

Preface

BIRDS AND BIRD SONGS inhabit the edges of the troubled contemporary world evoked vividly by Andrew O'Hagan's recent novel, *Be Near Me* (2006).¹ The Scottish island Ailsa Craig, referred to in the novel as a bird sanctuary and as a "golden spot on the Irish Sea" (93), is the setting in the novel in which the narrator presents an avid account of his Catholic faith. The island provides a haven of beauty in a novel set primarily in harsh urban conditions. Late in the novel the narrator, a Scottish Catholic priest, attends a concert performance of Olivier Messiaen's brilliant composition *Oiseaux exotiques*, and describes the work as "a wild aviary of earthly things struggling to wing the imaginary sky," and observes that "birds were the first musicians" (245). In a contrasting image, the odor of a dead bird thrown into the back seat of a car as a disgusting practical joke suggests the stench of cultural decay that haunts the world of the novel. O'Hagan exhibits a world suffering from cultural deformation and therefore incapable of resonating fully with the beauty offered by nature and art; but nevertheless it is a world in which divine love hovers as an offer and a promise in the atmosphere.

Be Near Me is a daring novel in the subject matter it addresses. The narrator is a Roman Catholic priest named David Anderton, born in Scotland with a Benedictine education at Ampleforth in Yorkshire before studying at Oxford and Rome, who at the age of

fifty-six is assigned to a parish on the coast of Scotland not far from Glasgow. Fr. Anderton (through what he acknowledges as weakness of judgment) becomes friends with a group of young people and, in an extreme climate that draws together a number of sources of resentment against the priest, is accused of sexually abusing a teenage boy. Without denying the troubling reality of abuse as a contemporary issue, O'Hagan nonetheless chooses to examine thoughtfully in this fictional situation the sources of hatred toward the priest that are evident throughout Fr. Anderton's parish and the human flaws in his complex inner life that provided material for this hatred to seize upon. Love seems everywhere distorted, attenuated, and uprooted in this world, and the focus of the novel is upon a deformed cultural world that seems in many ways to be inhospitable to faith but in which the deepest human longings are nevertheless for love and faith—a world in which people are quietly “looking for faith in the cold night air,” (305) quoting from the final page of the novel.

Two poems referred to in the novel together powerfully suggest the themes illuminated by O'Hagan. During the trial of the priest, his friend and housekeeper Mrs. Poole dares to quote the “Ayrshire wisdom” of poet Robert Burns preceding her testimony as a witness, referring to his “Address to the Unco Guid” and commenting that the poem is “about the Rigid Righteous and the Rigid Wise” (267), terms used by Burns in the poem. The judge probably knows the poem, having described himself as “Chairman of the North Ayrshire Association of Burns Clubs” (267), and he seems to recognize the aptness of the words as characterizing the self-righteousness of the priest's accusers. Mrs. Poole insists upon the point: “The whole world is full of them now. These people running through the streets haven't a line of poetry between them and yet they would seek to destroy this man” (267). In various discussions among characters in the novel, Mrs. Poole's statement that the world is full of self-righteous people receives substantiation through references to attitudes in the United States and Great Britain toward Iraq, in references to various forms of terrorism, and through references to intolerance

toward Muslims among some of the young people in Fr. Anderton's parish. The novel is intent upon showing the deep cultural flaws that seem to be caused by intellectual deficiencies, artistic indifference, and insufficient contact with love as the heart of faith, and O'Hagan's depiction of contemporary cultural conditions in these terms is closely drawn and therefore convincing. The final stanza of the poem by Burns is not quoted in the novel, but the novel would seem to endorse the view expressed there that our judgment of one another should be surrendered as we recognize God's loving judgment:

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias:
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.

The second poem that evokes some of the themes of the novel is of course alluded to by the novel's title. "Poem 50" from Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* conveys with brilliant intensity the longing for love and faith in the midst of turmoil that seems to permeate this novel as well:

Be near me when my faith is dry,
And men the flies of latter spring,
That lay their eggs, and sting and sing
And weave their petty cells and die.

