The David Foster Wallace Disease

BY SASHA CHAPIN

It's funny, knowing that, if I were living in one of my favourite minds, I might want to turn it off.

Famous dead writer David Foster Wallace made many writers unhappy. The unhappiness, of course, was a feeling of inferiority. You know, if you're a writer reading Wallace, that you just aren't that good. You just can't be. Anecdotal evidence of this includes many hours of my sadness. More anecdotal evidence of this includes Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections, a big brick of a novel clearly intended to rival Infinite Jest, the latter marking its twentieth anniversary this year. (Franzen, in an interview in BookPage, said, "Infinite Jest got me working, as competition will get you working.") And then there's David Lipsky's Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, a book about hanging out with Wallace that is largely about Lipsky's envy at not being his equal. I am not alone in this neurosis.

Wallace was blatantly virtuosic—not a subtle writer. I don't mean that his writing didn't have subtleties; what I mean is that his writing roared onto the page, declaring its own importance. It wasn't like other, quieter great writing, the work of Kafka, say, or, more recently, Lydia Davis—his writing didn't rely on small shifts, occurring quietly across multiple paragraphs. His work was maximal. His immense vocabulary—he casually used words like "nystagmus" or "erumpent"—was animated by syntax as delicate as a crystal glove. He hurled raw linguistic power in all directions. He apparently also felt that his giant paragraphs weren't erudition enough, so, for much of his career, he littered them with very pregnant footnotes, as if to say, "Hey, did you think I only had one thousand pages of intelligent remarks? Well, too bad, I've got more." Some passages felt like flirting with a sad encyclopedia. Other passages felt like hanging out with an over-excited kid with a supercomputer for a frontal cortex.

These tendencies could get excessive. I would forgive anyone for introducing Infinite Jest to a wood chipper upon reading this sentence, about how Gerhardt Schitt, a tennis coach,

"seemed intuitively to sense that it was a matter not of reduction at all, but—perversely—of expansion, the aleatory flutter of uncontrolled, metastatic growth—each well-shot ball admitting of n possible responses, n-squared possible responses to those responses, and on into what Incandenza would articulate to anyone who shared both his backgrounds as a Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response, Cantorian and beautiful because infoliating, contained, this diagnate infinity of infinities of choice and execution, mathematically uncontrolled but humanly contained, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination that brought one player finally down, that kept both from winning, that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of self."

I mean, I'm not even expecting you to read that. I'm just putting it there in this essay so it can imposingly occupy an area, like one of those monolithic monuments it doesn't feel right to approach.

However, I loved even his most convoluted writing. There was an ugly beauty in his most difficult tendencies. At the time, I considered it the necessary awkwardness of a profusion of brainpower settling for putting one word after another. Also, it gave me an excuse to look up "Cantorian" and then pretend I had known who Georg Cantor was since fetus-hood.

Me, I got into Wallace because I was into being smart. As a younger person, I considered intelligence my sole redeeming feature—one day,

I was convinced, the girls who wouldn't dream of touching my greasy teenage hair might regret that decision when they read my beautiful sprawling novels. I read everything I did because I wanted to absorb its linguistic verve. My taste in literature wasn't about enlarging my heart, or discovering the essence of different lives. I was just wringing juice from the great works.

To this end, in grade 7, I started reading the Modern Library Association's list of the 100 best novels of the 20th century from the top. I was reading James Joyce's Ulysses at 14—and though I understood none of it, I was still thrilled by the forbidding verbal architecture I found there.

After a couple of years of similar proactive pretension, I found Infinite Jest, probably through Googling something like "book smart intellectual post-modern." The book shattered me, because, unfortunately, unlike Ulysses, I kind of understood it. While I was incapable of grasping its themes when I was 16, I could at least paraphrase its content, so I could fully appreciate how its verbosity reconfigured reality. Instantly, I felt like a drooling moron in the face of its power. This book, which I came to in the hopes of being smart, made me feel hopelessly stupid.

This is when I caught a kind of mental disease—call it Wallacitis: the immediate desire to make one's work as Wallace-like as possible. This, like the simple envy of his stature, was also not a rare obsession. Later on, in university, I met a lot of classmates who suffered similarly. We were all hungry for a chunk of whatever secret mineral powered Wallace's brain. We wanted some of that neural gasoline which lit up even the man's minor work.

