

Preface

WISEBLOOD BOOKS in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has impressively inaugurated a series titled *Wiseblood Essays in Contemporary Culture* with the publication of a slightly revised and expanded version of “The Catholic Writer Today” by Dana Gioia, which originally appeared in the December 2013 issue of *First Things*.¹ That *Wiseblood* has published the essay in two handsomely designed formats, one hand-bound, exemplifies the important point articulated concisely but fully by Gioia that the Catholic tradition exhibits a “glorious physicality” (29).

Although Gioia deliberately refrains from directly grounding his essay in the broader thinking of theological aesthetics, the essay is infused with the understanding that the truths spoken by Catholicism reach the heart most directly when offered to culture through their beauty. This essay makes evident with respect to the contemporary condition of American literature and cultural life the truth of the broader claim put forward by Hans Urs von Balthasar in the opening pages of *The Glory of the Lord* that “Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be sepa-

rated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.”² As he reviews the extent to which Catholicism seems to have retreated from contemporary American cultural life, Gioia offers a warning: “Whenever the Church has abandoned the notion of beauty, it has lost precisely the power that it hoped to cultivate—its ability to reach souls in the modern world” (30). Throughout the essay, Gioia attends judiciously to what he calls the “two vast impoverishments”—the impoverishment suffered by the Church and the impoverishment of American culture—that result from the “virtual surrender” (26) of Catholicism from the artistic life of the culture.

This attentiveness to both Church and artistic culture brings to mind another great work of reflection on these issues on a much broader level, the “Letter to Artists” of Blessed John Paul II. Gioia helpfully brings to bear in his focus on contemporary American literature a local version of the dialogue between the Church and art that John Paul engages in his apostolic letter. In that letter he asserts that “the Church needs art” and then provocatively asks “does art need the Church?”³ Gioia joins John Paul in answering that question affirmatively and in the view that the Church needs art as his essay points to what he calls the “disfigurement” (7) suffered by Catholicism through a contemporary neglect of the arts. Gioia also argues that even those who dislike Christianity should lament the retreat of Catholicism from American literature because this absence diminishes culture. In keeping with his observation that the Catholic writer has the advantage of drawing upon a temporally and spatially capacious tradition (but is therefore also faced with the challenge of achieving the mastery needed to participate in such a tradition), Gioia even while focusing on contemporary American literature remains mindful in the essay of the scope and depth of the Catholic artistic tradition beyond its strands based in the United States.

In what ways can Catholicism be said to suffer a disfigurement, as Gioia remarks, as a result of its detachment from contemporary American cultural life? The image suggests a wounded deformation

that makes it more difficult to recognize and receive Catholicism in its fullness. The saving truth that the Church enacts repeatedly is addressed respectfully and lovingly to all persons in all states of life and so is expressed in its fullness to all of the senses through which we participate in the world in our endlessly variable ways. Literature in particular—which, again, is the focus of the essay—from the very start in biblical narrative and poetry shows human beings rendered defiant or forgetful or blind by sin and who must be repeatedly offered the grace of divine presence through the many different modes in which that presence can be expressed. Literature, then, provides us with an opportunity to recognize human beings in the shadow of sin and sharpens our perception of the ways in which sin penetrates our lives, but it can also show the movement of a soul turning toward God through the struggle with sin. In a section of the essay that was not included in the version published in *First Things*, Gioia observes that many Catholic writers have ample first-hand experience with sin but are able nonetheless to depict artistically a rich Catholic vision of life, and such knowledge of sin is relevant to the potential of Catholic literature: “If Catholic literature has a central theme, it is the difficult journey of the sinner toward redemption” (14). If Catholicism is inadequately present in contemporary American literature, then some of the channels of grace that it makes available to contemporary culture will be more difficult to find, and its radiant expressiveness in its embrace of American life will be truncated.

There is corresponding harm done to American culture as well if the Catholic presence is less fully manifested in American literature, and especially if voices expressing cultural intolerance toward Catholicism should become culturally dominant. Gioia suggests that a surprising degree of scope is granted to anti-Christian and especially anti-Catholic prejudices in some corners of contemporary American culture and argues that even those who do not feel congeniality toward Christianity and Catholicism should welcome the added richness their participation can bring to culture. The absence of the

voice of Catholicism in culture “weakens the dialectic of cultural development. It makes American literature less diverse, less vital, and less representative” (28). Moreover, such an absence is likely to make many of the great cultural achievements that are inspired by Christian faith less fully accessible to culture and so the culture is likely to be diminished. If we gaze back toward the origins of literary culture and of art as a whole, the human encounter with the divine in many forms seems inextricably tied to the emergence, continuity, and vitality of art. What if those who think that such works of art show only the history of an illusion are wrong? Could there be arrogance rather than enlightenment at work in such an attitude?

