Too Much and Too Little: A History of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*

June 2005: For eight years David Foster Wallace had been attempting, with varying degrees of success, to compose his third novel, *The Pale King*. This novel, which had already gone through several substantial plot changes and at least two working titles, was still failing to cohere, with Wallace describing the ‘tornadic’ nature of the process to his editor Michael Pietsch as ‘like wrestling sheets of balsa wood in a high wind’. On 7th June, Wallace wrote a lengthy note-to-self in which he laid out his concerns about the compositional problems of the novel. The note betrays concern over the amount of material that the third novel has generated and the attendant problems engendered by the retention of older drafts and material:

The danger of re-reading all this old material is that it makes me think it all has to be preserved and used. As if the book were a puzzle and all these pieces had to fit into it. This is not so. The truth is that the book must be written – started afresh, and continued with. There are promising nuggets in this old stuff […] but none of them can just be re-used per se […] I have too much stuff, and too little.

This note clearly represents a crisis point in the life of *The Pale King*, exacerbated by the fact that a number of sections earmarked for the novel had been published in the short story collection *Oblivion* the previous year, leaving Wallace with less workable material from which to draw. In the period immediately following, Wallace devised a new narrative strategy to bring the disparate drafts together: he wrote himself into the novel.

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What exactly is *The Pale King*? How did it evolve between 1997 and 2007, when Wallace withdrew from writing the manuscript while struggling with the onset of depression that would ultimately lead to his death the following year? The title of Toon Staes and Luc Herman’s article ‘Can *The Pale King* Please Be a Novel?’ speaks to a desire, both readerly and scholarly, to be able to perceive the text as a coherent system. It also speaks, indirectly, to Wallace’s own anxiety over the assembly of notes, drafts and chapters that comprise the fundamental materials of the novel. When approaching this unfinished text, one would be wise to recall Frank Kermode’s assertion in *The Sense of an Ending* that ‘no novel can avoid being in some sense what Aristotle calls “a completed action”. This being so, all novels imitate a world of potentiality […] They have a fixation on the eidetic imagery of beginning, middle, and end, potency and cause.’

In the unusual case of *The Pale King*, Kermode’s formula is literalized: the text exists as both a ‘completed action’ (an assembly of some of the drafts by Michael Pietsch into a novel-like format for posthumous publication in 2011) and ‘a world of potentiality’ (the public availability of the sprawling collection of compositional materials held in Wallace’s archive at the Harry Ransom Center). Having examined all extant archive-based documentation and draft material pertaining to Wallace’s fiction in the period 1997–2007, I have constructed a detailed genetic history of the novel’s composition. Such a model allows us to formally systematize *The Pale King* project based upon the broadest spread of empirical evidence and will, I hope, help to advance a critical understanding of the nuances of Wallace’s composition in this period by creating a map of his late fiction.

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In his article ‘A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness’, Stephen J. Burn takes issue with biographer D.T. Max’s assertion that Wallace’s creative history after the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996 can be framed as a struggle to surpass the reputation of that novel. Burn argues that Max ‘mistakenly ascribe[s] a linear sequence of discrete projects, rather than emphasising a series of parallel compositions enlivened by creative cross-fertilization’. I believe that, on the basis of the archival evidence, the truth is somewhere between these two positions. There can be absolutely no doubt that, as Burn suggests, the fiction after 1996 comprises a set of coexisting and co-evolving literary projects. However, I would suggest that the struggle to surpass *Infinite Jest* is absolutely central to the composition of *The Pale King* in that a significant number of the post-1996 fictions, most notably the stories in *Oblivion*, come into existence *because* Wallace is trying to write his third novel. Archivally, if one considers the ‘shape’ of Wallace’s composition before *Infinite Jest*, he tends to write stories and novels discretely. Even during the main period of composition of *Infinite Jest* between 1993 and 1995 this process is remarkably cohesive considering the size and sprawl of that work, and no other substantial fiction emerges out of the period of that novel’s composition.

