

Preface

HOMER'S *ILLIAD* FAMOUSLY EXHIBITS the power of anger to destroy communal values, made especially evident in Book 9 when Achilles says of Agamemnon: "No, I'll never set heads together with that man—no planning in common, no taking common action" (9: 264).¹ But a closer look at the condition of Achilles indicates that it is not anger alone that has overcome him. Underlying the many refusals expressed by Achilles in that book is a condition that in Homer's time does not seem to have had a name but that would come to be recognized as a capital vice in later Christian times—acedia, misleadingly called "sloth" in English. Remarkably, a form of the root word from which the term "acedia" would later be derived (a-kēdos, lack of care) is applied to Achilles by Nestor: "But Achilles, brave as he is, he has no care"—*ou kēdetai* (11: 787 in translation, 11: 665 in the Greek text). Acedia is a lack of care for the good, the loss of the capacity to respond warmly to the highest good, a condition of sadness and distraction. The anger of Achilles quickly leads him to sadness and distraction as he withdraws from his comrades after his quarrel with Agamemnon in Book 1: "Achil-

les wept, and slipping away from his companions,/ far apart, sat down on the beach of the heaving gray sea/ and scanned the endless ocean” (1: 89). Later when the three Greek ambassadors sent by Agamemnon to make peace encounter Achilles, he is sitting alone with his lyre, “lifting his spirits with it now,/ singing the famous deeds of the fighting heroes” (9: 257). His efforts to lift his spirits have been limited in effectiveness, we soon see.

Nestor says that Achilles has no care for his comrades, and the term *acedia* becomes especially fitting when we see that his loss of care extends even to the highest values that motivate the warriors in the *Iliad* on both sides of the conflict. The warriors strive to achieve the honor and glory acquired in battle (in the ethos of the epic poem) when a man in the moment of his peak performance seems to push up against the border between the mortals and the immortals and become godlike in stature. But in Book 9 Achilles, lost in his *acedia*, seems to disparage these values: “One and the same lot for the man who hangs back/and the man who battles hard. The same honor waits for the coward and the brave” (9: 385–87). These words spoken by Achilles in response to the speech of Odysseus express a loss of the capacity to respond to the highest values, an inability to care for the mortal aspiration to be godlike that is the key characteristic of his *acedia*.

Achilles arrives later at a mad delusion of detachment and autonomy in the world, an indication that a loss of care for others (in the charge directed at him by Nestor) and a loss of care or even impiety toward the divine are interlocked vices. He addresses Patroclus in Book 16 as he prepares to send Patroclus into battle in his place and imagines a terrifying final state of victory in which he and Patroclus are the sole survivors:

Oh would to god—Father Zeus, Athena, and lord Apollo—
not one of all these Trojans could flee his death, not one,
no Argive either, but we could stride from the slaughter
so we could bring Troy’s hallowed crown of towers
toppling down around us—you and I alone! (16: 115–19)

That he should call upon the gods to endorse the slaughter of all other warriors, enemies and allies alike, is to ask the gods to project upon the world as a whole his own complete detachment from others and his mad illusion of dwelling alone (save for one friend) in the world.

It is remarkable that Homer focuses with such intensity on a spiritual condition experienced in the midst of war that will in early Christian times become associated with the challenges of the monastic life, as *acedia* explicitly came to be understood in the writings of the desert fathers (more about this later). But the transposition of values from the ancient Greek context to the early Christian monastic context becomes more understandable if we observe that in each case the central spiritual issue is both the deep detachment of a person from any sense of participating in community and the weariness of the soul in its approach to the divine, a certain refusal of the soul to embrace the beauty of the divine, even though such beauty comes to appearance in radically different life contexts.

We find further support for arguing that Achilles is overwhelmed by *acedia*—and additional reasons to associate the *acedia* of the warrior and the *acedia* of the monk—when we note that the *acedia* of Achilles finally seems to be overcome only when Priam courageously confronts him in his camp and asks Achilles to return the body of his son, Hector, that Achilles in his unceasing anger has been continuing to punish. “Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right, / remember your own father!” (24: 588–89). These words touch Achilles deeply—and the theme of the power of words to touch the soul is recurrent in the *Iliad*. The weeping that overtakes both men together marks the turning of the soul experienced finally by Achilles as he steps out of his *acedia* and reconnects to participation in an extended sense of the human community that in the world of the *Iliad* can link even enemies, without ever renouncing the more limited category of the enemy. When Achilles rouses himself from weeping, he is able to see the grief of a father whose son he has killed: “Poor man, how much you’re borne—pain to

break the spirit!" (24: 605). These words mark the dissolution of the isolation of Achilles, and once he experiences compassion for another human being—especially for an enemy—he is prepared to agree that the war will cease long enough to permit the Trojans to conduct proper funeral rites for Hector, a concession that indicates a return of a proper reverence for the gods to whose dominion the dead belong. This concession made by Achilles and the first words of mourning expressed by the Trojans for Hector mark the conclusion of the poem.

