

THE PERSISTENCE OF FAITH IN A SECULAR AGE

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Jeffrey Folks

Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature, edited by Mary R. Reichardt (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010)

*B*etween *Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature* is, as its editor notes, the first essay collection to focus entirely on the work of contemporary Catholic writers of the past thirty years. By bringing the work of new and, in many cases, lesser-known writers to our attention, the collection performs a useful service. While far from comprehensive, the volume discusses in some detail the work of more than twenty-five poets, novelists, and memoirists from North America, Europe, and Japan. Equally varied are the critical approaches, from the humanistic to the Marxist and postmodern, and the range of what one might term a “Catholic writer,” from practicing Catholics to converts, lapsed Catholics, and even those who are overtly hostile to their former religion or who question the relevance of religious practice altogether.

Any reader with an interest in religion and literature will, I believe, find the contents of *Between Human and Divine* informative and thought-provoking. This is certainly the case

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with David S. Lenoski’s fine essay on the novels of David Lodge. As Lenoski demonstrates, Lodge’s writing dramatizes the familiar gulf between the high tradition and the everyday experience of Catholicism, with the more prosaic or “poetic” Catholicism occupying central place within all his novels. Yet despite the degree to which Lodge’s novels engage in humorous and parodic sniping at the high tradition, mainstream Catholicism plays a significant role in his work.

The problem of evil, for example, remains a central moral concern in his fiction, although for Lodge, as for many other Catholic writers today, the answers provided by the high tradition—the church’s solution to the problem of evil with which earlier Catholic writers such as Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene were still much concerned—have been supplanted by a distinctively postmodern receptiveness to “ambiguity, possibility, and mystery.” As to how this aspect of Lodge’s aesthetic relates to traditional Catholic thought, Lenoski finds that the “openness, decentering, and questioning” are “combined” with more conventional concerns: the fallibility of human nature, the weight of mortality, and the continuing relevance of Catholic language, symbols, and patterns of thought.

Lodge’s fiction exemplifies an important truth about contemporary Catholic writing: that no matter how far Catholic writers have drifted from the high tradition, few are capable of dismissing the enduring influence of Catholicism as both a religious faith and cultural practice. The tension between postmodern skepticism and an enduring affiliation with Catholic tradition is evident, for example, in the novels of Brian Moore and John McGahern, two writers for whom the changing identity of Irish Catholicism since the 1960s has had major artistic and professional consequences. As Irish writers

whose careers traverse Vatican II, Moore and McGahern experienced an acute shift from official control and even censorship to a much greater freedom following the 1960s. Of course, this newfound freedom entailed its own difficulties, one of which was the sudden irrelevance of the artistically productive posture of brave rebellion against the overbearing authority of the church. In a perceptive analysis of the changing effects of “inherited dissent,” Eamon Maher demonstrates that Moore and McGahern, despite their sensitivity to the abuses of religious practice in Ireland, “were appreciative nevertheless of many of the Church’s positive attributes.” Yet in what may well be a post-Catholic Ireland, Moore and McGahern are perhaps the last representatives of the Irish Catholic novelist.

All the essays in this collection deal to some extent with the issue of the conflict between the Catholic writer and an increasingly secular culture, with several critics, including J. C. Whitehouse, attempting to defend the relevance of orthodox sensibility. Yet even as they insist on the persistence of Catholic tradition, nearly all the essayists in this collection struggle to understand the precise nature of that tradition in its present form and to determine the extent to which it continues to inform Catholic writing. However scrupulous their arguments, the contributors to *Between Human and Divine* provide no compelling evidence that contemporary Catholic experience differs radically from that of other Christian faiths. The inescapable fact is that, at least within the highly developed and increasingly secularized nations of the West, Catholics and Protestants experience everyday life in rather similar ways.

Evidence of this tendency can be found in the contents of the volume under review, in which many contributors focus not on the

influence of Catholic dogma or tradition but on the authority of various deterministic theories. While these readings can be informative, they display an unfortunate tendency to compartmentalize human experience and to overlook the fundamental human truths that transcend categories. This would seem to be the case in Meaghan B. Cronin’s essay on the contemporary convent novel, a subject that nearly always seems to elicit a reductive interpretation from literary critics. In what is otherwise an informative essay, the author focuses overmuch on the opposition of women’s and men’s experiences and beyond that on the particularities of the Catholic woman’s baby boomer memoir. One imagines that a reading of such works as Patricia Hampl’s *I Could Tell You Stories* or Beverly Donofrio’s *Riding in Cars with Boys* from a broader humanistic perspective might be more productive, in that it would reveal how much these memoirists share with earlier writers, with non-Catholics, and, indeed, with men.

Far more worrying is the critical approach, so familiar in essays on contemporary writing, of the cultural antagonist dissecting society’s presumed victimization of one class or another. Inevitably, it seems, this mode of interpretation finds its way into nearly all academic discourse, and it is not absent in the collection. The writing of Jon Hassler certainly lends itself to a sociological approach, and Ed Block’s discussion of *Staggerford* and other novels correctly focuses on the role of the empathetic observer and particularly on the theme of recovery in Hassler’s fiction. Working from the assumption that a “Catholic perspective shows compassion and love” and “accepts human responsibility” even as it “acknowledges the key role of grace,” Block’s essay vividly conveys the fragile and failing world depicted in Hassler’s novels. Taken on its

own terms, Block's analysis is persuasive, though amid such overwhelming despair as one encounters in Hassler's fiction, one has to question whether faith continues to play a role. Why is it that every major character in Hassler's moral universe should be in such need of recovery? Why not a better world of responsible and disciplined adults in which one avoids the addiction, isolation, and self-laceration to begin with?

