



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Three / 2017

A Return to Awe

KIRK KRAMER

Father Francis Bethel OSB, *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism* (Thomas More College Press, 2016).

Lucifer in Starlight

On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.
Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend
Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened,
Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose.
Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.
And now upon his western wing he leaned,
Now his huge bulk o'er Afric's sands careened,
Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.
Soaring through wider zones that pricked his scars
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,
He reached a middle height, and at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.
Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,
The army of unalterable law.

Christian thinkers have looked at the Devil and the Fall, at Heaven and Hell, through different lenses—according to different modes of knowledge. St. Thomas and the popes and the Catechism have examined them systematically or scientifically (using the word “science” as Aristotle did). Preachers like Newman and the Curé of Ars have spoken of these doctrines rhetorically, to persuade their congregations to be mindful of them in living their Christian vocation.

And then there are the poets, like George Meredith, who wrote about Prince Lucifer and his dark dominion in the lines quoted above. The poets lead us to knowledge of a different kind, knowledge that acknowledges mystery, the knowledge men gain when heart speaks to heart. St. Thomas himself gave it the name “poetic knowledge.”

Elucidating a doctrine of poetic knowledge was perhaps the great intellectual achievement of John Senior, the subject of this new biography by Dom Francis Bethel, OSB. Senior was one of the greatest, if comparatively unknown, American Catholic thinkers of the 20th century. A New Yorker, Senior was a student of Mark Van Doren’s at Columbia only a few years after Thomas Merton. He became a Catholic at the age of 37. After a brilliant academic career teaching at Cornell and other New York colleges, he chose to go west, where in 1967 he eventually joined the faculty at the University of Kansas. With two colleagues, he established a Great Books program there, the Integrated Humanities Program. Hundreds of his students became Catholics, and some became priests and monks, among them the current Archbishop of Oklahoma City and the Bishop of Lincoln—and Dom Bethel himself.

Dom Bethel has entitled his work—the fruit of nearly two decades of research and reflection—*John Senior and the Restoration of Realism*. Its opening chapters trace Senior’s intellectual odyssey through his youthful adherence to Marxism, his close study of Freud and Jung, his scrutiny of Eastern thought and two of its Western interpreters, René Guénon and Ananda Coomaraswamy, and his related interest in the French Symbolists who were the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Newman and the *Summa* were the chief intellectual agents of Senior’s acceptance of the “*philosophia perennis*” and of the Catholic faith. These early chapters of the book tracing Senior’s intellectual journey are so rich as to constitute almost a primer on the philosophical realism of which the title speaks.

But the most absorbing chapters of the book come later, when Dom Bethel looks at Senior’s work as a teacher and how his work in the classroom shaped his developing ideas about poetic knowledge.

In a 1969 letter to Mark Van Doren, who remained his friend and interlocutor until Van Doren’s death, Senior told of attending a meeting in San Francisco with a dozen other professors to discuss founding a Catholic Great Books college, a plan that came to fruition when Thomas Aquinas College opened its doors two years later. Senior considered leaving Kansas to join the TAC faculty. But he had a fundamental difference of opinion about the kind of education the college students of the day required. He wrote to Van Doren:

My criticisms are chiefly not about the college proposed per se but about the impossibility of sending a young person to college without his having been to school. The liberal arts college begins with wonder and ends in wisdom. But the freshman has had wonder pretty much crushed out of him. I think, therefore, the college must give all students a year, at least, of poetry, before the liberal arts properly begin—I should say *music*, in the sense of the things the *Muses* do. For example, it seems criminal to teach the liberal arts of astronomy (the mathematical science) to someone who has never looked at the stars. (295)

Or as Dom Bethel himself writes:

Teachers today have to enrich their students’ memories and stimulate their delight in reality and their wonder at its mysteries through gymnastic and music before they can undertake more elevated studies like the liberal arts and

philosophy.