One last note on *acedia* in the *Iliad*. I was perplexed to observe while writing this preface that Achilles uses the root word for *acedia* to describe the condition of the gods—"the gods live free of sorrows" (*akēdees*, 24: 614 translation, 24: 526 in the Greek text). Is "*acedia*" in some sense the condition of the gods in this worldview? This claim made by Achilles in one sense does not recognizably describe the passionate involvement of the gods in the world of the *Iliad*—they experience great anger, they can be wounded, they experience fear and sorrow. But in another sense, they are able to withdraw from such passionate involvement and rejoice together in feasting, free of the cares that are inevitable for creatures who live in the shadow of death. I think the insight that exists beyond the fringe of possible knowledge of the divine in the *Iliad* is that God loves humankind and each human being, that it is not impassiveness that exists in the heart of God but love. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the *Iliad* is caught in a theological tangle that the text does not unravel, a tangle that Plato recognized had to be addressed (though not with regard to the concept of divine love for the world, perhaps). The *Iliad* simultaneously speaks of the carefree world of the gods while also daring to imagine that a god can be wounded—a remarkable feat of imagination—and while recognizing that even Zeus grieves for the death of his son—when acquiescing to the death of his son Sarpedon, Zeus "showered tears of blood that drenched the earth" (16: 546). The *Iliad* does not reconcile these two aspects of divinity and can only partially imagine a

condition in which acedia is fully overcome by the joy of the mutual love that binds God and the human person.

The Christian heritage and implications of acedia are explored in a welcome new book by Kathleen Norris, titled *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer's Life*.² Norris has been an oblate in the Benedictine Order since 1986 and she brings to the foreground the accounts of acedia provided by the desert monks, especially Evagrius Ponticus (345–399) and John Cassian (360–435). She strives to make acedia recognizable to her readers as an overshadowed but widespread contemporary spiritual malaise, pointing to what she calls its liminal status in Western culture and in the Christian East. That the phenomenon of acedia is described powerfully by the monks indicates the close association between acedia and vocation, according to Norris. (One last mention of Achilles—he, too, we might note, had a powerful vocation to seek the glory of the warrior in the ethos of his culture, and his acedia was a disruption and distortion of soul related to that vocation.) The monk through prayer, contemplation, and work seeks the openness and stillness of soul in which to know the presence of God and must confront the threats in the soul—Evagrius calls them the “eight thoughts” in a list that eventually developed into the seven deadly sins—that disrupt a full-hearted affirmative response to the calling discerned in the soul. Evagrius and Cassian in their writings about acedia offer profound insight into the spiritual struggle with acedia as a sin. Norris believes that “Evagrius and Cassian do not merely predate modern psychology, but also prefigure it,” (36), and the soundness of this opinion is demonstrated by the accounts she provides of how the ancient accounts of acedia prove to be a source of contemporary spiritual healing.

Norris recognizes that her writing about acedia enters a long tradition in which this “liminal” concept is rediscovered and rearticulated. St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Pascal, and in the twentieth century, Aldous Huxley, are among the figures who have brought this elusive sin back into view. Norris argues that in the contemporary world we confuse depression and acedia, and here I

think of the opening pages of Walker Percy's novel, *The Second Coming*, in which while introducing Will Barrett's depression the narrator observes, "It is an undeniable fact that more people than ever are depressed nowadays. At last count, the symptom of depression outnumbered all other symptoms put together."³ A contemporary account of acedia, then, needs to offer a distinction between depression and acedia to bring it out from the shadows and Norris addresses this challenge with perspicacity. Norris suggests that both depression and acedia will be widespread in a culture that is preoccupied with consumerist attitudes in which even spiritual needs, when they are attended to at all, are approached from a perspective of self-indulgence. She then sketches the boundaries of situational depression, in which identifiable although perhaps hidden causes interrupt one's psychological well-being, depression as an illness that arises from neurological causes, and acedia as a spiritual condition that must be approached with discernment to name and confront long-practiced vices that have wounded our capacity for spiritual response and vitality.

