In a ceremony in 2007 marking the conferral by the Catholic Institute of Paris of an honorary doctoral degree upon Chinese-born writer François Cheng, Professor Nathalie Nabert described Cheng’s work as “a continual dialogue of the interior worlds,” a dialogue conducted on the basis of Cheng’s Chinese cultural heritage and his long-time participation in French culture, culminating in his election to the French Academy in 2002 as the first Asian-born member of the Academy.¹ Cheng was born in China in 1929 and has lived and worked as a scholar, writer, and translator in France since 1949. In his acceptance speech at the Catholic Institute of Paris, Cheng confirmed the importance of dialogue between China and the Christian West in his work, describing himself as having become “a man of dialogue” because of what he described as his “double destiny,” and pointing to the central place of Christianity in the West as he had encountered it in his experience.²

In his recent book translated from French into English as The Way of Beauty, Cheng establishes beauty as a key term in the dialogue between the Christian West and China, but he insists that we can
speak of beauty “in these times of universal suffering, random violence, and natural and ecological disasters” only if we confront the position of beauty in relation to evil.3 “I am convinced that it is our urgent and ongoing task to take a hard look at these two mysteries, which constitute the two poles of the living universe: at one end, evil; at the other, beauty” (5–6). He offers a biographical account of how this realization first confronted him. One of his aunts returned to China after a visit to France and brought reproductions of a number of great paintings. Around the same time, he encountered documentary photographs depicting the results of acts of torture perpetrated during the 1936 Nanking Massacre. “From then on, in the consciousness of the eight-year-old child I then was, superimposed upon the image of ideal beauty in Ingres’s ‘La Source’ was that of the violated woman, maimed by her abuser” (10). This horrifying juxtaposition of images powerfully reflects a dilemma concerning beauty that has frequently been discussed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: when we focus on beauty, do we evade the reality of suffering and evil in the world? Cardinal Ratzinger has expressed this problem in these words:

Can the beautiful be genuine, or, in the end, is it only an illusion? Isn’t reality perhaps basically evil? The fear that in the end it is not the arrow of the beautiful that leads us to the truth, but that falsehood, all that is ugly and vulgar, may constitute the true “reality” has at all times caused people anguish. At present this has been expressed in the assertion that after Auschwitz it was no longer possible to write poetry; after Auschwitz it is no longer possible to speak of a God who is good.4

How, then, does Cheng develop an understanding of beauty that responds to the reality of our experience of evil? As he tells us in his previously cited speech at the Catholic Institute of Paris, his fundamental cosmological vision comes from the great Taoist intuition of the interdependence of all things: “Beginning with the idea of the
Breath-Spirit, Taoism advances a unitary and organic conception of the living universe, where everything adheres and is interlinked” (168). In The Way of Beauty, Cheng argues that this cosmological vision is at the heart of Chinese culture and of the Chinese experience of the beautiful. “The primordial Breath that ensures the original unity continues to animate all beings, linking them into a giant, interwoven, engendering network called the Tao, the Way” (67). Every object, every component of the cosmos, when coming into its fullness of being emerges as a participant in the living interconnected whole: “The uniqueness of each individual can only be constituted, affirmed, gradually revealed, and finally can become meaningful in the face of other unique beings, thanks to other unique beings. That is the very condition of open life” (14).

The phrase “open life” in Cheng’s account of beauty points to the cooperative participation of each thing in the Way, and the human person stands in a special relationship to the movement toward open life because we are capable of perceiving such movement. “True beauty is that which follows the course of the Way, the irresistible progress toward open life—in other words, a principle of life that keeps its whole promise open” (23). Cheng believes that the Chinese are particularly adept at seeing the world through metaphor, through the capacity to perceive interconnection and resemblance, and in sensing the movement toward an interdependent plentitude in the openness of life we are witnesses to beauty. Our awareness of beauty therefore gives rise to our sense of the sacred, a recognition that Cheng believes is part of ancient Greek philosophy and of all of the great religions. “Our sense of the sacred, of the divine, does not come from simply witnessing the truth, that is to say, something that carries out its function, that operates smoothly. It comes much more from witnessing beauty, that is, something that is striking for its enigmatic splendor, that dazzles and enthralls. The universe no longer appears as a given; it reveals itself to be a gift, inviting gratitude and celebration” (22). In his novel Green Mountain, White Cloud, Cheng describes the emergence of this sense of the sa-
cred through beauty: “Looking was communicating, making beauty emerge; Beauty . . . was a fountain at once visible and invisible, rising instantly from the depths of those gathered in appreciation of it. It was contact . . . and only the attentive could make it stunning and marvelous and unique.”