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The specific quality of Wallace I wanted to mimic is what I'd call his gift of sight. He had a way of generating luminosity by perfectly capturing tiny pieces of sensation spliced out from even the most banal moment of consciousness—his descriptive powers could give the sound of an air conditioner the consequence of a dying star. He had seemingly endless receptivity.

In the first section of Infinite Jest, he writes, "And who could not love that special and leonine roar of a public toilet?" With that one word, "leonine," Wallace transforms the most mundane of sounds with his highly tuned attention. He also slightly transforms the reader, by which I mean me—public toilets have roared like lions ever since I read that. From the same section, I also frequently recall the sentence, "The room's carbonated silence is now hostile." We've all encountered this kind of moment—when a room's energy is suddenly menacing—but Wallace describes our reality more completely than we ever have. This kind of

atomistic observation powered his journalism, too. In "Shipping Out," his dissection of the cruise ship experience, he writes: "We pass a huge field of those hammer-shaped automatic oil derricks all bobbing fellatially, and on the horizon past them is a fingernail clipping of shiny sea." It's funny, it's cinematic, it renders the everyday spectacular. It makes a lot of aspiring writers fear their lack of talent.

Wallace snares transitory, forgettable milliseconds with unforgettable prose. That's what I envied most. If I had this particular gift, I felt I would finally break the boundary impeding my making great art—the artlessness of my own life was composed almost exclusively of the kind of bland lack that Wallace articulated so well. I was a filthy, whiny child who had become a loud, sensitive nerd. Mostly, I was bored in boring rooms with people who disliked me, often for good reason. Not exactly novel material. But if I had the Wallace magic, my artistic power would become boundless—compelling writing would fall out of my fingers. I could make something profound from the nothing I lived in.

My efforts in this area produced exactly zero good work. For long weeks I vigorously crafted sentences wound around needlessly archaic synonyms, sometimes rummaging around inside a single phrase for whole days without ever reaching a satisfying full stop. The prose produced was perhaps even more labourious for the reader than for the writer. Knowing my writing was terrible, I tried harder. The writing got even worse. My sentences grew increasingly overstuffed as my grief progressed. Every day was given shape by this awful Sisyphean task of trying to think about why I wasn't as good at thinking as Wallace was.

It's difficult for me to recall how exactly I gave this up. There was probably no one moment when I realized I wouldn't achieve my dreams. Perhaps reading other writers taught me other virtues—I was impressed, for example, by how Flannery O'Connor's writing snapped shut instead of springing open. Also, I guess I got tired.

But I never entirely got over my fixation on stealing the Wallace style, even when I knew the effort was entirely futile. Finally, I consoled myself by dwelling on his artistic flaws, which is a sign of what bad shape I was really in. I hoped that if I concentrated on his deficiencies long enough, I wouldn't want to be his clone anymore. Occasionally his voice did go wrong: in a story called "Forever Overhead," he described the feeling of orgasm as "spasms of a deep sweet hurt," which, I humbly submit, is terrible. It sounds like hacky ad copy for hot sauce. One of his Harper's essays, about how people should use language correctly, is riddled with errors—for example, he misuses the showy word "bethought."

If these judgments sound petty, that's because they are. The few flaws I saw at that time were vivid in my mind because I clung to each

desperately. I didn't want to consider Wallace superhuman, but, clearly, I did. It got to a point where, when another writer-type asked me who my influences were, I would omit any mention of Wallace, or I would mention his name among a long list of others, speaking it nonchalantly, as if he hardly mattered.

Slowly, my grief about not being Wallace became disappointment, which became resignation. But eventually, my envy evaporated almost completely, leaving my admiration intact. Finally, I genuinely loved Wallace while wishing him no malice. I was glad that a mind that had been dragged through so much misery—so much of his writing was focused on depression, of course—had made so much of it, had harnessed that pain so prettily. I had no doubt he would continue producing incredible work. I devoured the digressive reporting he did for publications such as Rolling Stone, as well as his collections of short stories, Brief Interviews With Hideous Men and Oblivion. I was so, so glad that David Foster Wallace got to live that life.

And, uh, well, then he killed himself.

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The evening David Foster Wallace died, I went to my best friend's house so we could be miserable together. We sat in his kitchen, bewildered, eating unbuttered hunks of egg bread. It was awkward. When he got up to get a glass of water, I gave him a big hug that wasn't particularly warranted or wanted. Stilted remarks were made. Somewhere in there, he said something that struck me really hard: "I guess being David Foster Wallace wasn't enough."

