

ESSAYS

FAITH AS A SORT OF PRESENT

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S RELIGIOUS DESIRE

Gabriel Torretta, O.P.

The Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well could never find what she wanted: in love she moved from man to man; in society she was forced farther and farther into the margins; and in religion she found discord and disorder where she looked for worship. Hers was a life of frustrated longing, unable to find the truly good among the lesser goods that were making her miserable. She herself tells us her deepest, most hidden desire: the Messiah, the one who “will show us all things” (Jn 4:25). It was out of longing for him that she went searching, and it was for want of him that she went astray.

This terrible and beautiful tension characterizes the life and writings of David Foster Wallace, the iconic late-twentieth-century American author whose works sprawl over just about every kind of human drama under the sun, insistently revealing the real human dignity of drug addicts, street thugs, transvestites, sociopaths, bureaucrats, suburbanites, and everyone else we love to reduce to dehumanized stereotypes. Experimental in both form and content, his works are easy to write off as more post-modern posturing or hip posing (goodreads.com made a whimsical “hipster lit flowchart,” the first question of which is “Have you read *Infinite Jest*?”), but doing so ignores the two critical engines that give his writing its motive power: longing for transcendence, and confusion about where it is to be found. Like the Samaritan woman before Christ made himself known to her, Wallace was tormented by a desire for more than what he saw; he was, in Flannery O’Connor’s remarkable phrase, “Christ-haunted.” Wallace’s works struggle to

reveal the face of the unknown God to a people who has forgotten the God of its fathers, and as such, they provide a compelling case study of the problem of faith in the contemporary world.

The question of faith is almost always hiding in the background of Wallace's works, and almost never in the foreground, causing many people, including his biographer D.T. Max, to conclude that God "was not as high on his list of concerns as, say, ethics and trying to do right in the world." Yet this conclusion misses one of the major dynamics in Wallace's writing project, which is to rediscover a way of speaking seriously about the deepest realities to a culture that has forgotten how. He observed to David Lipsky in an interview that "it's very hard to talk about people's relationship with any kind of God, in any book later than like Dostoyevsky," in large part because the literary scene of the late twentieth century had come to feed on a solid diet of irony and ridicule that conflated sincerity with banal naiveté.

The problem, of course, is that for many of our contemporaries, religion has become something banal. Pope Francis's encyclical *Lumen fidei* recognizes this point, recounting in summary fashion how the knowledge of faith and eventually the knowledge of reason as well has fallen thrall to subjectivism and relativism, with the result that "it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which take us in endless circles, going nowhere" (§3). Moreover, the ubiquitous and hypertrophied marketing culture has made people cynical about public discourse, seeing every form of speech as a trick to push a product. In such a context, making a universal truth claim about a God who cannot be seen, especially as a member of a church that accepts tithes, becomes indistinguishable from throwing a Tupperware party or selling your forehead for ad space: all of these seem like just bizarrely personal and invasive ways to make a buck or manipulate other people.

The difficulty confronting the fiction writer who wants both to explore the most serious issues affecting humanity and to create realistic voices for his characters, then, is how to speak seriously when no one else does. Speaking about the problem of trying to write directly about God and America's entertainment addiction—for him, two very related concepts—Wallace tells Lipsky, “I mean the culture, it's all wrong for it now. You know? No, no. Plausibly realistic characters don't sit around talking about this stuff.” Nor did Wallace figure out a solution right away; his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, while engagingly and hilariously written, generally fails to go deeper than conceptual play, and infrequently strikes a sincere note.

By the time he published *Infinite Jest*, he had discovered a way out of the bind. In the realm of theory, he had developed an elaborate defense of the “banal,” which would culminate in the celebrated commencement address to Kenyon College in 2005, where he insists that, “in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance.” In the realm of literary practice, his solution was that of a true artist: to express reality by plunging as completely as possible into the human mystery, allowing the truths that hide in the depths of man's heart to rise to the surface along the way just as they do in real life—fleetingly, mysteriously, but constantly, ever-available to the attentive viewer.

