

The Scandal of the Partial

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Review: *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, by Will Arbery (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2020), 98 pp. Softcover, \$10.95.

Later a writer must face the choice of becoming an artist or a prophet. He can shut himself up at his desk and selfishly seek pleasure in the perfecting of his own skill or he can pace about, dictating dooms and exhortations on the topics of the day. The recluse at his desk has a bare chance of giving abiding pleasure to others; the publicist has none at all.

—Evelyn Waugh, 1955

Will Arbery's "Heroes of the Fourth Turning," which debuted off-Broadway in 2019 to rave reviews from both the right and the left, is a unique and stunningly successful play; some reviews have even suggested that the play will have an enduring greatness. That Arbery has so beautifully articulated genuine utterances of conservative thought and managed to get them voiced off-Broadway is truly admirable. One can only surmise that the incredible praise the play has received among conservatives and Catholics in particular must be due to the tremendous and genuine relief of hearing one's beloved language spoken in public again, even if haltingly, after having been so long and so violently forbidden; Arbery's anti-heroes do articulate truly forbidden things and not just the straw-man prejudices with which the powers-that-be have replaced them in the public square. Tragically, the beautiful and persuasive conservative and/or Catholic arguments remain abortive scraps that are never allowed to live and show their fruit. Arbery, whether intentionally or unintentionally, gratifies a liberal audience and deceives an optimistic conservative audience. Despite a Dostoevsky-like scenario, complete with dreams, possession, and paranormal screeching off-stage, this play is not a modern-day *Devils*. The potential beauty of the dialogue between old friends cannot overcome the play's frankly trite, nihilistic, and even somewhat juvenile tendencies. In spite of the pieces of true things spoken, the play ultimately presents a shallow view of conservatism, leaving the audience with a breathtaking cynicism about human nature and divine providence.

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Like so many plays being published now, the play has no discernible plot but relies instead on character-driven conversation. The consequences of ideas are never really worked out in action. There is no redemption or, for that matter, damnation, and all the characters, even the new president of the Catholic college whose much-anticipated arrival seemed to promise a more mature intervention, are fundamentally intoxicated losers, presumably meant to represent what we all “secretly” know is true of every human being. Reading through the play is a bit like looking through the notes of a clever college student who has attended lectures by brilliant and beautifully articulate professors. He has carefully jotted down some of their best lines, but ultimately leaves out or misunderstands essential elements of the underpinning of those arguments, while obscene doodles scattered throughout the notes further obscure the thought with his own fixations and unformed musings. The vogue, if juvenile, choice to adulterate good or serious moments with vulgar acts, crass speech, or strange, loud noises every time things get too tense or interesting may be the author’s attempt at the grotesque, but it is more accurately monstrous: it produces an incomplete fusion of bits and pieces of living argument and experience jammed together into an ugly and, frankly, unrealistic whole.

For instance, Gina, the professor, and her protege, Teresa, both present the clearest and most compelling arguments, but both turn out to be savage, beastly people. Teresa, a Trump and Bannon-loving blogger, eschews the old-style drunkenness of her friends and favors cocaine, because she’s a cool, New York style conservative, apparently. She can glibly run on about the “scandal of the particular” when her friend Kevin asks her to give an argument for why one ought to venerate the Virgin Mary, but she treats everyone present as an object to be used or abused. Teresa’s defense of the unborn is not an argument at all, as one would expect from a true intellectual conservative, but rather a label: “abortion is murder because I say it is.” The compelling points of the abortion debate, such as personhood, the pain of a child being dismembered, and the terrible physical, psychological, and spiritual effects upon the mother are all neglected and subsumed by a shallow discussion with Emily, who wants to explain just how *nice* and *good* people are who help women get abortions. It is a straw-man presentation of a Right that hatefully labels suffering people as murderers and a Left made up of simple, loving souls. The conversation descends into complete inanity, where Emily’s

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clinging sweetness is simply a foil to the barbaric delight Teresa takes in fantasizing about humiliating Emily's pro-abortion friend in a "real" debate.

