

Preface

This issue marks another move forward for *Logos*. Our first two were thematic ones containing articles solicited from well-established scholars. With Issue 3, we began moving toward publishing articles that had not been solicited and had gone through our process of “blind review” for acceptance or refusal. That process was used for nearly all the pieces that appear here; it ensures the journal’s standing as a scholarly one, ready and willing to operate by the rigorous standards of the best and most prestigious academic publications. While every publication has (and ought to have) a particular slant, determined in part by the editor’s vision and predilections, this review process helps to ensure an appropriate degree of objectivity and openness to new advances and different ways of thinking. It also allows the journal to become one “of record”—of providing access to the ongoing conversation in a discipline or area irrespective of a particular point of view. This makes for healthy scholarship and generally good reading.

Walker Percy, Southern Wayfarer and Man of Letters

We open this issue with two articles on one of the most independent-minded and fascinating writers of our time. Walker Percy never intended to become a philosophical essayist, to convert to Catholicism, and to spend the rest of his life writing novels (the first of which won the National Book Award in 1960) on the problems of Christian belief at the end of the twentieth century. He was intent on a career in science, and, thus, after work in chemistry at the University of North Carolina, he entered Columbia’s School of Physicians and Surgeons, and upon graduating began a residency in pathology at Bellevue Hospital. Performing an autopsy, he contracted tuberculosis and was sent to upstate New York to convalesce, where he began a course of reading in existentialist novels and philosophy that shook his faith in the ability of science to answer the deepest questions of human existence. He found himself turning to philosophy, Catholicism, and eventually to novel writing, the art form most particularly able to engage “the Christian fact.”

John Desmond, the president of the Walker Percy Society of America, provides a fine overview of Percy’s philosophical positions, particularly his stance in the realism-nominalism debate. Percy affirmed realism, the belief in the existence of real universals independent of the human mind, and this affirmation provides the necessary foundation for his triadic theory of language and is at the heart of his belief in transcendent reality. Desmond is particularly helpful in elucidating the parable of the castaway that Percy used (indeed expanded into a full-length and delightfully quirky book, *Lost in the Cosmos*) to legitimate Christian belief. To understand that parable—indeed, to understand Christianity itself—one must distinguish between “a piece of knowledge” and “a piece of news.” As important as knowledge is and as much as we benefit from it, it cannot substitute for news, for “its object is ‘not the teaching but a teacher,’ a single person (Jesus Christ), and it is addressed to the existential situation of the individual hearer.” To treat this news as knowledge that can be examined for its “philosophical truths,” according to Percy, “ignores the fundamental claim of Christianity, that it is based upon a unique event, God’s entrance into history in the person of Jesus Christ, an historical event

“ ‘existing here and now in time.’ ” Percy took this somewhat unusual approach to the problem of religious knowledge because he wanted to avoid traditional theological categories, which, he held, no longer were meaningful for most people, including church-going Christians.

Since his death to cancer in 1990, two substantial biographies have been published on Percy. Our second piece reflects on the relative merits of these two accounts and offers an astute critique of the most recent one, *Walker Percy: A Life*, by Percy’s literary executor, Patrick Samway, S.J. Over three pages of acknowledgments indicate how exhaustive was Samway’s investigation (it seems he talked to or corresponded with nearly everyone who had some acquaintance with Percy), but as Kathleen Scullin suggests in her essay, a welter of details does not make for a life. The great biographer of Henry James, Leon Edel, spoke of the importance of discovering the pattern beneath the carpet, but that seems not to have happened here, even though Samway states that his principal aim was “to trace Walker Percy’s life and explain the dynamism that gave this life depth, charm, and coherence.”

Scullin does find the excerpts from Percy’s literary correspondence valuable. And the discussion of the role of Stanley Kauffmann as Percy’s first editor and the responses of Caroline Gordon and Shelby Foote to Percy’s drafts provide insight into his writing process. It cannot be easy to write a biography of a person who was himself so consumed with the question of how to live a life authentically, and while Scullin is grateful for many of Samway’s details and observations, she finds that *Pilgrim in the Ruins* by Jay Tolson better responds to its subject.

“Smit with love of sacred song”

As anyone knows who lived through the years following the Second Vatican Council, the liturgical changes that were enacted as a result were accepted with alacrity by some and greeted with bitterness by others. Even today—25 years after the council—one can hear expressions of remorse over what the Council wrought liturgically. Adam Schwartz gives us a detailed chapter in the history of the Church’s “liturgical revolution.” He looks at three Britons—novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991), historian Christopher Dawson (1889-1970), and poet-painter David Jones (1895-1974)—and shows “how Catholic intellectuals of different backgrounds and areas of literary interest shared a common fear that changes in liturgy represented a larger attempt by the Church to accommodate modernity.” All three regarded this accommodation as ill-considered and ill-fated to reduce the authority and appeal of traditional Christianity. The response of these three remarkable figures must be attended to carefully; while it does reflect a general climate of response, it also reflects “the discrete dynamics of twentieth-century British Catholicism.” The minority position of Catholics in Britain can only have exacerbated the response of these three writers.

