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**MODERN MYTH AND IDEOLOGY IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *THE
PALE KING***

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Matthew Ryan Stewart

July 2016

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MODERN MYTH AND IDEOLOGY IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *THE PALE KING*

English

Missouri State University, July 2016

Master of Arts

Matthew Ryan Stewart

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze David Foster Wallace's novel *The Pale King* through the critical lenses of Lubomir Doležel's *Heterocosmica* and Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" to arrive at a theory of the heroic in the novel. *The Pale King* features multiple characters experiencing various crises in the face of an invisible, adversarial force that can be understood through Doležel's modern myth formulation, in which an invisible domain oppresses characters. This study analyzes three themes of the novel in which this interaction is most observable: the religious, the supernatural, and the civic themes. Althusser's work is applied to argue that the invisible domain functions through an ideological mechanism. The thesis's last chapter arrives at a twofold theory of the heroic that both helps illuminate *The Pale King*'s central characters and augments Doležel's theory. The heroic characters of the novel follow one of two models: the mystical model – embodied by Shane Drinion – comprises being able to find meaning in meaningless work, rather like Sisyphus; the civic model – embodied by DeWitt Glendenning – entails adhering to the outmoded but noble convictions of civic responsibility despite inevitable downfall in the face of the invisible domain.

KEYWORDS: *The Pale King*, *Heterocosmica*, modern myth, ideology, heroism, civic responsibility.

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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INTRODUCTION

Even if he had given up writing after the publication of 1996's *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace's place in the circle of Great American Writers would have been more or less granted. Some of the acclaim garnered for that behemoth novel – e.g. “it's as though Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL or Wittgenstein had gone on ‘Jeopardy!’” (Caro) – would be enough to settle the matter: the novel was a post-postmodern game-changer, the work of a deeply talented writer. It was also the work of a writer deeply interested – morally interested – in the state of America at the turn of the millennium. The impetus behind the writing of the novel was Wallace's desire to “do something real American,” and, specifically, to capture the “stomach level sadness” that “doesn't have much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of that stuff that gets talked about on the news” (Miller). I probably do not have to remake the case of Wallace's moralism here (though it will get explored later in the essay): rather, suffice it to say, Wallace was keenly aware that there was some nebulous lack in American life at the cusp of the twenty-first century.

In the years after *Infinite Jest*, Wallace seemed to have zeroed in more specifically on what the “stomach-level sadness” comprised. In his later short fiction and, famously, his Kenyon College Commencement Speech address, Wallace perceived a problem with attention and awareness endemic in U.S. culture. Ultimately, it is his final work of fiction, the unfinished, posthumously-published *The Pale King*, that Wallace presented his most forceful thesis on the issue of American sadness. *The Pale King*, assembled from hundreds of pages of manuscript that Wallace left after his suicide in 2008, presents

perhaps a new novelistic form that understands the forces at work in U.S. society in a “modern mythological” format. The novel explores the forces at play in late capitalist America that disable feelings of satisfaction and legitimacy in its populace: these forces have perverted, in a sense, political, religious, and familial values at some juncture in the second half of the twentieth century. This paper primarily aims to prove two points. The first is that Lubomir Doležel’s modern myth novel theory, as outlined in his *Heterocosmica*, clearly illustrates the form of *The Pale King*. The second point is that since Doležel’s myth formulations – which comprise invisible forces that oppress the denizens of the myth world – can be understood as ideological in nature, I will use an Althusserian understanding of ideological functions to further illustrate the oppressive forces in the novel. From these lenses of interpretation I intend to arrive at a model of the heroic that encapsulates Wallace’s prescriptive anodyne for American frustration, that augments Doležel’s modern myth, and that will ultimately suggest that ideological conflict present in the modern myth undermines a sense of fulfillment and meaning in the characters of the myth. I will focus on the religious, supernatural, and civically-minded aspects of the novel, as it is in these aspects that the mythological and ideological elements are made most plain.

I intend for this project to add to the scholarship on a novel that is just beginning to be studied by academic critics. A holistic examination of the novel does not quite exist yet: perhaps because of the necessarily fragmented nature of the unfinished work, most critics have focused on rather small chapters of the novel. I cannot pretend that this thesis presents a holistic view of the work, but it does consider aspects that have yet to be examined at great length. It seems that the novel’s religious and supernatural aspects, for

example, have received very little attention – this project will begin to remedy this lack. Throughout this thesis, I address the work of scholars such as Stephen J. Burn, Conley Wouters, and Ralph Clare, who are helping to create a new interest in the novel's emphasis on civics – whereas most of the very earliest articles and reviews focus primarily on the boredom and attention “arc” of the novel. I hope to show how the civics and boredom thematic arcs cross and inform each other. Doležel's modern myth makes lucid many of these themes and their interactions in *The Pale King* – but the novel also offers interesting potential augmentations to Doležel's modern myth, which, as presented in *Heterocosmica*, is not thoroughly developed. Doležel never discusses the heroic in this new form of myth, and I will develop a framework of what the heroic in such a model might look like.

Nor does Doležel consider the potential similarities between the invisible domain in his theory and contemporary understandings of ideology. This is not a fault of Doležel's: of course Marxist criticism does not have to inform his theories of novel structure. But an understanding of ideology and the apparatuses of ideology certainly seem to enhance our understanding of Doležel's modern myth, in which oppressive and mysterious – but ultimately human – forces govern the masses of the visible world.

This thesis will be divided into what I hope is a logical succession of chapters. The first of these explores more thoroughly Doležel's theory. Applying the theory to *The Pale King* requires a thorough examination of the novel's mythological aspects, therefore the following chapters will examine aspects of the novel in which the mythological is most explicit – the aspects of religion, the supernatural, and the civic. The concluding

chapter summarizes the findings and uses them to develop a theory of the heroic in the modern myth.

CHAPTER ONE:

DOLEŽEL'S MYTHOLOGY

Lubomir Doležel's *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, published in 1998, develops a system with which to understand a given novel as a constructed "possible" world. Though the "Modern Mythology" chapter of the book is given somewhat little space in the entire work, it is imperative to define a few of Doležel's more general terms before discussing it. As I go through these terms, I will be using both Doležel's examples as well as my own examples from *The Pale King*.

I. An Introduction to Possible World Formulae

A fictional world is, in Doležel's theory, expressed in a modal formula that looks like this: $W(P, NF, S)$, in which W = World, P = Person(s), NF = Natural forces¹, and S = States. States are more or less the physical setting of the world in a kind of mathematical blankness natural forces are "the effective forces of the laws of nature [which cause] specific changes in the states of the world" (32). A possible world does not become a fictional narrative world, however, until at least one person² is introduced to it. Doležel examines one-person worlds: he spends time looking at *Robinson Crusoe* and Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" as examples of this peculiar and difficult possible world. The worlds in these two examples are acted upon by the narratives' protagonists, such that Robinson Crusoe shapes nature to his will (taming the wild goats, etc.) and Nick Adams's fishing. In the novel's world, Robinson Crusoe must be

¹ Natural forces are often abbreviated as "N-forces" in Doležel.

² That is, some sort of conscious entity must exist in a narrative world.

“socialized” into the natural world in order to survive; Nick Adams, an experienced nature-wanderer, goes there to find a kind of solace and rejuvenation.

Ultimately, the one-person model makes clear the functions of the agential actions of the protagonists. As Doležel puts it, “Isolating a person from others bares the rudimentary features of acting and mental life” (37). This is a necessary first step in the understanding agential constellations – incarnations of power, influence, and motivation found in multi-person worlds. Crusoe’s power as a rational agent in the midst of a dangerous natural world determines his ability to survive, and Crusoe’s isolation allows the reader a singular view of his mental processes. Doležel writes that “Crusoe constantly expands his knowledge of the world by observation and experiment,” (39) in an attempt to recreate something like the culture or civilization that he came from to the natural environment. It is also important – for the sake of cultural contextualization – to note that Crusoe comes to more clearly understand his own society’s Christian mythology of the world through his isolation and the mental processes of survival. Namely, Doležel points out that illness and a dream brought about by it causes Crusoe to begin to see the natural world not as an indifferent set of events, but as something more supernatural, as something conscious of and interactive with him. In this way, the “World of man becomes God’s world,” (41) in that Crusoe begins to see himself as small and ineffectual in face of a natural world that has taken on mythological proportions. Especially, it is solitude itself that has awakened the deeper reflection and self-awareness in Crusoe and has led to his mythologization of the natural world.

What makes this significant for our purposes is that Defoe wrote the novel in cultural milieu that valued the mass opinion over that of the individual³. Common sense – “common” as in arrived at through a generic sort of consensus – was valued over the solitary genius, and being part of the highly socialized intellectual scene in England in the 18th century was considered superior to shutting oneself away with one’s own thoughts in a more hermetic fashion. “Made impotent by a serious illness,” Doležel writes, “Crusoe regains religious belief and arrives at a mythological interpretation of his ordeal: his fate was determined by universal laws of Christianity” (41). Deprived of his society, he comes to commune, through prayer, with now God-like “N-force”, and this suggests that his forced isolation from his society – a society which eschews the natural - is exactly what allows him to understand Christian mythology.

Perhaps I need to elucidate these ideas. Though the 18th century in England is categorically considered the Age of Reason, it was nonetheless dominated by an iteration of Christian dogma aggravated by burgeoning capitalistic values. It was a highly politically charged environment, with the great writers of the age – Pope, Swift, and of course Defoe – on the side of conservative royalism backed up by religious conviction and going against the market-oriented liberalism that was increasingly establishing a middle-class that interrupted the social order. The new market also interacted with and influenced the new middle class in myriad ways: e.g., the printing presses and social coffee houses that were integral to the creative and intellectual environment of the day depended upon this new middle-class merchant sensibility; the Protestant ideology

³ See, e.g., Pope’s “An Essay on Man”: “The proper study of mankind is Man.”

justified an approach to wealth that claimed that earthly wealth was a sure sign of godly favor.

It is no coincidence that the novel arose from this ideologically tempestuous moment. The long narrative form that explored the goings on of a representative citizen⁴ in his encounter with some vaster power is the form that begins to think about ideology. This was a primary function of many early novels (*Joseph Andrews*, e.g.) With Defoe, we see a resistance to the idea that the social was godly, and an implementation of a question: what is man alone, not only in relation to the natural world, but in relation to God? In this interaction, what is the function of reason, and of civilization? The early novel's emphasis on grand society-level ideas and problems will help us understand how Wallace's novel represents the ideologically transitional late-20th century United States. Furthermore, these concerns with reason, God, and shifting ideologies were presented as moral problems in these early novels, and Wallace's oeuvre is famously concerned with morality, even in what might be thought of as his one-person world narratives.

Wallace did not write a traditional one-person narrative world that I am aware of, but in a few stories – namely the “Brief Interview” stories in the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* - Wallace experimented with form in such a way that the “hideous men” being interviewed could be understood as isolated in the storyworld. In most of these stories, the interviewer's questions are left unwritten, and are designated only by the letter “Q” and interruptions and responses in the interviewee's speech. The impression this ends up making on the reader is one of isolation, of the speakers' being left in a kind of void in which their only dialogue is really with their own consciences or

⁴ Citizen is an important term here.

psyches. In the very least, the questioner's role in the dialogue is invisible: it reads as a power dynamic that leaves the interviewee at its mercy while exposing nothing about the questioner. I.e., these are ostensible dialogues that are actually monologues: the interviewee mental life is unfurling in a kind of isolation.

These stories offer a moral examination of the state of the male psyche at the end of the 20th century. Certainly, they are somewhat parodic: a part of what Wallace is doing here, as Adam Goodheart pointed out in his *New York Times* review of the collection, is mocking what he had called the "Great Male Narcissists" – Updike, Roth, et al., whose swaggeringly masculine protagonists engage in a sort of sexual solipsism that tends to promote a kind of self-indulgence but also misogyny. Suitably, Goodheart reads a "moral fervor [that] burns beneath the surface of all his work," a fervor Wallace has been known for, especially since his death. The "Brief Interviews," most of whose hideous men could have walked from an Updike novel, expose the neuroses and pasts that have led the men to commit their quasi-horrific acts, often consist of manipulating women in nefarious ways to have sex with them. Furthermore, the interviews are presented as documents, complete with a headings that describes location, date, etc., of the given interview. What the reader "receives," then, is a secondhand document. Wallace is presenting these moments of clarity, of quiet repentance and stubborn or blind nonrepentance through a sort of bureaucratic file documenting this change. What entity this bureaucracy is and what stake it has in these interviews is unknown, invisible.

Short stories do not interact with ideology to the same extent as novels: instead of exposing them, they are perhaps merely flavored by them. But like Defoe writing his fiction in the 18th century, Wallace uses his stories to expose underlying worldviews,

mythologies, and ideological conflicts. In *Brief Interviews*, the protagonists' confessions are collected in mysterious documents by an entity who remains unseen and unheard. In Doležel's terminology, this inquisitive entity is an N-force, an inescapable entity who directs the challenges of the protagonist with a sort of moral probing. The revelations of ideology do not happen in the protagonists, as in *Crusoe*, but are left for the reader to parse out, and nothing is made clear, but merely suggested. *The Pale King's* Chapter 14, in which video interviews of the agents at the Peoria branch of the IRS are being conducted in order to make an informational video for public awareness, features a form similar to what we experience in the story collection, and the responses from the interviewees reflect a kind of tendency for confession and defensive explanation: i.e., none of them really accomplish anything that the IRS would consider viewing-worthy. The vicarious reception of the interviews, as with "Brief Interviews," again distances the reader from the characters. This reestablishes for the novel Wallace's concern with the documentation of moral dysfunction in his characters. It also displays an earlier interest in "invisible" entities or forces that have a hand in directing modern life.