Essentially, the fiction after *Infinite Jest* could arguably be described as one huge linear ‘discrete project’ that shed or engendered other projects during its process. Of course, within this project there is just the kind of ‘creative cross-fertilization’ referred to by Burn which results in the creation of other fiction, but this tends to come about as the result of creative frustration or incompatibility with the larger project. Elsewhere in the same essay Burn argues that *The Pale King* represents a ‘summative work’, but I would suggest an additional term: paralytic. Wallace’s formal preoccupations advance and accrete in the most coherent sections of *The Pale King*, but the novel’s composition is also marked by the juxtaposition and partial incompatibility of prevailing narrative voice and persona, an incompatibility which I believe is intrinsically connected to Wallace’s increased visibility and public persona after the much garlanded publication of *Infinite Jest*. *The Pale King* is, then, a narrative within which all of Wallace’s prior formal concerns accumulate but are also in conflict. Between 1997 and 2007, Wallace was continually working on his third novel. During this period, the novel progresses in three distinct but imbricated compositional phases.

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Phase 1: *Sir John Feelgood* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1997-1999)

In May 1997, Wallace typed an early outline for a long work titled *Sir John Feelgood or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*. Certain elements of this project, such as the character name Drinion and the use of the IRS as a location, are early manifestations of details from *The Pale King*. However, the principle plot notes for *Sir John Feelgood* are not present in *The Pale King* and revolve around technological advances in video pornography, as evidenced by this plot summary sketched by Wallace:

IRS Special Agent becomes actor in his own digitized porn movies […] ‘Virtual reality goggles’, but instead of piping a VR scene into your eyes they pump a view of you – the goggles wearer – from outside, from the camera’s eye view. So what you see is not what you’re ‘looking at’ but rather you looking at it […] This exteriorized perception of self can cause disorientation, like trying to cut your hair in a mirror or move a mouse on a computer screen.

Despite these intriguing plot developments, *Sir John Feelgood* is not a stable project. It exists only as an eight-page synopsis with a number of attendant, semi-related documents. In *Sir John Feelgood*, Drinion is an IRS special agent who ‘first sees himself from outside in a special video made during a videotaped sting operation of a tax scam’ where he ‘plays some sort of sham role as [an] interested taxpayer’ but becomes ‘enraptured’ with his image on video. Through fraud enforcement, Drinion gets to know a pornographer named Steve Fast, who ultimately hires him as an actor because ‘for some reason he’s unusually easy to erase from [the] shot’, being ‘unnaturally pale’. Finally, ‘Drinion/“Sir John Feelgood” becomes the void the viewer is projected onto’. The synopsis ends with the proposed opening paragraph of the novel:

The sky lightened and the horizon greened. I sat in a tan Service vehicle on the Western edge of an immense system of cornfields, masturbating. It is curious that I jerked off hardly at all during adolescence but now as an adult have logged literally hundreds of hours masturbating, often on solo surveillance or alone at night in the district office.

This paragraph bears traces of what will become the first and third chapters of *The Pale King* through its focus on the Midwestern landscape, IRS surveillance and masturbation. However, the *Sir John Feelgood* project is not only a template for *The Pale King.* It is also a network of various motifs and thematic preoccupations that will significantly inform Wallace’s subsequent story collections *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*.

This relational network is best illustrated via four pieces written by Wallace in 1997. The first, listed as ‘BI#79’, is a proto-‘brief interview’ featuring a blind date between an unnamed woman and a man named as ‘Nugent/Keck’, names that will later be given to IRS agents in *The Pale King*. Subsequently Keck resurfaces in a second short piece, earmarked for *Sir John Feelgood*, as the narrator of a story about his own inability to pay attention as a child in a Peoria school in 1965. This piece is clearly the basis for ‘The Soul is not a Smithy’, a story that was slated for *The Pale King* before being included in *Oblivion*. Wallace writes a third piece in this period set in the late 1940s and titled, alternatively, ‘What is Peoria for’, ‘Metamora’ and ‘Electric Girl’. This story, about a rural girl who suffers at the hands of her family and her mother’s abusive boyfriends, is the basis of Toni Ware’s story in chapter 8 of *The Pale King*. Written initially as part of *Sir John Feelgood*, it chimes thematically with the actions of the hideous men in Wallace’s 1999 collection before being subsequently listed for inclusion in *Oblivion* in 2004, then substantially rewritten in 2007 for *The Pale King*. Finally, in some further notes for *Sir John Feelgood* Wallace writes a short piece suggesting that the reason for Drinion’s suitability for pornography might be that ‘Drinion’s penis is huge because after he got burned by hot water spilling into his diaper the doctors had to inject him with steroids, and this caused hypertrophy of the dick’. This is a partial description of the synopsis of the disturbing story ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’ from *Oblivion*.

