Preface

Annie Dillard's most recent novel, *The Maytrees* (2007), marks a culmination in her practice of a kind of spiritual discipline exhibited and cultivated through artful writing. Through this discipline she confronts deeply entrenched modern skepticism concerning the truth of Christian experience and moves through that skepticism to a spiritually resonant perceptiveness of the world that finds indications of God's goodness and beauty permeating the present moment. Her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), confronted doubt concerning God's goodness derived from a knowledgeable encounter with the apparent amorality of nature in which both death and fecundity in endless horrifying variations leave one wondering whether the created order could indeed be good. Dillard's other writings have grappled with the reality of human suffering and the enormity of evil and faced up to such experiences with the insistent courage exemplified in a brief passage from her book *For the Time Being* (1999): "Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, 'All your actions show your wisdom and love.' Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, 'That's a lie!'—just to put things on a solid footing."[1] Dillard knows that the

fullness of Christian experience can be achieved only if we face up to the endless discordant aspects that can be finally reconciled with a Christian understanding of the world at a deep spiritual level.

Although nearly every book or essay by Dillard draws richly upon the enormous range and depth of her avid reading, the response to skepticism in her writing relies in the end not on argument and theory but on a spiritually responsive engagement with the world as it arises directly through perception and experience. Perhaps the word "theoretical" in its obsolete sense might describe her account of a Christian experience of the world, drawing upon the earliest citation from the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the older meaning of the term: "*Theoría,* contemplation, speculation, deepe study, insight or beholding." [2] Just as Dillard's writing gives evidence of her wide reading, it also makes evident how fully she has cultivated her power of contemplative immersion in the moment and how deftly she has developed a power of spiritual discernment in such immersion. Such discernment is evident, I think, in a sentence from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek:* "Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."[3] In other words, beauty and grace are not products of our will and are not dependent on our sensory powers—but they do offer an invitation that we have the responsibility to accept. The constant and courageous readiness to accept such invitations marks nearly every page Dillard has published.

Writing for Dillard is not merely a means for conveying perception and insight but must itself be honed and formed by the same spiritual discipline that she brings to insightful contemplation of the present moment. She has the highest expectations as a reader and strives in her writing to live up to that expectation on behalf of her readers: "Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?"[4] As a result, Dillard's prose is demanding: sentence structures are often simultaneously spare and precise, vocabulary is wide ranging, and structure frequently departs from chronological sequence to bring

to fulfillment the rich potential for insight-bearing temporal perspectives. *The Maytrees* is preeminently a product of such disciplined writing. Dillard has said that the original manuscript was fourteen hundred pages long but was pared down to its published length of 216 pages.[5]

The term "Christian apologetics" in a limited sense describes many of Dillard's works, but that term does not extend to an interest in defending matters of Christian doctrine. Dillard converted to Catholicism in the early 1990s and the center of her spiritual interest is always with the reality of the core mysteries of Christian faith. The question at the heart of *The Maytrees* is the reality of family love. The various possible reductions of love are considered and eventually dismissed: Is love merely a cultural construction invented by the troubadours? Is it simply a biological urge? Is it a personal illusion? Or does the love that binds husband, wife, and child disclose the deep mystery of human dignity and open a perspective upon the sacred? The novel seeks to capture the phenomena of lived experience in which such questions assume their true human importance.

The setting for the novel suggests that in a larger perspective a human lifetime is only a brief span of time but precious and saturated with value all the same. The horizon of the novel is established by Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod, an area "that still seems antiquity's very surface," and "the backdrop of fixed stars," whose names Toby and Lou Maytree continue to learn into their last days.[6] The ocean's edge is almost constantly in view throughout the novel, and death or burial at sea are frequent motifs.

Toby Maytree awkwardly courts Lou in the early part of the novel, and he is thirty years old when they marry. Their experience of love in the early years of marriage as articulated by Toby to Lou is profound: "It is an unnameable boon love hauls down, that people rightly prize as the best of life, and for which it fusses over weddings. Not only will a cavedwelling pair cull food and kill so kids thrive, but their feeling for each other, not to mention for the kids,

brings something beyond food people need" (45). The sense of love as divine gift shimmers over these sentences, even though the character himself is not inclined to speak in theological terms. When their son Petie is born, Lou recalls her mother's words spoken to her and rejected by her on her wedding day: "Until you have a baby . . . you don't know what love is" (49). Now Lou finds that she must endorse these words and later in her son's life observes, "Few, if any, women love anyone so much as their children. Parents love adopted babies with the same passion" (108). That last observation exemplifies the novel's dedication to refusing the reduction of family love to a biological imperative.