II. Multi-Person Worlds

Power dynamics become more complicated in a narrative world featuring multiple characters. In fact, Doležel spends a separate chapter exploring the mechanisms of power, action, and motivation before delving into the exploration of multi-person narrative worlds. Here are some basic concepts: *intentionality* is the fact of a characters' actions being the result of a mental life (whether or not an action is conscious); *motivation* is the general term for the factors – personal and societal – that govern the intentionality of

“action in context” (63). Doležel discusses trends in understanding motivation 20th-century psychology studies, which essentially link motivation to drives that function to preserve the self and the species – i.e., factors like thirst and sex drives. Doležel recognizes here that what motivates persons (and thus characters) can often be traced back to “scripts and plan,” which essentially link certain individual actions to prescribed norms that do not necessarily demonstrate a direct causal relation to survival or well-being (65). These norms, of course, are dependent upon the society of the story world, and thus can reveal the ideological nature of the story world. That is to say, the “script” that motivates characters is ideological in nature.

This latter point is especially important, as we will see, to the understanding of invisible powers that dominate multi-person worlds. The factors that cultivate motivation congregate in “motivational clusters,” which write a complex script of influences on a character’s actions. Herein lies the potential for motivational conflict, too, if “the cluster includes contradictions...The person is pulled in opposite directions, and a serious disruption of acting occurs” (69). Doležel argues that it is this conflict that results in irrational acting in an individual. He brings in a term we will be revisiting later in this thesis, *akrasia*. This is a weakness in or lack of will in an otherwise reasonable individual that allows him or her to bend to motivational influences that may not represent that individual’s best interests. I would suggest, too, that yielding to these influences and the irrational⁵ actions that results from it also detrimentally complicates the individual’s emotional wellbeing.

⁵ I should probably point out here that, by irrational action, I mean an action undertaken by an individual that is not in that individual’s best interest and that the motivation behind the action is not entirely or immediately clear to the individual.

These influences become increasingly complicated and powerful in multi-person worlds, which is why this model is infinitely more narratively fecund than the one-person world. “The persons’ interaction, individually or in groups, is the prime source of stories,” Doležel writes (74), which shows that multi-person novels are, fundamentally, concerned with power dynamics and the inherent conflicts thereof. In multi-person worlds, we are introduced to the concept of the agential constellation, or the groups of individuals who interact in various dynamic ways. Doležel uses Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* as his introduction to the multi-person world and the agential constellation: the novel’s most immediate constellation is that made up of Myshkin, Nastasja, Rogożyn, and Aglaja. These four agents’ links modulate in unstable ways because of the volatile passions of each (the novel is largely about passions acting upon and dominating the rational, which makes it easy to see why Doležel chose the work for his fundamental example of the multi-person world.) Doležel writes, “rational antecedents of acting are minimized: the crucial deeds of the heroes and heroines of *The Idiot* are unreflected leaps from desire or despair to physical or verbal acts” (77), and therefore the primary plot points of that novel are breakdowns of will that result from a lack of reason and reflection (*akrasia*.) The novel, of course, ends in disaster for all characters. In *The Pale King*, we will see a similar outcome for those characters who suffer from a breakdown of will because of the conflicting and irrational motivations that inform their decisions. The confusion of scripts – which we will see in the conflicting ideologies of some of the novel’s central characters – lead to a kind of spiritual *akrasia*.

III. The Modern Myth

So multi-person worlds are finally narrative worlds that reveal and explore power dynamics within social interactions. In a short but crucial chapter near the end of *Heterocosmica*, Doležel explores the possibility of power dynamics in which the source of the dominating power is not visible and conspicuous in the world of the characters. In this chapter, Doležel sees an analog in classical myth-making, specifically those myths that seek to explain the reasons that apparently inexplicable things happen in the world. These are myths that give power and persona to the parts and events of the world which seem to interrupt human endeavor. This explanatory system requires the breaking up of the world into two components: the natural and the supernatural. It is, in other words, a dyadic structure, with a specific power dynamic. The supernatural world, which seems to have a hand in the inexplicable events that cause turmoil in the lives, relationships, and communities of the human world, is mysterious, and is mostly inaccessible to the natural world. Thus, the playing field is uneven. On the few occasions in which a mortal is given access to the supernatural realm – say, in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice – the mortal protagonist is given specific guidelines of conduct that stunt his or her agential power. In every case, the supernatural world has the upper hand.

For reasons left unexplored by Doležel, in the twentieth century it became incumbent upon storytellers to revisit the dyadic world model with its imbalanced power dynamic. Perhaps it was the interest in remaking tradition and placing oneself in the canon of classical work, a concern seen in the works of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, et al., or perhaps the model made sense in the wake of the ideologically, technologically, and

economically unprecedented complications leading up to and following the first world war. But in any case, the model became viable and useful once again.

There are, nonetheless, key differences between the classical and modern myth worlds. Doležel describes two models: the hybrid world, in which the barrier between the supernatural aspects of the classical myth world and the modern visible world vanishes (Doležel uses Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" as an example of this⁶); and the visible/invisible model, which is the model *The Pale King* falls neatly into. Kafka's work is representative of this model as well, according to Doležel, who explores *The Trial* and *The Castle* as key examples of this model's dynamics.

Before looking more deeply at this model, I do need to define two terms important to it. The first is *authentication*, which in Doležel comprises the ways in which a text, through its internal discourse, justifies its fictional world's existence. To be clear, Doležel writes that a conventional 3rd-person fictional work offers two modes of discourse, "the narrative of an anonymous, impersonal narrator and the direct speech of the fictional person(s)" (148). In other words, in a traditional third-person narrative, the facts of the story world are validated by the discourse of the narrator (what would be called the implied author, in creative writing terminology) and this discourse is the standard against which the truth-values of the speech acts of the fictional characters are judged⁷. This two-discourse model is termed "dyadic authentication"⁸. Doležel offers the term "graded authentication" for authentication in first-person narratives. As one might

⁶ I would add magical realism in the style of Garcia Marquez, too, as an example of this world that is directly and blasély interactive with the supernatural to the list.

⁷ To use Doležel's example, the reason we know the windmills in *Don Quixote* are, in fact, windmills and not giants is that the narrator tells us they are windmills, regardless of what the protagonist may insist (148).

⁸ This is a separate concept from the "dyadic structure" that Doležel describes the modern myth with.

imagine, authenticating the facts of the story world is trickier here, given that the reader is experiencing the story world through an individual character's perspective (and psychology)⁹. Graded authentication must earn a reader's trust. Authentication in *The Pale King* is convoluted. A number of chapters are narrated by a character (David Foster Wallace even has a stand-in Wallace who features some aspects of Wallace's biography narrate at least two chapters) while many more feature the dyadic authentication that marks traditional 3rd-person narration. What unites both the general narrative voice and the character narrators is a propensity for sheer data – the reader is inundated with facts and jargon, as well as informational asides and tangents, in such a way that we may understand the novel as being authenticated *by* the data field, which is thematically important in any case.

The second key term is *saturation*. A representation of a fictional world relies on a certain level of world construction – how inundated the reader is with the factual material of the world is termed saturation. As texts are, of course, contained worlds, there is no such thing as complete saturation, but there is nonetheless a spectrum of saturation. On one end, if the author offers little world “texture,” or zero texture, then we have what is termed a *gap* in the text (170). When a reader encounters these gaps, instead of being frustrated by the lack of world building information, he or she imagines¹⁰ the world using various other cues issued by the writer (a function of traditional realist mimesis) (172). The other end of the spectrum is not, again, complete saturation, but rather a level of saturation that achieves an encyclopedic texture. Doležel uses Gabriel Garcia Marquez's

⁹ Graded authentication also applies to very “close” third-person, in which the implied author adopts a character's perspective to the point of “speaking their language,” as it were.

¹⁰ If, essentially, the writer possesses a talent for evocation, the reader will be able to fill these gaps.

Love in the Time of Cholera as an example; certainly David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* fall into this category of novels that bombard their reader with information. I will explore saturation in *The Pale King* briefly in Chapter Three, but for now, these basic definitions should suffice.

The dyadic, visible/invisible world model depends on authentication and saturation to delineate the boundary between the invisible, powerful half of the world and the visible, controlled half: "the split in the fictional world is brought about by textual¹¹ strategies of the saturation function . . . the facts of the visible (determinate) domain are constructed explicitly, those of the invisible (indeterminate) domain implicitly" (190). Instead of the glimpses into the supernatural realm that we get in classical myth (with the human-like passions of the gods, the various rules of conduct presented to mortals who are allowed in, etc.) the invisible world of the modern myth remains, in Doležel's theory, mostly unseen and unknowable. Kafka's *The Trial* offers an example of this "agent-deletion" that leaves the invisible realm unsaturated. Here are the words addressed to Josef K. during his arrest at the novel's beginning: "Proceedings have been instituted against you...I am exceeding my instructions in speaking freely to you..." (Kafka 3). The passive voice of the first clause is simultaneously vague and ominous. The nature of the "instructions" remains mysterious, other than their function of keeping K. in the dark. Even the novel's opening sentence – "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K..." (1) – show a sort of helplessness on K.'s part, a sense of fatalism in that anyone can be called in to this higher authority at any time, under any pretense. The passive voice plays a very important role in the saturation of this world, as the arresting officers tell K.

¹¹ This term refers to the amount of saturation – sheer world-building textual information – in a text.

that “great demands will be made upon” him (7) and, of course, the insistent facelessness of the authority: “...who accuses me? What authority is conducting these proceedings?” (11). The warders themselves claim to know nothing about the case, simply that they were to bring in Josef K.

Agents who serve as emissaries from the invisible world are common, such as the warders in *The Trial*. These agents are powerful solely because of their connection to the invisible world; otherwise they are quite human and fallible (Doležel 192.) Occasionally, too, there exists in this type of mythological model an intermediate realm – called in Doležel the realm of shadows, typified in Belyj’s *Petersburg* – in which the feckless protagonists can view not the invisible world in complete, but enough of the mechanizations thereof to be unsettled. This purgatorial or threshold realm is important in *The Pale King*, as we will see.

There are two more important points I need to make about the structure of the modern myth before I end the chapter and begin applying these ideas to *The Pale King*. To make the first point, I need to affirm the power dynamic in this setup: Doležel writes that “the visible domain is under the dominion and control of the invisible domain” (193). In novels in which the barrier between the domains is more or less clear (as in *The Trial*), the denizens of the visible world live under a kind of oppression – fear-based oppression in Kafka’s case. In Wallace’s novel, I will argue that the oppression is somewhat more subtle, in that many of the protagonists are unable to affirmatively recognize the oppressive force in their lives, and in the sense that the oppression manifests not in fear but in a spiritual malaise. The novel’s thematic treatment of the changes in civic responsibility in late 20th century United States culture displays nothing so blunt as the

subtle flavor of totalitarianism in Kafka, but it still displays the result of a deep-seated ideological mechanism that is a), largely invisible and unknowable by those in the midst of it and b), more powerful than the visible world of the IRS workers and the citizenry.

The second important point that I want to bring up from Doležel is his question of whether or not the modern myth requires a “restoration of the supernatural” (196). In Kafka, the invisible world seems not supernatural but rather “antihuman”; the invisible world is not controlled by gods or demons but by “nothing other than the mysterious, perverse ingredients of human nature and societal organization” (194). In other words, it is governed by the worst angels of our nature, entities that work against reason and progress. But Doležel offers Belyj’s *Petersburg*, again, as a counter. In this novel, that intermediate realm that the protagonists can glimpse perhaps *does* function in some supernatural way. The mysterious figures who dwell in the intermediate realm of shadows act something like phantoms, Doležel suggests. These phantoms offer symbolic values that help explain the world: there is, for example, a Christ-like symbolism inherent in one of the phantoms, and a satanic force represented in another. This revival of the symbolic supernatural in the modern mythical is present, too, in *The Pale King*, in Sylvanshine’s quasi-effectual ESP and in the real and hallucinated ghosts that visit the wigglers as they process the endless data of the tax-forms.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE PALE KING AND RELIGION

The Pale King is concerned, somewhat subtly but very seriously, and much more so than any of Wallace's other work, with religion. After reading the novel, the Wallace reader may in fact be struck at how markedly absent the theme is from his other work: merely there is the mention of the Catholicism of such-and-such character's parents, for example, or, as in *Infinite Jest*, the acknowledgement of the A.A.'s concept of a "higher power" as a useful cliché, a thing to draw solace from. This pragmatic, secular account of the spiritual was an early understanding of the function of religion for Wallace, and one that is fairly indicative of the late-nineties educated person's account of religion, an account steeped in relativism and college-flavored cynicism. Things we do know about Wallace and religion are rather vague: he hinted occasionally in later essays and interviews about the topic. In his famous 9/11 essay "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" there is a brief, unexplored mention of churchgoing – "The church I belong to is on the south side of Bloomington, near where my house is...it's not one of those churches where people throw Jesus' name around a lot or talk about the End Times, but it's fairly serious" ("The View..." 135). There is a hint in the essay that it is the closeness of the church community that Wallace finds noteworthy. Furthermore, an interview with Patrick Arden notes that Wallace tried twice in his life to join the Catholic Church, but "flunk[ed] the period of inquiry" (Arden 99). Wallace in this interview again mentions enjoying the "being part of a larger thing" (99) that comes with belonging to a church. Other than the communal aspect, however, Wallace remained more or less tight-lipped on the topic.