Learning is gradual and first things must come first. (151)

The notion of wonder mentioned in the preceding passages by Senior and Dom Bethel is fundamental to the story of Senior's intellectual life and to his work as a teacher. The motto of the Great Books program he established at K.U. in 1971 with Dennis Quinn and Frank Nelick was "*Nascantur in admiratione*"—let them be born in wonder. By wonder Senior did not mean curiosity. Wonder means awe—amazement—delight—and is accompanied by the kind of gaze the Apostles turned toward Heaven on the day of the Lord's Ascension. "*Viri Galilaei, quid admiramini aspicientes in caelum?*" the angel asked them. To gaze with wonder at the stars and the mountains and the sea, into the faces of those we love, and into our own hearts, was the disposition Senior tried to cultivate in his students.

Which brings us back to the subject of the poetic mode of knowledge. Dom Bethel says it is an experiential, emotional, intuitive and connatural knowledge. It is related to mystery. In a passage that echoes the thought of Joseph Ratzinger, Dom Bethel declares:

An effort at clarity, solution and mastery is useful in many domains, but all knowledge cannot be reduced to clear ideas and problem resolution; reality cannot be reduced to something reason can fully comprehend. Senior writes, "To most of life's grave issues, science, dialectic and rhetoric are blind; their reasons cannot penetrate to mysteries like love and war, or why a sinner hopes for his redemption." Mystery can be described as those aspects or depths of reality that can never be brought completely out into the open. . . . We will never get to the bottom of a mystery, never figure it out completely. (182)

One of the strengths of this book is the abundant use Dom Bethel makes of Senior's own words, taken from his letters, poems, four published books and especially his last, as yet unpublished, book *The Restoration of Innocence: An Idea of a School*. Perhaps the renewed interest in John Senior brought about by Dom Bethel's book will result in finding a publisher for the manuscript.

Those like the present reviewer who had the immense good fortune of studying with John Senior will find themselves moved by the memories stirred up by these lines of Dom Bethel's, which apply so well to Professor Senior.

The teacher is God's intermediary and has a fatherly dignity and responsibility. Senior wrote that the teacher acts not only *in loco parentis* but also *in loco Christi* and that "students imitating them are indirectly imitating Christ, as St Paul said: 'Be ye therefore followers (*imitatores*) of me, as I also am of Christ.'" (125)

It is another story, one worth a book of its own—but this reviewer cannot omit at least a mention of perhaps the most remarkable example of John Senior's fatherly dignity and role as a teacher. Senior had a great esteem for St. Benedict and the monastic life, and encouraged young people to consider a monastic vocation. Dom Bethel and six of Senior's other students at the University of Kansas eventually became monks at the Abbey of Fontgombault in France. In 1999, those seven, and six other monks from Fontgombault, established a new monastery in the Oklahoma Ozarks, Clear Creek Abbey. Dom Bethel is prior of that community.

Fontgombault and Clear Creek are houses of the Congregation of Solesmes, founded in the 19th century by Dom Prosper Guéranger to restore Benedictine life in France after the Revolution. Not the least of the virtues of Dom Bethel's book is the transmission into English (of a charming franglais sort) of the deeply supernatural Solesmien spirit. As an example, let the last words of this review be Dom Bethel's, in which he expands on a passage by Senior about the Blessed Virgin Mary. Dom Bethel's words are indeed worthy of a son of Dom Guéranger.

In a way, one can say that Mary completes Jesus. We need a lady, a mother. The art historian Kenneth Clark reminded us that no religion without a feminine element ever produced great art. A man needs a lady for whom he desires to do beautiful things, who makes him more delicate and attentive to details. She inspires music in his soul and makes him a poet. Mary indeed represents a very special, eminent case. This woman, who is Queen of Heaven and Earth, Mother of God and of Christians, breathes divine music into our souls. By striving to make all things beautiful for her, our home and its environment, our work, our schools, our liturgy, our monasteries, all our activity and culture will be more beautiful for her Son as well. (278)

Kirk Kramer writes from Cottage City, Maryland.

Keep reading! Click [here](#) to read our next article, *On "Disenchantment," Work and Leisure*.

