

## ***The Pale King***

David Foster Wallace

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Here is an excerpt from David Foster Wallace's unfinished novel, *The Pale King*. Wallace took his own life, in 2008, and much of the text of the work is understood to be biographical. Wallace is notable for his vivid, detailed realizations of the patterns of human thought and expression.

In this scene, his character is recounting a drug-induced expansion of awareness, experienced during college years. This heightened awareness, the character reports, entails a significant elevation in his basic quality of life. The narrative is in the first person, and Wallace provides little sign that these are not recollections. He is careful to indicate that he means here not to endorse drug use.

For our purposes, consider the state that Wallace describes and its significance or value to one who might be in it. In philosophy, in some cases, it may be possible to achieve such states, more reliably, more safely, and of a more enduring nature than by the consumption of a drug.

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There was, however, sporadically throughout this whole period, the matter of Obetrol, which is chemically related to Dexedrine but did not have the horrible breath and taste-in-the-mouth thing of Dexedrine. It was also related to Ritalin, but much easier to get, as Obetrol was the prescription appetite suppressant of choice for overweight women for several years in the mid-seventies, and which I liked very much, somewhat for the same reasons I'd liked Ritalin so much that one time, though also partly – in this later period, with me five years older than high school – for other reasons which are harder to explain. My affinity for Obetrol had to do with self-awareness, which I used to privately call 'doubling: It's hard to explain. Take pot, for instance – some people report that smoking it makes them paranoid. For me, though, although I liked pot in some situations, the problem was more specific – smoking pot made me self-conscious, sometimes so much so that it made it difficult to be around people. This was another reason why smoking pot with my mother and Joyce was so awkward and tense – the truth is that I actually preferred to smoke pot by myself, and was much more comfortable with pot if I could be high by myself and just sort of space out. I'm mentioning this as a contrast with Obetrol, which you could either take as a regular capsule or untwist the halves of and crush the tiny little beads into powder and snort it up with a straw or rolled bill, rather like cocaine. Snorting Obetrols burns the inside of the nose something terrible, though, so I tended to prefer the old-fashioned way, when I took them, which I used to privately refer to as Obetrolling. It's not like I went around constantly Obetrolling, by the way – they were more recreational, and not always easy to get, depending on whether the overweight girls you knew at a given college or dorm were serious about dieting or not, which some were and some weren't, as with anything. One coed that I got them from for almost a whole year at DePaul wasn't even very overweight – her mother sent them to her, along with cookies she'd baked, weirdly – evidently the mother had some serious psychological conflicts about food and weight that she tried to project onto the daughter, who was not exactly a fox but was definitely cool and blasé about her mother's neurosis about her weight, and more or less said, 'Whatever,' and was content to offload the Obetrols for two dollars apiece and to share the cookies with her roommate. There was also one guy in the high-rise dorm on Roosevelt who took them by prescription, for narcolepsy – sometimes he would just fall asleep in the middle of whatever he was doing, and he took Obetrol out of medical necessity, since they were evidently very good for narcolepsy – and he would every once in a while give a couple away if he was in an expansive mood, but he never actually sold or dealt them – he believed it was bad karma. But for the most part, they were not hard to get, although the roommate from VIC never carried Obetrols for sale and squeezed my shoes about liking them, referring to the stimulants as 'Mother's little helper' and saying that anyone who wanted them could just ring the doorbell of any overweight housewife in the Chicagoland area,

which was obviously an exaggeration. But they were not all that popular. There weren't even any street names or euphemisms for them if you were looking for them, you had to just say the brand name, which for some reason seemed terribly uncool, and not enough people I knew were into them to make *Obetrolling* any kind of candidate for a hip term.