But the presence of religion in *The Pale King* makes sense: in a novel devoted to the conflicts present at the crossroads of ideologies, Wallace needed to use religion as a force that plays a vital role in the psyches and concerns of the various characters. This chapter is going to look at three specific representations of religion in the novel. First, it will examine Lane Dean Jr.'s biography, especially the early chapter devoted to his girlfriend's unwanted pregnancy, and how this chapter sits in relation to Dean's later chapters in which he is unable, because of his religion to engage with the expectations with his job. Next, Chris Fogle's encounter with his roommate's religious girlfriend and the Jesuit professor will be considered. Finally, the recurrence of the 1973 film *The Exorcist* and significance this may have to the characters or for Wallace. I will examine these occurrences to understand how Wallace saw the core problems at the heart of the novel as problems of the spirit. For my purpose, this inquiry into the religious concerns of *The Pale King* should establish that religion and religious imagery allows the characters to understand the various conflicting ideologies, as well as the invisible domain, in terms of myth narrative.

I. "Good People"

Perhaps the first indication of this interest in religion in *The Pale King* is the excerpt of it published in the *New Yorker* in February of 2007: Chapter 6 was published here as the stand-alone piece "Good People." This is the introductory chapter for Lane Dean Jr., a recurring character in the novel. In a way, the narrative can be looked at as a

retelling of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"¹²: we have a young couple being weighed down by an impending decision of abortion – they are, in this case, both teenagers, wholesome and Midwestern in their matching jeans and button-ups. The entirety of the narrative takes place at a picnic in a park and in the head of Lane Dean Jr., who is crumbling internally in conflict between faith and his own freedom, choices. This conflict is banal, but partly that is the point, and it plays out in interesting way. Dean is stuck in a crux of intentionality, questioning the depth of his religious convictions: of his pregnant girlfriend Sheri, he considers "She was serious in her faith and her values in a way that Lane had liked and now, sitting here with her on the table, found himself afraid of. This was an awful thing. He was starting to believe he might not be serious in his faith" (*The Pale King* 38). His hypocrisy is more worrisome a sin to him than the impending abortion, and "he was desperate to be good people" (37-8). The issue here is the conundrum of which ideological standard is the superior, which is the path to "goodness," the religious values that now Dean feels that he cannot uphold through selfishness, fear, and the fact that he does not love Sheri, or the responsibility towards Sheri in supporting her decision. The chapter ends with the certainty on Dean's part that Sheri will admit to him, then and there, that she cannot go through with the operation, and that she will absolve Dean of all responsibility because she knows that he does not love her all of this in an extended fantasy that ends with a series of questions from Dean's conscience, such as "What if he has no earthly idea what love is?...What if he was just afraid?" (43). These are a series of banalities, to be sure (there's even a literal "What

¹² (For what it's worth) both the Hemingway story and Chapter 6, at the moment of crisis action, feature the woman shutting down the man's argument with a quietly desperate string of "please"s. The similarity, therefore, did not seem lost on Wallace.

would even Jesus do?” question there as well) but these banalities are, for Dean, representative of a serious predicament. The chapter ends on these questions unanswered, with Dean frozen on the picnic table.

This frozenness is thematically key: earlier in the chapter, Dean’s stasis is likened to the “blank frozenness of his father” (38) – this is quickly echoed a little later as “a terrible kind of blankness had commenced falling through him” (39) on the morning the abortion was supposed to take place. The intergenerational conflict that is threaded throughout the novel – diligent but downtrodden workaday fathers remembered frightfully or sadly, or somewhat contemptuously, as we will see in the chapter about Chris Fogle – indicates in this case the sort of crisis that comes with what Doležel would term *akrasia*, that lack of will that begins to lead a character to make choices not in their own best interest. That character would be termed an *akrates*. Here is Doležel on the concept: “The *akrates* acting is a manifestation not of irrationality but of an irreconcilable discordance within his or her motivational cluster” (70). The clash of ideological impetus, in this case, constitutes the discordance. As we will see, Dean remains an *akrates* throughout the novel, due to a similar ideological conflict.

This stasis, too, haunts Dean throughout the novel, in the couple chapters that revisit him directly. In chapter 16, we see Dean eavesdropping and trying ineffectually to drop in on a couple IRS veterans’ conversation during a break. The older workers discuss barbecues and the maladies of their children, etc.; Dean offers the occasional cliché interjection – “You don’t have to tell me,” e.g. (123). The fact that the older employees’ discussion hinges on banal images of the suburban American identity, with its barbecues, low-level marital strife, etc., suggests that the older agents are fully immersed in the

mindset – the ideology – of politico-economic mythology of late-twentieth century America. Dean can't break in to the discussion, and therefore the mindset portrayed by the other two men is apparently unavailable to him. The structure and incompleteness of the novel regrettably do not establish a clear link between the Lane Dean Jr. of chapter 6 and that of the later chapters, but the reader does know that Dean's relationship with Sheri became a marriage (377) and that the pregnancy seems to have not been terminated (380). It seems that his religious values won out over his fear. This adherence to his Christian ideology is key to understanding what ultimately becomes of Dean.

In chapter 33 we see Dean in the very throes of extreme boredom – he repeatedly invokes religious phrases and exclamations as he sits at his desk, unable to process returns: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a poor sinner” (377). These exclamations, of course, indicate the metaphor for Hell that Dean sees in his workplace¹³. This distress shows a number of things, with regard to the conflict of ideologies depicted in the novel.

part of what I want to suggest by describing the book as a modern mythological novel is that, in addition to the invisibility of the powers that govern the visible world, conflicts that occur when multiple ideologies are in action create motivational discordance within the characters – this is an essential condition of the modern myth. These ideas are not explicit in Doležel: rather, I want to argue that what Doležel describes as the “invisible” that govern the “visible” is ideological in nature, and that the resurgence of the mythological in the early-twentieth century novels indicates the late modern era's increasing confusion of ideological values. *The Pale King* augments Doležel's ideas by considering the increased ideological tension of the latter half of the

¹³ IRS Headquarters, the reader will note, is known colloquially by employees by its street address: Triple-Six.

century. Lane Dean Jr.'s spiritual distress represents this very conflict: the ideals of Protestant work values – the rewards, both physical and spiritual, of hard work. – are refuted as Dean confronts the meaninglessness of the work he actually does. Conley Wouters, in an essay on the posthumanistic aspects of the novel, sees a link between the questions Dean asks of himself at the end of chapter 6 and the distress Dean is experiencing in chapter 33, namely that it is “the inability to ask questions like these is what ultimately threatens to undo Lane Dean in chapter 33. In [chapter 6], they serve as proof that Lane is ‘good people’” (Wouters 176). Wouters suggests this term not only offers a sort of moral declaration, but functions to reaffirm the actual *personhood* of Dean. I do not entirely agree that Dean's not being able to ask these same sorts of questions in chapter 33 is the cause of his distress, primarily because he obviously has *not* lost his ability to express his frustration in religious terms. But what is interesting in Wouters' suggestion is the humanizing function of religious conviction. It establishes a specific conscience that, instead of being unavailable to Dean in chapter 33 – as Wouters argues – is simply ineffectual in the face of the vast, dehumanizing tedium that Dean is experiencing.

II. Chris Fogle's Coming-to-the-Light Moment

In Chris Fogle's long story of how he came to the IRS we see a similar issue of religious guidance, but here, it seems that the humanizing element of religion has been coopted by the invisible domain: Fogle's spiritual awakening that occurs at the pre-final of an accounting class he accidentally walks into is flavored with religious vernacular that seems to be the actual recruiting mechanism for Fogle. Fogle's narrative is famously

difficult to get through, riddled as it is (and intentionally so) with wandering details and redundant, irrelevant information (Fogle's nickname at the office is, accordingly, "Irrelevant" Christ Fogle.) He tells of his teenage flirtations with nihilism – "I was the worst kind of nihilist – the kind who isn't even aware he's a nihilist" (154) – and his conflicts with his father. It also charts Fogle's journey of increasing awareness of his condition as he chronicles his meanderings: first, his academic endeavors in literature, psychology, etc., lend him an outlook of life as being completely subjective, that "nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable" (155) and the passing grades he got on his papers, which consisted of simply "going through the motions" of academic language. He mentions the use of recreational drugs to his outlook: taking Obetrol, for example, was like, "a sort of emergence, however briefly, from the fuzziness and drift of my life in that period. As though I was a machine that suddenly realized it was a human being and didn't have to go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over. It also had to do with paying attention" (182).

Unlike Lane Dean, Fogle starts out in a dehumanized state and occasionally glimpses something beyond that. One of these glimpses is the encounter with his roommate's religious girlfriend, who tells Fogle a somewhat banal¹⁴ story of her coming-to-the-light sort of moment. In this story, the girl recounts a period of time in her life when she felt "totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope...wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert of our younger generation's decadence" (211) when she encountered a church congregation whose expression of acceptance and love initiated

¹⁴ I realize I keep using this word. Yet, banality is an important theme not only in *The Pale King* but in Wallace's oeuvre in general. The idea is something along the lines of those things that are cliché and repeated *ad nauseum* are done so because they do, in fact, contain something like a profound truth.

a spiritual shift in her. The girl and her story annoys Fogle until he stumbles into an advanced accounting class being taught by the Jesuit professor. The professor is reviewing class material for the final, and closes the review with an odd but inspiring speech. Up until this moment, Fogle had been “aimlessly wandering,” as well, and the accounting class serves as his congregation. Here is a sample of the professor’s post-review speech, which leaves Fogle in awe: “Gentlemen, here is the truth: Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what is, today, in this world neither you nor I have made, heroism” (229). This lecture has the zeal of a sermon, and Fogle is readily reminded of the Christian girlfriend’s conversion tale. The professor’s speech renders Fogle able to understand the girlfriend’s point, he realizes. He laments that he had not been “aware and attentive enough to hear what the actual point she was trying to make was” (228)¹⁵.

Fogle has the ability to keep track of numbers subconsciously – he stops the narrative a few times to reflect on how many words he has said up to that point. His default mode, then, is thoughtless accounting – perhaps he is, as he suggests, a machine that has glimpsed humanity; perhaps he is the perfect product of late capitalism culture, whose bliss can be found in the performance of mindless rote task. In the mythology of late capitalism, he is something close to heroic¹⁶ – the being with a natural quirk that gives him an advantage in the new world, the person somewhat other-than-human, as the

¹⁵ The speaker, by the way, has a certain ineffable quality about him. He is not the Jesuit professor who normally teaches the class (though he is, apparently, a Jesuit), which intimates that he appears there, in a way, only to speak to Fogle. He can be read in a couple of ways: as something like an emissary from the invisible world, conjured for the moment to bring Fogle in, something like the warrens in Kafka’s *The Trial* (though, unlike them, he seems mysteriously more complicit in the mechanizations of the invisible world.) Or he can be read – somewhat more clearly, maybe – as a mentor sort of character who opens the door not to the invisible domain, but to the heroic, to Fogle.

¹⁶ A later chapter deals with the problems of heroism in *The Pale King*.

other examiners see him. Doležel does not address what the heroic means in the *modern* myth, but by the end of this thesis, I hope to have contributed to amending this.

III. *The Exorcist* and the Stygian Atmosphere of the Wiggle Rooms

Before moving on to the next chapter, there is one more aspect of the religious in *The Pale King* to address: the presence of the film *The Exorcist*. This may seem a negligible topic for discussion, and indeed the film's appearance in the novel may not have merited more than a footnote if it had not also been a thematic concern in Wallace's short story "The Soul is Not a Smithy," from his collection *Oblivion*. This collection is made up of stories written concurrently with *The Pale King*, and many of these stories share stylistic similarities with the novel. Wallace's biographer D.T. Max writes that *Oblivion* constituted a sort of practice run for *The Pale King* at moments when Wallace became stuck in the composition of the novel, and the collection's "trick-free prose, the Pynchon-free plots, the insistence that the reader work for his or her satisfaction" (280) were attempts to move toward an earnestness that Wallace felt he needed in his novel. In any case, the similarities between the stories and the novel can occasionally be startling, and this is almost certainly the case with "The Soul...": the story centers around the events one afternoon in an early 1960s civics classroom in Columbus, Ohio. A substitute teacher begins, *a propos* of nothing, to write the words "Kill Them All" on the board, in a state that might be seen as possessed. The nameless narrator, telling the story from middle-age, is one of the few students in the class who fails to evacuate as the teacher's behavior becomes increasingly erratic: the narrator had been stuck in his mind, constructing a narrative from images he was observing from the window. Here we can

see *The Pale King's* concern with attention and distraction, as well as a subtle hint at the modulation of civic responsibility. Furthermore, when the narrator moves from the classroom to a meditation on his father, who works a menial and tedious office job, we can see an overlap in imagery. Specifically, the overlap from a nightmare the narrator recounts is too clear to be coincidental: "The dream was of a large room full of men in suits and ties seated at rows of great grey desks, bent forward over papers...motionless, silent, in a monochrome room" ("The Soul..." 108). Compare this to the following, from *The Pale King*, Chapter 23: "Dream: I saw rows of foreshortened faces over which faint emotions played like the light of a distant fire...blank as the faces on coins" (253). While this is not verbatim, there is a clear echo between the scenes¹⁷. "The Soul is Not a Smithy," in many ways, is a kind of microcosm of *The Pale King* and it is interesting to note what details and images Wallace chose to include in the story. Certainly, the recurrence of *The Exorcist* is not accidental. The function of the film in the novel remains somewhat unknowable – a casualty of the novel's incompleteness, perhaps – but I will examine a couple of the mentions of it and round out my interpretation of the film's import by revisiting "The Soul..."