As well as these four pieces, which go some way to illustrating the complex processual counterpoint at the heart of the *Sir John Feelgood* project, Wallace wrote another short narrative that would eventually be included in Pietsch’s assembly of *The Pale King*, a story with a compositional history that spans the full decade-long process. Usually titled ‘Cede’, it was first drafted in August 1997 before being revised in 2001 and again circa 2006–2007. It appears in *The Pale King* as chapter 36 and concerns a young boy who attempts to kiss every part of his body. ‘Cede’ is significant because Wallace comes to regard it as essential to locking together several disparate sections of his third novel, but can never make the story cohere fully with the rest of the narrative. In this sense it stands as perhaps the most characteristic piece of writing in the whole process of writing the third novel. Wallace wrote to his agent Bonnie Nadell in August 1998 suggesting that ‘Cede’ might be placed in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, but that it was ‘not even close to complete’. In its 1997 iteration the full title of the story is, bizarrely, ‘Americanid Rex: Adventures in Achievement: Dog, Creatus, Achiever: Cede’ and the story of the self-kissing boy is intercut with two strange sections set in ancient Rome that deal respectively with the phenomenon of ‘Pontic flights’, during which exceptionally thin people were carried into the air by the wind and mistaken for angels, and the use of Molossian hounds by Emperor Nero. Wallace ultimately abandoned the story for inclusion in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* but it remains important to *The Pale King*, and I will return to it shortly.

Wallace’s publication of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in 1999 marks the end of the first stage of composition of the third novel, as much of *Sir John Feelgood*’s focus on sex, relationships and visual perception is sloughed off into that collection via stories such as ‘Adult World’ parts 1 and 2, ‘Datum Centurio’ (which was written simultaneously with *Sir John Feelgood* and may well have been intended as part of it) and, of course, the ‘brief interviews’ themselves. Wallace does not refer to the project as *Sir John Feelgood* after 1999, which suggests that the pornography element has been refined out of the project. Instead, the peripheral focus on tax and the IRS assumes the main body of the narrative.

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Phase 2*: Glitterer*/*The Pale King* and *Oblivion* (1999-2005)

The second period of composition begins around the publication of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in 1999 and ends in 2005, a year after the publication of *Oblivion*, with Wallace’s note-to-self with which I began this article. The compositional crisis that characterizes the end of this six-year span is in many respects characteristic of the problems of coherence that mark this second stage of the novel’s genesis. However, while the period 2005–2007 saw Wallace rework his novel with renewed energy and focus, several key elements of *The Pale King* were developed within this preceding interval.

An ‘embryonic outline’ for the novel from November 1999 sees the first appearance of ‘two broad arcs’ that are supposed to underpin *The Pale King*:

1. Paying attention, boredom, ADD. Machines vs people at performing mindless jobs.

2. Being individual vs being part of larger thing – paying taxes, being ‘lone gun’ in IRS vs team player

This is substantially different from anything that appears in the notes for *Sir John Feelgood*. This document also sees the first appearance of *Pale King* characters Sylvanshine, ‘Shane’ Drinion, Glendenning, Lehrl, Bondurant and Stecyk as well as Ellen Bactrian, who will later appear instead in the novella ‘The Suffering Channel’ in *Oblivion*. In this outline Ellen Bactrian, described as ‘assistant director for documents’, is also ‘Dave W’s boss’. Indeed, this list of characters includes a certain ‘David Wallace’, who has ‘trouble paying attention, sitting still, can’t work’ and ‘disappears 100pp in’. This is the first time ‘David Wallace’ appears in proximity to the third novel, but his presence does not become in any way substantial until after Wallace’s compositional crisis of 2005, and there is no reference at this stage to the appearance of the ‘David Wallace’ author persona that eventually narrates the key ‘Author Here’ chapters of *The Pale King*. A two-line plot point on the same document refers to ‘discovery of crude virtual-reality porn being developed at Fornir’ and how ‘Drinion being photographed has huge effect on him’. The relegation of the central narrative of *Sir John Feelgood* to a subplot suggests the degree to which Wallace’s interest in this idea has waned.

Between 1999 and 2001, before settling on *The Pale King*, Wallace refers to the novel as *Glitterer*. A document titled ‘*Glitterer* Pt 1 – Plot’ partially refocuses the story on a character called Hurd who moves to Peoria from Rome NY to pass the CPA exam and ‘after a life of selfish drifting wants to become a quiet hero’ before losing his ID and facing humiliation at not being able to take the exam. Hurd’s story will eventually develop into both Sylvanshine’s flight into Peoria in chapter 2 and the identification drama within which ‘David Wallace’ finds himself in chapter 24 of the published version of *The Pale King*. Wallace wrote the opening section of *Glitterer* in October 1999, and incorporated Hurd’s flight as the second section, in much the way that Michael Pietsch places Sylvanshine’s flight in the published book. The opening section of *Glitterer* employs an odd rhetorical register to describe the IRS agents coming to work:

Look at the Internal Revenue Service agents coming to work at the Peoria/ Lake James IL post at 116A-E Reed Road in 1989’s first quarter. Look at them curve around from three directions and enter the parking lot and park their cars and exit their vehicles […] What color is the lot? How well ploughed? What is its capacity? Who designed it, and who hired that person? […] One imagines years of months of weeks of days seated under room-length fluorescent rods examining other Americans’ tax returns […] Remaining for 7.25 hours daily sensitive to pattern and discrepancy and the nuance of attested fact […] Who are these men.

This section is followed by a short devotional testimony that resembles an early version of Chris Fogle’s epiphany from chapter 22 of the published version of *The Pale King*:

I’d always from early on as a child I think somehow imagined Revenue men as like those certain kinds of other institutional heroes, bureaucratic, small-h heroes […] I don’t mean the kind of heroes that ‘put their lives on the line.’ I suppose what I’m saying is that there are other kinds. I wanted to be one. The kind that seemed even more heroic because nobody applauded or even thought about them, or if they did it was usually as some enemy.

*Glitterer* here begins to work the more religious and heroic elements found in *The Pale King* into its narrative. Simultaneously with this opening, Wallace writes a story about a focus group titled ‘12 Hungry Men’ which will eventually evolve into the story ‘Mister Squishy’ from *Oblivion*, which itself occurs in the same world as *The Pale King*. Wallace told Michael Goldfarb in 2004 that ‘Mister Squishy’ was ‘part of a cycle, and the rest of the cycle kind of died’, but it is hard to ascertain from the available materials exactly what might have constituted this cycle. In any event, I find it hard to agree with D.T. Max’s assertion that the composition of *Oblivion* was a ‘smoother process’, as the collection does not come together organically as much as adumbrate the problems Wallace was having with his third novel. Indeed, Wallace responded sharply to Mark Costello’s suggestion that *Oblivion* could be ‘the road map for *The Pale King*’, saying ‘You don’t understand how tough the problem actually is’.

The ‘problem’ would appear to be that much of *Oblivion* essentially *was* *The Pale King*. At least three stories from that collection (‘Mister Squishy’, ‘The Soul is not a Smithy’ and ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’) were at one point part of the third novel. In October 2001, Wallace describes the stories in *Oblivion* as ‘the best of the stuff I’ve been doing while playing hooky from a certain Larger Thing’, but a cursory look at the evolution of some of those stories suggests that Wallace may not have been wholly honest here. In the most glaring example, chapter 23 of *The Pale King*, with its reference to ‘wire mesh in the windows’ of a Midwestern grammar school, is clearly a partial draft of ‘The Soul is not a Smithy’. Notably, Wallace redrafts ‘Cede’ during this period, and attempts unsuccessfully to combine it not only with an early version of Chris Fogle’s monologue, but with *Oblivion* stories ‘Mister Squishy’ (‘juxtapose w/boy touching his own body?’) and ‘Good Old Neon’ (a note on the handwritten manuscript from 2001 suggests that Neal ‘rescues kid in “Cede” ’). Another note to self suggests incorporating ‘Cede’ into one of the Leonard Stecyk chapters from *The Pale King* and with ‘Incarnations of Burned Children’. Wallace evidently wanted the project to cohere, but the eventual publication of *Oblivion* suggests that he was having significant trouble corralling the narrative.