This thought was compelling because I had so recently thought that being David Foster Wallace was the zenith of human achievement. Wondering whether I was wrong, I re-read most of his work in the subsequent weeks. In a fashion, I felt like I was reading it for the first time. I had a kind of lucidity I didn't enjoy in previous years, when I was rifling through his writing for the tricks I might borrow.

And I noticed something strange. There was a truly weird thing about his writing I didn't see when I was a more feverish kind of fan. A bewildering contradiction.

What I noticed is this: David Foster Wallace, in his wildly cerebral body of public expression, woven with an unprecedented set of skills, constantly seemed suspicious of intelligence itself—most of all, his own. This is conspicuous in Infinite Jest, a novel full of brilliant weirdos who endanger the world and hard-headed folky misfits who hold it together.

The novel, published twenty years ago, has two heroes—let's talk about

the smart one, who is extremely lovable but somewhat horrifying. Hal Incandenza is a sad kid full of brilliant encomiums who plays tennis and smokes a lot of pot. Notice that if you replace "Hal Incandenza" in that sentence with "young David Foster Wallace," it remains entirely accurate.

But Hal, although decent to those around him, is broken. At his core, he's completely unfeeling—he apparently "hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny." Hal's arc in the novel—yeah yeah, spoiler alert—is that he becomes a gibbering lunatic after eating a fungus. His even smarter father imperils the world by making a movie capable of inducing in its viewers a joy so complete that they watch it until they die of starvation. In Infinite Jest, the intelligent are imperiled or perilous.

However, the other hero, Don Gately, is quite literally hard headed. He's a reformed criminal and live-in staff at a halfway house. Gately is good because of what he does with his terrific bulk—taking bullets, or cooking dinner for junkies going cold turkey—rather than what he does with his brain.

This trend continues through scads of Wallace's fiction—stories populated by either lovable lunkheads or malformed geniuses. An early much-praised micro-story, "Everything Is Green," is narrated by a blue-collar American who talks like this: "But there is things I know. I know I am older and you are not. And I give to you all I got to give you, with my hands and my heart both." The story is gently moving. Essentially, the man has a revelation about the complexity of the world with his not particularly complex mind. He's capable of channeling enlightenment through a second-grade vocabulary.

Compare that to "The Soul Is Not a Smithy," from Oblivion—a story of the inner life of a young genius sitting in a classroom while his teacher has a psychotic breakdown. The genius has spooky powers of perception—evocative, again, of Wallace. He sees that "[the] total number of words on the chalkboard … was either 104 or 121, depending on whether one counted Roman numerals as words or not … The facts about the words were simply there, much the way a knowledge of how your tummy feels and where your arms are are there regardless of whether you're paying attention to these parts or not." His intellect does not serve him well. During the story, he mentally composes a complicated comic book reality, different facets of which he visualizes in different panes of a grid of windows on the far wall of his classroom. It's a story in which a stray dog is abused and a man gets mutilated by the blades of a fancy snow blower. All of the protagonist's processing power is spent living a horrific life of the mind while horror plays out in front of him.

Beyond this correlation that appears in Wallace's fiction so often—between intelligence and the corrosion of the soul—there's also the matter of Wallace's outlandish self-deprecation, specifically on the subject of his genius. When David Lipsky, during the course of their interviews, accused him of being brilliant, Wallace replied, "I treasure my regular guy-ness." To which the obvious response is, uh, what regular guy-ness are you talking about? The part where you eat at Burger King when taking breaks from writing gigantic essays about dictionaries? In Infinite Jest, Wallace writes that one of the things you learn in rehab is that "no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that." Again, this seems suspicious. Maybe Wallace had a moment where he realized he wasn't as smart as Nikola Tesla or Ramanujan, but that's not quite the same as having a moment of true intellectual humility. Perhaps the most glaring such moment comes in an essay about a second-string tennis player in which he writes, "You are invited to try to imagine what it would be like to be among the hundred best in the world at something. At anything. I have tried to imagine; it's hard." The fatuousness of this little riff is, I think, self-evident.