But the novel keeps the inconstancy of human love forthrightly in view, facing the challenge posed by the familiar difficulties of persisting in marriage. After fourteen years of marriage, Toby leaves Lou for a mutual friend, moves to Maine, and remarries. Toby eventually articulates this weakness in human loving as "the recurrence of love." "Why can love, love apparently absolute, recur? And recur? Why does love feel it is—know for certain it is—eternal and absolute, every time?" (127). But each challenge to the deep reality of lasting love is regarded by Toby as an "apostasy," a betrayal of the fundamental truth of love (128). This word again indicates the religious foundation of love, and in what is perhaps the central question of the novel, Toby asks himself: "Was romance hierophany, or some fowler's snare that yanked a culture by the toe?" (128). Mircea Eliade speaks of "hierophany" as "an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different."[7] Toby in his mediations after twenty years of his second marriage could only affirm the truth of his love for Lou, in spite of his betrayal of that love. Additionally, Dillard, in a sense, points throughout the novel to the shack on the Provincetown beach in which Toby and Lou spent part of each year during their marriage, where Lou continues to live after Toby left, and to which under extraordinary circumstances Toby eventually returns as analogous to a sacred space.

The novel extends its inquiry into the reality of love at least briefly to a consideration of beauty. Lou late in her life "puzzled over beauty, over the tide slacked holding its breath at the flood. . . . Certainly nothing in Darwin, in chemical evolution, in optics or psychology or even cognitive anthropology gave it a shot" (201). Toby near the end of his life reaches the same observation of the reality of beauty: "Only now did he reckon beauty itself was the great thing. As a deathbed revelation this required—like most, he suspected—more thought" (214). Those who grow in love, even when having suffered from the betrayal of love, come to know the grounding phenomenon of beauty.

Dillard opens the epilogue of the novel with a quotation (slightly paraphrased, I believe) from Ralph Harper's book *On Presence* as an epigraph: "Nothing restores the sense of being alive less ambiguously than the birth of the unexpected, the finding of a person who one did not know one loved so much" (199). The final loving days of Lou and Toby in their shack on the beach during Toby's dying are filled with affirmations of the reality of love, with the horizon of sea and fixed stars framing the sacredness of the experience. I turned to Harper's 1992 book after reading the epilogue and found a few sentences that illuminate Dillard's theme beautifully: "The heart of personal continuity is memory of presence: self, other people, places, art, nature, and the ability to make promises and keep them. We cannot do without these presences: it is 'the holiness of the particular' that makes life worth living, its numinous mystery, its power to change us."[8] Dillard's novel penetrates to the core of such continuity and brings us into the presence of the sacredness of marital love. Dillard's art shows that language shaped by a spiritually rich and intense concern with attending to the grace and beauty offered to us as a gift in each present moment can illuminate the sacred fullness of experience.

The first article in this issue of Logos explores the contemporary dialogue between poetry and the monastic life as indicated through the correspondence between Czeslaw Milosz and Thomas Merton. The Reverend **Jeremy Driscoll, OSB**, in **"The Correspondence of**

Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz: Monasticism and Society in Dialogue" calls our attention to Milosz as a great twentieth-century poet whose work registers the great suffering but also the great hope of his time and whose poetic concerns led him to seek the spiritual insights of a monk, while Merton emerges as a monk who was intensely involved in the literary movements of his time. Driscoll centers his interest in each figure as emblematic, seeing Milosz as representative of the poet immersed in the historical and social situation of his time and Merton as representative of monastic life, and then provides a reading of the correspondence as indicative of the contemporary relationship between society and the monastery. The correspondence was initiated by Merton after reading Milosz's book *The Captive Mind,* a book that probes the deforming power of modern totalitarianism; Merton found himself seeking spiritual guidance from the poet in his effort to discern how best he could serve humanity in the face of the conflicts of the mid-twentieth century. Driscoll shows how Milosz through their ongoing correspondence tried to shape Merton as a writer, how Merton helped Milosz understand the cultural deficiencies of American life, and how the two exchanged views of antiwar activity, the Church, and other topics of social concern and of personal spiritual significance. Merton died in 1968, and Milosz in the final thirty-five years of his life after Merton's death wrote "some of his most deeply spiritual poems, some of his most deeply Catholic poems" according to Driscoll. The article concludes with a touching personal account of Fr. Driscoll's meetings with Milosz after Milosz read a draft of Driscoll's essay on Milosz's poetry published in the Fall 2005 issue of this journal.