The reason I bring up pot is for contrast. Obetrolling didn't make me self-conscious. But it did make me much more self-aware. If I was in a room, and had taken an Obetrol or two with a glass of water and they'd taken effect, I was now not only in the room, but I was aware that I was in the room. In fact, I remember I would often think, or say to myself, quietly but very clearly, *'I am in this room.'* It's difficult to explain this. At the time, I called it 'doubling,' but I'm still not entirely sure what I meant by this, nor why it seemed so profound and cool to not only be in a room but be totally aware that I was in the room, seated in a certain easy chair in a certain position listening to a certain specific track of an album whose cover was a certain specific combination of colors and designs – being in a state of heightened enough awareness to be able to consciously say to myself, *'I am in this room right now. The shadow of the foot is rotating on the east wall. The shadow is not recognizable as a foot because of the deformation of the angle of the light of the sun's position behind the sign. I am seated upright in a dark-green easy chair with a cigarette burn on the right armrest. The cigarette burn is black and imperfectly round. The track I am listening to is "The Big Ship" off of Brian Eno's Another Green World, whose cover has colorful cutout figures inside a white frame.'* Stated so openly, this amount of detail might seem tedious, but it wasn't. What it felt like was 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 just go through the motions it was programmed to perform over and over. It also had to do with paying attention. It wasn't like the normal thing with recreational drugs which made colors brighter or music more intense. What became more intense was my awareness of my own part in it, that I could pay real attention to it. It was that I could look at, for instance, a dorm room's walls of institutional tan or beige and not only see them but be aware that I was seeing them – this was the dorm at VIC – and that I normally lived within these walls and was probably affected in all kinds of subtle ways by their institutional color but was usually unaware of how they made me feel, unaware of what it felt like to look at them, unaware usually of even their color and texture, because I never really looked at anything in a precise, attentive way. It was kind of striking. Their texture was mostly smooth, but if you really focused your attention there were also a lot of the little embedded strings and clots which painters tend to leave when they're paid by the job and not the hour and thus have motivation to hurry. If you really look at something, you can almost always tell what type of wage structure the person who made it was on. Or of the shadow of the sign and the way that the placement and height of the sun at the time affected the shape of the shadow, which mainly appeared to contract and expand as the real sign rotated across the street, or of the way that turning the little desk lamp next to the chair on and off changed the room's interplay of light and the different objects in the room's shadows and even the specific shade of the walls and ceiling and affected everything, and – through the 'doubling' – also being aware that I was turning the lamp off and on and noticing the changes and being affected by them, and by the fact that I knew I was noticing them. That I was aware of the awareness. It maybe sounds abstract or stoned, but it isn't. To me, it felt alive. There was something about it I preferred. I could listen to Floyd, say, or even one of the roommate's constant records from his bedroom like *Sgt. Pepper*, and not only hear the music and each note and bar and key change and resolution of each track, but know, with the same kind of awareness and discrimination, that I was doing this, meaning really listening – *'Right now I am listening to the second chorus of the Beatles' "Fixing a Hole"'* – but also being aware of the exact feelings and sensations the music produced in me. That may sound all drippy-hippie, getting in touch with inner feelings and all that business. But based on my experience during that time, most people are always feeling something or adopting some attitude or choosing to pay attention to one thing or one part of something without even knowing we're doing it. We do it automatically, like a heartbeat. Sometimes I'd be sitting there in a room and become aware of how much effort it was to pay attention to just your own heartbeat for more than a minute or so – it's almost as though your heartbeat wants to stay out of awareness, like a rock star avoiding the limelight. But it's there if you can double up and make yourself pay attention. Same with music, too, the doubling was being able to both listen very closely and also to feel whatever emotions the music evoked – because obviously that's why we're into music, that it makes us feel certain things, otherwise it would just be noise – and not only have them, listening, but be aware of them, to be able to say to yourself, *'This song is making me feel both warm and safe, as though cocooned like a little boy that's just been taken out of the bath and wrapped in towels that have been washed so many times they're incredibly soft, and also at the*

*same time feeling sad; there's an emptiness at the center of the warmth like the way an empty church or classroom with a lot of windows through which you can only see rain on the street is sad, as though right at the center of this safe, enclosed feeling is the seed of emptiness.*' Not that you'd necessarily say it that way, just that it was distinct and palpable enough to be said that specifically, if you wanted to. And being aware of that distinctness, as well. Anyhow, this was why I was into Obetrol. The point wasn't just to zone out on pretty music or back somebody up against a party wall.