The experience of beauty holds special importance for enabling us to cultivate a sense of the goodness and wonder of the created order, a sense of the sacred. Cheng argues in *The Way of Beauty* that “an experience of beauty recalls other previous experiences of beauty, and, at the same time, it calls to future experiences of beauty” (35). In Christian terms, Cheng seems to suggest that each experience of beauty is simultaneously Edenic and eschatological: “Within the consciousness in question, where nostalgia and hope merge, each experience of beauty recalls a paradise lost and appeals to a paradise promised” (35).

But to return to the challenge posed by our encounters with evil in the world, can the experience of beauty prevail over the dark shadow cast by evil? In *Green Mountain, White Cloud*, Cheng presents us with a character who experiences what we could call an incipient response to beauty but whose personal degradation resulting from a lifelong habit of abusing women for his own pleasure prevents him from witnessing and experiencing what Cheng calls the advent of beauty. The character, called “the Second Lord” (indicating the subordinate position he holds in relation to his older brother in his powerful family), is aware of the “radiated beauty” he perceives but is incapable of a response in which the movement of that beauty toward the fullness of life can be registered: “All this required rising to another order of things, one beyond the realm of the Second Lord” (90). The destructive power of evil is real, but in Cheng’s depiction even a person who lacks the spiritual integrity required to resonate properly in response to the appearance of beauty might well achieve a moment of clarity sufficient to make him or her aware of a defective response to beauty. In the case of the Second Lord, his impotence in the face of beauty enrages him, and such rage is dangerous
and destructive, but it does not annul the proper order of values according to which beauty is at one with the good.

Acts of courage in response to beauty are required in the face of the oppressive weight of evil in the world, as Cheng asserts in *The Way of Beauty*: “The problem of extreme evil—evil capable of destroying the order of life itself—remains the inescapable hurdle in our attempts to establish values” (64). Just as the experience of beauty carries us toward the interdependent plentitude of the fullness of life and engenders a deep sense of connection, evil seems to thwart such a movement—it isolates, sunders, and diminishes all that it touches. But we risk blindness if we allow our focus to be fixed exclusively upon the reality of evil, and to prevent such blindness requires “the courage to give the highest place, in the scale of the true, to beauty based on goodness” (64). Beauty, Cheng acknowledges, can be used for deception or domination (23), but all such uses are eventually self-destructive. Again turning to *Green Mountain, White Cloud*, the main character, named Dao-sheng, in an affirmation of the power of love, comes to an important realization: “Beauty is fragile. . . . Cruelty and brutality snuff it out. . . . What is it about love that brings it [beauty] so close . . . ? Like love, beauty is a form of connection” (156).

But is courage enough to enable us to affirm beauty in the face of the oppressive power of evil? Dao-sheng continues his reflections upon his experience of love and beauty, and thinks also of the dialogue in which he has been engaged with a Jesuit missionary in China (the novel is set during the last years of the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century): “He realized once again how we are given life by the faith we carry within, a faith born of intuition or of experience. We would be crushed without it. If love was ‘more enduring than Heaven-Earth,’ it was because he believed it. . . . That stranger from beyond the Ocean of the West also believed it as well” (157). Beauty and love serve as indispensable points of contact in the intercultural and interreligious dialogue that forms one strand of *Green Mountain, White Cloud*, and an important strand
of the reflections in *The Way of Beauty*. Dao-sheng in Cheng’s novel stands at an early moment of the encounter between Christian missionaries and China, and is able to accept with a sense of wonder the promise of a possible deeper understanding through the shared experience of beauty and love. After speaking to Dao-sheng of love, the Jesuit missionary proclaims: “My good friend Dao-sheng, do you not hear throughout the world all the voices ring out exclaiming: ‘Love never dies! You will never die!’ And all these voices join to form one enormous path. Yes, the Way—the Tao” (120). In his reflections upon this proclamation, Dao-sheng recognizes that the Jesuit echoes the Taoist teaching of accepting the living universe and the Buddhist teaching regarding compassion but in some ways perhaps exceeds them: “With his stories of love, this man is forced into action: to act, to persuade, to wait, to hope—in short, to feel passion, as a man driven mad would feel passion. . . . We are madmen, he and I, madmen incapable of violence and capable only of speaking of love” (121).

The capacity to act on behalf of love, perhaps even to give one’s life in the service of love as the Jesuit missionaries who have travelled to China have done, is the highest affirmation of beauty and is perhaps the life-affirming witness that the world needs to uphold the value of beauty in the face of the reality of evil. Such a gift, Cheng asserts in *The Way of Beauty*, “shines forth with a strange beauty.” Such beauty has been exemplified throughout the world, but Cheng points especially to “Christ, who, in order to show that absolute love is possible and that no evil can affect it, willingly accepted death on the cross” (55). He points also to the special power of beauty that shines out through the faces of some of those who have known the deepest suffering, suggesting that “there is a uniquely human beauty, that fire of the spirit that burns, if it burns, beyond the tragic” (55). This is why, as he points out, many of the works of art representing the Pietà are some of our greatest artistic masterpieces.