Yet another version of contemporary reductionism is to be found in the aesthetic of postmodernism. David Heckman's essay on the role of estrangement in Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* is a revealing study of the inability of the postmodern artist to arrive at a workable ethics or rationality. In *The Sparrow*, a novel that mirrors the general spiritual tone if not the exact terms of Russell's career, Heckman discovers "a highly personal story of moral and ethical estrangement," but estrangement from what and to what end? Heckman implies that the estrangement of Russell's protagonist, Emilio Sandoz, SJ, is, and ought to be, the normative condition of contemporary existence itself. As Heckman has it, Sandoz is the "typical postmodern subject": "a person teetering on the border of faith and reason, torn between the empirical realities . . . and subjective fantasies." For the postmodernist sensibility, it is thought to be by means of just such a disengaged and liminal condition that one forges a purposeful existence, but at the core of that pursuit one discovers little more than rebellious antagonism toward every sort of existing moral consensus.

Heckman's thoughtful essay certainly clarifies the prevailing ethos of a particular segment of Western society—the segment that Flannery O'Connor scathingly referred to as "Big Intellectuals" (a class of individuals in which she included Mary McCarthy)—but it does not probe the

destructive implications of this ethos. Had one pursued the topic, one would have found in the final chapters of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* a valuable discussion of the ethical consequences of postmodernism: "a certain type of rootless cosmopolitanism, the condition of those who aspiring to be at home anywhere . . . are therefore in an important way citizens of nowhere." A reading of Russell's novel informed by MacIntyre's insights would be a fascinating and rewarding project. As it is, we have an intelligent if somewhat narrow essay that clarifies the relationship of Russell's *The Sparrow* to postmodern consciousness and attempts to relate the novel's Jesuit protagonist to the contemporary phenomenon of cultural estrangement.

Fortunately, a number of the essays in this collection escape the limitations of contemporary theory. Stephen McInerney's admirably straightforward reading of the "sacramental poetics" of Elizabeth Jennings and Les Murray does exactly what good criticism should: it provides a clear and informed reading of the subject at hand, free of axe-grinding and obfuscating jargon. In an essay that draws on the critical insights of Jacques Maritain, Theresa DiPasquale, and Kathleen Norris, McInerney relates the poetry of Jennings and Murray to an "incarnational" tradition in modern poetry that stretches back to Hopkins." In the poetry of Jennings, McInerney encounters a homely, circumscribed world of pain and consolation centered on the poet's attention to the presence of a sacramental patterning or "inscape" within the natural world. In Murray's writing there exists a Eucharistic identity that both "feeds the human desire of sacrifice" and, "potentially, prevents such sacrifice through catharsis." McInerney's essay illuminates both writers and relates their work in a useful way.

Another excellent contribution is that of Dominic Manganiello, whose essay on the fiction of Michael D. O'Brien is among the most thoughtful and original in the collection. Focusing on O'Brien's *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse* and *Strangers and Sojourners: A Novel*, Manganiello demonstrates the central place of cultural renewal in O'Brien's fiction and essays. Much influenced by Maritain's discussion of the *imago Dei*, "lost when Adam fell and restored to the original unity of image and likeness with Christ's redemption," O'Brien views the restoration of Christian orthodoxy as the last remaining bulwark against the apocalyptic force of contemporary nihilism. In O'Brien's Bunyanesque narratives, his protagonists confront head-on a modern culture that appears to be rapidly descending into a "seemingly benign totalitarianism," as O'Brien writes in *The Family and the New Totalitarianism*.

It is a mode of fiction that, as Manganiello notes, occupies an important place within Catholic literary tradition. Stretching back to Robert Hugh Benson's *Lord of the World* and to Chesterton's Father Brown novels, the genre was revived more recently by Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Like O'Connor, O'Brien is an "artist of hope" who unflinchingly identifies and assails the faithless cynicism pervading the general culture and who at the same time asserts the never-ending possibility of redemption through grace.

Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature is an impressive collection of essays, carefully edited with an informative introduction and useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The collection offers a wide-ranging discussion of the changing role of the church and of Catholic identity in recent decades. Readable and well-informed, its individual

contributions provide detailed studies of the works of a significant number of contemporary Catholic writers. Expansive in its contents and varied in its approaches and perspectives, *Between Human and Divine* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of recent Catholic literature.

THE DEMISE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?

Paul H. Lewis

Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Authors and Arguments, edited by Catherine H. Zuckert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Are political theorists becoming an endangered species? Pierre Manent, a French philosopher and frequent contributor to *Modern Age* and other ISI publications, thinks that "the twentieth century has witnessed the disappearance, or withering away, of political philosophy." In this volume Professor Zuckert has put together a collection of essays about eighteen thinkers "to demonstrate the richness and vitality of philosophical reflection on political issues in the twentieth century in response to the many observations of its weakness, if not death." Each essay summarizes a political philosopher's career and discusses his principal works.

The volume is divided into four parts. Part 1 is intended to provide examples of the

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