And nor was it just good or pleasurable things you were aware of, on Obetrol or Cylert. Some of the stuff it brought into awareness wasn't pleasant, it was just reality. Like sitting in the VIC dorm room's little living room and listening to the roommate-slash-social-rebel from Naperville in his bedroom talking on his phone – this so-called nonconformist had his own phone line, paid for by guess who – talking to some coed, which if there was no music or TV on, you couldn't help overhearing through the walls, which were notoriously easy to put your fist through if you were the type that punched walls, and listening to his rap of ingratiating patter to this coed, and not only sort of disliking him and feeling embarrassed for him at the affected way he talked to girls – as if anybody who was paying any attention could miss seeing how hard he was trying to project this idea of himself as hip and radical without being the slightest bit aware of how it really looked, which was spoiled, insecure, and vain – and listening and feeling all this, but also being uncomfortably aware that I was, meaning having to consciously feel and be aware of these inner reactions instead of just having them operate in me without quite admitting them to myself. I don't think I'm explaining it very well. Like having to be able to say to yourself, *'I am pretending to sit here reading Albert Camus's The Fall for the Literature of Alienation midterm, but actually I'm really concentrating on listening to Steve try to impress this girl over the phone, and I am feeling embarrassment and contempt for him, and am thinking he's a poser, and at the same time I am also uncomfortably aware of times that I've also tried to project the idea of myself as hip and cynical so as to impress someone, meaning that not only do I sort of dislike Steve, which in all honesty I do, but part of the reason I dislike him is that when I listen to him on the phone it makes me see similarities and realize things about myself that embarrass me, but I don't know how to quit doing them – like, if I quit trying to seem nihilistic, even just to myself, then what would happen, what would I be like? And will I even remember this when I'm, not Obetrolling, or will I just go back to being irritated by Steve Edwards without quite letting myself be aware of it, or why?'* Does this make sense? It could be frightening, because I would see all this with uncomfortable clarity, although I would not have used a word like *nihilism* during that period without trying to make it sound cool or like an allusion, which to myself, in the clarity of doubling, I wouldn't have been tempted to do, as I did things like this only when I wasn't really aware of what I was doing or what my real agenda was, but rather on some kind of strange, robotic autopilot. Which, when I did Obetrol – or once, at DePaul, a variant called Cylert, which only came in 10 mg. tablets, and was only available one time in a very special situation that never repeated – I tended to realize again that I wasn't even really aware of what was going on, most of the time. Like taking the train instead of actually driving yourself somewhere and having to know where you were and make decisions about where to turn. On the train, one can simply space out and ride along, which is what it felt as though I was doing most of the time. And I'd be aware of this too, on these stimulants, and aware of the fact that I was aware. The awarenesses were fleeting, though, and after I came off of the Obetrol – which usually involved a bad headache – afterward, it felt as though I barely remembered any of the things I'd become aware of. The memory of the feeling of suddenly coming awake and being aware felt vague and diffuse, like something you think you see at the outer periphery of your vision but then can't see when you try to look directly at it. Or like a fragment of memory which you're not sure whether it was real or part of a dream. Just as I'd predicted and been afraid of when I'd been doubled, of course. So it wasn't all fun and games, which was one reason why Obetrolling felt true and important instead of just goofy and pleasurable like pot. Some of it was uncomfortably vivid. As in not merely waking up to an awareness of my dislike of the roommate and his denim workshirts and guitar and all of the so-called friends who came around and had to pretend to like him and find him cool in order to get their gram of hash from him or whatever, and not just disliking the whole rooming situation and even the nihilistic ritual of the foot and the Hat, which we pretended was a lot cooler and funnier than it was – as it wasn't as though we did it just once or twice but basically all the time, it was really just an excuse not to study or do our work and instead be wastoids while our parents paid our tuition, room, and board – but also being aware, when I really looked at it, that part of me had chosen to room with Steve Edwards because part of me actually sort of enjoyed disliking him and cataloguing things about him that were hypocritical and made me feel a sort of embarrassed distaste, and that there must be certain psychological reasons why I lived, ate, partied, and