No less terrible is the professor and now president of the college, Gina, who shows up tipsy and proceeds to wax eloquent on the subject of traditional conservatism, responding to Kevin's desire for an explanation of why one might be conservative apart from Catholic belief. Her lovely description of "the space between the cup and the lip"—that place for deliberation and even gridlock—should inspire everyone there, but fails. Arbery will let no intellectually considered idea succeed, even when the voice is beautiful and poetic. Instead, we must witness Gina descend from the poetic heights to savagely attack her protegee, Teresa, for having the wrong views, going so far as to call her a slut who is "whoring [herself] to popular opinion," and to regret the clemency she once showed the girl when she was a student at the college. All this, of course, is portrayed without any real back and forth concerning her ideas at all, merely a jumbled succession of ad-hominems (from "I met him in Napa, he's a pig" to "they're all on their third wives", and even the uber-trite unsupported assertion that they're all "a bit racist"). Gina's breakdown is such a disgusting turn from the magnanimous character with whom we have been presented that it breaks the suspension of disbelief. Worse, of course, is the fact that Teresa has behaved so repugnantly throughout the play that one can imagine how the audience may even be meant to relish Gina's rebuke: "Look at you, you're worldly, you're crude, and you're *weak*. You're *one of them*." Her broadside is, itself, crude, intellectually weak, and just another ad-hominem.

For Arbery, ideas do not form actions, but only get in the way of what he assumes to be naturally good passions. Intellectuals are always hypocrites. Why? They just are. While bad ideas can certainly have the effect of weakening human sympathy, good ideas have been lauded throughout history for their power to form the soul and conscience. Yet the good ideas held by the characters in the play do not possess this power. Teresa, for instance, seems unaffected by her own argument that one ought to venerate the Virgin Mary because of the "scandal of the particular," and is able simultaneously to hold to the idea that empathy is "empty ... impossible ... self-righteous ... irresponsible and dangerous." While veneration of what is sacred in the Virgin should lead her to a more general reverence and empathy for people around her, that point is utterly lost to her, and her interlocutors do not point this out either. Furthermore, Teresa's faith and conservatism seem to be in no way reflected in

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her morality; she uses cocaine, casually dismisses the feelings of others, and generally treats people terribly in complete contradiction to what would be the natural consequence to some of the ideas she presents. Likewise, the professor-turned-college-president carries within her what Alice von Hildebrand has called “the Tabor vision,” that is, the view from Mt. Tabor at the transfiguration of Christ; she understands her duty and her calling as inspired by the transformative picture of glory, light, beauty, and she imparts that to her former students in the most poetic of terms, yet in the end, she has so little self-control that she is easily and violently provoked by Teresa’s suggestion that likens her support of Pat Buchanan to that of Trump. The ideas have not formed her character. A meaningful, mature argument within the play would demonstrate how these ideas themselves necessarily lead to such hypocrisy, if they do, rather than merely putting these ideas in the mouths of characters who happen to be hypocrites.

Although the remaining characters, Kevin (the one most drunk), Emily (the invalid), and Justin (the Marine veteran), are meant to be more endearing, they, too, must bear the weight of Arbery’s cynical theme. Kevin’s genuine doubts about pretty much everything seem compounded by his drunken desire to prompt a “big conversation”; surely, in reality, he is not quite so lost, or why would he attend daily mass three times a week back home, or work for a Catholic textbook company? Is he really wondering why he should love the Virgin Mary? Ought we to take him seriously when he says to Gina, “All we know how to do is make things Catholic. That’s all you taught us how to do. At other schools, they allow for different conclusions.” Is he really so naive as to believe that such liberality exists on other campuses? Try asserting the beauty and fittingness of the perpetual virginity of Mary in your garden variety feminist-lit class. Even so, Kevin continues with his critique:

But here, we’re in the pursuit of the same conclusion- what you want isn’t different conclusions, you want better poetry to get us to the same place. It’s all pre-determined, you’re exceptionally good at thinking deeper and more poetically into the *dogma*. You chide us for not being imaginative, but you kick us out of school for smoking a joint.