Cheng brings his inner dialogue with Christianity to a culminating point in the 2007 address to the Catholic Institute of Paris I have
previously cited, and seems to offer a conclusion concerning what has been necessary for beauty to flourish in a world in which the power of evil threatens to overwhelm it. His words (in my translation) are worth quoting at length:

At a given moment, I understood that at the heart of humanity, it was necessary that Someone come to stare (dévisager) in the face of absolute evil and to contemplate (envisager) absolute good. And not only stare in the face of the one and contemplate the other, but to really take charge of them, and this at the cost of his own life, offered as a total gift, in order to demonstrate that absolute good is possible, and that we are not hopeless in the presence of absurdity and despair. This is what one calls an incarnate truth; this is what Christ accomplished in whom absolute good was manifested as absolute love. (168)

If human courage and will are not by themselves sufficient to enable us to affirm the value of beauty in a world that is marked by the shadow of evil, the grace of divine love and divine participation in human affairs provides the gift that upholds us in the truth of the experience of beauty. One need not infer an identity between Cheng’s beliefs here and Christian doctrine, but he clearly opens up rich territory for continued interreligious dialogue.

The first article in this issue of *Logos* by J. Daryl Charles argues that the prevailing view of early Christian history overlooks the complexity of the dialogue between worldly power and Christian faith in the first centuries of Christianity by exaggerating the extent to which the early church advocated for a complete separation between Christian faith and participation in military matters. In “Pacifists, Patriots, or Both? Second Thoughts on Pre-Constantinian Early-Christian Attitudes toward Soldiering and War,” Charles points to the dominance of a historical narrative according to which the purity of pacifism in the early church gradually
gave way to increasingly compromised views permitting Christian participation in affairs of the state and he points to the prescriptive theological character of such a historical view when it is used as a point of advocacy for Christian pacifism. Charles reexamines the historical sources in an effort to determine whether such a narrative has solid historical grounding. The article considers Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and other patristic writers before undertaking a reassessment of New Testament teachings on the use of force from a Christian perspective. He concludes that there are divergent strands of thinking in both the patristic sources during the first three centuries of Christianity and in the New Testament, finding evidence of both pacifist and nonpacifist thinking in the early church. The article concludes with a call to reevaluate the complexity of the relations between church and state during the first four centuries of Christianity.

In “Sulpicius Severus’s Life of Saint Martin: The Saint and His Biographer as Agents of Cultural Transformation,” John P. Bequette examines the efforts of early Christian thinkers to transform the intellectual legacy of Greco-Roman culture in a manner that would support the mission of the Church and examines The Life of Saint Martin by Sulpicius Severus in this context while calling attention to the significance of this work because it established the paradigm for later hagiographical works. Bequette demonstrates that “Sulpicius presents Martin as an agent of cultural transformation, one who challenges the Roman virtue of military valor with a corresponding divine valor rooted in Christian humility.” The article examines the literary and religious conflicts between Christianity and paganism and the conflict between Christian and imperial authority. Bequette concludes that Martin in the presentation by Sulpicius personified the counter-cultural ideal of valor rooted in humility and thereby transformed pagan literary values as well: “While pagan authors wrote the lives of valorous men in order to achieve some mode of immortality for themselves and their subjects, a hagiographer such as Sulpicius
Severus writes a saint’s life in order to inspire his readers to practice heroic Christian virtue.”

Frequent Logos contributor H. Wendell Howard challenges the common misreading of a work by Robert Browning, “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” in his article “Browning, Blougram, and Belief.” The article establishes the context for a careful examination of the character of Bishop Blougram in Browning’s poem by acknowledging the difficulties posed by Browning’s allusive style and by Browning’s characteristic sense of optimism. Many readers, including even G. K. Chesterton, have read the poem as “an incredibly optimistic attempt to make the best case for a sophistical priest at his worst.” Browning’s poem has often been thought to be a satire on Cardinal Wiseman, first Archbishop of Westminster, but Howard brings forward biographical information showing that Browning himself regarded the poem as neither satirical nor as hostile to the Catholic Church. The article then carefully examines the dramatic context established by the poem, which is a soliloquy by Bishop Blougram but with constant reference to a silent antagonist named Gigadibs. Howard shows that the character of Blougram issues significant “intellectual arguments . . . bolstered by . . . statements of belief,” and demonstrates that “the Christian answer to hate is faith.” The argument concludes with a call for a thorough reassessment of Browning’s intent and achievement in this work.