The novel's first mention of *The Exorcist* occurs in chapter 19, in which DeWitt Glendenning, Stuart Nichols, and couple others are stuck in a malfunctioning elevator. The brunt of the chapter details a dialogic exploration between the men concerning the decline in civic responsibility¹⁸ exercised by U.S. citizens, but an extended consideration of the movie tries to create an analogy for the rest of the topic:

¹⁷ That both the story and chapter 23 take place in Columbus, Ohio – a place unmentioned in the entirety of the rest of the novel – also seems to suggest something: perhaps the chapter is from an early draft of the story.

¹⁸ This part of the novel will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.

“I think what’s changed somehow is they don’t think of themselves as personally responsible. They don’t think of it like that their personal, individual going and buying a ticket for *The Exorcist* is what adds to the demand that keeps the corporate machines coming out with more and more violent movies to satisfy the demand.”

“They expect the government to do something about it.”

“Or corporations to grow souls” (138-9)

Given the contextualization of the film that we will see in the rest of the novel, it does not seem like an arbitrary choice that *The Exorcist* is the example that Glendenning, et al., land on. The movie (and others like it) seems to represent the cultural agency of the invisible world here, in that in its excessive spectacle it draws citizens away from attending to civic duties. It is the sort of addictive and toxic entertainment Wallace puts center-stage in *Infinite Jest*, but in this case Wallace uses not only a real film, but one that is historically controversial – frequently condemned by religious groups as obscene, for example – and frightening as well. This quote also demonstrates a suggestion that the issue lies somewhere beyond politics and the market.

The next mention of *The Exorcist* is in chapter 32, which is devoted entirely to a scene in which the narrator – Nugent, in this case – calls his sister Julie on the phone in order to have her perform her impersonation of famous lines from *The Exorcist* for his coworkers. She acquiesces, and impresses everyone. It seems important that the voices Julie is performing come in over the phone: her own voice and the impersonations have a “tinny, desiccated quality” (373) and the power of the impersonations cause visible shock in the listeners. The third mention is in chapter 33, in which Lane Dean Jr. overhears the previous chapter’s phone conversation, and reflects that no one “in either [Sheri’s or his own] congregation ever saw *The Exorcist*. It was against Catholic dogma and an obscenity. It was not entertainment” (381). To the very religious Dean, who earlier in the

chapter repeatedly mentally prays in face of the terrifying tedium he is experiencing, this random encounter with a film declared verboten by a church must contribute even more assuredly to the ungodliness and hellishness he is already attributing to his work place. Later, during his hallucination or encounter with the phantom, Dean witnesses a fellow who makes “his hands into claws and held them out at the other wiggler like a demon or someone possessed. The whole thing happened too fast to almost be real to Lane Dean . . . someone else had called it that, *soul murdering*” (385). Furthermore, at the very end of the chapter, Dean looks at the clock to see that “no time had passed at all” (385), solidifying the stygian atmosphere of the work place. The tedium in respect to the film about possession obviously points out Dean’s conviction of the “soul crushing” aspects of the job. But the satanic imagery is difficult to discount, and it suggests that the invisible world is inimical to spiritual wellbeing. It also contributes to the very decidedly supernatural façade of that world: it does not function purely ideologically, such that a character’s personal false consciousness is the mechanism for oppression, but is possessed by an evil sort of consciousness or agency. This may or may not be the case, in terms of what Wallace wants to say about tedium, but it certainly *is* the case for the characters in the midst of the tedium.

The Exorcist can be seen as a small detail that simply adds to this underworld atmosphere, but it seems more significant. To round out my point, I will be returning to “The Soul is Not a Smithy” and its treatment of the film. The narrator of “The Soul...” recounts finding the film profoundly obscene when he and his wife viewed the movie in a theater; nonetheless the image that sticks with him is the nightmare sequence experienced by Father Karras in the film. Specifically, the narrator is haunted by the

single-frame splice of Father Karras's face done up in demonic white, with fangs, that flashes during the nightmare. As for why he is so disturbed by the image, the narrator says "it can only be the incongruous, near instantaneous quality of its appearance. For it is true that the most vivid and enduring occurrences in our lives are often those that occur at the periphery of our awareness" (97). Here is a brief exploration of what this can mean with regard to the invisible world: the narrator, plagued by attention deficit disorder for most of his life, along with a general tendency to dwell on irrelevant details¹⁹, witnesses a representation of a face of evil²⁰ that is meant to be peripheral in the extreme. His attention is rewarded with a glimpse of the devil, so to speak, which is, of course, Faustian in any number of ways. But the equation of paying attention and seeing evil, coming face to face with the adversary is meaningful: note that this is perhaps the only glimpse of the devil behind the possession in the film, which means that through devoted attention, one may see, however briefly, the face of the invisible.

The religious aspects of *The Pale King* show us a shift in ideology, and what this shift means to the characters of the novel. For Dean, who is stubbornly loyal to his religion, it means he possesses a clear view of the new ideology as a demonic or hellish entity, and therefore experiences a deep spiritual turmoil in interaction with the domain. For Fogle, who "sees the light" through a sort of subversion of religious language by the invisible domain, it shows that the invisible domain can overcome clashing ideologies by taking over rhetoric. Finally, the tying of *The Exorcist* to the invisible domain suggests

¹⁹ He does this in much the same way that Chris Fogle does.

²⁰ That the face of evil is pale may or may not be relevant, but in pre-drafting stages of this thesis I considered referring to the invisible world entity in the novel as "The Pale King," as "invisible world" was becoming cumbersome. The phrase is the known to be Wallace's intended title of the novel, and the title is never at all satisfactorily explained in the work. All of which makes the term seem to fit the bill, so to speak.

that the nature of the invisible domain is ultimately evil, and only occasionally and perhaps subliminally visible (given the very brief glimpse the narrator of “The Soul...” is allowed.) These depictions of the domain strengthen Wallace’s characterization of contemporary American ideology as a nefarious and spiritually detrimental entity.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SUPERNATURAL ASPECTS OF *THE PALE KING*

The first mention of the supernatural in *The Pale King* is a rather direct addressing of the issue that takes up the entirety of chapter 15, which opens with this: “An obscure but true piece of paranormal trivia: there is such a thing as a *fact psychic*” (118). From here, the chapter goes on to discuss the qualifications of this condition, the random acquisition in the effected of meaningless random data, sometimes from the world at large, sometimes from people or places in the vicinity. In *The Pale King*, this is especially thematically key: the question of what to pay attention to, of which facts out of the millions of bits of data have meaning, is fundamental. It is also, if we believe the previous chapter’s argument that the tedium of the examiners’ job is more or less literally hell-like, the avenue through which one’s salvation may be attainable. In *The Pale King*, attention is something supernatural, a quasi-mystical attribute so rare that those who possess a great ability for it are superhuman. There are a number of supernatural facets to the novel, but I want to focus on three of them: Claude Sylvanshine’s random-fact intuition, Shane Drinion’s levitation, and the phantoms and ghosts haunting the Center. Also worth mentioning is Chris Fogle’s concentration ability outlined in the notes at the end of the novel. These supernatural aspects of the novel serve to further cement *The Pale King*’s place in the modern mythological narrative form – Doležel’s examination of that form suggests the restoration of the supernatural, despite the fact that the “modern myth...is a product of the secular culture of the twentieth century” (Doležel 198). He ultimately discounts the validity of the supernatural in the modern myth outside the realm

of national motif and imagery²¹, but this, to me, seems undeveloped. Culture in the twentieth century is increasingly secular to be sure, but it is also a century built on the older grand narratives of Christianity. The modern myth relies on classical myth, on the thing that came before. . Wallace is writing in the years when modernist sensibilities can seem quaint, and in which even the postmodern seems cute, which makes his interest in the supernatural in *The Pale King* all the more stylistically purposeful²²and compelling to look at. In any case, there seems to be a function in the modern myth that asks for the supernatural yet still, and I believe that the heroic aspects of the modern myth is where this function comes from.

I. Claude Sylvanshine and Random-Fact Intuition

Sylvanshine is the first character we meet in the novel: in chapter2 he is on a small plane to Peoria for the CPA exam. Random factoids and formulae regarding this test punctuate Sylvanshine's observations of his fellow passengers. One indication of where the novel is headed is the deathlike figure of an elderly woman, who is a fellow passenger on the plane The interruptions Sylvanshine is experiencing can perhaps be chalked up mostly to stress, as it is only in chapter 15 that we discover that what he

²¹ Or, this is sort of the case: Doležel is, unfortunately, rather vague on this point. His example of the possible supernatural in the modern myth comes from his analysis of Andrei Belyj's *Petersburg*, in which, as with our novel, there exist phantoms that serve something like emissaries between the visible and invisible worlds – at the end of the chapter, however, he *seems* to suggest that the phantoms are the result of Belyj's interaction with Russian nationalism, and therefore they constitute a unique, exceptionable case. This is the point that he is rather vague on, however. I would posit that if the phantoms in *Petersburg* are legitimized as specifically a Russian concern, the hallucinations, etc., in *The Pale King*, offered in conjunction with that great American tradition the horror film (*The Exorcist* in this case) are similarly legitimized. I.e., understanding the work ethic through old Christian values inherent in the American approach to task completely makes the presence of demonic entities understandable. This seems to go back even in U.S. literature quite far, in, e.g., "Young Goodman Brown." But that is best left as the subject of a different paper.

²² And, again, given the absence of the supernatural in much of his other fiction, it is very interesting.

actually experiences is an ineffectual form of extrasensory perception. “In the case of GS-9 fact psychic Claude Sylvanshine,” that chapter tells us, “on, say, 12 July 1981, the precise metric weight and speed of a train moving southwest through Prešov, Czechoslovakia, at the precise moment he’s supposed to be crosschecking 1099-INT receipts” (119). These bits of data constitute a sort of field of distraction: “one reason Sylvanshine’s always so intent and discomfiting is that he’s always trying to filter out all sorts of psychically intuited and intrusive facts” (119). The psychic bombardment of information can be easily read as allegorical for the literal bombardment of information that marks US media culture in the 2000s, and the trick to navigating it, for Sylvanshine (and for US citizens,) to determine what is important to pay attention to. We are clouded by irrelevance²³. This condition of contemporary U.S. life was, as I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, very much a concern for Wallace for much of his career. As he told David Lipsky, “I received 500,000 discrete bits of information today, of which 25 are important. My job is to make some sense of it” (161). *Infinite Jest*, of course, is largely about what it means to become overly infatuated with incoming information, as well as how this flow can be drug-like and perhaps even weaponized²⁴. What makes information so distracting and alluring, for Wallace, is “a strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering, [and] TV’s²⁵ going to avoid these like the plague in

²³ In very recent times, a psychological condition has been named for those unable to discern what is useful and what is not in this deluge of data: infomania. With unprecedented technological access and multiple forms of social networking, tech-junkies can fall into an obsessive devouring of any bit of content available (Zomorodi).

²⁴ As seen in the Quebecois terrorist’s plot to use the mind-numbingly entertaining film *Infinite Jest* to overthrow the Canadian government.

²⁵ Wallace being a child of the 70s, it is television that offers the most addictive flow of infotainment for him.

favor of something anesthetic and easy” (qtd. in McCaffery). Wallace insists that, in non-Western-industrial cultures

getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire’s still going. But if you just look at the number of ways that [Americans] try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms... - from fast-fast-fast-relief antacids to the popularity of lighthearted musicals during the Depression—you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem (qtd. in McCafferty).

Some of this is question-begging: these other cultures Wallace mentions remain nameless, other than being non-Western. The exact mechanism through which industrialization causes this pain-as-problem mentality also stays unexplored in this interview. This last is a question, though, that the novels try to answer.

Technology acting on a spiritual level (i.e., as a salve for suffering, etc.) is a not-unvisited theme in contemporary American fiction: Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* sees something mythological or mystical in the otherness of technology. That novel, with its “death made in a laboratory” (127), the religio-mystical communion of the check-out lanes at a supermarket (“Everything that we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks”. [326]), looks beyond the ideological functions of consumer culture to something much more spiritually nefarious, as in the scene in which Jack Gladney checks his balance at an ATM:

I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we are in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies (46).

The idea that the “deranged person” somehow is no longer in accord with “the networks” indicates a power of exclusion from the system and a hint that to not

participate would to be insane. This is very directly modern-mythological: the holy system is even deemed invisible. In *The Pale King*, the mystical or paranormal way in which Sylvanshine is inundated with flecks of data and irrelevant information suggests a system in its own right, a stratosphere of information accessible through technology or extrasensory perception. This places Sylvanshine in the position of the superhuman or the classically heroic: the person touched, as it were, by the gods.