The spiritual aridity described by those lines captures the condition to which Fr. Anderton is subject in his lonely life and in his yearning for a greater intensity of love. In a chapter of the novel in which the narrator looks back on his days at Oxford, he recalls his youth-

ful romantic love for a young man who died while they were still in school. Later in the novel, as he reflects on his friendship with his housekeeper, Mrs. Poole, he imagines distantly what it would have been like to have been part of a family with her, had they been a married couple. Mrs. Poole herself, one of the most brilliantly depicted characters in the novel, knows the pain of broken love. She describes to Fr. Anderton having found a note in her husband's handwriting under the mattress one day on which the words "I don't love you any more" were written. Among the young people in his parish, Fr. Anderton notes a kind of impoverishment of love, perhaps a wounded capacity for love that afflicts them without their really knowing the nature of their own suffering. These images of love's endless disappointments permeate the novel.

But neither Fr. Anderton nor the novel as a whole sinks to a level of despair in the face of such disappointments. He looks back to his youthful love and recognizes that the experience of love carries us closer to an understanding of divine love: "Be near me. True love is what God intends" (208). In the midst of the trial, the narrator finds support through his mother's unconditional love, even though she herself is not a Christian believer. She asks her son: "But what about your friend—your God?" To which he replies: "You won't like me for saying this, but I believe God is present in all this too" (241). And Mrs. Poole, who dies of cancer shortly after the trial, provides her own steady affirmations of love for the priest throughout his ordeal, and her burial carries hints of this blessing. Mrs. Poole had planned carefully to be buried in an ecologically natural cemetery in which the remains are shrouded in biodegradable materials and returned to the earth. A gardener describes the grounds to the narrator during the burial:

"This area is managed for the benefits of the plants and wild-life . . . You should see it here in the summer months. Just colour."

"And good for birds?" I said.

“Tree sparrows, yes,” he said. “Barn owls. Yellowhammers.” (294)

We recall here the narrator’s comments about bird songs in the music of Messiaen to capture the hint of grace conveyed by these words.

Be Near Me draws together an account of a rigid culture lacking intellectual development and suppleness, lacking a deep sense of artistic form and the capacity for the love of artistic beauty—a culture in which the ability to love has grown weak and distorted, all the while seeming never to waver in the assurance that Christian love abides in such a world. The deformations of culture and the wounded capacity for love do not silence a yearning for faith. Grace and beauty infuse that world if only one knows how to seek their presence. O’Hagan’s novel captures the condition of a disfigured world that continues to strive toward the fulfillment of faith, turning aside from the temptation of despair.

We were reminded by Ed Block in the previous issue of *Logos* (10:3) that Hans Urs von Balthasar also reached an assessment of contemporary cultural conditions that points to the defects of love when Block quoted the words of von Balthasar: “Certainly the present time is one where love is absent, where things are deprived of the splendor reflected from eternity. Even for Christians it is extremely difficult to avoid the contagion . . . which views all that pertains to [the world] in a positivist and neutral light.”² In this issue, **Jeffrey A. Vogel** presents an account of the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, arguing that this aspect of von Balthasar’s theology has been relatively neglected. In **“The Unselfing Activity of the Holy Spirit in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,”** Vogel examines von Balthasar’s analysis of the ways in which human beings are closed off to love by sin: “It is only by breaking them out of their self-enclosure that the Spirit is able to draw them into the selfless love of the Father and Son. . . . In being ‘unselfed,’ human beings are not estranged from their nature as finite creatures but

opened up from a falsely circumscribed existence to participate in true life.” In the terms developed by this preface through consideration of Daniel O’Hagan’s novel, a world that seems to be stifled by personal and cultural deformities but still remains open to the possibilities of faith can find through its suffering the impulses of the Holy Spirit that seek to restore the fullness of love to the human heart. Vogel examines closely von Balthasar’s claim that “the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of God’s revelation in Christ,” and explicates the claim: “The mission of the Holy Spirit in von Balthasar’s theology is to establish in those whom he indwells Christ’s attitude of selflessness, and . . . it is in this way that he is called ‘interpreter.’” Interpretation in this sense is accomplished by opening the person to the presence of Christ: “The Spirit incorporates those whom he indwells into the relationship of mutual love of the Father and the Son, giving them an inner participation in it. More specifically, the Spirit gives them the form of the Son in this relationship.” We can readily recognize that such an account has been framed with an eye in particular toward contemporary forms of suffering caused by a culture that is enclosed upon itself by lowness and narrowness of vision and thus stands in need of the dramatic unselfing activity of the Holy Spirit.