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Ultimately, I think all of this has something to do with a plate of nachos I ate one time that made me cry. The plate of nachos was enjoyed alone on a Monday around midnight. It troubled my very essence. It was traumatic.

Now, sitting alone in a diner late at night with a large plate of food could be a slightly winsome experience for anyone, though probably not categorically threatening. But depression is silly. Depressed people are creative in a bad way. Looking upon the melty cheese in front of me, I wondered why a preposterous person such as I would presume I deserved such a fun-time food. The meat lining the plate seemed like an excellent symbol of the sack of flesh I inhabited. Tentatively, I placed each tortilla chip in my mouth, holding it there, feeling it soften, wondering if this might be the experience that would finally destroy me. I avoided all eye contact, much as I wanted to look hard at everyone's face at Sneaky Dee's, hoping they could save me from the pain of hanging out, I guess.

If you haven't suffered from major depression, you naturally imagine that depression is just sadness, but a bunch more. You've felt sad, so depression must be about feeling, like, super duper sad. But it's not like that at all. Because the great thing about sadness is that it actually isn't that bad. We all know about the lustre of a minor melancholy—how the right fall evening can bring your memories to a fine gloss almost felt on the face. Idly reflecting on people you've passed up satisfies you in the same way as picking at a scar—you get a sense of what's inside you

for the low, low cost of some superficial harm. Bleak movies make you feel kind of heroic for staring down into the dark essence of the human condition or whatever. The raw power of grief—the way a real loss can feel like being stabbed—reacquaints us with how comparatively pleasant the rest of life is.

Even certain funerals are nice. Because it's nice to wear your best suit. Because life doesn't otherwise offer much solemnity. Because talking about all the good memories of grandma turns out to be more fun than visiting her was, for the last few years. Because, if you're a certain kind of neurotic, there's a gratification in arranging your face in the appropriate formulation. Here you are, feeling sorrowful, as you should, with others who feel the same—grief is your duty. You are performing excellently. Tears, if they appear, are admirable.

Regular sadness works that magic only because you like yourself. I'm so great, you tell yourself, while life's less kind vicissitudes wash over you. It doesn't threaten your integrity all that much. It's like a weird exercise routine you crave every so often. If you think of contentment as your rightful property then sadness is merely a tiny interruption in the fun parade. You're just having a good cry in the bath. No problem.

All of this is to say that sadness doesn't possess the real teeth of depression. The symptom that distinguishes depression from any other state is something I would call terminal fragility, although it's defined in a less hand-wavey way by the DSM as "guilt/worthlessness." It's the feeling that the world's fundamental malignancy begins with oneself. It represents a categorical change in the way you perceive negative outcomes. You see pain as appropriate punishment, instead of occasional inconvenience. You see yourself as a burden—a net loss for humanity—somehow less worthy of life. Instead of thinking, "that shitty day happened to me," you think, "as is consistent with my deservedly shitty life, that shitty day occurred, the pain of which is unmitigated by its predictability." The normal thought, if your hair is misbehaving, is, "fuck, I've gotta buy a blow dryer." The depressed thought is, "I am feeling paralyzing woe because my hair, finally, is as ugly as my soul." That's depression's foremost distinction—it holds you responsible for your suffering.

Let's quote the man himself on how this feels, from a passage of Infinite Jest:

> "It is an unnumb intuition in which the world is fully rich and animate and un-map-like and also thoroughly painful and malignant and antagonistic to the self, which depressed self It billows on and coagulates around and wraps in Its black folds and absorbs into Itself, so that an almost mystical unity is achieved with a world every constituent of which means painful harm to the self."

Yikes.

This ends with a hopeless narcissism. I spent long afternoons studying every stray strand of my personality, despairing. My most obvious attributes—even those occasionally prized by those around me—became depression's fuel. I was left with a sense that I'd rather be nothing at all—a person with as few characteristics as possible.

So if you're David Foster Wallace, you become ashamed that you're a genius. You get worried that all your cerebral power is just a flashy procession of empty words hiding an essentially sick centre.

Wallace was a smart guy who often used his smarts to think about how terribly dumb being smart was. The engine of his intelligence was turned painfully inwards. He had the brain that ate itself.