Brennan C. Pursell in **"The Historical Theory of Benedict XVI"** calls our attention to the view of Pope Benedict XVI as historian and theologian that "the field of history is incomplete, or even makes no sense, without theology, or, if you will, a philosophy of ultimate meaning and causation." This view runs contrary to some of the dominant trends in contemporary historiological thinking but thereby makes a major contribution to a reformulation of the

concept of history in a manner attentive to the full significance of human experience. Pursell argues that one can find in the work of Benedict a Christian theory of history that overcomes a "determinist, never-ending triumphalism" while also avoiding the error of "uninformed, superstitious mythmaking." Some of the key features of this theory are its recognition of the role of reason both in historical analysis and in an understanding that human life itself is inherently meaningful; Pursell quotes the words of Benedict on this point: "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God." Benedict's theory of history includes a recognition of the place of suffering in human life and of the redemptive power of suffering. A Judeo-Christian understanding of history is imbued with hope, looking forward in the movement of history to an action of the divine. The historical reality of the resurrection can be maintained reasonably (even though not proved) on historical grounds, and the recognition of the place of Jesus and his followers in history discloses that each person lives in relationship to God. Accordingly, the possibility of spiritual intervention in history must be acknowledged. Pursell brings us to this conclusion: "To adopt Benedict's Christian theory of history means to accept the reality of truth, of good and evil, of justice and injustice, and the redeeming power of love and mercy. If you want to see God at work in history, then focus on the myriad instances when truth and love prevail over their opposites."

In 1858 John Henry Newman at the request of some friends began working on the establishment in Birmingham of a public (in the British system, independent of the state) Catholic school called the Oratory. The historical account of Newman's involvement with the school has now been provided by Paul Shrimpton. The Reverend **Leo Chamberlain, OSB,** in ***"A Catholic Eton? Newman's Oratory School*: Paul Shrimpton's Book and Catholic Education Then and Now"** provides an informative reading of the book while placing the issues raised there in the broader context of Catholic education. Newman was at the center of religious controversy both in relation

to the established Anglican church and in Catholic circles as well, and Catholics were excluded from the notable schools of the time. In spite of many difficulties, Newman provided to the Oratory "a distinctive Catholic ethos . . . that looked to both the academic ambition of the strongest contemporary institutions and to a Catholic and religious spirit." Chamberlain traces the development of Catholic education in the United Kingdom into the contemporary period as it struggles to maintain a truly Catholic identity in the face of the challenges of modern secularization and professionalization, and he points to Newman's vision of liberal education including theology within the circle of knowledge as an enduring source of educational strength in the ongoing effort.

Although there are some notable precedents it is nonetheless still unusual to find a serious exploration of the human encounter with the divine in science fiction. According to **Christopher Beiting**, this is exactly what we find in the writings of contemporary science-fiction master Gene Wolfe. In **"The Divine Irruption in Gene Wolfe's *The Book Of The Long Sun,*"** Beiting provides a persuasive reading of Wolfe's tetralogy, arguing that the work "is a fine addition to the corpus of mythopoetic fiction established by the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis." Beiting offers background information about Wolfe, reporting that he converted to the Catholic Church in preparation for his marriage but then especially through reading Chesterton and the Inklings became intensely involved in his faith. In *The Book of the Long Sun,* Wolfe develops what Beiting identifies as the "generation-ship tale," a genre based on the premise that interstellar voyages would transpire over several generations during which the travelers eventually lose track of their origin and situation and must struggle to make sense of their spaceship world. Usually, according to Beiting, works in this genre show the spaceship inhabitants constructing a mythology of deities and then eventually overthrowing their own socially constructed religion to achieve liberation within a materialist understanding of the universe where science and technology are the locus of glory.

Wolfe, however, "unlike most science fiction writers . . . is acutely sensitive to the importance and centrality of religion—even a religion based on myths—to human life and the human order." The novel depicts the irruption of divine revelation into the world of the protagonist who must then struggle with the effort to understand this revelation as it shakes and disrupts the established religious order in which he has lived his life. Beiting points out the allegorical interest Wolfe has in this plot: "Wolfe uses this tetralogy to explore in allegorical form one of his favorite themes: the coming of Christianity to the pagan, Greco-Roman world; the uneasy coexistence of both faiths in the same world; and the occasional conflict of those faiths in the mind and heart of a single individual." Beiting provides a masterful overview of the expansive work and concludes with ringing praise: "Seldom has the science fiction genre produced such a rich, and richly rewarding, Christian allegory."

