choice of the IRS as a career," it "might appear connected" (172, 175). This is in stark contrast to the disconnected paragraphs that moved from Tang to Johnny Carson with no pausing for breath. Fogle's narrative has shifted, one might say, from the realm of "expressive communication" to "communicative communication": communication that is strategically shaped into a form or performance for a listener or listeners, one that will give sense to what would otherwise be a jumble of raw data.

*The Pale King* can be said to make an argument through its form for the continuing need for fictional narratives in an information-saturated age. The book insists that readers experience the desert-like feeling of wading through pages of tax jargon that have not been formed into story; when Wallace then does offer the reader sections of story—prose that has been formed and shaped—those parts are all the more appreciated. The substitute lecturer tells the DePaul accounting students that while "[y]esterday's society's heroes generated facts [...] the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. [...] To put it another way, the pie has been made—the contest is now in the slicing" (232). This "slicing of the pie" seems analogous to the substitute's later mention of "putting on a hat"—both are acts that involve making a commitment to a particular form that will reveal new possibilities in heretofore raw, unshaped data.

In a 1988 review of David Markson's novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Wallace wrote that "myth [read: fiction] is finally compelling only in its opposition to history & data & the cingulum of Just the Facts, Ma'am. Only in that opposition can story enrich & transfigure & transcend explanation" (106). *The Pale King*, I have been suggesting, is deeply concerned with exactly this transformative power of art, the way in which by composing our attention, narrative art can transform both narrator and narratee. Discussions of Wallace's treatment of sincerity are incomplete until they take into account the importance that this novel places on stories, performance, and artifice: things that are shaped, made, formed. This new understanding of sincerity is, as Kelly has suggested, dialogic (or, in Timmer's terms, "relational"), but the dialogism occurs, importantly, not just between narrator and narratee but also between narrator and narrative—between, that is, the teller of a story and the forms or conventions of story-making with which she or he engages. "We fill out pre-existing forms and when we / fill them we change them and are changed."

Early in the Author's Foreword, the "David Wallace" narrator makes a purportedly parenthetical comment that provides perhaps the novel's most succinct formulation of the way in which engagement with narrative can allow us to bracket an unhelpful fixation on sincerity and authenticity. "I am about art here," the "Wallace" narrator writes, "not simple reproduction." What some people "fail [...] to understand," he says, is

that there are vastly different kinds of truth, some of which are incompatible with one another. Example: A 100 percent accurate, comprehensive list of the exact size and shape of every blade of grass in my front lawn is 'true,' but it is not a truth that anyone will have any interest in. What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another. (*Pale King* 259)

The suggestion here is that the fixation on sincerity and performance that recurs so often in Wallace's fiction stems from an unrealistic picture of truth as being equivalent to raw data,

something one can identify unambiguously. What differentiates humans from machines is their ability to connect with one another (through the forms that language makes available) and to change and be changed. The obsession with authenticity that characterizes Fogle's adolescent mocking of hats, or Rand's rejection of men whom she fears like her only for her beauty, or § 36's unnamed boy's goal of kissing every inch of his own body, or the American memoir craze—all indicate a poverty of imagination. As the narrator notes, crucially, commenting on the boy who tries to kiss himself, "We are all of us self-inaccessible" (401). Or, as he writes in another section, "There are secrets within secrets" (99).<sup>5</sup> A focus on sincerity is a dead end because it reduces the human to the level of a machine, something that can be "taken apart" to "[figure] out how it work[s]" (471). The danger of this kind of mechanistic understanding of the self, though, is that it takes away the secret selves that might be waiting to emerge if we were willing to pretend or to perform for one another.<sup>6</sup>

### Performance and Possibilities

That Wallace may have seen art as a means of accessing these "secret selves" was suggested in several of his statements in published interviews. In an oft-cited 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, for example, Wallace said that the fiction writer's challenge is to have "the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved" (McCaffrey 50). Similarly, in 1996 interview with David Lipsky (the transcript of which was published in book form after Wallace's death), Wallace explained that he uses complexity in his fiction in order to "teach the reader that he's way smarter than he thought he was." The problem with television and similar forms of entertainment, he went on, is that they teach the viewer "that you're the sort of person who really just wants to sit in a chair and have it easy. When in fact there are parts of us, in a way, that are a lot more ambitious than that" (Lipsky 71). In the McCaffery interview, then, Wallace suggests that art involves a certain part of himself coming to the fore while another part quiets. In his statements to Lipsky, by contrast, he emphasizes the way in which an audience or reader can have a similar experience of finding different parts of the self engaged depending on the performance at hand. Both statements, though, illustrate the two-way relationship between individuals (writers and readers) and forms that I am arguing is central in *The Pale King*. The self that is presented in these statements is not monolithic; it contains many possibilities and is susceptible to the influences of forms.

This idea of the self as containing multiple potential "selves" bears affinities to the story of selfhood put forth in by sociologists James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (a text Timmer references frequently as a source for her concept of the post-postmodern). Holstein and Gubrium argue for a conception of the self as "a *project* of everyday life, whose local by-product is more properly articulated in the plural, as 'selves'" (13). This is a decidedly pragmatic conception of selfhood, and one that I think can be traced in *The Pale King* from its epigraph ("We fill out pre-existing forms . . .") to Meredith Rand's "showtime." It brackets poststructuralist anxieties (or celebrations) about the death of the subject and instead allows for a focus on how art(ifice) can call things into being—about, in other words, the two-way relation that exists between performance and reality. For Fogle and Rand, whose stories involve a movement toward this more pragmatic conception of selfhood, questions of sincerity or authenticity miss the boat entirely because they presume the existence of a monolithic self that pre-exists language and performance. Fogle and Rand's shared discovery is

that by putting on what may seem like inauthentic performances, they can summon new versions of themselves into being.<sup>7</sup>