The ability to name and thereby identify acedia as a dangerous and damaging spiritual condition is particularly important because the condition is likely to be interwoven with or mistaken for a form of depression. Once acedia is named and known, it is possible to take responsibility for the chain of vices (such as anger and greed) that weaken one's spiritual vitality and eventually open the door to the spiritual apathy of acedia. Norris gathers a valuable treasury of writings and insights that bring the condition into focus and offer spiritual resources (and hope) for the effort to release the grip of acedia as a deadly sin. The book concludes with what Norris calls "Acedia: A Commonplace Book," which offers over forty pages of excerpts from a wide range of authors writing about acedia.

In the first article in this issue of *Logos*, **Maire Mullins** focuses on a virtue essential to overcoming acedia, the theological virtue of hope. "**Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts': Hope in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast***" provides an insightful reading

of Dinesen's 1950 story by bringing it together with Josef Pieper's 1935 treatise, *On Hope*. Mullins shows that the discord in the community in Dinesen's story is a result of the loss of moral knowledge in a small community that has lost its way. This loss has established the condition in which acedia and hopelessness have greatly diminished the spiritual vitality of the community. In this context, an act of great magnanimity in the artful preparation of a glorious feast becomes "an instrument of transformation, renewal, and healing, and serves to restore lasting hope at both the communal and the individual level." Babette and the feast she prepares are instruments of grace for the community and the story brilliantly exhibits the possibilities of spiritual transformation in the recovery of "living and eternal hope."

Daniel McNerny brings to our attention the analysis of the contemporary predominance of sloth (acedia) provided by Evelyn Waugh. In "**Sloth: The Besetting Sin of the Age?**" McNerny points to a brief 1962 essay on sloth written for the *London Sunday Times* by Waugh and then proposes that "in Waugh's novels . . . we find the argument for his claim that sloth is the besetting sin of the modern world. For one way to read the dramatic arc of his oeuvre is to see it as an extended reflection on the nature of sloth and the way in which the moral, political, and spiritual conditions of modernity make us particularly prone to it." After some reflections on the particular way in which fiction functions as argument through complex images set in a dialectic relation to one another, the article focuses on Waugh's trilogy of novels set in World War II titled *The Sword of Honor*. Tracing the "encroachment of sloth" in the hero of the trilogy, Guy Crouchback, the article draws upon Waugh's essay on sloth to identify it as "the refusal of the highest of spiritual goods, the Divine Good" (following the analysis of sloth provided by St. Thomas Aquinas). McNerny explores the causes and the manifestation of sloth in Crouchback throughout the trilogy and then examines how the character overcomes the destructiveness of sloth through a particular understanding of personal honor.

The sense of personal honor Guy must discover and ultimately embrace is rooted in the virtue of Christian *caritas*, the theological virtue of *communion* with both God and neighbor. In coming to recognize how God is calling him to live charity within the highly constrained circumstances of the war, Guy begins within his own sphere to rebuild the Christian community that lies in ruins, not only due to the punishments of the Second World War and centuries of increasing secularization, but also due to his own sinful failures—his own sloth.

In “**Quantum Mechanics and its Interpretations,**” Peter E. Hodgson offers an insightful overview of an important twentieth-century scientific development and endeavors to show why some of the theological implications that some thinkers have derived from quantum mechanics are unsupported speculations. Hodgson sets out two competing interpretations of quantum mechanics, the Copenhagen interpretation asserting that quantum mechanics “applies to each individual system such as the behavior of a single electron or atom,” and Einstein’s view that “quantum mechanics is essentially a statistical theory applying only to ensembles (or large groups) of similar systems.” He shows that a number of paradoxes emerge when the statistical nature of quantum mechanics is not properly understood and then explores the wider implications of this scientific controversy. Pointing to scientist Neils Bohr as the major thinker at the heart of the Copenhagen interpretation, Hodgson offers an account of what is at stake in the confrontation of the positions held by Bohr and Einstein: “Einstein’s view encourages further thought and experimentation, whereas Bohr’s cuts off the hope of future progress. Einstein’s is the Christian view that looks forward to the achievement of a deeper understanding of God’s world, whereas Bohr is content to remain in Buddhist contemplation. . . . The debate on the hidden structure of the world is a debate between Christian optimism and Eastern pessimism.”