hung around with a person I didn't even really like or respect very much ... which probably meant that I didn't respect myself very much, either, and that was why I was such a conformist. And the point is that, sitting there overhearing Steve tell the girl on the phone that he'd always felt today's women had to be seen as more than just sex objects if there was going to be any hope for the human race, I would be articulating all this to myself, very clearly and consciously, instead of just drifting around having all these sensations and reactions about him without ever being quite aware of them. So it basically meant waking up to how unaware I normally was, and knowing that I'd be going back to sleep like that when the artificial effect of the speed wore off. Meaning it wasn't all fun and games. But it did feel *alive*, and that's probably why I liked it. It felt like I actually *owned* myself. Instead of renting or whatever – I don't know. But that analogy sounds too cheap, like a cheap witticism. It's hard to explain, and this is probably more time than I should take to explain it. Nor am I obviously trying to give any pro-drug-abuse message here. But it was important. I like now to think of the Obetrol and other subtypes of speed as more of a kind of signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware and alive in daily life. In this sense, I think that abusing these drugs was a valuable experience for me, as I was basically so feckless and unfocused during this period that I needed a very clear, blunt type of hint that there was much more to being an alive, responsible, autonomous adult than I had any idea of at the time.

On the other hand, it goes without saying the key is moderation. You couldn't spend all your time taking Obetrols and sitting there doubled and aware and still expect to take care of business effectively. I remember not getting Camus's *The Fall* read in time, for instance, and having to totally bullshit my way through the Literature of Alienation midterm – in other words, I was cheating, at least by implication – but not feeling much about it one way or the other, that I can recall, except a sort of cynical, disgusted relief when the prof's grader wrote something like 'Interesting in places!' under the B. Meaning a meaningless bullshit response to meaningless bullshit. But there was no denying it was powerful – the feeling that everything important was right there and I could sometimes wake up almost in mid-stride, in the middle of all the meaningless bullshit, and suddenly be aware of it. It's hard to explain. The truth is that I think the Obetrol and doubling was my first glimmer of the sort of impetus that I believe helped lead me into the Service and the special problems and priorities here at the Regional Examination Center. It had something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it's a choice. I'm not the smartest person, but even during that whole pathetic, directionless period, I think that deep down I knew that there was more to my life and to myself than just the ordinary psychological impulses for pleasure and vanity that I let drive me. That there were depths to me that were not bullshit or childish but profound, and were not abstract but actually much realer than my clothes or self-image, and that blazed in an almost sacred way – I'm being serious; I'm not just trying to make it sound more dramatic than it was – and that these realest, most profound parts of me involved not drives or appetites but simple attention, awareness, if only I could stay awake off speed. But I couldn't. As mentioned, usually afterwards I couldn't even recall what had seemed so clear and profound about what I'd come to be aware of in that cheap green previous tenant's easy chair, which somebody had just left there in the room when he'd moved out of the dorm, and which had something broken or bent in its frame under the cushions and kind of tilted to one side when you tried to lean back, so you had to sit up very straight and erect in it, which was an odd feeling. The whole doubling incident would be covered with a sort of mental fuzz the next morning, especially if I woke up late – which I usually did, given what was essentially a kind of amphetamine's effects on getting to sleep – and had to more or less hit the floor running and hurry to class without even noticing anyone or anything I was running past. In essence, I was one of those types that have a terror of being late but still always seem to be running late. If I came into something late I'd often be too tense and wound up at first even to be able to follow what was going on. I know I inherited the fear of lateness from my father. Plus, it's true that sometimes the heightened awareness and self-articulation of doubling on Obetrols could go too far – *'Now I am aware that I am aware that I'm sitting up oddly straight, now I'm aware that I feel an itch on the left side of my neck, now I'm aware that I'm deliberating whether to scratch or not, now I'm aware of paying attention to that deliberation and what the ambivalence about scratching feels like and what those feelings and my awareness of them do to my awareness of the intensity of the itch.'* Meaning that past a certain point, the element of choice of attention in doubling could get lost, and the awareness could sort of explode into a hall of mirrors of consciously felt sensations and thoughts and awareness of awareness of awareness of these. This was attention without choice, meaning the loss of the ability to focus in and concentrate on just one thing, and was another big incentive for moderation in the use of Obetrols, especially late at night – I have to admit that I know that once or twice I got so lost in the