Late in the novel, Sylvanshine has become an aide to Dr. Merrill Errol Lehl, who, according to Wallace's notes presented at the end of the book, is creating a sort of occult group of examiners able to perform at a superhuman rate (540). The notes suggest that Fogle possesses the ability to gain total concentration with a mysterious series of numbers that he discovered while processing audits (541), and that this is why Sylvanshine is attempting to recruit him for Lehl. It is unfortunate, again, that the final vision for the novel never came to fruition such that we can get a clear vision of what Wallace finally intended with this team of supernatural examiners, but in the novel as is, the mystery of their powers deepens the unknowable nature of the invisible world.

Before moving on to the next chapter, I would like to point out that one way in which the novel is somewhat sympathetic to Sylvanshine is that it saturates the reader with similar bits of data throughout. This is how the invisible domain is saturated in *The Pale King*, to use Doležel's term: it uses very short chapters for this occasionally, such as chapters 10 and 11, which contain legal and medical jargon that a reader is inclined to skim through or skip altogether, though a reader may also have his attention rewarded by

finding useful or illustrative kernels²⁶. The world is built through these subtle and buried tidbits – through the white noise of data the reader is left to cull significance. It is this kind of saturation that makes the novel sort of a litmus test for the reader herself. In other cases, it is not jargon but tedium that the reader has to parse through. For this informational tedium, Chapter 25 is the famous example: “‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page,” (310) and so on *ad nauseum*. If the reader soldiers through this monotony, however, she will be rewarded with mysterious sentences imbedded within, such as “Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror” and “Every love story is a ghost story” (312). What these statements mean is up to the reader – the latter may refer to the theme of failed relationships throughout the book, for example – but their being buried so deeply in the tedium-saturated text suggest that they are meaningful in some way. The text demands of us that we go and find them. Like with Sylvanshine’s RFI, however, the successful delivery of these facts and their significance is hindered by the white noise.

II. Shane Drinion’s Levitation

Concentration is championed by the invisible world in *The Pale King*. This is suggested in the notes about Fogle, as well as in the inability of Lane Dean - committed to an outdated and conflicting ideology – to focus in his hellish environment. Perhaps it is most notable with Shane Drinion, who is a sort of personality-less drone of an examiner who levitates when in the throes of extreme concentration. In Chapter 46, the

²⁶ “The bureaucracy is not a closed system; it is this that makes it a world instead of a thing” (86) is an example of this from §10. That the agents experience “Phobic anxiety (numerical)” and “Unexplained bleeding” (88) is a contribution of §11.

last very lengthy chapter of the novel, Drinion encounters Meredith Rand – who is “totally, wrist-bitingly attractive” to the male examiners and therefore an object of some scorn for the female examiners (447) – at the examiner’s Friday evening happy hour. Drinion is “unaffected by the presence of a terribly attractive woman” and is “possibly the dullest human being currently alive”²⁷(448), and when he is listening to a person talk, “there is no particular study in his gaze; he just gives whoever is speaking his complete attention” (448). Perhaps it is this reputation that summons Meredith Rand to begin a long, confessional personal history to Drinion. This history, much like Chris Fogle’s, is a meandering and circular narrative and riven with superfluous detail. Even Rand seems aware of this, as skeptical as she is of Drinion’s undivided attention to her story. She suspects that Drinion’s attention has something to do with her attractiveness, as this exchange makes plain:

‘All right, I’ll play the little game here,’ Meredith Rand says. ‘Do you think I’m pretty?’
‘Yes.’
‘Do you find me attractive?’
‘...’
‘Well, do you?’
‘I find that question confusing. I’ve heard it in movies and read it in books. It’s strangely phrased. There’s something confusing about it. It seems to ask for an objective opinion as to whether the person you’re talking to would describe you as attractive. From the context it usually appears in, though, it seems almost always to be a way of asking whether the person you’re talking to is sexually attracted to you” (460).

Note Drinion’s computer-like analysis of Rand’s question, his earnest attempt at motiveless accuracy. It is through media that Drinion has collected data through which to

²⁷ A truly copious amount of academic papers, by the way, could be written on the focalization of the narration throughout the novel. This § features an extremely free indirect 3rd person narration, making chatty judgments on the general goings-on here.

make a kind of judgment on Rand's insecurities. This objectivity is partly technological – the books and the TV – but it is also the product of the completely objective and machine-like way Drinion has in interface with the human sphere. As Rand's confessional conversation goes on and as Drinion becomes immersed, he begins to levitate a couple inches off of his chair.

A key aspect of Drinion's pure concentration is that according to Wallace's ultimate scheme for the novel, Drinion "is *happy*...it turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (546). Drinion's levitation, of course, brings to mind various bromides of joy, "floating" etc., as well as the image of the levitating monk rapt in meditation. In the world of *The Pale King*, attention/concentration is imbued with a kind of godliness. (This last point will be examined more in Chapter Five of this thesis.)

Yet, this is an area where we begin to receive mixed messages from the novel. Assuming that the ideologically-driven invisible world in *The Pale King* is nefarious and at least somewhat satanic, what does it mean that the character who represents boredom – which seem to embody or be a symptom of the system - exhibits perhaps the best ability to deal with the system? That is, if Drinion, the perfect tool of the ideology, is happy, and if his levitation symbolizes a sort of holiness-of-attention dynamic, then why does his personality seem so inhuman, so representative of the system that is anathema to earnest attention-paying? A part of the complication, of course, has to do with the novel's incompleteness, but there seems to be a kind of statement here about the nature of heroism in the modern myth. I will explore this complication in Chapter Five.

III. Ghosts/Apparitions

The theme of death and afterlife in the examiners' rows, of course, augments the stygian aura of that workplace. An early chapter written as a newspaper article details the death of Frederick Blumquist, who passed away at his desk and was not discovered for four days. Blumquist's supervisor chalks up no one noticing the corpse to Blumquist being "the first guy in each morning and the last to leave at night. He was very focused and diligent, so no one found it unusual that he was in the same position all the time" (27-8). This chapter is one of the more heavy-handed thematic forays in the novel, as it reads like absurdist comedy. Yet it does cement the boredom-equals-death equation in the novel. Blumquist shows up later as a ghost. In Chapter 26 we get a taxonomical report of the two different varieties of apparition that the examiners experience. The first are hallucinatory phantoms, occurring to only certain kinds of examiners "at a certain threshold of concentrated boredom" (314), and manifesting as a diametrically different personality of the examiner who's currently seeing it, so that, e.g., "Devout wigglers see demons; prudish ones see splayed harlots or priapistic gauchos. The immaculately hygienic get visits from filthy figures whose clothing jumps with fleas" (314-15). In other words, they are haunted by things repulsive. Obviously this plays into the hellish aspect. There are two "actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room" (315), however. Blumquist's ghost "basically just sits with you...Only a slight translucence about Blumquist and his chair betrays anything untoward" and to the visited examiner he poses "no bother" (316). The implication here is that dying on the job means truly never leaving.

Two different types of visitations – from the psychological phantoms and from the “actual” ghosts – shows the variety of signification at the wiggle room. With the former, the examiners are assaulted by visual representations of things they’d, as individuals, find repulsive. These are brought about by a sort of psychological trauma of mindless boredom. Or, on the plane of the natural, the place and work are detrimental to well-being. The latter type of apparition paints the wiggle rooms as spiritual hells as well, or at least a sort of afterlife or purgatory. Thinking back to Doležel’s “shadow realm” with its “phantoms” as represented in *Petersburg*, I argue that the wiggle rooms act as a sort of shadow realm in *The Pale King*. This intermediate realm, in this case, seems to operate on the minds and abilities of those subjected to it: Fogle apparently discovers his mystical number here, Sylvanshine apparently finds that his RFI may be valuable here after becoming an aid to Dr. Lehl, Drinion levitates here. Lane Dean Jr. experiences his own encounter with a phantom here, as well: as he is fantasizing about suicide and envisioning the room as hell in Chapter 33, a figure appears to him and begins reciting a historical and cultural accounting of the word “bore.” Though apparently a phantom of his own psyche, this apparition relates information that Dean does not know:

...bored *of* as opposed to *with* is a class marker which is all that ever really concerns Partridge. The only Partridge Lane Dean knew was the same TV Partridge everybody else knew. He had no earthly idea what this guy was talking about but at the same time it unnerved him that he’d been thinking about *bore* as a word as well, the word, many returns ago. Philologists [*this is the apparition speaking again*] say it was a neologism – and just at the time of the industry’s rise, too, yes? of the mass man, the automated turbine and the drill bit and bore, yes? Hollowed out? . . . Look for instance at L.P. Smith’s *English Language*... Posits certain neologisms as *arising from their own cultural necessity* (384).

It is hard to determine whether this apparition is one of Dean's hallucinatory conjuring (it may be Garrity, the other "actual" ghost, though it does not quite meet the same description we get on 315-16). Though it is aware of information that Dean does not know, it also seems to have been brought about by Dean's own frenetic meditation on the word *bore*. It seems, then, to bridge the gap between the psychological and the supernatural. Furthermore, with the apparition's discussion of the cultural necessity of the term *bore* at the rise of industry can be read as a missive from the invisible domain of the capitalist origin of the boredom versus attention issue. It ties the aspects together in some ways: Wallace uses the supernatural image to tie boredom to industrial labor, and therefore to suggest that boredom is culturally necessary in an industrial society. Also significant is that it is Dean - the most advertently religious of any of the characters - who is made privy to this knowledge. Despite being religious, and perhaps because of it, Dean is the only major character deeply bothered by the tedium that he likens it to hell.

Figuring out the precise interrelation of these factors is difficult; I would posit that Dean's history of doing the "right" thing or the "responsible" thing, as determined by his religion, complicates his motivational cluster. Therefore, his own morality, coming from outside the invisible domain, is unwelcome and even detrimental to his mental wellbeing in the purgatorial wiggle room. The invisible domain rejects ideologies counter to its needs, in other words.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE CIVIC ASPECT OF *THE PALE KING*

DeLillo's *White Noise* was written in the early 1980s; it was published in 1985. This novel's equation of the consumeristic and technological to the mystical and religious in some ways is the result of 1980s culture. Increasingly, industry came to rely on technology beyond the layman's casual understanding – perhaps readers could relate to Jack Gladney's feeling of cosmic acceptance, of being a primitive in a mythical world, when the ATM communicates his checking balance to him. *White Noise* suggests that the intersection of grand narratives at this edge of the postmodern era meant that meaning could be had from any source, that if commodity culture brings one comfort, perhaps there exists something spiritual in that. No one could deign to want more when even the president relied on astrology for various policy decisions and “his strategic defense proposal was strikingly reminiscent of one of his own movies” (Hertzberg 371). That the office of the president was held by a western and war movie actor²⁸ is postmodern in itself, but that one of the president's biggest preoccupations was the risk of an extraterrestrial invasion (Hertzberg 372) seems like something drawn from a Pynchon novel.

For these reasons, perhaps, and because of the 1980s being a sort of ground zero for neoliberal economic policy takeover in the United States, David Foster Wallace set *The Pale King* in the early to mid 1980s. (Incidentally, it is his only novel to not take place in the somewhat near future.) In this chapter I will examine the long political

²⁸ Which might suggest that the portrayal of American heroism/masculine stereotype is indistinguishable from the embodiment of it, etc.

discussion that takes place in Chapter 19 in hopes to establish a conversation about ideological functions in the novel before tying the ideological aspects of the novel to the mythological aspects of Doležel.

I. The Elevator Discussion

Chapter 19 features a long conversation between DeWitt Glendenning and three or four other individuals. (I must thank Adam Kelly, in his paper “David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas,” for delineating who exactly is in the broken elevator with Glendenning – it is “Stuart Nichols, a man named Gaines, and a character simply named X” (14) as well as a mysterious first person narrator who pops up for a single “I said” – as this was undoubtedly quite a chore given that the dialogue in the chapter is unattributed.) It is this dialogue that the novel displays the biggest single part of its concern with civic responsibility and the most direct addressing of the real²⁹ ideological issues governing the book. Adam Kelly uses this specific scene to describe the Dostoevsky-like quality of dialogue in Wallace’s later work; what makes *The Pale King* a “novel of ideas” is Wallace’s ability to display earnest debate and discussion about politics circa the United States 1960-1980. At what point in the book this conversation would have ended up in the final, polished draft will not ever be known, but regardless, in many ways chapter 19 is the heart of the novel, a picture of not just apolitical truth but, more importantly to Wallace, a non-dogmatic, clear-eyed discussion thereof—a depiction, in other words, of how a political debate held in the Democratic Spirit should be performed. In “Authority and American Usage,” Wallace examines the virtues and

²⁹ “Real” here may be confusing; I suppose I mean the central sort of moral to be taken from the book, something not bequeathed by ghosts or phantoms or religious confusion, etc.

difficulties of achieving this dialogue in earnest: “A Democratic Spirit’s constituent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it’s almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some dogmatic camp” (72). Responsibility to the Democratic Spirit requires a sort of constant vigilance and self-governance that Glendenning, with his hesitant qualifications and openness, demonstrates in this chapter. Furthermore, the scene is key in unlocking a large chunk of the novel’s mythological concerns.