Gioia seeks to awaken and infuse hope that the possibility of change remains alive and is in the hands of writers and those who value their work. Such hope does not spring from optimism or positive thinking, but from the same grace upon which the Catholic writer depends in facing any difficult challenge. The sin of refusing the possibility of hope is despair, but Gioia offers a more nuanced diagnosis of the difficulty: “The main barrier to the revival of Catholic writing and the rapprochement of faith and the arts is despair, or perhaps more accurately, *acedia*, a torpid indifference among precisely those people who could change the situation—Catholic artists and intellectuals” (32). We are more prone to *acedia* if we succumb to a sense of the poverty of our own resources in relation to the richness of the Catholic intellectual and artistic traditions and if we feel intimidated by the magnitude of the task of cultural change. With respect to the first difficulty, Gioia counsels the Catholic writer to “recover confidence in his or her own spiritual, cultural, and personal identity” (32). Humility is always the antidote to *acedia*, which in the end is a refusal of our position as beloved by God within our place in the created order of things. As for the magnitude of the task of cultural change, Gioia offers an analysis of the dynamics of such change: “The success of cultural and religious movements inevitably reveal that many people already share the new ideals but do not feel empowered until there is a credible

call for public action” (31). That conditions were ripe for religious and cultural change is something we can learn only retrospectively, and it can be liberating to surrender responsibility for the ultimate result and success of one’s best effort.

The term “postsecular” does not occur in this essay, but is perhaps coyly suggested in its third paragraph, where Gioia characterizes the dismissive response of many journalists to the possibility that Catholic artists and writers might have important contributions to make to contemporary culture: “Contemporary culture is secular culture, is it not?” (8) The essay is written with the notion that we are moving beyond an American culture that is determinedly secular, and it is published both by *First Things* and then by Wiseblood Books and then noted and celebrated here with the understanding that such initiatives might be making their own contributions to the emerging vitality of a postsecular American culture in which the Catholic intellectual and artistic traditions find a place.

The first article in this issue of *Logos* undertakes a careful examination of the relationship between Catholicism and liberal democracy through a critique of the position derived from the writings of John Courtney Murray that the modern principles of “religious liberty, freedom of the conscience, and the separation of church and state are all doctrines that are fundamentally Christian in origin.” In **“John Courtney Murray, Religious Liberty, and Modernity, Part I: Inalienable Natural Rights,”** Timothy W. Burns examines issues arising in the “Declaration on Religious Liberty” (DRL) in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Burns examines opposing interpretations of the relationship of this document to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and asks: “How are we to make sense of these diametrically opposed interpretations of the DRL, the one holding that the DRL reflects the rationale of the First Amendment, the other that it sounds similar to it but in fact stands fundamentally opposed to it?” Burns’s inquiry ultimately leads to the disclosure of what he sees as difficulties in reconciling the thinking of modern political rationalism and classical political rational-

ism, and he suggests that the Catholic intellectual tradition offers remedies to the deficiencies of modern political rationalism. *Logos* is publishing this essay in two parts, with the second part to appear in our next issue, *Logos* 17:3.

Stephen Napier in “**St. Ambrose, Euthanasia, and Antisenescence Arguments: Death As a Good?**” points to the challenge of reconciling Catholic positions on the topics of euthanasia on the one hand and the antisenescence movement on the other. As he indicates, antisenescence is a term covering the drive to develop technological resources to postpone death extensively or perhaps even indefinitely. In response to the antisenescence movement, he retrieves arguments from St. Ambrose and other sources indicating the ways in which death can be considered a good. But if death is in some senses a good, what arguments could be developed to oppose the euthanasia movement and its efforts to make choosing death as a good available to those who are suffering? Napier’s argument offers clear and careful distinctions that make it possible to navigate the tensions that arise with respect to these issues, achieved especially by noting important ambiguities in the concept of death.

