Reading about the beatification ceremony for John Henry Cardinal Newman on September 19, 2010, inspired me to turn to a great poem by Newman that is best known today through performances of Edward Elgar’s musical setting The Dream of Gerontius. Since Elgar’s setting omits some portions of the text, I turned to Newman’s poem as a whole. The work provides an intense and luminous vision through which we can glimpse Newman’s remarkable ability to present a theologically informed understanding of human life through vivid and powerful linguistic means, an ability that of course can be found as well in the prose works that form a much more prominent portion of Newman’s intellectual legacy.

“The Dream of Gerontius” is a dramatic poem in which the etymologically named old man, Gerontius, completes a journey from the edge of life through death and then to a place and period of purgatorial suffering in which the consummation of the beatific vision is anticipated. The poem is dramatic not only by virtue of its action but especially because Gerontius even in the solitude of death remains in dialogue with others on both sides of the gate of death. The communal character of the dramatic poem is one of its most significant features, and it would be right to call this quality of the poem ecclesiological, establishing a dramatic vision of the com-
pleteness and continuity of the universal Church that extends across the boundary of death. In his dying moments, Gerontius hears a priest reciting portions of the “Litany for the Dying” together with others in the room joining in the prayers and called “Assistants” in the text. The vast community of the Church is presented through the words of the prayer:

All holy Disciples of the Lord, pray for him
All holy Innocents, pray for him.
All holy Martyrs, All holy Confessors,
All holy Hermits, all holy Virgins,
All ye Saints of God, pray for him.

Gerontius remains engaged with others throughout his dying, addressing those present collectively as “my dearest” and “my friends” (27–28). Moreover, the community of friends surrounding him in prayer as he is dying is envisioned as extending beyond death to a vast community awaiting him and assisting him in his journey.

Newman strongly emphasizes the continuity between the spiritual world and the material world out of which Gerontius is dying, and finds poetic means to make this usually imperceptible continuity mysteriously available to be sensed by him when, in the moment after his death, the soul of Gerontius narrates his dying and his after-death experience:

I had a dream; yes:—someone softly said
“He’s gone”; and then a sigh went round the room.
And then I surely heard a priestly voice
Cry “Subvenite”; and they knelt in prayer.
I seem to hear him still; but thin and low,
And fainter and more faint the accents come,
As at an ever-widening interval.
Ah! whence is this? What is this severance? (179–86)

These questions, full of the urgency of suffering, are to receive answers, because there is an agent of continuity who is sensed for the first time by the soul of Gerontius as he struggles to determine
his condition, a guardian angel in whose custodial care Gerontius has been throughout his life. The soul of Gerontius describes his first awareness of the angel’s care:

Another marvel: someone has me fast
Within his ample palm; ’tis not a grasp
Such as they use on earth, but all around
Over the surface of my subtle being,
As though I were a sphere, and capable
To be accosted thus, a uniform
And gentle pressure tells me I am not
Self-moving, but borne forward on my way. (225–32)

The geometrical conceit brilliantly suggests the transformation of being and the transformation of the senses that mark the transition from the material world to the spiritual world, and in many ways the heart of the poem is its ability to articulate a vision of continuity that links the material and spiritual worlds and establishes death as a kind of homecoming.

The angel is perfectly suited to this role of offering a vision of continuity, because the divinely assigned duty of the guardian angels teaches them the nature of the mortal human being:

How should ethereal natures comprehend
A thing made up of spirit and of clay,
Were we not tasked to nurse it and to tend,
Linked one to one throughout its mortal day? (298–301)

The angel is in fact well studied in the nature and experience of human temporality and spatiality that provide the core of material embodied existence. Such knowledge of the nature of the material world enables the angel to offer some powerful suggestions to the soul of Gerontius concerning the nature of its consummation in the resurrection of the body, and here again the brilliance of the poem is the expansiveness of its vision of continuity. The angel assumes that the soul of Gerontius has heard that amputees often experience a phantom limb syndrome in which they suffer from pain in the severed limb. This continuity of experience on the part of one who has
lost a limb is then reversed by the angel to describe the anticipation of one who will in the future gain a glorified body:

Hast thou not heard of those, who, after loss
Of hand or foot, still cried that they had pains
In hand or foot, as though they had it still?
So is it now with thee, who hast not lost
Thy hand or foot, but all which make up man;
So will it be, until the joyous day
Of resurrection, when thou wilt regain
All thou hast lost, new-made and glorified. (556–64)

The angel understands that he speaks in analogy and must continue to offer analogies to the soul of Gerontius until the soul has completed its purgation and is finally capable of a direct encounter with God.

The poem especially explores analogies through which the continuity of material and spiritual existence can be viewed by a careful consideration of temporal and spatial perspectives. Since it belongs to the nature of analogies that it is necessary to examine both the similarities and the differences between the terms in analogical relationship, the poem seeks to establish such differences emphatically while conveying the manner in which such perspectives provide a transitional means of understanding as the soul continues its journey in its spiritual existence. Newman clearly understands the quasi-temporal nature of poetic form, with the underlying elements of metrical rhythm and the sequential unfolding of lines and stanzas, and shapes such elements artfully to bring vividly to display the radical differences of temporal perspective that mark the crossing from the material to the spiritual realm.