Glendenning, the general manager of the Peoria center, and offers a representation of something fairly close to the ideal citizen for Wallace. In a late chapter, Wallace-the-character relates a fantasy in which he encounters Glendenning in a quiet setting and is given a glimpse into his (Glendenning’s) day-to-day approach to work:

Sometimes I imagined coming into the coffee room and finding Mr. Glendenning, alone, leaning back against the counter, staring into his coffee and thinking deep administrative thoughts. In my fantasy he looks tired, not haggard but careworn, weighed down by the responsibilities of his position. I come in and get some coffee and approach him, he calling me Dave and I calling him DeWitt or even D.G . . . and I ask what’s up and he confides in me about some administrative dilemma he’s on the horns of, like how the systems guy Lehl’s constant reconfiguration of people’s spaces and passages between them was a ridiculous pain in the ass and waste of time and if it were up to him he’d personally pick the officious little prick up by the scruff of his neck and put him in a box with only one or two air-holes in it and FedEx him back to Martinsburg (435).

The fantasy concludes with David Wallace’s giving Glendenning a practical solution to a banal issue and being rewarded expressions of gratitude. I quote this passage at such length because it deals directly with a number of the novel’s themes and ideas. The most immediate of these has to do with the kind of generational dynamic performing the novel: a goodly number of times the reader receives a missive from one of the characters

regarding his father and the sorts of disappointments and various ideological differences present in the interactions thereof. Chris Fogle's long descriptions in Chapter 22 about his relationship with his father, the various disappointments and generational dissonance in their relationship, would be an example. The long, boredom-haunted dream described in chapter 23 would be another instance of this theme: in any case, the characters' parental associations in *The Pale King* nearly ubiquitously point to dissonance and alienation. In the passage quoted above, Glendenning functions as a sort of father-figure. Wallace-the-character yearns for approval and comradery from Glendenning in a way that the other characters do not, necessarily, from their fathers. Also, we see a mention of Lehl³⁰ that not only equates him with technology ("systems guy" etc.) but puts him in an antagonist position that both Glendenning and Wallace-the-character agree on. As we will see, Glendenning represents an old-fashioned masculine ideal of rather conservative civic responsibility that we also get from, e.g., Chris Fogle's father. Of course Wallace would have his fictional stand-in seek out comfort and approval from Glendenning.

The elevator scene³¹ features Glendenning and the above-mentioned other three-or-four stuck in a malfunctioning elevator, while engaged in an analysis of the political and civil situation of circa 1980. Glendenning begins the debate with "There's something very interesting about civics and selfishness, and we get to ride the crest of it"³² (130), and this is a very purposeful statement to begin the chapter with. To Wallace, like DeLillo before him, this time period was a sort of ground zero for late capitalism and for

³⁰ Who I discuss, briefly, in a previous chapter.

³¹ I.e., Chapter 19.

³² I need to point out here that later in my argument, the specifics of this quote will be very important.

neoliberalism. It was the height of spiritual consumerism, too, according to DeLillo's novel. Here, Glendenning points to the inevitable fate, as he sees, of consumer culture:

'...Corporations are getting better and better at seducing us into thinking the way they think – of profits as the *telos* and responsibility as something to be enshrined in symbol and evaded in reality. Cleverness as opposed to wisdom. Wanting and having as opposed to thinking and making. We cannot stop it. I suspect what'll happen is that there will be some sort of disaster – depression, hyperinflation – and then it'll be showtime: We'll either wake up and take out freedom or we'll fall apart utterly' (130-31).

This statement, like all but one of the paragraphs of dialogue in chapter 19, is unattributed, but the sentiments are in keeping with those that Glendenning expresses later in the same chapter. Of course, Wallace-the-author is writing with twenty-plus years of hindsight, but by placing *The Pale King* at this point in U.S. history he is able not only to create a character that seems preternaturally in-tune with the political/climate, but he is also able to use that character to tragic ends with regard to that knowledge. The above quotation can apply to the 2010s as easily as the 1980s, and it should, given that a novel concerned overtly with ideology must give us a peek at the period contemporary to its composition. That being said, the dialogue in the elevator is more complicated than the rather vague rhetoric displayed above.

As Kelly points out, the dialogue consists primarily of DeWitt Glendenning's (somewhat) conservative exploration of the crumbling of the civic spirit in the American citizen and Stuart Nichols's (somewhat) more liberal extrapolation of that exploration. Interrupting these speakers is Gaines and X, who offer mostly minor refutations or chatty rejoinders, though occasionally they offer the sort of shortsighted rebuttals that tend to prove Glendenning's points. There are two things very important (for my purposes) about this dialogue. First is the very rhetorical nature of the exchanges – the speech from

Glendenning and Nichols never becomes demagogic in the way that typifies political ‘discussion’ in the U.S. c. 2016. Engaging in something like, as Kelly argues, an early-Socratic dialogic model, in which “truth-seeking is organic to the genre of the dialogue itself”³³ (Kelly 6), Glendenning and Nichols set out to arrive at an answer to why the sense of civic responsibility seems to be declining in American citizens. This dialogic tradition appears often in Dostoevsky’s novels, as well, as discussed in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* by Mikhail Bakhtin (Kelly 6). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, observe how Dostoevsky gives his character Ivan Karamazov an opinion on religion diametrically opposed to Dostoevsky’s own views on Christianity, and he does this in a way that recognizes and fairly treats Ivan’s specific, individual psychology as opposed to having Ivan function merely as a sort of foil. That is, Ivan’s argument is valid and convincing and powerful and “his own,” despite the author’s own religious convictions³⁴. Thus do Dostoevsky’s characters function with a real-seeming psychology, and also thus do his novels represent earnest attempts to get to the bottom of important, moral questions, much as Wallace wanted his own work to do. Keeping the above in mind, we will now return to Glendenning and Nichols. One of the things the elevator dialogue accomplishes is a dismissal of cut-and-dried political denominations: when one of the other voices –Gaines or X – shrugs off Glendenning’s argument with ““Did I tell you he was a conservative?”” Glendenning responds with ““But that’s just a put-down. There are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve” (*The Pale King* 132). As the dialogue continues, similar dismissals of political agendas

³³ As opposed to truth being inherent in a single consciousness – the lecturer, i.e. – here the truth is arrived at through the mechanism of a dialogue between equals.

³⁴ This is a shallow analysis of Bakhtin’s thesis, admittedly, though not incorrect.

disappear. Kelly argues that the “unattributed quality of the dialogue suggests...Wallace is not particularly interested in dividing the positions of his characters into traditional liberal/conservative or left/right binaries” (15). Furthermore, here is Kelly on the nature of Glendenning’s rhetoric “Glendenning in this scene seems unconcerned to wield power over others. Instead, his interest is focused on what he and others are saying, he is dialogically responsive in Bakhtin’s sense, and his tone is generally a humble one, admitting confusion about the accuracy and tightness of his arguments” (15). These two quotes are important because their sentiments are reflected in Wallace’s own political concerns and writing. Though Wallace was not, for much of his nonfiction *oeuvre*, an overtly political writer, a few of his later essays express a concern for the political scene of the millennial United States. Notably, in “Host,” Wallace spends time with conservative radio host John Zeigler and meditates on the state of political discourse in the U.S. In the aforementioned “Authority and American Usage,” Wallace discusses (among other things) the political ideologies behind more permissive or less permissive American English usage guides and what these say, ultimately, about American political ideologies³⁵. Both of these essays show an abiding interest in (and disgust for) how Americans talk about politics. The latter essay spends time considering the cons of using Politically Correct English³⁶ (PCE): “Usage is always political,” his argument goes, “but it’s complexly political. . . . Usage conventions can functions in two ways: on one hand they can be a *reflection* of political change, and on the other they can be an *instrument* of

³⁵ I might include “Up, Simba,” which Wallace wrote on the campaign trail with John McCain in 2000 and is more or less contemporary to the above-mentioned essays, but this piece seems somewhat less concerned about political discourse in U.S. culture and more concerned with being simply entertaining. For one thing, “Up, Simba” contains far fewer footnotes than the above-mentioned, which is a point that will become relevant in a minute.

³⁶ “Differently-abled,” e.g., or “Economically Disadvantaged.”

political change” (“Authority...” 111). What makes PCE dangerous is the confusion of these functions – that it operates under the assumption that it can be an instrument of political change, but is rather “a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo” (112). The debate around linguistic nuance matters little the person at the poverty line, whether he is called “poor” or “economically disabled,” goes Wallace’s argument, and anyway that debate does nothing to help the person’s situation. Language can help or hinder the citizen, and its functions and mechanisms, yielding to ideology, are often used as a tool of misdirection and oppression.

In a 2003 interview in *Believer* magazine, Wallace explicitly identifies the difficulty of earnest dialogue as one of the defining political problems of the 2000s.

As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 [sic] percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it’s supposed to be about. Meaning it’s become totally ideological and reductive...Everybody’s pissed off and exasperated and impervious to argument from any other side. Opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil. . . . Since the truth is way, way more gray and complicated than any one ideology can capture, the whole thing seems to me not just stupid but stupefying. (Eggers 74-5)

Reading *The Pale King*’s Chapter 19, it is difficult to not read Wallace’s thoughts on meaningful discussion in the nature of the elevator dialogue. Glendenning, by dint of his careful and patient examination of his own views, which by his own admission have never been verbally expressed up until this point but have rather been “a tornado in my head as I’m driving in the morning” (138), achieves something not only unheard of in 2000s discourse but that is of utmost importance. He parses out these complicated ideas through dialogue that is both earnest and meaningful: he achieves something human that’s outside the immediate ideology of late capitalism. Kelly writes that Chapter 19

“can be read as Wallace’s depiction of what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like” (14). Later in the above-mentioned interview Wallace speculates on the literary novelist’s place in such a culture and arrives at the conclusion that by grace of being capable (supposedly) of “a special kind of empathy” (Eggers 75), the young American novelist writing about the political can act as a sort of salve for the diseased discourse. Thus, the elevator conversation becomes a model for this, or perhaps a sort of wish unfulfilled.

To begin discussing the second very important thing about the dialogue in Chapter 19, I need to introduce some concepts from Louis Althusser. Althusser’s 1971 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” extends the Marxist theory of ideology beyond Marx’s own somewhat vague notions of false consciousness. In addition to the (repressive) state apparatus – those mechanisms of oppression such as the police, the army, prisons and so forth – that Marx describes, Althusser posits the existence of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) that exist to ensure the reproduction of labor-power. (In brief: the reproduction of labor-power requires a sort of mental conditioning of the workforce so that it is not only physically capable of labor, but also psychically convinced that the labor fits the natural order: ISAs create this mindset.) ISAs are “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (243) – institutions such as education, religion, politics, the family, etc., each of which fulfills a certain role in conditioning the proletariat for labor, and thus perpetuating the state ideology. Chapter 19 is the scene in which the functions of the political ISA are perhaps most observable in *The Pale King*. Though the superficial crux of the conversation is that, as Glendenning says, “attitudes

about paying taxes seems like one of the places where a man's civic sense gets revealed in the starkest sorts of terms" (141), over the course of the conversation, he and Nichols begin to examine the more profound elements implicit in the considerations of civic duty, democracy. Glendenning states that he wishes he could get away from using political language, even if the issue is "probably irreducibly political" (136), and Nichols states explicitly that the issue of civic responsibility (or lack thereof) "goes beyond politics" (142) to be something rather more abstract:

'Maybe it's existential. I'm talking about the individual US citizen's deep fear, the same basic fear that you and I have and that everybody has except nobody ever talks about it except existentialists in convoluted French prose. . . .Our smallness, our insignificance and mortality. . . .the thing that we spend all our time not thinking about directly, that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces.'

(143)

Nichols's statement becomes something of a rant that extends for most of the page. Ralph Clare refers to this rant as a "light parody" and as hilarious "over-the-top existential angst" (Clare 194-5) whose energy is undercut by Gaines's (or X's) snappy retort "News flash: we're going to die" (*The Pale King* 144), but I would argue this angst also serves as a vehicle for a more considered epiphany between Glendenning and Nichols.

Glendenning clarifies: "I think Stuart's tracing the move from the production-model of American democracy to something more like a consumption-model. . . . That we're turning into consuming citizens instead of producing citizens" (146). In the consumer model (of "democracy," note, not capitalism) the citizen is overcome with a need for product-consumption to overcome existential fear. Whatever the issue is, "It has something to do with liberal individualism...the Constitution's overestimate of individual character, and something to do with consumer capitalism" (135). Through earnest

dialogue, attention, and awareness, these men are close to uncovering a singular truth about their condition, and the conditions of their fellow citizens; what is restricting them so far is being able to converse only in the lexicon of the political ISA, perhaps; recall Glendenning's lament about the state of political language. Whether this dialogue would have led to an actual prescriptive epiphany as these characters developed in a finished version of the novel we will never know. But, as we will see later, Wallace certainly hoped his book would be prescriptive; the characters' participating in an earnest and attentive dialogue seems key to whatever Wallace was working towards.