Robert Barron helps us to understand that a necessary foundation for any Christian culture is “a correct description of God. Everything else—culture, politics, nature, human relationships—is properly understood only in the measure that ultimate reality is grasped with at least a relative adequacy.” In **“Augustine’s Questions: Why the Augustinian Theology of God Matters Today,”** Barron shows how Augustine grappled with prominent concepts of God posed by a number of sources in his time and developed a profound understanding of God through these efforts. Augustine early in his life encountered the ideas of the Manichees and Platonists and was at first attracted by what Barron describes as “a kind of materialistic pantheism, God as a force or power running through and uniting all material creation.” Barron shows that

such a view is both very ancient but also familiar from a number of contemporary thinkers, such as Joseph Campbell. Augustine gradually came to recognize that Paul's account of a God who enters the world in an act of incarnation yet empties himself in so doing could overcome the problems Augustine encountered in the Manichean and Platonist concepts. "What Augustine found, through Paul, was a way of combining and overcoming the tension between the Manichees and the Platonists. He found the Creator God who, in his perfection and godliness, is *not* the world and who, in his love, becomes one with the world. He found, in a word, the God of Jesus Christ." Augustine went on to confront the Arian claim that "the Logos present in Jesus was not fully divine but rather the highest of creatures." Barron shows how Augustine drew upon and developed the Trinitarian concept of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "persons" as a response to the problems posed by the Arian doctrine, and he helps us see what is distinctive and illuminating about Augustine's thinking in this area. Finally Barron shows how Augustine late in his life confronted the charge that the collapse of Rome was caused by "the nefarious influence of Christianity." Barron finds Augustine's approach to this problem to be exemplary: "He is not looking for a way to make the social theory of Rome compatible with an interiorized Christian piety; rather, he is attempting to show that what passes for justice and right social order in Rome is in fact fraudulent and that the Church alone represents the right political vision." Barron in his conclusion holds up the thought of Augustine as a demonstration of the importance of clear and rigorous thinking in Christianity and points to the importance of Augustine for contemporary Christians. He argues that Augustine "produced a subtle, beautiful, and finally revolutionary theology of God. So those of us today who are committed to the propagation of the Catholic tradition in and for the wider society should take Augustine's restless intelligence as a model."

Michael Keating in "**The Strange Case of the Self-Dwarfing Man: Modernity, Magnanimity, and Thomas Aquinas,**" draws to-

gether reflections from C. S. Lewis and a number of other modern writers to present an analysis of what he calls “the modern dilemma.” The dilemma stems from the way in which presumption and pride, based on the unprecedented modern technological manipulation of nature, are combined with an “exaggerated *humility*, . . . an unwillingness or an inability to rise to a proper conception of who we are and what we ought to do” and thereby produce a peculiar modern deformation of the concept of the human person. Keating points to the concept of magnanimity in Thomas and Aristotle as an appropriate response to this modern deformation. He shows that in Thomas

magnanimity is a striving for excellence, a reaching out toward greatness, a concern for great honor, or more precisely, for those good actions that are rightly deserving of honor. As part of the virtue of courage, it disposes a person to accomplish great things in the face of difficulty. It is directly related to hope, since the magnanimous person hopes, in spite of difficulty, to attain to his or her proper place, and to perform those actions worthy of his or her true being.

But this raises a problem for Christians: how is such a concept of magnanimity compatible with the Christian virtue of humility? The question becomes even more pressing when we turn to Aristotle’s presentation of magnanimity, and Keating poses the inevitable question one must ask: is Thomas blind to the problems posed by a pagan heroic concept for Christian thinking when developing this concept? Keating goes on to show that Thomas properly adjusted Aristotle’s concept “without subverting his theory as a whole” by considering the altered horizon of human thinking and experience brought about by Christian revelation and by reflecting on the new concept of Christian humility. From these reflections, a remedy for the modern dilemma emerges: “A true appreciation of our human vocation, of our final end, is the first step. And directly upon its heels, presenting itself as a crucial need for the modern age,

is the virtue of magnanimity, the courage to lay hold of that high destiny.”