The act of dying itself is presented primarily through the dissolution of temporal and spatial perspectives experienced with a vertiginous sense of horror. Gerontius dismisses as indicators of his new condition as he dies the familiar physical signs of distress marked by disruptions of the usual rhythms of breath and heartbeat and points instead to a strange new feeling: “That I am going, that I
am no more” (8). The suggestion of movement into the future as an objectless void and of the dissolution of the self so as to vacate any standpoint of continuity on the basis of which alone past and future as temporal perspectives are possible leaves Gerontius feeling he “must needs decay / And drop from out the universal frame / Into that shapeless, scopeless, blank abyss” (22–24). The dissolution of temporal and spatial perspectives are joined here as Gerontius in his fear experiences death as annihilation.

Gerontius briefly rallies his courage and faith and turns to prayer to sustain him through the crisis, but the fear of annihilation returns and overwhelsms him and again he feels as though

Down, down for ever I was falling through
The solid framework of created things,
And needs must sink and sink
Into the vast abyss. (115–18)

His dying words are a prayer of supplication in the midst of this terror.

The first words of the soul of Gerontius in the moments after death express a strange but comforting temporal perspective: “I feel . . . / . . . as I were at length myself, / And ne’er had been before” (174–75). This feeling could only emerge from some new identification with an enduring self that Gerontius cannot yet connect to the mortal life just ended. Connection to his mortal life and sense of time is blocked also by the strangeness of his new endurance in time experienced without the familiar sequence of time:

How still it is!
I hear no more the busy beat of time,
No, nor my fluttering breath, nor struggling pulse;
Nor does one moment differ from the next. (175–78)

But memory persists, although because Gerontius cannot yet connect his new state to the mortal state just ended, memory is experienced as though it were a dream, as the words heard during his last dying moments come back to him and he even dimly continues to hear the
words still being uttered by the priest in prayer over his dead body. Though noted earlier, I recall this poignant passage again:

I had a dream; yes:—some one softly said
“He’s gone”; and then a sigh went round the room.
And then I heard a priestly voice
Cry “Subvenite”; and they knelt in prayer.
I seem to hear him still (179–183)

Newman has Gerontius use the concept of dream to point to an experienced lack of continuity between modes of existence that remain connected but not ontologically integrated—the soul of Gerontius does not yet understand its continuity with the mortal Gerontius who has died. Similarly, Newman has the angel later describe Gerontius’s current condition prior to purgatory as a dream because he cannot yet establish full identity with the mode of existence into which he is now entering but which he is not yet fully prepared to engage and comprehend:

And thou art wrapped and swathed around in dreams,
Dreams that are true, yet enigmatical;
For the belongings of thy present state,
Save through such symbols, come not home to thee. (144–47)

The dream experienced by Gerontius is therefore twofold: it is both the memory and distant perception of a mortal mode of life in which he no longer participates and simultaneously the anticipation of a mode of life which he anticipates as belonging to him but in which he cannot yet participate until after his purgatorial purification. The poem prompts the reader to follow Gerontius into a sense of estrangement from the familiar experience of time and space in preparation for the challenge of imagining what the poem can project as a promised new (and final condition), a condition, however, that is not and cannot be exhibited in its fullness by this or any work of art.

That final mode of existence is presented by the poem through the negation of the temporal and spatial perspectives that are grounded in the material world. The angel, in preparing Gerontius
for the fulfillment toward which his love of God powerfully moves him, contrasts the spiritual and human sense of time. After describing the human measurement and division of time based on astronomical phenomena and the motion of the pendulum, he offers an account of the spiritual mode in which “intervals in their succession / Are measured by the living thoughts alone, / And grow or wane with its intensity” (356–58). Time is not a means of measurement shared in common but each one “is standard of his own chronology” (363). Space is also reconfigured in the spiritual realm, with spatial structures formed of lifeless material parts in the world of mortality, but the House of Judgment entered by the soul and the angel “is made up of life— / Of holy, blessed, and immortal beings, / Who hymn their Maker’s praise continually” (635–37).

Such things are mysteries, as the angel acknowledges, and the deepest mystery of all will be the particular judgment when the soul sees the face of Christ the judge and experiences simultaneously a longing to dwell forever in the beauty of Christ and a deep sense of shame of the soul’s unworthiness until it is cleansed (744–47). As the poem ends, the soul willingly enters its purgatorial period still wrapped in angelic care, with its final awakening to the beatific vision a secure promise of which it has already had a foretaste.

Newman artistically draws out the essential contours of the human experience of time and space and artistically delegitimates the assumption that such experience is the true and final measure of things while urging the reader to move toward a vision of spiritual possibility that supports the teachings of the Church concerning the Last Things.