Working under such a model, the danger that Wallace's fiction points at again and again involves a too-rigid understanding of the self. As the narrator of "Good Old Neon" says after speaking of the "universes inside you," the "infinities [...] that you can never show another soul":

And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. (179)

This returns us to the expression-versus-communication distinction: what the narrator of "Good Old Neon" suggests is that notions of sincerity rest on the false premise that pure expression, untainted by motives of communication, is possible. More significantly, the description of the self as containing "infinities" indicates the hubris that underlies claims to sincerity: There is something grandiose, it's implied, in the premise that we could know every inch of our own selves and uncover every last one of our own secrets. The challenge that Rand and Fogle face is to expand their notions of self (as Fogle says, "deep down I know that there was more to my life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me" [187]) by engaging in the kinds of performances that can summon new ways of being in the world, new ways, that is, of composing attention.

The sense of the self as larger than we can conceive has mystical overtones, which in "Good Old Neon" come through in passages that describe the self as being "like a whitecap on the ocean" who only at the moment of death becomes "really even aware that there's an ocean at all. [...] Or like a leaf that doesn't believe in the tree it's part of, etc." (152). But it's important to recall that this sort of transcendence is, by the narrator's own account, "almost impossible" for a still-living human being to access. For Meredith Rand and Chris Fogle, by contrast, the self is expanded not through mysticism but rather through the art of narrative. They transcend "the cingulum of Just the Facts, Ma'am" by choosing particular hats to wear, performances to craft, and narratives to construct. Rand and Fogle, like the boy in § 36, are "self-inaccessible" in certain crucial ways, and therefore always more and other than their self-narratives would suggest. Telling new stories, and thereby composing their attention in new ways, allows them to see what the narrator of "Good Old Neon" learns only after death, which is that "who and what I believed I was was not what I really was at all" (155). The art of narrative is what allows these characters to enlarge their ideas of what is possible, to speak their way into new ways of being in the world.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Langan, for example, writes in his assessment of *The Pale King* that Wallace "claimed to value honesty and reader-writer connection above all other virtues" but that much of his writing belies this claim. While reader-writer connection was indeed one of Wallace's professed core values, the statement that Wallace "claimed to value honesty" seems like a problematic extrapolation from the above-referenced discussion of irony in "E Pluribus Unum." Similarly, Jon Raban, reviewing the novel for the *New York Review of Books*, asserts that "Wallace's intellectual sophistication and prowess were entwined with a moral and social simplicity that feels almost childlike [...]." Raban avoids the term "sincerity," but he is clearly invoking the popular image of Wallace as proselytizer of sincerity; children are often invoked as paradigms of sincerity. More recently, in *The Stone*, a philosophy blog on the *New York Times* website, Princeton

professor Christy Wampole cites Wallace as a representative of a group of “New Sincerity” movements. While the term “New Sincerity” has been used by Adam Kelly (whose arguments inform my reading of *The Pale King*) to suggest a more dialectical understanding of sincerity, Wampole seems to be using the word “sincerity” to mean something like “direct expression of what’s really going on inside of a person.”

<sup>2</sup>Readers of *Infinite Jest* will see parallels between that novel’s treatment of Alcoholics Anonymous and this discovery of Rand’s. In *Infinite Jest*, the alcohol- and Demerol-addicted Don Gately makes a conscious choice to set aside his doubts about the program and to go through the motions of belief even when he doubts his own sincerity. One of his sobriety mentors tells him that “it didn’t matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he did” (466). In an article that focuses on *Infinite Jest*’s treatment of play, Mark Bresnan reads Gately’s success in recovery as a result of his willingness to “strategically construct [...] a self that can comply with all of AA’s ‘suggestions’” (66). This notion of “strategically construct[ing . . .] a self” is, I will argue, key for characters in *The Pale King* as well.

<sup>3</sup>In this, his first published essay, Wallace writes, “Entertainers can divert and engage and maybe even console; only artists can transfigure” (“Fictional Futures” 53).

<sup>4</sup>Substitution continued to be central for Derrida in later works such as his essay “Hostipitality,” in which he asks, “Can one, must one, substitute oneself to oneself?” (413). This, in a way, seems to be the logic of self-construction through narrative that I have been attempting to trace in *The Pale King*.

<sup>5</sup>This recalls Kelly’s formulation of sincerity for Wallace as a “the kind of secret that must always break with representation” (143).

<sup>6</sup>I have chosen not to examine the characterization of Shane Drinion within this article because he strikes me as far less fully realized than Meredith Rand or Chris Fogle in the version of *The Pale King* that we have. It is interesting, however, to note the frequency with which Drinion is described as machine-like: watching him, “Rand has the sense of an optical reader scanning a stack of cards very fast and efficiently” (453), and Drinion answers her questions “literally, like a machine” (459). While some cues in the text (such as his levitation) suggest that he is to be viewed as an enlightened figure, the text also emphasizes the ways in which Drinion is hardly a person at all: we’re told that “[i]f he gave off a sound it would be like a single long tone from a tuning fork or EKG flatline instead of anything that varies” (450). This may be because he is “completely the same, affectwise and demeanorwise, by himself as he is in a large group”—that is, because he does not engage in the kind of performances and hat-wearing that give shape to the other characters’ selves.

<sup>7</sup>The concept of self as multiple is, interestingly, congruent with recent models suggested by neuroscientists in which the brain is conceived of as a “team of rivals” (see Eagleman).

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#### About the Author

Shannon Elderon recently earned her MA in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati.