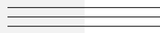
FICTION IN REVIEW



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The Pale King, David Foster Wallace's last, unfinished novel, deals with the revolutions that beset the IRS in the mid-1980s, and it was released on 15 April, the traditional Tax Day. Tax Day has the strange temporal effect of finishing off the year just past in a coda. It as if the long stretch from New Year's Eve to spring turned out to be, on closer inspection, a much too predictable rise out of cold and darkness, and the country needed yet another reminder of the twin inevitabilities. However easily one might file an extension, however unimportant the annual return is for those who file quarterly, however frequently the date is moved to accommodate a minor state holiday, 15 April remains the most prominent secular deadline in the American calendar. You've got to get your taxes *done*.

The Pale King is not done, and none of the slew of reviews has sidestepped the basic question of unfinishedness, a question that has taken on three general aspects. Unfinishedness can appear to be a problem internal to the writing process – a matter of editorial

The Pale King, *by David Foster Wallace (Little, Brown, 560 pp., $27.99)*

control: What did editor Michael Pietsch make of the pile of holograph and the duffel bag of notebooks? Or it can be deflected into a problem entirely external to the writing process – a matter of Wallace's biography. (Certainly no one seems to believe that the state of the book is somehow deeply connected to its author's suicide.) Or, finally, incompleteness can be taken up as the crucial fact of the reader's experience: most charitably, whatever he or she likes or respects or appreciates becomes the essential matter of the book; whatever seems less polished or satisfactory is something Wallace would have changed. In any case, the reader cannot escape asking, Is this the way it would have ideally been? That suspicious, analytic mode of reading guarantees that the novel will not find a particularly wide audience – no *Freedom*-style crossover awaits *The Pale King*.

Even if Wallace had managed to finish the novel, there is reason to believe that it would not have ended satisfactorily, certainly not as well as it begins. *The Pale King* opens with a long, almost Nabokovian evocation of the landscape around the Peoria, Illinois, IRS facility: "Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers." In an art where the sense of an ending is crucial, Wallace was not a great finisher of novels (his essays and stories often end better because they are less freighted). But in this case, he seems to have set the thing up so that the disappointment would be built-in, planned. Among the notes and fragments reproduced at the back of the book are various outlines and guideposts that point toward a novel that doesn't exist. One sentiment returns: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens."

Monotony, dullness, and boredom have been taken to be the crucial subject of the book. Wallace does not seem to have determined whether he was intent on inducing that feeling or transcending it. His editor (as anyone who is hoping that a book will be popular must do) thinks the latter: "If anyone could make taxes interesting, I figured, it was him." Despite the fragmentary protocols, Wallace often agreed. The monotony would be the necessary backdrop to a new, bureaucratic sort of heroism: the inability to be bored. "It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish."

This unborable hero figure came to the fore in Wallace's 2000 profile of John McCain, published first in *Rolling Stone*. The essay itself switches between exhortations to "try to think about it" (meaning McCain's injuries, imprisonment, and torture) and the ludicrous grind of the campaign trail. The essay was enormous and had to be pared down to fit the magazine. Along the way, Wallace and his editor cut various evocations of boredom on the, probably correct, assumption that telling readers that politics is boring is not likely to make them continue reading about politics. The deleted material was reinstated in the e-book version and other reprints of the essay. One in particular captures Wallace as he goads his audience into paying attention to boring things: "But health-care reform is politics, and so's marginal tax rates, and defense procurement, and Social Security, and politics is boring – complex, abstract, dry, the province of policy wonks and Rush Limbaugh and nerdy little guys on PBS, and basically who cares." Like the McCain profile, *The Pale King* is an argument for caring, even for things that don't end.

If it was no coincidence that *The Pale King* debuted on 15 April, it was a rough synchronicity that this "unfinished novel" would appear within a couple weeks of the final concerts by LCD Soundsystem. In contrast, bands can seem almost eternal as they slide from importance into nostalgia. James Murphy, the band's leader, wanted none of that. He announced his plan to get out of the game by age forty. The final album, *This Is Happening*, was announced as such. During the final tour, the band cut a live-in-studio record, but that, too, was unsurprising. The final concert was announced for Madison Square Garden, but when scalpers gamed the system and drove up ticket prices, the band responded by announcing additional shows that would take place the week *before* the final concert. At those final shows, Murphy announced early on that they would occur in "three chunks" and that there was no need for the audience to applaud to bring them back onstage – they were coming back, but there would be none of the usual encore theatrics. At the end of the show, his voice was used up, and the band was done.

LCD Soundsystem fused indie rock and dance music to become the most cred-laden American band of its era. However important

the beat, much of what made LCD Soundsystem a remarkable band was James Murphy's lyrics. He had invented, and perfected, a genre that we might call "losing my edge," after their first single. These songs all had a twin aspect. On one hand, they seemed to register the passing anxieties of younger listeners that the mad race to stay cool, to put up a polished front, to hold the cultural vanguard was fruitless. But what gave these songs a particularly mordant tone was Murphy's conviction that he really was losing his edge. He could turn this into humor, or he could wallow in it. "I'm losing my edge to the art-school Brooklynites in little jackets and borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered eighties" seems like a sincere jab at "the Internet seekers who can tell me every member of every good group from 1962 to 1978." But he's already given up the game when he says, "I was there in 1968. / I was there at the first Can show in Cologne." (He hadn't been born in 1968.) The anxiety seems to be a put-on, in which everyone on both sides of the age divide gets slammed equally. Except that it isn't: "But I'm losing my edge to better-looking people with better ideas and more talent. And they're actually really, really nice." Whether he secretly believes that or secretly doesn't, it's the best account he can give of where he stands in the music world.

The novelist Sam Lipsyte said that Murphy, a New York University English major, could "quote from *The Recognitions*," which is plausible. Throughout the band's catalogue, there are other wordy, clever, Gaddisian songs. A litany like "Drunk Girls" – "Drunk girls cause a couple of heart attacks / Drunk girls are unusually mild / Drunk boys keeping pace with the pedophiles / Drunk girls are boringly wild" – would find the aperçu "Drunk girls know that love is an astronaut: It comes back but it's never the same." A faux self-hating rave-up like "North American Scum" managed "All the kids, all the kids don't wanna make a scene / Here in North America / When all your kids get to read it in your magazines / (We don't have those)." Alex Abramovich pointed out the elegiac strand in Murphy's writing in lines like "You spend the first five years trying to get with the plan / And the next five years trying to be with your friends again," so it was only logical to find that inflated into a full-scale eulogy in "Someone Great": "To tell the truth I saw it coming, / But nothing can prepare you for it – the voice, on the other . . . end."

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But mostly there was a sound. Abramovich has argued that the difference between a rock history and a pop history is that the first is a history of artists (and struggles), the second a history of sounds (and sequences). In Murphy's case, that sound was "Death from Above," which began as the nickname for his PA setup for the band Six Finger Satellite. It was crushingly loud and remarkably intimate at the same time. The nickname carried over to his D.J. gigs and then became the name of the record label he started with Tim Goldsworthy. (It was shortened to DFA after the attacks on 11 September 2001.) He has a sound engineer's sense of space and timing, and a born mimic's easy way with reference.

There are moments when rock and pop histories come into sync, when a particular artist's struggle will feel like the struggle of a sound to get out. That alienation can be destructive – it was for Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, for example – but can also feel like the conviction that one is, actually, right now, in the process of making art. *This Is Happening*.

Reading *The Pale King* just after seeing one of those final LCD Soundsystem shows is like listening in on an argument about the legacy of postmodernism. This is not as labored a comparison as it may seem. In 1993 an interview with Wallace ended with this long analogy:

> For me, the last few years of the postmodern era have seemed a bit like the way you feel when you're in high school and your parents go on a trip, and you throw a party. You get all your friends over and throw this wild disgusting fabulous party. For a while it's great, free and freeing, parental authority gone and overthrown, a cat's-away-let's-play Dionysian revel. But then time passes and the party gets louder and louder, and you run out of drugs, and nobody's got any money for more drugs, and things get broken and spilled, and there's a cigarette burn on the couch, and you're the host and it's your house too, and you gradually start wishing your parents would come back and restore some fucking order in your house. It's not a perfect analogy, but the sense I get of my generation of writers and intellectuals or whatever is that it's 3:00 A.M. and the couch has several burn-holes and some-

> body's thrown up in the umbrella stand and we're wishing the revel would end. The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. We're kind of wishing some parents would come back. And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back – I mean, what's wrong with us? Are we total pussies? Is there something about authority and limits we actually need? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back – which means "we're" going to have to be the parents.