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Wallace was fixated on tennis, a sport he once played semi-well—the one big area of his life where his linguistic faculties couldn't help him. And he seemed to love it for precisely this reason. During his aforementioned essay about Michael Joyce, he opined that tennis is the most beautiful sport there is, because "the sort of thinking involved is the sort that can be done only by a living and highly conscious entity, and then only unconsciously, i.e. by combining talent with repetition to such an extent that the variables are combined and controlled without conscious thought." (Italics mine.)

During this essay, he follows Joyce, who he describes as possessing "realness," because "[it] turns out that what Michael Joyce says rarely has any kind of spin or slant on it; he mostly just reports what he sees, rather like a camera. You couldn't even call him sincere, because it's not like it seems ever to occur to him to try to be sincere or nonsincere." Quick question for you: what kind of person is the complete opposite of someone for whom language is an instrument for bland reporting? Maybe a great author known for his endless talent in the area of descriptive acrobatics, who dramatically reformats sense impressions with complicated prose.

Finally, Wallace says of Joyce that "the radical compression of his attention and self has allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art—Michael Joyce is, in other words, a complete man (though in a grotesquely limited way)." Wallace sees essential nobility in quiet athletic focus, rather than in an expansive, baroque imagination like his. He saw the athlete as a saint.

This clarifies a slightly puzzling statement he made during a 1996 interview on WBUR, a college radio station in Boston: "College was neat for me because I had sort of been a jock in high school." This might be true, in a sense, but he was a highly atypical jock. In his biography, D.T. Max's Every Love Story is a Ghost Story, we find out that in high school, although Wallace played tennis, he also had some other notable attributes, revealed by this anecdote about his dad, a professor, teaching him about philosophy:

> "Jim Wallace had his son read the Phaedo, Plato's argument for an afterlife. Wallace grasped the philosophical reasoning of the dialogue immediately. It was the first time his father realized how brilliant his son was, his mind faster, his father remembers, than that 'of any undergraduate I have ever taught' … His grades put him near the top of the class. He was also on the debate team and won a prize for best student writing."

When Wallace praises Joyce, or calls himself a jock, he's praising ways of life that involve inhabiting the physical realm fully rather than altering it with the abstractions consciousness is capable of, a task Wallace clearly regarded as dangerous. In a commencement address at Kenyon University that was later published as the best-selling This is Water, Wallace goes on a little riff about how intelligence provokes suicide:

> "It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in: the head. They shoot the terrible master. And the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger."

Bullshit. Where you shoot yourself probably has little to do with the dilemmas of your life. Alcoholics don't shoot themselves in the liver; widows don't shoot themselves in the heart. And if you don't have depression, intelligence isn't some kind of terrible master. Intelligence is correlated with a lot of really happy stuff, like high job performance, better stress management, and, surprisingly, emotional wellbeing. Yes: contrary to the popular imagination, a recent statistical analysis by the Mental Health Sciences Unit at University College London showed that happiness is strongly correlated with IQ. I suspect that the myth of hyper-intelligent depressed people has something to do with the fact that a highly depressed genius is a thrillingly complicated character, whereas a highly depressed worker in a paint factory is quietly regarded as an unfortunate casualty of the industrial age.

But Wallace was depressed, and so his terribly powerful intelligence was, in fact, his terrible master. In the story "Good Old Neon," Wallace's narrator mentions that he's "emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself." Wallace averred, to David Lipsky,

that "there's good self-consciousness, and then there's toxic, paralyzing, raped-by-psychic-Bedouins self-consciousness."

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Wallace's story "The Depressed Person" opens like this:

> "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror."

It continues apace. It's a real page-turner. The plot of the story is that a depressed person annoys the friends who support her. It's brutal, monotonous, and unfunny. And, as in the commencement address, one suspects it's a portrait of Wallace, although a less merciful one. Another clue here is that Wallace had a habit of hiding autobiography with a gender swap—the protagonist of The Broom of the System, he's said, is basically him in lady form. The saddest character in Infinite Jest is Kate Gompert, a woman through whom long paragraphs about depression are delivered.

It's funny to realize, after envying Wallace's brain so much, that he frequently didn't like having such a singular device. He didn't like being a genius, so he treasured what wasn't. If anything, he might have envied someone a little further down the IQ totem pole, like me: smart enough to read his books, but not smart enough to write them. Or maybe someone like his biggest fan, David Lipsky, a slightly famous writer who released a modestly praised little novel, and now works as a non-celebrity journalist.

Frankly, it's funny, knowing that, if I were living in one of my favourite minds, I might want to turn it off.