Around the turn of the millennium, Wallace engages a separate narrative strand in the *Glitterer* project based around journalism and non-fiction. This represents the first sustained attempt to address the question of the novel’s narrating voice after the collapse of *Sir John Feelgood* and, crucially, points towards the ‘Author Here’ sections that narrate *The Pale King*. In 1997, Wallace’s notes suggest that *Sir John Feelgood* might take the form of a first-person memoir written by Drinion, while elsewhere he writes that the novel could be narrated by a ghost. The ‘ghost’ remains in *Glitterer*, albeit through the figure of a ghostwriter.

The non-fiction narrator of *Glitterer* goes through so many contradictory changes that it is extremely difficult to map them coherently. However, it is important to think about why Wallace decides to incorporate the figure of a non-fiction narrator at this stage of the process. By the late 1990s Wallace had a well-established separate public persona as a writer of non-fiction, a persona he was at pains to separate from himself (‘There’s a certain person created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier than I am’, he told David Lipsky in 1996). While journalists appear in his work before this time (Steeply in *Infinite Jest* is the most obvious example) they never assume a significant central or narrating role. The emergence of journalist characters in ‘The Suffering Channel’ and the unpublished short story ‘Wickedness’, both of which were written in the *Glitterer* period, indicates that Wallace was beginning to draw upon his established non-fiction persona for the purposes of his fiction, as well as considering that a putatively non-fiction narrator might be the keystone to the increasingly disparate parts of his third novel. Moreover, the question of the novel as memoir, rather vaguely raised in 1997, begins to re-emerge in a slightly different and more convoluted form. Wallace produces a chapter circa 2000 titled ‘Forward’ (sic) which begins ‘In this little part I’m going to talk about where this book came from and why it’s being published as fiction even though it’s over 99% true and accurate and is really in fact a piece of journalism’. The following section, which at twelve pages is one of the longest extant pieces of unpublished material from the third novel project, is a monologue set in 2000 and narrated by an undercover journalist who identifies himself as ‘Frank Brown’. Brown is a reporter for a magazine called *Money and Skin* that combines soft-core pornography and investigative business journalism (the receding traces of *Sir John Feelgood* are detectable here) and has been tasked with going undercover in the IRS for three to six months. Frank Brown’s style involves ‘amassing a huge amount of carefully observed data’, which inevitably draws comparison to Wallace’s own non-fiction style. Brown has a ghostwriter (a ‘friendly ghost’) who is advising him on how to turn this story into fiction, allowing him ‘10,000–11,500 words of personal, unfictional address directly to the reader’, though the publisher is allowed to ‘black out’ any data they see fit.

This section is obviously the original of those later ‘Author Here’ sections in *The Pale King*, with the above statements essentially rephrased by the ‘David Wallace’ character, but the tawdry nature of the publication (tagline: ‘What’s Sexier than Money?’) also draws comparison to two other trashy and voyeuristic publications: *Style* magazine in ‘The Suffering Channel’ and *Wicked* in ‘Wickedness’, which were being composed around the same time. Indeed, one possible motivation for the junking of both the Frank Brown section and ‘Wickedness’ might well have been their similarity to ‘The Suffering Channel’, in which case they can be considered early variations of that story. However, Frank Brown’s reminiscences of his childhood lack of concentration and Ritalin prescription and his garrulous and unfocused foreword also draw comparison to the narrator of ‘The Soul is not a Smithy’ and ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle’s lengthy monologue from *The Pale King*. In fact, Wallace seems to have considered publishing this foreword as a stand-alone story, as a piece titled ‘Ritalin’ later appears in a list of stories for possible inclusion in *Oblivion*. Furthermore, a marginal note on page 11 of Brown’s foreword reads ‘Ghost: As you can see, this guy’s totally nuts, and mostly full of shit’. The use of ‘ghost’ in this context most likely refers to Brown’s ghostwriter, ascribing to that narrator a similar sentiment to ‘David Wallace’ as he passes irritated judgement on Chris Fogle’s long monologue in the published version of *The Pale King*. On the same page, yet another note indicates that ‘David Wallace, 18, was a cart boy w/ Frank Brown at Peoria in 1981’. If this wasn’t convoluted enough, a separate structural document synopsizes Brown’s foreword before continuing ‘Confession – he’s not journalist – he wrote copy for porn spreads. […] Alright, a lifelong IRS employee. Not a journalist or writer at all.’