In the first article in this issue of Logos, Christopher O. Blum turns to the writings of Newman to help establish the proper role of history in Catholic intellectual life. In “The Historian and His Tools in the Workshop of Wisdom,” Blum observes that the medieval university had no place for the craft of the historian. Newman is well suited to act as guide in such an inquiry, argues Blum, both because of his fidelity to the Catholic intellectual tradition and because of the important role his understanding of the development
of Christian doctrine played in his own conversion and theological development. Why, then, did Newman assign historical studies to a subordinate role in his writings about liberal education? Blum points to the importance of Aristotle in Newman’s understanding of philosophy and education, and then suggests that the historian is important especially through the development of right judgment. Historical understanding in this perspective will be related especially to ethics, and the writing of history will be related to rhetoric. More broadly, the historian in this perspective can be seen to address three primary intellectual tasks: “the describing and analyzing of exemplars, the presentation of aspects of the common good as actually realized in human community, and the praise of the virtuous.”

Michael S. Sherwin, OP, in “Happiness and Its Discontents” argues that there are powerful currents in modern thought that regard happiness as unattainable and the pursuit of happiness as a “self-regarding project” in opposition to upholding our moral commitments, and goes on to explore the problems inherent in such a view and the resources in the Catholic intellectual tradition for retrieving a proper understanding of happiness. After considering the development of the dominant modern view especially in the writings of Locke and Kant, Sherwin turns to the primary difference in the approach to happiness in the classical tradition. In that tradition, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the goal of human life and then to evaluate human action in relation to the fulfillment of such a goal. Understanding Christ as the way to human fulfillment provides a new perspective on happiness, and Sherwin examines the views of Augustine and Aquinas in this regard. After offering reflections on the Christian paradox that happiness achieved by following the way of the Cross involves suffering, Sherwin explains why we should not exaggerate the discontinuity between Christian happiness and natural happiness. The article concludes with reflections on the role a “restless longing for happiness and fulfillment” played in the life and Christian conversion of Malcolm Muggeridge.

In “Macbeth and the Tragedy of Sin,” Ken Colston reviews re-
cent scholarship on Shakespeare as a “closet Catholic,” and then argues that even though we may not be able to establish the biographical facts of the matter with complete certainty, it remains true that Christian ideas play a particularly important role in Shakespeare’s plays. This is particularly true of the importance of a Christian understanding of sin in *Macbeth*. The play cannot be properly understood in terms of crime or personal qualities such as ambition. Only through a Christian understanding of sin as a disruption of human and divine order and of guilt as a sign of respect for the divine and for justice can we bring the full depth of the play into focus. The article provides an insightful reading of the play that makes the position taken by Colston evident.

Philip McDonagh examines the concept of hope in Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *Spe salvi*. In “Uncovering the Sources of Creation: Pope Benedict XVI on Hope,” McDonagh argues that hope plays a central role in Benedict’s thought, and then demonstrates the complementarity between *Spe salvi* and Benedict’s encyclical *Deus caritas est*. He also brings into view the communal character of hope in *Spe salvi* and the connection between hope and justice, and then points to the relevance of *Spe salvi* to the 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. The article is especially notable for the way in which McDonagh is able to bring to bear the insights of several contemporary poets as he elucidates key concepts from the encyclicals.

How can the military contribute to a just society? Christopher Toner takes up this important question in “‘Militia vel Malitia’: How Can the Military Contribute to a Just Society?” The article examines key principles of just war theory and then focuses especially on the capability of the military to uphold a commitment to life even while possessing the power of deadly force, a capability that he suggests is in fact a real commitment in contemporary military life and not merely a theoretical commitment. The article concludes with suggestions for how the military can intensify its participation in the tradition of excellence rather than focusing merely on efficiency and shows that this would enable it to keep strong its ongoing commitment to life.

Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, in “Reason, Faith, and Obedi-
ence” examines a set of problems posed by the relationships among these three key concepts. Since reason and faith pertain to our intellectual faculties but obedience to the faculty of the will, what links obedience to faith and reason? Weinandy shows first how truth binds the will to the intellect, and then examines the role of love in binding the intellect to the will. The unity of the human person established in the understanding of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God provides a way of understanding that we are created to know the truth, to love the truth, and to act in truth and love, and each of these concepts in turn is carefully examined. The effect of sin is considered next, leading to an account of Jesus’s obedience to the will of the Father and the importance of such obedience in healing the damage suffered by reason as a result of sin. The article concludes with a careful account of the ways in which the Franciscan way of life exemplifies a particular ordering of reason, faith, and obedience.

In “Understanding the Creator from the Things that are Made,” Terence Nichols considers the biblical claim that God can be known by reason from the created order and then examines the reasons why this claim is disputed by many contemporary philosophers. As he shows, since the philosophy of nature has been largely ceded to the modern physical sciences, and since modern science has developed modes of conceptualization that rely solely upon material causality, the ancient argument that we can come to know God from creation seems implausible on the face of it. Nichols reviews the topic in light of the development of Christian tradition, then considers some prominent modern atheistic understandings of nature, and then sets out an argument that considers the findings of modern science and establishes that we can indeed know God through the things that are made.

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Notes