But that's all a bit simple, isn't it? Surely, Wallace didn't die just because of the character of his inner life. Any suicide is a collaboration of desperate circumstances. Statistics show that hot weather increases suicide risk, as does job loss, as does, in the case of postpartum depression, having a baby. Before he killed himself, Wallace went off the medication that was holding back swarms of dark thoughts because of its effect on his stomach.

Partly, I'm writing about Wallace's high-powered self-hatred machine because it's a way of making his disappearance from the earth seem like an inevitability—a curse he was born with. Although there's some validity to the view that he's a kind of martyr, he was really just an animal in an environment, with unfortunate inputs that produced unfortunate outputs.

Equally, I don't easily think of the complexities of Wallace's life—the ways he wasn't a particularly good guy. Like the fact that he "was violent with" Mary Karr, or that he slept with women in the twelve-step programs he lionized in his fiction. Because this is what we do with artists we love, or at least I do—we crudely bandage our wounds with a sampling of their complexities, or graft them onto our flimsy conception of "the human condition."

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When Wallace died, he was writing The Pale King. The novel—which exists only in the form of a posthumously issued compilation of chapters that may have become a novel at some point—contains some of Wallace's most astonishing paragraphs, as well as some of his hollowest, most smart-alecky word confetti.

Here's the synopsis of the book: a bunch of people working for the Internal Revenue Service feel weird about stuff. Tax people feel emotions.

Wallace was writing about the most boring setting possible because he had the spiritual intuition that, if you embrace boredom, there's a kind of enlightenment on the other side. He thought that being scared of boredom was a part of mankind's current social condition. In other words, he thought that being a happy IRS examiner was like being a kind of monk. He writes:

> "Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient, low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. Admittedly, the whole thing's pretty confusing, and hard to talk about abstractly…but surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places any more but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airport gates, SUVs' backseats."

Wallace believes that there's a kind of essential wisdom in being at home in boredom—that, "if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish." Wallace seems to think that heaven is full engagement with the present moment, no matter how nondescript.

This is a strange idea of heaven. Like endlessly giving the noonday sun a quizzical look without losing your eyeballs. Like living in the grey,

homogenous soup that the universe will become after the completion of all the complex thermodynamic transactions that comprise our lives. Most of us, I think, when we picture a supernaturally transcendent life, picture excitement. We want sex, or fireworks, or both, God telling us knock knock jokes every Sunday. Wallace wanted to be enchanted by an even, gray sky. His ideal, apparently, was finding total satisfaction in lukewarm milk. David Foster Wallace, with all his superhuman receptivity, dreamt of being a happy blank.

Wallace includes a character with a strange affliction in the novel—an odd superhero named Claude Sylvanshine, who intuits random facts about the world:

> "…the precise metric weight and speed of a train going southwest through Presov, Czechoslovakia … then the Toltec god of corn, except in Toltec glyphs, so that to Sylvanshine it looks like an abstract drawing of origin unknown. The winner of the 1950 Novel Prize in physiology slash medicine … the human appendix's real reason."

Sylvanshine experiences what so many of us would like to—endless knowledge, far-reaching powers of perception—except it's a pain in the ass, because it's uncontrolled. His knowledge is like an itch inside. It's a barrage of truthful statements without any sentimental gravity. His intellectual superpower is kind of a bummer.

When you're suffering from depression, although you feel that there's no hope for relief, you still, during many moments, imagine what relief would look like. Though we'll never know what exactly Wallace wanted, there are portions of his late work that seem telling.

The Pale King contains an appendix in the back pages, where some of Wallace's notes on the novel are recorded: little thoughts on the novel's structure, as well as descriptions of the sentimental payload he hoped it would deliver. There's one for the following tedious passage:

> "Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. 'Groovy' Bruce Channing attaches a form to a file. Ann Williams turns a page. Anand Singh turns two pages at once by mistake and turns one back which makes a slightly different sound. David Cusk turns a page. Sandra Pounder turns a page."

Strangely, the note about this passage doesn't concern any of these characters—it's a note about the fate of David Foster Wallace, who is, himself, a character in the novel. It's the intended end of the story he wrote himself into, the unwritten conclusion of his last work—his finality, which he conceived but never lived. It goes like this:

"David Wallace disappears—becomes creature of the system."