How can the doctrine of predestination be reconciled with human freedom and with God's justice? This is the challenge taken up by **John Dool** in **"Predestination, Freedom, and the Logic of Love."** Noting that the doctrine is firmly rooted in both biblical tradition and magisterial teaching, Dool recognizes that it nonetheless poses difficulties for contemporary believers. The article focuses on the presentation of the concept by Thomas Aquinas but suggests that the concept as developed by Thomas can be helpfully expanded "especially by reflecting more deeply on the nature of God's love and how it is operative in God's providential relationship to humanity. This more personalist approach creates a context for understanding predestination that may render the doctrine more intelligible to contemporary faith." After a careful account of predestination in Thomas, Dool concludes that Thomas brings his argument to rest in the concept of the unknowable will of God and observes that we might seek a broader context to enrich our probing of the mystery of predestination. Dool goes on to reflect on the trinitarian understanding of the personal mode of existence of God and emphasizes that in light of this concept "love ceases to be understood as

an emanation or property of the substance of God but is recognized as constitutive of God; love is God's mode of existing, not merely an attribute." God's will must then be understood as an expression of God's love, and the freedom granted to the human person to accept or reject God's love is itself an essential condition of that freely offered love. According to Dool, "the inexplicable mystery at the heart of the doctrine of predestination is not that God chooses some and not others for reasons only God knows; the inexplicable mystery is why human beings might reject that love that is offered as universally as it is gratuitously. It is not God who is inexplicable, but ourselves. That is the enigma of sin."

Lloyd E. Sandelands draws upon the dark account of businessmen in the great story of Charles Dickens to reflect on the nature of business education today in **"Christmas Thoughts on Business Education."** He asks whether contemporary business education, especially in the United States but elsewhere in the world as well, has contributed to the problematic moral condition of business practices as reflected in many of the famous scandals that have rocked the business world in recent years. Arguing that business ought to be understood first of all in light of the ultimate end or goal of the human person and should even be understood as "a sacred and redeeming calling, a 'vocation' in God," the author demonstrates that business education stresses ends or goals that lead away from this highest calling in a manner that proves detrimental both to business practitioners and to business corporations. He finds that the curricula in business schools are highly similar and that most schools focus on "instrumentalities"—that is, on the acquisition of the power to manage the means through which business operates—while leaving largely untouched an examination of the highest ends toward the fulfillment of which the means of action should be directed. He argues that there is "no good apart from the primary good" and that "a secondary good mistaken as the primary good becomes no good." The article concludes with reflections on the true idea of the human person and in that light on the ultimate good toward which

the human person is directed, and the author issues a call for business education to redirect itself to exploring the importance of such knowledge within the business curriculum.

Shane D. Drefcinski takes up the widespread recognition that most college students today believe truth is relative, adding moreover that most students are unable to offer cogent arguments in defense of their relativist position. In **"The Superficial Sophistication of Moral Relativism,"** Drefcinski offers a definition of moral relativism, reviews two prominent arguments in defense of that position, and then brings to bear arguments that undermine the defense, concluding that "moral relativism appears on the surface to be an insightful approach to ethics but it withers under careful scrutiny." The article is concerned in particular not with a descriptive relativism that merely recognizes the variations in moral judgments in different times and different cultures but with that form of moral relativism that denies the existence of any universal, objectively true moral norms. The first argument in defense of moral relativism considered is "the argument from disagreement," which draws the conclusion that even if moral relativism cannot be proven to be true it nonetheless provides a more cogent explanation for the cultural fact of different moral beliefs and standards. The second argument for moral relativism is the argument from tolerance, according to which those who posit the existence of objectively true and universal moral beliefs are disrespectful to anyone who holds different moral beliefs so that any position attempting to uphold moral absolutes is really a form of cultural imperialism. Drefcinski then produces a number of arguments that expose the deficiency of these defenses of moral relativism, concluding with the argument that moral relativism "undermines the importance of our moral beliefs and practices" and threatens to undermine our capacity to uphold and defend our most important beliefs when confronted by external threats.

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Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 85.
2. *The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online (Oxford University Press, April 4, 2000), http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50250688
3. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 8. First published in 1974.
4. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 72. First published in 1989.
5. Sara Nelson, “A Lesson in Killing Characters: Sara Nelson Talks With Annie Dillard,” *Publishers Weekly* (April, 29, 2005).
6. Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins Pubishers, 2007), 1 (hereafter cited in text by page number).
7. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 26.
8. Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), vii. First published in 1992.