We turn next to musicology and opera. Frequent contributor **H. Wendell Howard** examines a composer who, he argues, has fre-

quently been insufficiently appreciated in the history of music. In **“Gounod’s *Faust: Opera of Redemption*,”** Howard finds a significant concord between Gounod’s deeply felt Christian beliefs and the tonal color schemes incorporated in his masterpiece. The article examines difficulties in the reception of Gounod’s work derived from the significant changes in music from the time of Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg, and argues that in spite of these changes the musical material employed by Gounod is well-suited to the spiritual vision at the heart of his opera. “This music is necessarily ‘traditional.’ Even though the opera presents illicit love, an illegitimate child, duels, murder, curses, and demonic influence, *Faust* is not a story that can be wedded to dissonances, atonality, and the clashing chords of [Berg’s] *Wozzeck*.” Howard provides a number of important insights into the musical means through which Gounod brings the quality of Christian redemption to a moving and brilliant display in this great opera.

In **“The Gospel According to Barbara Kingsolver: Brother Fowles and St. Francis of Assisi in *The Poisonwood Bible*,”** William F. Purcell examines this widely read contemporary novel and argues that the views of the Gospels presented within the novel are ultimately not in accord with a proper understanding of Christianity. Purcell considers the view expressed by Kingsolver that although the central character in the novel, an American missionary in Africa named Reverend Nathan Price, is an “arrogant proselytizer,” a more appreciative understanding of Christianity is represented by the character of Brother Fowles whose role in the novel in Kingsolver’s words is “to redeem both Christianity and the notion of mission . . . to represent Christian mission in a kinder voice.” But Purcell argues instead that the views presented by Brother Fowles constitute an ethical code that is not biblically rooted, that lacks any sense of the transcendent, and that misunderstands Jesus as an ethical leader rather than the son of God whose crucifixion and resurrection are central to Christian belief. Purcell locates the perspective offered by the novel in a contemporary culture in which pantheistic views

replace a Christian understanding of the world. A reductive understanding of St. Francis of Assisi in particular seems to be common within modern pantheism because his approach to nature seems to some to be in accord with a religion in which nature itself is understood as god. But, Purcell argues, Francis “was always aware of the distinction between Creator and created, between himself as part of the natural world and the Heavenly Father.” Purcell does acknowledge that Kingsolver’s novel in spite of the problems he has pointed out raises important questions about Christian spirituality and its relationship to non-Christian religions.

The first two chapters of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans are the source for extensive philosophical and theological reflections on the concept of natural law. **Matthew Levering** in “**Knowing What Is “Natural”**: **Thomas Aquinas and Luke Timothy Johnson on Romans 1–2**” compares a medieval and a contemporary exegesis by examining the writings of Thomas Aquinas and Luke Timothy Johnson that highlight some central issues regarding natural law. The article focuses on the questions of the relationship of natural law to the knowledge of God and on the question of how we know what is natural and unnatural in accord with natural law. The different conventions and approaches of medieval and contemporary exegesis are identified as part of the examination with the expectation that the differences of approach could themselves offer added illumination to the consideration of the issues at hand. Johnson’s approach is found to focus on “the interior, personal character of conscience, sin, and law” while Thomas emphasizes the necessity of grace in a manner that Levering finds to be more central to the text of Paul. Aquinas and Johnson agree with Paul (according to Levering) that the existence of finite things makes it possible for human beings to plainly know the existence of God. The problems of knowledge stemming from sin and pride must then be considered and Levering examines the implications of this reality as articulated by Thomas and by Johnson. Levering concludes that a “fruitful circle” emerges at the center of the question of natural law, a circle in which, just

as the “proper understanding of Scripture is assisted by natural law doctrine, so also proper understanding of natural law doctrine is assisted by Scripture.”

Our **Reconsiderations** feature in this issue is introduced by **Robert A. Ventresca**, “**A Plague of Perverse Opinions’: Leo XIII’s *Aeterni patris* and the Catholic Encounter with Modernity.**” Ventresca provides a rereading of the encyclical *Aeterni patris* that assesses its attempt to propose Thomism as the basis for Catholic engagement with modernity. The text of “*Aeterni patris*” by **Pope Leo XIII** is then reprinted here.

Michael C. Jordan
Editor

Notes

1. The translation referenced throughout this preface is Homer: *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990). References to the Greek text are to *The Iliad of Homer I–XII* edited by M. M. Willcock (London: MacMillan, 1978) and *Homer: Iliad XIII–XXIV* edited by Leaf and Bayfield (London: MacMillan & Co, 1898).
- 2 Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer’s Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).
- 3 Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Picador, 1980), 5.