During the middle years of the twentieth century, *Jubilee* magazine provided Catholic readers a fresh approach to Christian culture and anticipated some of the issues addressed by the Second Vatican Council, according to the account provided by **Mary Anne Rivera** in “*Jubilee: A Magazine of the Church and Her People, Toward a Vatican II Ecclesiology*.” Edward Rice, its founder, and editors Thomas Merton and Robert Lax met as students at Columbia University. Merton and Lax converted to Catholicism, each with Rice as godfather. They later collaborated to establish “a Catholic magazine with a pictorial format and a commitment to the Church’s social teachings,” and successfully published it from 1953 to 1967. Rivera examines the magazine to ascertain from its pages how the pre-Vatican II Church understood itself in the United States, and she identifies a number of ways in which the magazine contributed to the development of ideas that eventually came to formal expression within the Church in some of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The magazine sent out a valuable and effective call for Catholics to involve themselves more fully in secular culture, undertook efforts “to bridge the chasm between the clergy and the laity,” and addressed the need for Christian unity. Rivera brings the story of this notable publication to life in her comprehensive account.

The next article turns to one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, and brings forward the philosophical encounter between Heidegger and another philosophical thinker who was shaped intellectually by her studies of twentieth-century phenomenology: Edith Stein. It is a remarkable and dramatic story, made all the more notable by the divergent paths these two great thinkers would follow in later years. **Rafal Kazimierz Wilk** in “*On Human Being: A Dispute between Edith Stein and Martin Heidegger*” examines the increasingly divergent paths followed by Heidegger and Stein, paths that are overlaid with the dire influence of the Nazis, culminating in Stein’s death in the

concentration camp of Auschwitz and in Heidegger's later efforts to distance himself from his involvement with the Nazi movement. Wilk demonstrates that Stein was a critical reader of Heidegger, recognizing both the importance and extraordinary power of his thought but also its deep problems. Wilk finds the core of Stein's critique of Heidegger in her approach to the issue of nothingness: "The frailty of finite beings led Heidegger to attempt to understand them in terms of nothingness, whereas such frailty led Stein to Eternal Being." Stein was probably one of the first thinkers to recognize in Heidegger the "fury, hatred, [and] anger directed against every question about God." Many later thinkers followed Heidegger in this stance. Wilk argues convincingly that a fuller understanding of Heidegger would be achieved by taking into consideration Stein's critique of his work because she recognized both the importance and the dangerous limitations of his work with great clarity.

Thomas G. Guarino in "**The God of Philosophy and of the Bible: Theological Reflections on Regensburg**" examines the important reflections of Pope Benedict XVI on the relationship between Christian faith and rationality, as an aspect of the address he gave in Regensburg on September 12, 2006, that was overshadowed in popular accounts by commentary on the Pope's remarks on Islam. Guarino shows that "the Pope not only derided the kind of reason that proceeds without faith, he also took to task those who failed to grasp that faith is inextricably bound up with reason, even with a certain kind of philosophical thinking." These reflections draw profoundly upon Christian tradition but are developed by Pope Benedict in terms that directly encounter the contemporary relationship between faith and reason, as had been demonstrated also by Pope Benedict's important dialogue in 2004 with German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (see the article about this dialogue in the Spring 2006 issue on our Web site, www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/logos). Guarino finds in Pope Benedict's address "a forceful affirmation of several traditional themes concerning reason as a gift from God with its own *relative* autonomy" and a Christian defense of reason and

philosophy. Guarino presents the importance of the position taken by the Pope in this address: “Properly understood, the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cannot be placed at antipodes.”

John Zucci introduces our **Reconsiderations** feature in this issue with his article, “**Luigi Giussani, the Church, and Youth in the 1950s: A Judgment Born of an Experience.**” Zucci recounts the story of the Italian priest and founder of the Communion and Liberation movement and shows us the importance of Giussani’s evangelism especially among Italian young people beginning in Milan in the 1950s. Giussani recognized that young people were especially lacking a sense of mission and that such a mission can be supplied by an encounter with Christ within community, an encounter that is not achieved by introspection but by engagement with the Church in the world. We then offer John Zucci’s translation of a work written in 1960 by **Luigi Giussani, “Open Christianity.”**

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Editor

Notes

1. Daniel O’Hagan, *Be Near Me* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2006). First published in Great Britain by Faber & Faber Limited. Hereafter cited in text with page numbers.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Revelation and the Beautiful,” *Explorations in Theology: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 110.