In “**Two Apostles of Loneliness: Caryll Houselander and Catherine Doherty on the Mystical Body of Christ,**” **David Vincent Meconi, SJ** brings together two women he calls “quintessential pilgrims of the twentieth century”: the British novelist Caryll Houselander and the Russian-born founder of the Madonna House Apostolate in Ontario, Canada, Catherine Doherty. According to Meconi’s account, both women “spent their lives addressing the new ennui of the twentieth century as well as its only real remedy, the Mystical Body of Christ.” His article opens with the story of the single brief meeting of the two in London and then offers a brief biographical account of each. This is followed by a study of how each came to understand loneliness, how each found a theological opening through loneliness to encounter the loneliness of Christ, and how each arrived at an understanding of the Mystical Body “as the only true antidote to the otherwise alienated soul.”

Glenn W. Olsen recognizes an opportunity in the breakdown of the Enlightenment consensus at the heart of modernity to examine the inadequacies of Enlightenment and modern understandings of history and to cultivate an approach to history that more fully includes a Christian understanding of the world. In **“Toward a Postmodern Christian Historical Hermeneutic,”** Olsen identifies those views of history that incorporated a cosmological framework and those views that assumed without argument that a purely political framework was the proper way to develop a historical narrative. He examines in various views of Western history over the centuries the “continuing struggle to find the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, to determine the nature and place of the miraculous in history.” The article traces the way the concept of progress emerged from Jewish and Christian theologians and then offers an account of the secularization of the concept through the application of a modern scientific understanding of the world to the domain of history. As modern views of history begin to shift, Olsen seizes the opportunity to again engage in an understanding of history that appreciates the spiritual factors at work in human motivations and actions in shaping historical events and admits such factors into the historical narratives through which we position ourselves in the flow of history.

“Thomas Aquinas, Josef Seifert, and the Metaphysics of Respecting Persons” by **Paul Kucharski** begins with a brief account of the distinguishing features of any personalist philosophy before turning to the critique developed by Josef Seifert of the extent to which the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is adequate to provide a foundation for personalism. Kucharski listens carefully to the concerns developed by Seifert on this score, but then suggests that Seifert has not fully grasped the account of the nature of goodness in Aquinas. He asserts that contrary to the claims made by Seifert, Aquinas does incorporate an understanding of intrinsic goodness in his philosophy, and draws out the reasons why a reader might misunderstand this concept in Aquinas. The article then turns to an ex-

amination of the concept of desire in Aquinas and Kucharski argues that Seifert misunderstands Aquinas on this point as well. Kucharski concludes that “Aquinas’s metaethical principles very much account for the respect we owe to persons and for our capacity to respond to the incommunicable value of each person.”

Edward J. O’Boyle in “**Blessed John Paul II on Social Mortgage: Origins, Questions, and Norms,**” highlights the ways in which Blsd. John Paul emphasizes the importance of the social functions of property through the development of the concept of social mortgage. The concept is constructed through the recognition that all property is grounded in the created order according to which it is intended to serve the well-being of all. When it becomes private as a social arrangement to promote its optimal cultivation through human acts of co-creation, there is an inexhaustible obligation to the greater society that must be assumed by the property owner along with the benefits of the property, and this obligation can be understood as a social mortgage that must be paid but will never be paid off. O’Boyle carefully examines the nature of this obligation and offers guidelines through which we might understand more precisely the extent and nature of the obligations of the social mortgage.

The final article in this issue provides a close reading of a text by St. Anselm in which Anselm develops a purely philosophical account of immortality. “**Anselm on Immortality and Love: Reading Monologion 68–70**” by Douglas McDermid examines Anselm’s defense of “the thesis that the human soul which strives to love God will (a) live forever and (b) enjoy supreme happiness without end after death.” McDermid considers Anselm’s arguments closely in the effort to show why Anselm considers this thesis to be knowable philosophically apart from revelation. He also emphasizes what is at stake in Anselm’s thesis, since if true this thesis and the arguments that support it illuminate issues of the greatest importance. McDermid’s examination gives full weight to the nature of philosophical argumentation while also placing this discourse in its proper rela-

tionship to the implications for how we conduct our lives that stem from the truths attained and conveyed by the argument.

Michael C. Jordan
Editor

Notes

1. Dana Gioia, *The Catholic Writer Today* (Milwaukee, WI: Wisblood Books, 2014).
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. I: Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.
3. Bld. John Paul II, "Letter to Artists," sections 12–13.