Furthermore, phrases like "consumer capitalism" are appearing: the 1980s became the moment when the election of Ronald Reagan initiated the full swing of neoliberal policy, after a slow dismantling of social and economic policies, established during the New Deal and Johnson's "Great Society," that regulated banks and businesses and favored a strong government presence in the market – and offered various types of safety-net support for workers. Clare sees that "Wallace weaves the history of neoliberal economics into *The Pale King*'s by tying its most spectacular element – the presidency of Ronald Reagan – to its least noticed – the change in the tax code that completed Reagan's Tax Revolt" (196-97) and that, through the novel, Wallace thoroughly examines the waves these changes effected in culture and politics. Clare argues that through the characters Gaines and X in the elevator scene (both of whom insist that the shift in civic responsibility recognized by Glendenning and Nichols is a leftover of sixties counterculture entitlement) and in Fogle's relation of his own casual nihilism to seventies "malaise" in chapter 22, Wallace is offering something of a sociological narrative that charts the societal effect of burgeoning neoliberalism. Wallace certainly made the choice

to place the book in the 1980s for reasons of political history, but like Don DeLillo writing *White Noise* in the early eighties, neoliberalism and consumer culture seem to him merely to represent symptoms of a shift in something profound and perhaps even mystical. This is something that has to do with technology, and religion, and death, and fear, what DeLillo calls “American magic and dread” (19).

I will explore these things more in the next chapter, but first I want to note that the chapter 19 conversation is taking place inside a broken elevator. Technology, which may be a sort of agential power of the invisible world, is faulty in this case, but also and more importantly, the individuals in the elevator are cloistered together, away from work and distraction. Here they – or at least Glendenning and Nichols – are compelled to explore, through dialogue, issues that before had only been flitting, “tornado”-like questions at the corners of their minds, something they had no time to examine until this particular point.

II. The Ideological Mechanics of the Invisible Domain

The Pale King has been called, in a review by the novelist Tom McCarthy, “a grand parable of late capitalism.” Given Wallace’s late career political concerns and nature of the elevator discussion, the novel certainly seems ripe for Marxist interpretation. What’s more, though Doležel never explicitly discusses the ideological aspects of his theory, the theory itself lends itself very easily to neo-Marxist explanation (especially with regard to motivational factors and, of course, the nature of the invisible domain in the modern myth). Because this lack of discussion seems like a gap in useful literary theory, in this chapter I hope to demonstrate how ideological mechanisms contribute to Doležel’s ideas, and thus to our understanding of *The Pale King*. Because

Louis Althusser's "On Ideology" explicates ideological concepts most helpful to this analysis, this is the theoretical scaffolding I will use here.

In "On Ideology," Althusser develops a theoretical approach to ideology, which remained under-examined in the original Marx. Most notably, he is interested in "by what mechanism ideology makes individuals 'act all by themselves' without the need to post a policeman behind each and every one of them" (177). That is, how does ideology function to make individuals self-governing according to the principles of that ideology, such that the "reproduction of the relation of production" (180) is secured? What makes this relevant to the novel, I want to demonstrate, is that the mechanism through which the invisible domain operates in *The Pale King* (and perhaps in Kafka, et al.) is very similar to, and perhaps the very same as, the ideological mechanism that Althusser describes. Ultimately, the invisible domain is ideological in nature. In trying to incorporate both Doležel's and Althusser's vocabularies into a useful whole, and then apply these ideas to *The Pale King*, I will examine a major aspect of this mechanism in the novel. I want to call it *ideological akrasia*. Recall that in Doležel, akratic acting occurs when a motivational conflict causes a character acts against his or her best interest (shows, in other words, a weakness of will.) What occurs in ideological akrasia is a conflict in *ideological* motivation – which causes the sort of mental/spiritual trauma we see in the characters in the novel. The characters who display the least amount of this akrasia (Drinion, and Fogle to an extent) are the ones who are able to sustain a certain amount of attention despite the intense tedium of their work. But that is getting somewhat ahead of the point.

For now, I need to describe some terms and concepts in greater detail. Althusser's first thesis in "On Ideology" is that "Ideology represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (181). That is, ideology is a lens through which an individual's real conditions are perceived; furthermore, because this imaginary relation is "an allusion to reality...that we need only 'interpret'" (181), we might infer that by paying the proper amount of attention, we can grasp reality. At least, perhaps we can devise a satisfactory way of living within the ideology. In *The Pale King*, many of the characters' relations with reality are distorted: Lane Dean Jr. sees the wiggle rooms as supernaturally inimical to his religion based on his Christian ideology; perhaps a more dynamic example would be Chris Fogle's long narrative, in which we see a complex interaction of ideologies. First, the sort of "malaise" of the seventies gives him a nihilistic worldview, in conflict with his father's more traditionally capitalistic worldview; later he encounters the Jesuit professor's worldview and is 'converted.' These worldviews function as motivators (in a way that, once again, Doležel implies but never explicates) that influence characters' actions. Althusser is explicit on the effects of conflicting ideological apparatuses:

Each subject...is subjected to several ideologies that are relatively independent, albeit unified under the unity of the State Ideology. . . . This 'combination' does not go all by itself. Hence what is called a 'conflict of duties'. . . . One has to make a choice and, even when one does not choose (consciously, after the 'crisis of conscience' that is one of the sacred rituals to be observed in such cases), the choice makes itself. (200)

These "conflicts of duties" are representative of the ideological akrasia that, e.g., Lane Dean Jr. experiences at the end of Chapter 6 and during Chapter 33.

In some ways, the modern myth is *about* akrasia – about the irrational actions that are brought about by motivational conflict. The issue in the modern myth is that ideological confusion makes akrasia a sort of status quo for its characters. Using Althusser's terms, one might say that this akrasia occurs when various independent State Ideological Apparatuses are “grating and grinding” (200). The characters who are not akrates, like Drinion for example, are those who seem to thrive in the tedium: these characters are heroic in a unique and perhaps selfish way. They are not heroic because they overcome the power of the invisible domain, but because, through the use of their abilities, they are allowed into it; they are allowed something like happiness. Drinion's robotic personality – perhaps he personifies the state ideology – seems to bear this out. Conversely, the tragic characters³⁷ are akratic because they cannot dwell meaningfully in the ideology: they are heroic in a different sort of way, in which they adhere to their outmoded ideologies, which still champion a kind of responsibility toward others³⁸. This overcoming the motivational conflicts is the test of the invisible domain, it seems. It is tempting to look at the invisible domain as the embodiment of state ideology, but Althusser reminds us that “there is no ideology except for concrete subjects . . . and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject” (188). This partners in compelling ways with Doležel's account of the supernatural in the modern myth,³⁹ in which he argues that “human activities, and, especially, the activities of social institutions, are incomprehensible, but [also that] a . . . supernatural explanation is either no longer available or lacks authenticity” (198). In twentieth century and beyond, bereft

³⁷ Glendenning and Dean.

³⁸ These models of heroism will be explicated in Chapter Five.

³⁹ See previous chapter.

of a strictly religious mythology, humans react to the incomprehensible in a perhaps akratic way,⁴⁰ in which we see a collapse of accountability. As Doležel writes at the end of his chapter on modern myth, “now that the gods are dead, humans themselves are responsible for the chaotic world they have created and operate” (198). He never quite enters into an ideological consideration of this model of the modern world, but to me it seems readymade for just such an approach. The world myth of the modern era is secular, human-built, but it perhaps, through whatever mechanism in the human mind demands a narrative, must be understood in the dyadic myth model, in which the visible world is governed by something invisible. Thus, the invisible world in *The Pale King* can be understood to function similarly to Althusser’s ISAs. The ISAs “function by ideology” (“Ideology...” 244), and ideology “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (256). The institutions in the invisible domain are similarly powered by a kind of pseudo-supernatural agency that is nonetheless fundamentally human. Much like the state ideology, this agency manifests in physical institutions: for example, the Court in Kafka’s *The Trial* or Triple-Six (or the examination centers) in *The Pale King*. The state ideology can be understood in terms of the world-creating myth, and vice-versa.

What *The Pale King*, written nearly a century after Doležel’s examples, gives us is a glimpse of the modern myth evolved, much as the late twentieth century features an evolved form of capitalist ideology. It updates Doležel’s model in various ways, in other words. The religious ISA, for example, has been commodified into a sort of consumeristic experience – see DeLillo’s *White Noise* again, in which shopping at a

⁴⁰ As stated in the previous chapter’s quotation of this same passage, Doležel does not go into great detail in this chapter of *Heterocosmica*.

supermarket or withdrawing from an ATM are events that become transcendent and inclusive. But Wallace's novel sees something like the collapse of the Democratic Spirit; this is the concern of Glendenning's civics dialogue.

In a recent essay for *Harper's* magazine, Marilynne Robinson describes the change that *The Pale King* is concerned with: "There has been a fundamental shift in American consciousness. The Citizen has become the Taxpayer. In consequence of this shift, public assets have become public burdens. . . . Citizenship, which once implied obligation, has now been deflated" (31). An individual's responsibilities toward the public, the federal government, etc., are to be railed against in favor of spending power and some kind of feeling of autonomy. Robinson points out that neither "Citizen" nor "Taxpayer" constitute a sort of natural state, but rather are political constructs created by "consenting to the phantasms of the moment or of the decade" (31). Aside from the elevator dialogue, Chris Fogle's long narrative in Chapter 22 displays this shift, too. In this narrative, the shift from Citizen to Taxpayer is shown in a sort of parable form in the generational tension between Fogle, the lazy, nihilistic child of the 1960s, and his father, a representative of the last generation to embody the publicly responsible Citizen. When Fogle is caught by his father getting high and living in filth with a group of similar "wastoid" friends, his father exclaims, "*Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*" (170), a bit of trenchant witticism that addresses more than it seems to. In it, we may read a claim of responsibility for this new generation. Throughout, Fogle's father seems anachronistic, as he is a stoic laborer and a wearer of old-fashioned suits. (It is not at all surprising that his demise is brought about by ill-functioning technology: a subway door

closes on his arm and he is pulled by the train into the subway tunnel.) Wallace could not have made the ideological differences between father and son more apparent.

Fogle's epiphany that draws him out of his nihilism (as stated previously) is triggered chance encounter with a Jesuit accounting professor who champions accounting as a heroic profession. Here, the educational and the religious ISAs work to initiate Fogle's transformation to the Taxpayer model, perhaps. Importantly, the professor states that successfully overcoming the burden of tedium on a daily level⁴¹ is what makes the job heroic. Contrast this with an observation of Fogle's father: "My father said the city in-services were the mostly just tedious, which was a word he used a fair amount, *tedious*" (169). It is worthy of note that, though Wallace espouses the Citizen through Glendenning and in essays like "Authority and American Usage," tedium and boredom plague the Citizen as much as they do the Taxpayer. The difference is in those key Wallacian terms, attention and awareness.

⁴¹ You will find the exact quotation on page 23 of this thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE:

HEROISM IN THE MODERN MYTH

Having now examined *The Pale King*'s representation of the mythological in the aspects of religion, the supernatural, and civic responsibility, as well as ideology, I would like to use these aspects to establish a theory of the heroic the modern myth. Some of the following is a summary of points made above; this is for the sake of clarity and thoroughness. Though Doležel's modern myth theory does not contain an accompanying modern theory of the heroic, I hope that the following analysis amends this absence, and that future scholarly work might build on the ideas presented here to round out the theory as a whole. Stephen J. Burn writes that Claude Sylvanshine is the representative man-in-Hades in *The Pale King*: Burn reads the novel's first chapter as an evocation of the underworld – with the “tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight” (*The Pale King* 3) conjuring associations with “both stygian darkness and the coins that must be paid to Charon to ensure a safe crossing” (Burn 161). This journey downward is continued in the second chapter, in which Sylvanshine is the first accountant that we meet, on a plane that is lowering to ground level. Thus, Sylvanshine, with his Random Fact Intuition, is entering into an underworld of data-bombardment and soul-level ennui. Burn argues that Sylvanshine is therefore “the model of *this* specific novel, *The Pale King* . . . the logic that underlies many of the short fragments that interrupt the longer narrative seems to be the same logic that drives Random Fact Intuition: sometimes these miniature chapters are simply data, bureaucratic scraps irrupting into the novel” (161). This is a useful way to explain the brunt of those tiny chapters (Chapters 10, 11,

18, e.g.): they give a taste to the reader of the accountants' world through Doležel's saturation function (as we saw in Chapter Three.) So Sylvanshine models the reader's experience of the novel, and what becomes of him is perhaps supposed to be indicative of the prescriptive answer that Wallace was trying to arrive at.

But the novel is confoundingly unclear on Sylvanshine's character arc. The novel's endnotes, which consist of hints from Wallace's notes of the ultimate shape of the work, show Sylvanshine's role to be rather nebulous. Even though Burn sees Sylvanshine as centrally important in the earlier chapters, he admits that "in the penultimate chapter, [Sylvanshine] seems almost like a stock comic character almost entirely divorced from his earlier appearances" (159).

Given that we only have *The Pale King* as is, Sylvanshine's centrality can only be rather theoretical. Other characters offer more solid models for understanding the prescriptions Wallace saw for the novel's central problem. As suggested throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, Wallace's prescription for living in this kind of world has to do very profoundly with attention, and attention has something to do with a lack of motivational conflict. There seem to be two models of what might be called the heroic in *The Pale King*. I would call these the *mystic* and the *civic* models. Both of the models offer complications, however, to classical heroic models: in the classical model, heroes are often semi-divine or preternaturally skilled – that is, they contain within them some aspect of the supernatural (governing) world – and they use this capacity in a sort of battle engagement with an adversary. As we will see, this is fundamentally the same mechanism as mystic model but there is a discordance of some import in that the invisible (governing) world in this case functions largely *as* the adversarial force. The

role of the supernatural abilities of the heroes of the novel is somewhat confused, then. Furthermore, in what way do the heroic characters battle with the adversarial force, or do they at all? The novel's incompleteness is part of this lack of clarity, of course, but let's consider these two prescriptive models.

