

Vol. 2 No. 1 Spring 2023

PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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

Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* describes Rod Dreher's conservative movement as made with the slime of broken souls, yet Dreher sings its praises: it's "breathtaking." How could "someone so young write with such ... philosophical depth?"¹ Catholic hipsters and *First Things* find the play provocative: exactly what we need right now. The University of Dallas produced it and invited Will's father, Glenn Arbery (the president of Wyoming Catholic College), to lead a discussion. I too know about this Catholic world that Will Arbery portrays; my friends and family include Wyoming Catholic alumni.

In the play, two of those alumni, Kevin and Teresa, along with Emily (based on Will Arbery's real-life sister and not an alumnus), join a third, Justin, at his rural home for a commencement after-party. The commencement speaker, Gina Presson (based on Will's real-life mother, Virginia or "Ginny" Arbery), is both their mentor and the newly installed president of the Transfiguration College of Wyoming—a blatant stand-in for Wyoming Catholic. But reunion is the backdrop for disharmony as the characters question the value of their education and the 2016 election. In this attempt at a psychological thriller, Arbery asks how faithful Catholics could have voted for Donald Trump and what role their education played in misleading them so profoundly. For context, he situates the play one week after the "white-supremacist riot and murder in Charlottesville"; oddly, conservative reviewers tend to focus on the play's theme of suffering, or on how it gives "conservative Catholics ... a voice," but they often fail to reflect on its basic political teaching.²

Will Arbery's supposed insight is characters fleeing, or "fugue." Behind conservative opinions and confidence lurk weakness. Kevin is unnerved by an inner war with his thinly hidden lusts. He masturbates to porn and through drunken tears confesses his sexual

¹ Rod Dreher, "Will Arbery's Heroes," *The American Conservative*, October 2, 2019.

² Vinson Cunningham, "A Play About the Nuances of Conservatism in the Trump Era," *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2019; Sarah Salvadore, "In New Play, Conservative Catholics Find a Voice, and Nuance," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 14, 2019.

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fantasies about both women to their faces: he tells disabled Emily, “For so long I’ve wanted to bathe you”; he wants Teresa “to beat [him] up & teach [him] how to f—k.” But his weakness reflects his ambivalence, weakened again by his self-loathing for his inability to act. He questions his faith. Resentful of his Catholic upbringing, he seeks the “orgy” of all viewpoints, the “default of equality.” He dreams of fleeing to the big city, but instead reads philosophers and poets in boring Oklahoma. Justin, a combat veteran, is weakened by an actual war and so flees from the real world by applying Dreher’s Benedict Option. He can’t love a world he longs to end—“there’s nothing to love about it.” Teresa, Arbery’s villain, sees the world in black and white, despite her head-knowledge that grace comes by particular experiences. As the only strong, shameless character, Arbery must unclasp her. Confessing her fear of motherhood, she flees to Steve Bannon’s politics, a hipster lifestyle, and cocaine. She seeks clarity in moral certainty, and salvation by being a hero (thus the play’s title) in a coming imaginary civil war. Emily, physically weak, is the only character of real faith, meaning that she empathizes with the Leftists that Teresa hates. The final character, Gina, makes a late appearance. She is disgusted by her former students’ MAGA politics.

The play’s denouement is a showdown between Gina’s older conservatism and Teresa’s MAGA conservatism, followed by some plot twists that Arbery uses to round out each character. One is that Teresa and Justin had a sexual affair while at the college, but Gina intervened to prevent their expulsion. What all Arbery’s MAGA conservatives share is “hopelessness.” Those who voted for Trump are on their way out—white, Western, and Christian—and so they latch onto a substitute god, a charismatic figure or utopianism. This age-old argument of fleeing from freedom or democracy is repeated by age-old Gina in the play.³ Arbery adds frequent gunshots and a loud screeching noise, falsely claimed by Justin to be a generator, to reproduce this looming uncertainty. The MAGA movement’s bravado conceals its anxiety of an unnamed object—immigration, globalism, etc. And that’s the plot.

Will Arbery certainly has the skill, but in this play he lacks the experience and empathy to apply it.⁴ He doesn’t love his characters. They’re insects he pins to a board. He likes the shock value of his play. A politically progressive, lapsed Catholic, he parades out conservative

³ For one of many examples, see Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1941).