This is how Murphy put it in the third verse of "All My Friends":

> It comes apart
> The way it does in bad films
> Except the part
> Where the moral kicks in
> Though when we're running out of the drugs
> And the conversation's grinding away
> I wouldn't trade one stupid decision
> For another five years of life
> You drop the first ten years just as fast as you can
> And the next ten people who are trying to be polite
> When you're blowing 85 days in the middle of France
> Yeah, I know it gets tired, only where are your friends
> tonight?

Wallace is telling the story of postmodernism as the story of a party that has gone on too long, and Murphy is doing the same thing only more tacitly. The trick is to understand every LCD Soundsystem song as part of its argument about what an LCD Soundsystem song should be. As Murphy explained to *The New Yorker*, LCD Soundsystem is "a band about a band making music about making music." The party that is running out of drugs here begins as something like a studio session: "That's how it starts / We go back to your house / You check the charts / And start to figure it out." That is to say, it begins by announcing that it is

beginning just as the band ended by announcing that it was ending. They always knew exactly where they were.

Wallace's tale is the story of "the moral" "kicking in;" Murphy's is not quite. While he will become particularly fraught – "Where are your friends tonight? Where are your friends tonight?" – that Nietzschean moment – "I wouldn't trade one stupid decision" – is real. His consciousness is much happier. "And if it's crowded all the better / Because we know we're gonna be up late" is how he puts it in "All My Friends;" in "Home," he says it this way: "If you're afraid of what you need, look around you, you're surrounded. It won't get any better." Murphy *knows* he has a "face like a dad and a laughable stand," and yet he never needs that paternal recognition, the "uneasiest feeling of all." If post-postmodernism is a problem, then creative labor is his solution.

The great set-piece of *The Pale King* is about that "uneasiest feeling," the exceptionally long account of one examiner's entry into the IRS. At one point, the narrator recounts how his father returned early from a business trip to find "the three of us now slumped there all totally wasted and paralyzed, one of the guys wearing a ratty old tee shirt that actually said FUCK YOU across the chest, the other coughing out his mammoth hit in shock, so that a plume of pot smoke went rolling out across the living room towards my father – in short, my memory is of the scene being the worst confirmation of the worst kind of generation-gap stereotype." It is exceptionally long because the character, "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, takes seriously, even metaphysically, the question How does anything happen?

In the swirl of his tale, Fogle gives us the story of his parents' divorce, his father's death, and his conversion from "wastoid" to committed accountant. That conversion happens during a final review session for a course in Advanced Tax that Fogle has wandered into by accident. At its heart is a lecture by a "substitute Jesuit." The Jesuit (who may be no such thing) is a stand-in for McCain – "His expression had the same burnt, hollow concentration of photos of military veterans who's been in some kind of real war" – and the moral is the one from the McCain piece: "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. . . . Here is the truth – actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested."

Wallace has turned the aesthetic problem of being one of post-modernism's orphans into the political problem of being one of post-Watergate's wastoids. And when Fogle hears the Jesuit's invocation "Gentlemen, you are called to account!" it seems to him like a solution. But more important than the moral is the process that leads Fogle to receive it. "I never seem to recognize important moments at the time they're going on," he explains. Yet over the course of his extended adolescence, he will come asymptotically closer. What Fogle wants to explain to himself is how he became "primed" to choose a life of mind-numbing tedium and endurance, a life of unending demand for attention. At the tale's climax, Fogle has managed his way past the IRS's gauntlet of tedium by knowing that every boring, repetitive task was part of the testing process. And when he hands in the final forms, the recruiter "looked from me to the forms and back again, giving me the exact kind of smile of someone who, on Christmas morning, has just unwrapped an expensive present he already owns." Whether Wallace ultimately would have found heroism in Fogle's choice or not – and whether we ought to agree with him – what he has made in *The Pale King* is an appropriately intense investigation of the processes of self-consciousness, of what it means to know that this is happening.

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