In *Late Night Thoughts* Listening to Mahler’s Ninth Symphony, Lewis Thomas muses that if one is “looking about for really profound mysteries, essential aspects of our existence for which neither the sciences nor the humanities can provide any sort of

explanation,” he or she should start with music, for we “haven’t the ghost of an idea about what music is, or why we make it and cannot be human without it, or even—and this is the telling point—how the human mind makes music on its own, before it is written down and played.” And George Steiner opines in *Real Presences* that humans are human because they “can produce and be possessed by music.” Given these thoughts, and given the role that music plays in religious cultures of every sort, it is important that *Logos* address this important dimension of human existence, even though in discussions and analyses of music the limitations of language are most greatly realized. We inaugurate our engagement with music with two fine essays.

In the first, Jan Michael Joncas introduces the work of Arvo Pärt, the Estonian composer whose two *Masses* and deep spiritual sensibility have earned him, along with John Tavener and Henryk Gorecki, the appellation “holy minimalist.” Joncas presents Pärt’s “critical realism of the Christian tradition” as a refreshing response to the crisis in Western art music, a crisis that has altered the role of the composer in society and that has surrendered to the totalitarianism of serialism or the irrationality of aleatory music. Pärt, according to Joncas, regards the composer as a witness to a living tradition, as a transmitter of spiritual values, and as a herald of truth.

Next, H. Wendell Howard demonstrates that behind Puccini’s sweetness and sentimentality and occasionally chilling brutality is a deep “love and understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and its precepts.” After a compendious overview of the composer’s qualities, especially his verism, Howard focuses on *Suor Angelica*, the middle of a trio of one-act operas. *Suor Angelica* is Catholic, Howard argues, not “because the principal character is a nun, or because the action occurs in a convent, or because the dramatic conflict stems from serious sins, or because a miraculous vision appears in the end.” Its Catholicity lies in its affirmation of “the power of God’s forgiveness.”

Christian Readings of American Writers

Several years ago, the Conference on Christianity and Literature debated the question of whether there is a way of reading literature that is distinctly Christian; in other words, is there such a thing as a Christian criticism. The issue is a long standing one, and has been engaged by such luminaries as Jacques Maritain, William Lynch, and Dorothy Sayers. I don’t think that there has ever been a satisfactory answer. A Christian reads like anyone else—with attention to details and structures and with as much intelligence, imagination, and heart as she or he is capable of. Yet, critics continue to write interpretations that bring to the fore the Christian elements or implications of works, and if that constitutes Christian criticism, then we have two fine examples in this issue.

Margaret Bauer examines one of the “blockbusters” of American literature—Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—and demonstrates how Ishmael as a result of his being saved from destruction consecrates himself as a prophet to tell the story of the Pequod’s battle with the whale. She explores the process by which Ishmael comes to associate the whale with

God and how he comes to see the battle with Moby Dick as analogous to the final battle of Christ and Satan.

Kathleen Burk Henderson's essay is a most welcome contribution, one that I hope will help lead to the revival of a remarkable writer who has fallen by the wayside of literary history, even though she has had three biographies written on her. A woman of "prodigious mind with a Dantesque curiosity," Caroline Gordon is the author of nine novels, two collections of short stories, and several influential critical works. She was a close friend of the likes of Dorothy Day and Hart Crane and a literary advisor to Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. When Percy read Gordon's incisive suggestions on the manuscript of his first novel, he burned it and started over—such was the seriousness with which she was taken. In her last novel, *The Glory of Hera*, Gordon envisions God through the feminine imagination. A retelling of the myth of Heracles, the novel attempts to portray how Christ and transcendent reality are most fully and accurately encountered through the feminine, an idea that Gordon partially derived from medieval women mystics. This novel should be of interest to both Catholics and feminists. One can only admire the intellectual courageousness of one, who while loving the Church, attempted to find fuller and deeper expressions of spiritual reality.

In Defense of Conscience

In its wisdom, the Church stalwartly defends the right of individual conscience. In *Gaudium et spes* it says that "Their conscience is people's most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths." It is thus a pleasure to have in this issue John Crosby's lucid analysis of the difference between the conscience and the superego. Crosby does not deny the existence of the superego; neither does he disparage it. He simply points out that it is at a less sophisticated level of moral development. The superego, he observes, results from the introjection of parental authority or a "heteropathic identification" with others. A person acting out of the force of the superego has taken on the values of someone else, and he or she "yields in a sense to the others the place which should be occupied by his [or her] own self." The way of conscience is otherwise. In acting out of conscience, a person responds on the basis of a principle or moral directive that he or she understands, assents to, and has absorbed into one's being. To act in conscience is to experience "the quickening of one's deepest self." Thus, it is that Thomas More in refusing to take the oath of supremacy says to Norfolk: "I will not give in because I oppose it—I do—not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but I do—I. Conscience, according to Crosby, of the sort that More exercised "represents the most authentic, awakened personal existence."

Catholicism and Literature

We close this issue with an elegant review by Mary Reichardt of *Catholicism and Literature*, edited by John C. Whitehouse. As Reichardt points out, the Church has had a long standing interest in literature, though it has never formulated an official position on it. However, critics and writers have frequently spoken on the topic, and excerpts from their statements are usefully gathered in the volume under review.

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