This level of compositional paralysis is particular to the drafts of the third novel: there is nothing approaching this level of incoherence in the manuscripts of *Infinite Jest*. The note-to-self from 2005 with which I began this article is clearly a response to a text that is spiralling out of control and coherency. Wallace’s decision to include ‘The Soul is not a Smithy’ in *Oblivion* seems to have been something of a turning point, as he repeatedly omits it from earlier consideration for the collection. By relenting, he abandons a substantial part of the novel on which he has been working for seven years. Having hived off several ideas for the third novel into a collection for the second time in five years, Wallace’s concern in 2005 that ‘I have too much stuff, and too little’ is an understandable response to the ever more protean nature of the manuscript. However, the years 2005–2007 see Wallace respond to this crisis in a remarkably focused manner.

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Phase 3: ‘Author Here’ (2005-2007)

Between 2005 and 2007, several major elements of what was now called *The Pale King* fell into place. When Michael Pietsch explains that Wallace had ‘written deep’ into the novel, he is likely referring to the substantial work that was done in this two-year period. It is particularly poignant that in the two years before Wallace’s illness prevented him from writing, the novel’s progress was more rapid and assured than it had been at any previous stage of composition. The moment of crisis crystallized by the note-to-self in June 2005 seems to have galvanized Wallace, with the dating of his floppy disks suggesting that the novel’s most substantial sections (Chris Fogle’s 100-page monologue, the filmed IRS interviews, the lengthy ‘Author Here’ sections and Meredith Rand and Shane Drinion’s extended dialogue) all coalesced between July 2005 and August 2007.

The emergence of the ‘Author Here’ sections, which are notably set in 2005, can be traced to a notebook in which Wallace writes a two-page précis titled ‘Fake Memoir of Job at IRS by Fake Name’ which, in its move from article to memoir, appears to be a developed version of the earlier Frank Brown narrative. Wallace is clearly happy with this, marking the page with smiley stickers that say ‘Wow!’ and ‘Doing Well!’. In another notebook, seemingly in the same pen, Wallace writes ‘David Wallace, a reporter/freelance for *Money and Skin*, hired to do story’. This collapses together the Frank Brown sections with the notes written during the *Glitterer* period about incorporating a ‘David Wallace’ character into the novel, ultimately making Wallace the memoirist who performs an amended version of Frank Brown’s curatorial role. The effect of Wallace’s positioning of a fictional iteration of his persona is twofold: it affords the novel, for the first time, a pervasive structural ‘spine’ and, crucially, dramatizes Wallace’s prior curatorial role over the mass of data that he has accumulated. As Toon Staes argues in his article on *The Pale King*, ‘Work in Process’, ‘Wallace is aware that the jump from information to meaning rests on classification, organization and presentation’. By becoming the master narrator Wallace also implicitly dramatizes his attempted mastery of *The Pale King*’s prior baggy and disparate narrative. This entry into the narrative has the effect of creating an oppositional motif in *The Pale King* in which the narrative juxtaposes and dramatizes chaotic and controlled data. The text, effectively, begins to formally model itself around the manner of its own composition.

In this sense, narrator ‘David Wallace’s’ dismissal of Chris Fogle’s long monologue in *The Pale King* is in one respect self-chastisement: Fogle can stand for Wallace pre-2005, garrulously producing data, ‘information without value’. This is also dramatized in the difference between agents Sylvanshine and Reynolds: Sylvanshine’s messy, information-filled mind is associated with a shotgun, Reynolds’ with a rifle. In this respect, I would synthesize Stephen J. Burn’s two suggestions that ‘Sylvanshine’s role in the incomplete phase of the drafting process may have been to dramatize the difficulties that Wallace was experiencing with his novel’, and that the novel has a focus on binaries. I believe that several binaries occur in *The Pale King* not only at the thematic level but also as a way of commenting on the pre- and post-2005 composition processes. Indeed, a substantial amount of plot material written after the novel’s crisis point in 2005 makes reference to the corralling of messy data: Sylvanshine’s flight from the traumatic mess of documents in the Rome REC to the more organized Peoria REC; Chris Fogle’s transition from shambolic ‘wastoid’ to organized Service worker; the elision of the less efficient ‘David Wallace’ with his more skilled namesake, and Meredith Rand’s rehabilitation from her earlier problem with ‘cutting’, which is addressed by her husband, the pointedly named ‘Ed’.