This is particularly tragic, given that the setting is based on one of a handful of schools in the country that really still seeks to form the conscience through the great ideas of Western culture. “Smoking a joint” is not an act of imagination; in fact, it’s quite the opposite! What

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legitimate argument has this school refused to entertain? If we pursue the truth, yes, we pursue the same conclusion, of course. But, again, where is the connection between idea and reality? If Arbery's imagined school stifles legitimate considerations, why should we care unless given some reason to see why real liberal-arts Catholic colleges holding these particular ideas must necessarily be similarly hypocritical? The assertion of the Catholic liberal-arts tradition is not that we must forbid undogmatic ideas in order to know the truth, but that one may have faith that when truth is rigorously sought and all ideas ruthlessly tested in debate, we will discover the truth of the tradition and, indeed, the beautiful reality of the dogma.

The fragmented conservative ideas in the "big conversation" are thrown to the wayside at the end of the play with the revelation that what really mattered was Emily's unacknowledged but intense suffering in the background. This revelation is heightened by the sudden intrusion of the supernatural into the play. To be fair, the artistry of the last portion of the play is truly interesting and engaging, filled with a kind of magical realism that signals different things to different people, but that is also its chief problem. First, Kevin relates to Teresa the dream he had back in college. Teresa, who has just swiftly and literally knocked Kevin out for beginning to reveal an embarrassing secret from her past, is leaning over him, holding him, filled with regret for hurting him, as he is coming back to consciousness. It is her one humane moment. Teresa's blow evokes a vision-like dream or memory of a dream Kevin had as a freshman, the vision which made him begin to change into the doubter he now is. Kevin has had his own kind of Sinai/Tabor vision, one that is more genial toward the relativistic place into which he has moved and is moving. In this vision he sees a blind, gender neutral or transgender "someone" carrying stones like those of the commandments down the mountain.

The stones had words on them for everything we've been missing. There are things we've been missing ... secret sacraments and commandments we forgot to follow. And they were carrying the stones down.... They didn't see us.... They just kept moving.... They... They took the stones away, and I fell asleep, I didn't tell anyone.... And that's when I started to change...

This beautiful but heavy-handed dream has a message for Teresa and for all conservatives and Catholics, and that message is this: there is no truth, or if there is, it is entirely inaccessible. This revelation is being carried by a blind being who is both male and female,

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whose pronouns are apparently “they, them.” “They” possess the words for “everything we’ve been missing.” Perhaps if “they” return, we ought to stop them, listen to them, and obey their “secret sacraments and commandments.” We may have our truth and our laws, but they have theirs, and all flow from a place of equal authority.

After the revelation of this dream, Teresa is scared, not at the thought of having missed the words of the “secret sacraments and commandments,” but that her upcoming wedding “won’t be beautiful.” She voices bizarre concern over whether or not she has been “too private” with her love, saying, “People won’t know how to celebrate me, or my love. Or just that people don’t know me, that I don’t let them know me.” These are lines one might hear from someone “coming out,” so to speak, and perhaps she is, but to put them in Teresa’s voice is puzzling indeed. How can a wedding, public celebration that it is, mean that her love is too private? Isn’t the wedding the very manner in which people will celebrate her and her love? What is she talking about, and why does Kevin’s vision lead her in this direction?

Finally, after all have departed except for Justin and Emily, the audience receives one more revelation, one final piece of resolution for all the problems in the dialogue of the play averted through devices of interruption, vulgarity, humor, and departure. We discover that the loud, intermittent, off-stage screeching which has plagued both the audience and the characters, which Justin has explained as a problem with his generator, is not actually caused by a generator at all: “When I first moved into this house, I felt the most horrible presence. It was suffocating me. I had the house blessed. Fr. Paul came and basically scrubbed it down with holy water. It didn’t help. And that screech you heard, it isn’t the generator. I don’t know what that is.”