An illustration. The only truly innocent figure in *Infinite Jest*, Mario Incandenza, at one point wanders over to the Ennet House rehab facility where a host of hardened addicts are trying to live something remotely resembling a life sober. He is drawn to the place, despite its manifest aura of suffering and brokenness:

It's crowded and noisy and none of the furniture has protective plastic wrap, but nobody notices anybody else or comments on a disability and the Headmistress is kind to the people and the people cry in front of each other. The inside of it smells like an ashtray, but Mario's felt good

both times in Ennet's House because it's very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say God with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside.

Simple vignettes like this allow Wallace to address "banal" issues of religion and human meaning by circumlocution, implicitly criticizing social and literary norms that will not let him tackle the questions head-on. Mario's naïve perspective enables him to praise the Ennet House people for being able to speak seriously about the one thing everyone else calls banal (God), and to link that openness to healing and human maturation. In this indirect way he implies a provocative connection between God—however the term is understood—and the deepest reality of man. Perhaps, he suggests, our general unwillingness to take God seriously is a sign of a sickness in ourselves, a brokenness that needs to be healed. We may be just as much in need of recovery as the people in the Recovery House.

This brings us to a theme running under much of Wallace's writing: faith in God, or indeed any kind of faith, requires a change on the believer's part, a recognition of the insufficiency of his life in favor of a new kind of vision. As Joseph Ratzinger puts it in *Introduction to Christianity*, faith is the basic stance that "does not regard seeing, hearing, and touching as the totality of what concerns him," a stance that "seeks a second mode of access to reality, a mode he calls in fact belief." But this new seeing entails "what the language of the Bible calls 'turning back, 'con-version'"; the person who chooses to believe must turn away from his natural inclination, which is toward an egocentric absorption in the comfortable patterns of the visible world, toward something new, a source of meaning outside the self and its desire to control what it sees. As he puts it, belief simply "is the conversion in which man discovers that he is following an illusion if he devotes himself only to the tangible."



ABBOT HANDERSON THAYER — A VIRGIN

Implicit and explicit discussions of faith abound in Wallace's writings precisely because he was obsessed with the mysterious "about-turns" that mark the process of human maturation. Much of the drama of *Infinite Jest* centers on these about-turns, exploring the

different ways in which people come to recognize the insufficiency of their lives and the wounds they bear, and the painfully diverse human responses to those realizations. The drug addict and house burglar Don Gately, whose story arc comprises about one-third of the novel, becomes more heroic as he makes each successive about-turn, embracing more and more of reality at great personal cost; the rake of a football player Orin Incandenza dwindles into nothingness as he refuses to turn away from his casually cruel life; and the central figure of the young tennis champion Hal Incandenza exists in a torturous halfway zone, able to see the need to turn away from his self-destructiveness, but unable or perhaps unsure of how to do so.

But perhaps the most striking study of faith in Wallace's work can be found in the stream-of-consciousness autobiography of IRS examiner Chris Fogle, a single chapter that forms almost one-fifth of the unfinished novel *The Pale King*. Fogle narrates his time as a college "wastoid," roaming without purpose from one random project to another, sunk in drugs, TV, and selfishness. One day his Christian roommate's girlfriend tells him the evangelical story of her own conversion from college wastoid to committed Christian through a profound but random encounter in a wayside church. Fogle at first mocks her naiveté and her obvious implication that he is also looking for the same meaning she found in conversion; but eventually he discovers precisely the emptiness of which she spoke: "But the point was that I realized, on some level, that whatever a potentially 'lost soul' was, I was one—and it wasn't cool or funny."

Much of the story's remainder consists in his narrating an event in which he accidentally ends up in a high-level accounting class final review; and in the person of the coldly majestic professor (whom Fogle falsely believes to be a Jesuit in mufti) encounters reality for the first time. The professor is more than passionate about his subject; he believes himself to be participating in a grand and noble project, having committed his life to a difficult good simply because it is good: in this case, accounting. The experience

transforms Fogle's life, driving him with astonishing speed to abandon his wastrel ways and become a successful IRS examiner.