Poet Denise Levertov died in 1997, and the recognition especially for the Christian dimension of her poetry continues to grow. In “Denise Levertov: Poet and Pilgrim,” Dana Greene observes that Levertov’s turn to faith late in life enabled her to produce “a luminous and crystalline poetry” and suggests that the deep connection between the life and the work of the poet can be best captured by considering Levertov as both poet and pilgrim. The article includes a biographical overview of Levertov’s spiritual journey toward her conversion to Catholicism late in her career and examines a number of the works in which Levertov’s faith comes to expression in her poetry. Greene concludes that “it is only in the intersection of the
work and life of Denise Levertov, in the consideration of her as poet and as life-long pilgrim, that the full richness of her person and the profundity of her creativity are revealed.”

Michael Raiger in “The Place of the Self in C. S. Lewis’s The Great Divorce: A Marriage of the ‘Two Lewises,’” begins by pointing to parallels between Dante’s Divine Comedy and The Great Divorce, but against this backdrop establishes some significant and fundamental differences in the mode in which salvation and damnation are depicted in the two works. The differences, he argues, are not theological in origin but instead derive from the fundamentally different understandings of the material universe embedded in the worldviews of the two authors, differences due to the conceptual transformations that have taken place between Dante’s time and the twentieth century. Raiger also finds an important development in Lewis’s writings as he shifts from the allegorical mode of a work such as The Pilgrim’s Regress to a more complex symbolic mode in The Great Divorce, and he suggests that the latter work was composed in part to address certain dissatisfactions Lewis had with the The Pilgrim’s Regress. He argues that “there are two Lewises, linked by a Romantic sensibility (as Lewis defines it), but distinguished by their modes of representation: the early allegorical Lewis, and the later, symbolic Lewis,” while also showing carefully that the different modes of representation do not reflect a different theological understanding.

In “Keeping Faith: Evolution and Theology,” biologist Jayna L. Ditty and theologian Philip A. Rolnick demonstrate the fruitfulness of dialogue between science and Christianity in considering evolutionary biology and theology as upholding significant claims to truth. The conceptual development of evolutionary biology is considered, leading to an assessment of the extent to which biology and theology enter “overlapping terrain” in considerations of life and creation. They consider the extent to which biology requires a materialist interpretation, and then examine the territory in which the two disciplines have commonly been regarded as engaged in
conflict, leading to a rejection of the conflict model. The article concludes with a careful consideration (and enactment) of the possibilities of dialogue between biology and theology and then envisions the hope for an eventual integration model—which, however, is acknowledged to be still out of reach.

Walter Redmond has translated a number of the works of Edith Stein into English, most recently *Potency and Act*. In “Edith Stein on Evolution,” Redmond examines the views on evolution sketched by Stein in the final chapter of *Potency and Act*. He establishes the differences between the state of scientific knowledge in this area when Stein was writing and the current state of knowledge, and articulates the difference between the dominant questions in the dialogue between theology and biology at the time Stein was writing and the current discussion, and then provides an insightful analysis of the teleological character of Stein’s philosophy of science. The article traces the critique produced by Stein of the view of evolution proposed by Hedwig Conrad-Martius, and emphasizes the theoretical possibilities envisioned by Stein. The article concludes with a critical assessment of Stein’s achievement in this area, pointing to the problems left untouched by her views while acknowledging that Stein herself recognized that she was able to offer only a rough sketch in this difficult territory. Redmond also offers a very helpful chart that serves to clarify the ideas developed by Stein.

In “The Serpent of Heresy,” Peter M. Candler, Jr., retells the familiar parable of the blind men and the elephant, which is commonly used today to dismiss the possibility of achieving a comprehensive grasp of the truth because all claims to truth are necessarily products of perspective and are therefore merely opinions. He then offers the striking claim that it is precisely such partial views of the truth that the Fathers of the Church called “heresy.” He provides arguments from St. Irenaeus that he shows lead to this understanding: “Heresy is analogous to taking one portion of the truth, and proclaiming it as the whole.” The article moves from a clarification of the nature of heresy to a consideration of why heresy seems not
to be a matter of concern to many people and reviews the phenomenon of heresy in the contemporary world. The importance of achieving a comprehensive view of the truth cannot be abandoned simply because it is difficult to do so: “To see with the eyes of faith is to see differently; we require not simply our own eyes, but the eyes of the whole communion of saints—which is to say nevertheless that we still see through a glass darkly.”

Michael C. Jordan
Editor

Notes


5. François Cheng, Green Mountain, White Cloud, trans. Timothy Bent (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 156. The novel was originally published in French in 2002 under the title L’éternité n’est pas de trop.