After the only mention of a divine power of goodness, suggested in the image of holy water, the character Justin makes reference to its failure to do any good, yet this is the character who has just announced that he intends to join a monastery. If this noise is a spiritual power, he quickly dismisses its being combated by spiritual means, which are, apparently, inefficacious. And it’s not even of sufficient concern to cause him to cancel his party. In the world of Dostoevsky, or Graham Greene, or Evelyn Waugh, for that matter, prayer has power and the demonic is of real concern. Even if the power of the divine is subtle, it is still powerful and all-pervasive. But with Arbery’s world in this play, the divine is impotent and absurd, seen in the acts of praying the rosary while drunk, interrupted by vomit,

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or “scrubbing down” a house with holy water, as though holy water were some kind of cleaning solvent, a ridiculous magic potion that cannot solve the suffering of the world. We are clearly meant to see that Justin will retreat from the world and enter the monastic life not to engage it in love, but to escape.

Is this a harsh conclusion? Yes, but it is a valid one, considering the one remaining character, Emily, who is an icon of suffering throughout the play. The intellectual conversation has not only been fruitless but is actually a distraction from her very real suffering, happening on the stage for the last twenty minutes, ignored by the rest of the cast. “Why didn’t you say something?” Justin asks. “Everyone was trying to figure their things out,” Emily responds. Apart from her cloying sweetness, clearly the result of not having been damaged by the heartlessness of the intellectual life, Emily is a silent representation of the screeching noise of the suffering of humanity; she is the proper interruption in all philosophical discourse. She is also meant to point Justin toward a proper end, because she needs him.

Emily clearly loves Justin or is in love with him; it doesn’t matter which it is. But because she is suffering, she needs him, and tells him so. Not only is she suffering physically from her disease, but she suffers in another way: she alone of all the characters in the play appears to be bearing the suffering of others, a revelation the audience is to understand through her final monologue, in which she channels or is possessed by the rage and suffering of the woman in her nightmare, the woman she counseled at the pregnancy crisis center in Chicago who ended up getting an abortion anyway. We are probably meant to note suddenly that this is the only black voice to intrude into these white people’s privileged world tonight. The monologue is also a rebuke to each person she has listened to that night—to Kevin and his ideas of “merging” with those who are different from him, to Teresa who has claimed that Catholicism is a kind of panopticon, to Justin who has told the most awful children’s story, his “Grateful Acre” (akin to Shel Silverstein’s depressing book, “The Giving Tree,” but worse), to Gina who has empathy, pity, and understanding for liberals and MAGA folks alike—and the rebuke climaxes in the terrible agony of her pain. Pain, we are meant to realize, is the only truth here. Arbery wants Emily to be a new kind of Christ-figure, one who undergoes a passion to bear not the sins of the world but the suffering of it. She is the model for the audience. She hears the screams of the oppressed and does not push them away, as

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everyone has been trying to do all night long with the “screeching generator” that is not a screeching generator after all.

In the real world, the sympathy for and embrace of the other, especially the suffering whom Arbery wishes to idealize, is an action made possible by some of the very ideas he finds to be such a distraction and waste of time.

You would not have an Emily without this formation, but he makes no connection between it and love of neighbor; in fact, Emily seems only capable of this love because she has rejected the education of her friends. At the heart of Arbery’s argument, then, seems to be the idea that all of this high-minded, intellectual conversation only distracts us from and makes it harder for us to have the naturally good, sympathetic response to the suffering of others. While there is some validity to this, the failure to bring this argument into conversation with any other perspective (it’s just dropped on us *deus ex machina* in dreams and possessions and ghostly screaming) conveniently avoids a more complex understanding of how good and beautiful and true ideas help us to form and develop the ability to understand and have sympathy for our neighbors. The modern college’s rejection of rational debate and honest inquiry has not produced a generation of open-minded, loving Emilys, but quite the opposite: a bigoted mob unable to love or even tolerate human beings who entertain even the slightest deviation from their orthodoxy. It is precisely the Christian and classical ideas inculcated by the education Arbery critiques that produce the remarkable ability to love everyone, even one’s enemies. But here, at the close of the play, the nonsensical “doopy-doo” into which the conversation degrades is meant to be viewed as a more genuine and humane communication between Justin and Emily than any of the high-minded philosophy that has appeared in the text, while at the same time representing their continued efforts to avoid seeing the real suffering that is the only compelling reality in this nihilistic world.