Fogle's conversion narrative mirrors the Christian girlfriend's story on almost every point: the long, wasted life, the sense of hopelessness, the desperate desire for something unknown, the striking encounter with a reality beyond the self, and the sudden change in course. The only difference is nonetheless critical: the girlfriend makes an about-turn to a faith in the supernatural God, where Fogle makes an about-turn to a faith in something vague, an awareness of the need to live beyond the narrow borders of selfishness that is situated somewhere on the shadow-line between recognizably natural and supernatural visions of human fulfillment.

The tension between the natural and supernatural forms of conversion, between acts of faith achievable by human means alone and those achievable only by grace from God, remains unresolved in the novel. As tempting as it is to write off Fogle's conversion as purely natural (since accounting is unlikely to be treated in St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*), the depth of his desires and the very ambiguity of his response prevent us from making too-facile a judgment. The natural-supernatural divide is symbolized in the mysterious professor, who both is and is not a priest, and both is and is not an accountant; he is a priest only in Fogle's confused imagination, but the effect the man has on him is nonetheless genuinely priestly, bringing about a total change in life, an awakening beyond the self through the labor of sacrifice.

Fogle's confusion is more than accidental; the priest/accountant exists astride the infinite gap between the natural and the supernatural, not as if to close the distance between the two, but to emphasize it. The eye cannot tell the natural from the supernatural, as they are lived in men; this is why Ratzinger insists that faith involves a turning away from the merely visible. Is an accountant in civilian clothes a priest? Not to physical sight. Is a priest in a Roman collar an accountant? Not to physical sight. The inner meaning,

the deep reality of the figure, from which his compelling power springs, is totally hidden, and we are left uncertain as to whether Fogle's account is a description of the supernatural decaying into the natural, or the supernatural breaking into the natural. We know only that he has been changed by a longing for more than he has ever seen, and that this longing continues to drive him, to transform him, to make him more human. We see him *reborn*; but the image cuts out before we discover *reborn into what*.

In his dialogue *On Heaven and Earth*, Jorge Bergoglio stated: "In the experience of God there is always an unanswered question, an opportunity to be submerged in faith." This unanswered question is the crux of Wallace's dramas, both in his fiction and in his own life. The great difficulty of faith is that it always remains, in language Wallace once used in a very different context, "a sort of present." Some have faith; some do not. Some who have faith do not want it; some who do not have it want it. Wallace seems to have fit the latter category.

His biographer says that "faith was something he could admire in others but never quite countenance for himself," but that description does not quite fit the facts. Details are hard to come by, in large part because commentators on his life seem to find Wallace's churchgoing incomprehensible and largely ignore it, but we can glean some important items. Wallace sought faith with a kind of desperation, twice looking into becoming Catholic, dabbling in Buddhist meditation, and going to church constantly (he wrote an eight-item list of things he needed to do to have a balanced life in 1997, which included "church"), but never seemed to find what he was looking for. He remained, to all outward appearances, on the outside looking in, knocking at the door of faith and never seeing it open.

Yet Wallace's life and his works are imbued with an irreducible ambiguity about the natural and the supernatural, preventing us from drawing any certain conclusions about the action of grace within. Faith and the hiddenness of grace are constant themes

in his work; if we cannot state with certainty whether characters like Don Gately or Chris Fogle have been moved to natural faith in man or supernatural faith in God, how much less should we arrogate to ourselves the right to judge the inner workings of grace in Wallace's heart. Grace is invisible; we can speak of faith manifesting itself in works (Jas 2:14–26), but at the same time we know that faith and its graces resist human limitation, even to the point that, "in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him" (*Ad Gentes* 7). This terrible and beautiful tension echoes through Wallace's writings, and makes them an indispensable witness to the problem of faith in a post-Christian world.

Wallace's life and works are like the story of the Samaritan woman, if the manuscript cut off right before she abandons her water jar and runs into town to speak of Jesus. Has the woman's long-held yearning recognized the One who can fulfill that desire? Has she been changed by her encounter with the God-man? Wallace's life breaks off at this point, leaving us with only questions. The one thing we know for certain is that faith is and has always been a sort of present; Wallace shows both Christians and atheists alike what it means to long for that present. We do not know how Wallace's story ended, nor need we until the end of time. But he would not be the first man to die of longing for faith.

Gabriel Torretta entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.