halls or stacked layers of awareness of awareness that I went to the bathroom right there on the sofa – this was up at Lindenhurst College, where there were three roommates per suite ??? sofa was – which, even at the time, seemed like a clear sign of loss of basic priorities and failure to take care of business. For some reason now, I sometimes have a mental picture of me trying to explain to my father how I somehow became so totally focused and aware that I sat there and wet my pants, but the picture cuts off just as his mouth opens for a response, and I'm 99 percent sure this is not a real memory – how could he know anything about a davenport all the way up in Lindenhurst?

For the record, it is true that I miss my father and was very upset about what happened, and sometimes I feel quite sad at the thought that he is not here to see the career path I've chosen, and the changes in me as a person as a result, and some of my PP-47 performance evaluations, and to talk about cost systems and forensic accounting with from a vastly more adult perspective.

And yet these flickers of deeper awareness, whether drug-induced or not – for it is arguable how much that ultimately matters – probably had more of a direct effect on my life and direction's change and my entering the Service in 1979 than did my father's accident, or possibly even more than the dramatic experience I underwent in the Advanced Tax review class that I had sat in on by mistake during my second, ultimately much more focused and successful enrollment at DePaul. I've mentioned this mistaken final review already.

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By the way, I do think that awareness is different from thinking. I am similar to most other people, I believe, in that I do not really do my most important thinking in large, intentional blocks where I sit down uninterrupted in a chair and know in advance what it is I'm going to think about – as in, for instance, *'I am going to think about life and my place in it and what's truly important to me, so that I can start forming concrete, focused goals and plans for my adult career'* – and then sit there and think about it until I reach a conclusion. It doesn't work like that. For myself, I tend to do my most important thinking in incidental, accidental, almost daydreamy ways. Making a sandwich, taking a shower, sitting in a wrought-iron chair in the Lakehurst mall food court waiting for someone who's late, riding the CTA train and staring at both the passing scene and my own faint reflection superimposed on it in the window – and suddenly you find you're thinking about things that end up being important. It's almost the opposite of awareness, if you think about it. I think this experience of accidental thinking is common, if perhaps not universal, although it's not something that you can ever really talk to anyone else about because it ends up being so abstract and hard to explain. Whereas in an intentional bout of concentrated major thinking, where you sit down with the conscious intention of confronting major questions like *am I currently happy?* or *'What, ultimately, do I really care about and believe in?'* or – particularly if some kind of authority figure has just squeezed your shoes – *am I essentially a worthwhile, contributing type of person or a drifting, indifferent, nihilistic person?*, then the questions often end up not answered but more like beaten to death, so attacked from every angle and each angle's different objections and complications that they end up even more abstract and ultimately meaningless than when you started. Nothing is achieved this way, at least that I've ever heard of. Certainly, from all evidence, St. Paul, or Martin Luther, or the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, or even President Reagan never changed the direction of their lives this way – it happened more by accident.

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