I. The Mystic Model of Heroism

To discuss the mystic model, I need to examine some cases of supernatural powers exhibited by some of the characters. First, there is Chris Fogle's string of numbers that allows him complete concentrative powers. This string arrives, apparently, out of the endless barrage of information that comes to him through examining tax forms. Remembering that Fogle's nickname is "Irrelevant," apparently because of his penchant for lingering on and reiterating meaningless autobiographical detail⁴², it seems key that he is the one to stumble upon the number: Wallace's notes suggest that Fogle "wasn't paying attention" (541) when he found the number, and that he has to be "tricked" into using it. It is not of his own will, in other words. He is, in this way, comparable to Claude Sylvanshine, who is inundated with meaningless data constantly. Though they display supernatural characteristics, they are not heroic. Rather, these characters – especially Sylvanshine – appear to be somewhat ineffectual, rendered mindless by the white noise of information. Wallace's notes suggest an unsuccessful attempt on part of Dr. Lehl to harness Fogle's ability, ultimately making even his supernatural gift "irrelevant." Whatever Sylvanshine's function as aide to Dr. Lehl is, his Random-Fact Intuition cannot offer much of value to whatever scheme Lehl is constructing. It is impossible to

⁴² E.g., much of Chapter 22's rambling narrative can be understood as meaningless noise.

know where these characters would have ended up in a completed version, but it seems that Sylvanshine, with his inescapable field of white noise, and Fogle, whose gifts are accidental (i.e., not the result of his own disciplined awareness and attention), are doomed to become so much more meaningless data in the system.

Shane Drinion's levitation is somewhat different though, and it does suggest something of the mystic model of heroism. This he demonstrates while listening to Meredith Rand's narrative about her courtship with her husband in chapter 46. Like Fogle's autobiography, Rand's story meanders and is pocked with redundancies, such that the essential meaning behind the wall of detail is hard to get at. What makes Drinion heroic, in his way, is that through sheer attention, he strives very hard to receive some kind of meaning from the story, to parse out the human behind the noise. In fact, Drinion is rather devastated when Rand finishes her story and fails to *establish* meaning herself:

Drinion says, 'Is there some extra information I need to understand this?'
Rand looks both distracted and annoyed. 'Well, he didn't die, obviously, Mr. Einstein'. . .
Drinion's mouth is in the extended position of someone who wants to ask something but isn't sure where to even start, and is signifying that facially instead of out loud. (508-9).

Drinion, through a heroic act of attention, has glimpsed something like the ultimate meaninglessness behind something this woman sees as deeply significant.

Drinion's levitation when immersed in attention reminds one of Eastern images of transcendence, e.g., the mindful Buddha levitating in enlightenment. The equation in both Buddhism (for example) and in *The Pale King* between attention and transcendence seems to be clear. Drinion's most conspicuous displays of meditation happen in the wiggle rooms – "One night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion floating

upside down over a complex return” (485) – suggests that it is work that Drinion gives his attention.

There is another examination of the mystical qualities of attention in the book. In Chapter 36 we find the story of a boy who devotes his time to trying to kiss every square inch of his body. What this short part of the book (whose characters are never explicitly revisited) means is difficult to get at. There is something of the familiar generational disconnection: at various points the narrative seems to be focalized through the eyes of the boy’s father, who sees something spooky and unknowable yet also a kind of peace and contentment in his son (“This boy was not by nature a ‘worrier’ (Unlike himself, his father thought)”(407)). The father, for his part, obsessively collects inspirational quotes that fail to bring him any kind of satisfaction or perspective: “When the boy’s father thought of himself, on the other hand, the word that came unbidden to his mind was: *Tortured*” (405). The father is lacking in something that the boy, despite the apparent absurdity of his self-appointed task, has acquired. Considering the single-minded determination of the boy, it must be *in* the task that he finds whatever is satisfying him. Moreover, the narrative being interrupted by case-studies of the bodily miracles of religious mystics and saints the world over also suggests something spiritually sound in the boy’s actions. Like Drinion, the boy is perhaps one of the only apparently satisfied people in the novel. (It is not unthinkable that Drinion is the boy grown up, though there does not seem to be textual evidence to support this.)

Shane Drinion and the Contortionist Boy display a sort of human-centered attention⁴³ that may constitute a glimpse of one of the novel's heroic ideals. Instead of the hapless frustration we see in *Sylvanshine* and *Fogle*, Drinion and the Boy achieve something akin to enlightenment. The Contortionist Boy, in fact, sensing late in his endeavor the seeming impossibility of kissing, for example, the top of his head, chooses to understand "the enterprise [with] a somber dignity rather than [with] futility or pathos" (407). (This has an obvious connection to some of the most often quoted lines of Wallace's famous "This is Water" commencement speech: "You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship" ("David Foster Wallace...")).

To make explicit what the mystic model of heroism comprises, I would argue that Drinion shows that mindfulness, attention, etc., can be used to transcend the meaninglessness of the data, to establish meaning in a way that is satisfying. His failure to do this with Rand's story would indicate, however, that directing this attention at individuals who are inundated with the ideology of the invisible domain – Rand, in this case – is difficult and perhaps inevitably fruitless. It is when Drinion is alone and focusing on data that he is able to enter into his true transcendent state. Like the Contortionist Boy, he decides to *make* his task meaningful. This interior mindfulness can be understood as a way to privately combat this system that renders human beings spiritually void, but it admittedly does little to rail against the invisible world in a grandly heroic way. The mystic hero is something of an existential hero, unable to change the

⁴³ The Contortionist Boy's attention is, admittedly, *self-directed*, unlike Drinion's in his encounter with Rand. But his is a task that exists outside of consumer capitalism, which seems to haunt his father's psychic well-being.

system but able to find significance interiorly. It may be pertinent to revisit the passage in the addendum of notes at the end of the novel: “Drinion is *happy*. . . . It turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom” (546). The happiness, though, requires a sort of commitment to self and to work that may neglect other people. It also begs the question, is happiness an anodyne to the effects of the invisible world? To begin to answer this, I need to establish the other model of the heroic.

II. The Civic Model of Heroism

The novel’s other “Broad arc,” the concern with civic responsibility, establishes a foundation for the second model of the heroic, the civic model. This is a model that appears to be somewhat tragic in the course of the novel. Glendenning is the representative of this model: as we saw in the previous chapter, his commitment to the idea of the citizen’s responsibility to his fellow citizens is, in the increasingly neoliberal world of the 1980s, becoming outmoded. The elevator scene is the prime example of his concern of the “citizen becoming taxpayer” dynamic. The novel as is does not make clear what happens to Glendenning, though very near the end of the novel – Chapter 48 – we see a deeply distraught and unstable Glendenning being interviewed by FBI agents in the aftermath of a hallucinatory scene involving a company picnic with drugged iced tea, leading to an apparent orgy among the examiners and ultimately an FBI intervention thereof. How much of this actually happened and how much is Glendenning’s hallucination is very unclear – all we know is that in this late scene Glendenning is experiencing a kind of mental collapse that suggests the inevitable falling to the

discombobulating effects of the invisible domain. Wallace's notes suggest too that the character David Wallace, a sort of budding acolyte of Glendenning's, eventually vanishes, which means that he "becomes a creature of the system" (546).

The apparently inevitable collapse or incorporation into the invisible domain of those who follow this heroic model suggests that adhering to this model is futile, despite the noble intentions; in this way it is rather tragic. Glendenning, a part of the old guard of American civics, maintains his conviction that citizenship requires an awareness of and concern for the wellbeing of others. What all of this suggests is that the heroic in *The Pale King*, and in the modern myth comprises either, a) an ability to look past the tedium and meaninglessness of the work of the system in a way that allows for a private and perhaps isolating sense of self-worth, or b) insisting on the importance of the Democratic Spirit and civic responsibility despite an inevitable downfall in face of the invisible domain. It is ultimately a rather gloomy idea of the heroic,⁴⁴ but that is in keeping with the senseless existential tragedy of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. The hero has little choice but to accept the conditions of the invisible domain, and resistance is not only futile but dangerous. The ideological nature of the invisible domain, as explored in the previous chapter, is what complicates the classic idea of the heroic. Those characters who achieve a sort of Sysiphean fulfillment through devotion to their work do so only because they are no longer straining against the State Ideology represented in the invisible world. This is to say that the motivational conflicts (as Doležel would say) or conflicts of duty (as Althusser would put it) that some of the characters experience are resolved through dedication to work. This work, however, is ultimately in service to the invisible domain.

⁴⁴ And it is a gloomy picture of the late capitalist situation.

It requires an acceptance, perhaps reluctant, of the State Ideology. The characters who don't do this suffer for it. Lane Dean Jr.⁴⁵, for example, is not able to resolve the conflict: in Chapter 33, Dean Jr.'s last significant appearance, his insistently purgatorial or even hellish projections on his work place overthrow him. At the other end of the spectrum is Chris Fogle, who sees something epiphany-inspiring in accounting, and whose accidental gift arises from the white noise. These gifts he applies, inadvertently apparently,⁴⁶ only to data-processing in the wiggle rooms. He is part of the system, a spewer of irrelevant data.

Drinion is unique in that he can consciously direct attention to work as well as other people. He is able to make the best out of his situation in the system. It is fairly easy to connect these ideas of heroism with Wallace's real-world prescription for living in the modern world: Wallace's biographer D.T. Max writes that Wallace used his famous Kenyon College commencement address to "just tell the audience to be mindful instead of trying to orchestrate it [a model of mindfulness] through his characters" (285). The address, lucid and powerful, focused heavily on mindfulness and attention, especially toward the lives of others. Here is an excerpt that is directly applicable to heroism in *The Pale King*:

The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default-setting, the "rat race" -- the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing ("David Foster Wallace...")

⁴⁵ Lane Dean Jr., by the way, can also be understood in the civic model of the heroic. His religion, from where he derives his morality and his concern with other people (the coworkers and, of course, Sheri in the §6), serves him ill in the wiggle room, where he is most directly facing the invisible domain. His strife to the end of §33 suggests that he maintains his adherence to his principles, despite the resistance to the invisible domain that it creates.

⁴⁶ Wallace's notes are unclear here, as we saw earlier.

Keeping Wallace's concern with the Democratic Spirit in mind, we see here a definition of freedom that not only requires a sense of civic responsibility but also a deliberate consciousness that is necessary for mental well-being. Perhaps because of its incomplete state, however, *The Pale King* betrays a worry that the prescription is inadequate, that the best we can hope for is not a return to civil dialogue and collective responsibility but a personal contentment that may even be joyful within our individually constructed meaning. Perhaps, too, the incompleteness of *The Pale King* is indicative of this inadequacy. Note that Wallace had written *The Broom of the System* (his first novel) as his senior thesis as an undergraduate at Amherst, and although small set pieces of *Infinite Jest* existed as early as the 1980s, D.T. Max suggests that the serious conceptual drafting of that novel could not have taken place before 1990 (160), a mere four years before the first complete, 750,000-word manuscript of the novel was sent to Wallace's editor (196). But it was in 1996, more than a decade before his suicide and fifteen years before *The Pale King* as it was published, that Wallace began earnestly working on *The Pale King* (256). Wallace struggled with this book, and struggled with how to imbed within the book the prescriptive message that seemed so urgent to him. I would suggest that perhaps Wallace's inability to create a satisfying prescription is related to the necessities of the modern myth, in which Doležel affirms "A challenge to [the invisible domain] is doomed to failure" (196). A heroic act cannot overthrow the invisible domain: rather, the options are to create an individual meaning in which one is able to live in a spiritually satisfying way that does not rail against the invisible domain, but that is not overcome by it, or to maintain the value of the outmoded Democratic Spirit values despite the futility thereof in the myth-world (or, State Ideology.)

CONCLUSION

This project illustrates that David Foster Wallace's posthumously published and unfinished novel *The Pale King* lends itself to interpretation through Lubomir Doležel's modern myth model of Possible Worlds theory. This model elucidates some functions of the religious and civic aspects of the novel, as well as the odd supernatural occurrences that take place in many of the chapters. Furthermore, through these aspects of *The Pale King*, the modern myth model can be understood to function in an ideological manner. My intention is that this thesis accomplishes three things: 1) it successfully analyzes the ideologically complex *The Pale King*, a novel that is only beginning to receive attention from scholars, by applying an underdeveloped but potentially very useful aspect of Doležel's Possible Worlds theory (the modern myth); 2) the thesis uses Althusserian theories of ideology to round out this analysis in such a way that demonstrates that the mechanisms of Doležel's theory function ideologically; and, 3) the thesis examines *The Pale King*'s characters' interaction with the invisible domain in a way that begins to a theory of the heroic that expands the modern myth.

The Pale King shows us the mind of a writer who was disturbed by trends he saw in United States political and civil discourse, and by what these developments mean to the wellbeing of people living in the U.S. Wallace grounded his final novel in a moment that he apparently felt was ideologically pivotal in this scheme. That the novel can be understood in mythological terms (and few contemporary U.S. novels can: one of the reasons I work with DeLillo's *White Noise* in this thesis is because this was one of the few other novels that can be understood as a modern myth) indicates the complexity and

insidiousness of the problem. Throughout this thesis I have lamented the fact that we will never know *The Pale King* in a completed form, but this does not do justice to the powerful document that we do have. David Foster Wallace left us a blueprint for understanding late twentieth century America.

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