This process might also shed some light on why Wallace still doggedly attempts to incorporate ‘Cede’ into the narrative, despite its apparent incompatibility. In ‘Work in Process’ Toon Staes argues that this piece is ‘completely disconnected from the rest of *The Pale King*’ and that Wallace cannot connect the child to an adult. While I concur partially with this argument, I believe that the incompatibility only occurs at the level of plot. Wallace clearly wanted ‘Cede’ to fit, even including it in the ‘For Advance’ stack found on his desk after his death. In his drafts he makes numerous and often contradictory attempts to connect the section to the world of his third novel:

Some of the best examiners can’t pay attention when observed, as in condition for test against computer. But Drinion can. He’s kid from Cede.

Drinion and other guy (the self-kissing kid from “Cede”) will be set up against the machines in a John-Henry test.

Who’s the self-kissing kid?

Wallace’s motivation to retain ‘Cede’ is strongly connected to his problems with composition, and his subsequent dramatization of this process, and that this is in turn connected to the matter of motivation within the story. In the first version of ‘Cede’ in 1997, the boy’s mysterious self-kissing project is inscrutable: there is ‘little to say about the motive cause’. In the second version, written during the *Glitterer* phase, Wallace adds a possible motivation:

This boy had, as a fetus, produced (involuntarily) a rare and toxic type of intrauterine menconium during the final hour of his late mother’s labour, and that she had some hours afterward died of septic shock, and a rather cheap and shabby analysis could perhaps be offered in which the boy somehow believed unconsciously that he had ‘killed’ his mother and wished now in the latency of childhood symbolically to ‘resurrect’ her via his own reflexive access.

By the time the most recent version of ‘Cede’ appears, during the post-2005 composition process, all references to motivation, and all but one indirect allusion to the boy’s mother, have been removed from the story. This has the effect of foregrounding both the inscrutability of the project and the relationship between the boy and his exhausted father. To conclude, I want to suggest that this version of the story contains an important binary that also functions as a dramatization of Wallace’s composition of *The Pale King*.

The boy’s project in ‘Cede’ strikingly mirrors the way in which Wallace’s writing process between 1997 and 2007 oscillates between an apparently insurmountable large-scale goal (the third novel) and attendant discrete achievements (the two story collections), with the boy’s long-term project (the kissing of every inch of his body) only achievable through a series of small, connected projects (the kissing of each body part). This structural approach mirrors the long-term project of sobriety practised by Wallace’s recovering addicts in *Infinite Jest*: the ‘one day at a time’ philosophy which ultimately results in permanent sobriety. However, the crucial distinction here between *Infinite Jest* and ‘Cede’ is that the boy’s project is literally impossible to complete. In this respect, Wallace’s note to Bonnie Nadell that ‘Cede’ is ‘not even close to complete’ mirrors the boy’s unachievable quest. The relationship between the boy and his father suggests a binary that rhymes with those elsewhere in *The Pale King*: the ‘dutiful’ completion of a sprawling, large-scale task set against the ‘tortured’ messy world of the father. However, the development of this binary in ‘Cede’ could also relate to the length of its compositional period. In this more speculative reading, it is possible to see the boy, blissfully unaware of the scale of his project, as Wallace between 1991 and 1996, composing his gargantuan second novel *Infinite Jest*, possessing ‘nothing that anyone could ever call doubt, inside’. Conversely, the father stands for the post-1996 Wallace, looking back in amazement on a younger iteration of himself while trapped in the ‘cycle of torture’ that attends following the completion of an apparently impossible undertaking and trying to compose a new work, *The Pale King*, with both ‘too much stuff, and too little’.