⁴ Jennifer Schuessler, “A Play About God and Trump, From a Writer Raised on the Right,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2019: “The goal, [Arbery] said, wasn’t to convince anyone or to stir empathy” for conservative opinions; he admitted his concern that giving voice to some of those opinions might even be “evil.”

tropes from his parents' world and his former Catholicism to scandalize his progressive audience.⁵ But don't worry, he assures, he's really one of them. In his most high profile interview with *The New York Times*, he confesses the play was born from his own call to social justice: "I personally felt a lot of anger, and perceived a lot of anger, at the people who could've made [Trump's election] happen. I ... felt like I had a responsibility to write about five of those people."⁶ Arbery's audience will be rewarded; they'll find that each character, like some godawful rehash of *The Breakfast Club*, has some dark secret, the inner cause of why he or she is so broken. Arbery adamantly resists this reductionist psychological explanation of his characters, and one suspects it is because his own lost faith, resentment, and progressive politics seem all too well to explain the play's meaning. Indeed, one of its key features is its *impiety*: a son playing so carelessly with his own family's reputation. Every in-depth review of the play links Transfiguration College to Wyoming Catholic and pinpoints Arbery's family as the inspiration for its characters. Arbery may downplay the accuracy of his own representations, but one who borrows so openly from actual sources—proper names, positions, institutions—cannot simply retreat into artistic ambiguity when it suits him.

GINA AND EMILY: ARBERY'S LESSONS ON HOW TO BE A GOOD CATHOLIC CONSERVATIVE

Will Arbery has moral lessons for us in his favorite two characters, the soft underbelly of the play. The first is his mother, Gina, not to be confused with the real Ginny Arbery. The Ginny that I have met is lively and thoughtful; Will's Gina is a soulless dunce, a caricature used to contrast the older conservatism with the new by recycling obsolete political talking points, like "I believe in slowness, gridlock—these are the true hallmarks of democracy." But Gina's only likable for reasons Will's progressive audience would like: she's old, tired, defanged, harmless. She quotes forgotten conservatives and praises forgotten presidents like George Bush senior as "constitutionalists"; mind you, that's the Bush who signed the 1991 Civil Rights Act and 1992 Americans with Disabilities Act, labyrinths of lawless regulation. Nothing to fear here. The comparison and confrontation between Gina and Teresa only proves that Gina is a knot of contradictions—philosophically and politically she's a mess. She teaches immutable ideas for all times but frowns on Teresa's attempt to apply courses in

⁵ Tim Sanford, "Artist Interview: Will Arbery," *Playwrights Horizons*, January 10, 2020.

⁶ Schuessler, "A Play About God and Trump, From a Writer Raised on the Right."

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Thucydides and Herodotus to her own times: “I didn’t think you would take it this far!” Gina the *constitutionalist* hopes that Trump “gets impeached before he can re-campaign” without offering any *constitutional* reason. Despite her own past politicking for Pat Buchanan—he was okay before but is “loopy now”—her advice to the young is: “Tune it out. Say your prayers and vote Republican. Do it for the unborn. And then just be. Climb a mountain. Make a meal...” Conservatives’ rights are secure, says naive Gina, because “we have the Constitution, dear.” Gina’s confusion extends to her moral advice. She criticizes Teresa for “being ruled by emotion” before telling her to listen to her “gut instinct.” She condemns Teresa’s crudity before crudely calling her an “emotional, fire-spewing *slut*.” As a Catholic, she presumably believes in original sin but tells students to follow their natural goodness. At the peak of her naiveté, Gina asks drunken Kevin, whose “soul [she says] is in danger,” to apply for Dean of Admissions—he’d be “perfect”! What kind of school does Will Arbery think Wyoming Catholic is? He has Gina select a sexually unhinged pervert (she says, “There’s something awful in [his] eyes”) to handpick female students for the college!

Most importantly, Arbery needs his progressive audience to know that his mom is cool. She hates guns, and she definitely isn’t racist. But the new conservatives, Gina says, are “not true conservatives. They’re charlatans ... hucksters ... and honestly, darling, they’re a bit racist.” They seek to “oppress brown people and boost white people.” Gina says, “I didn’t have eight C-sections for white Western civilization, I did it for God.” Will slips in the word *white* just so we’re racist if we disagree. It’s cleaner that way. If we were to point out that for two thousand years the West was almost synonymous with Christendom, or that St. Thomas Aquinas never wrung his hands over racism and sexism, it gets much messier. Moreover, Gina is sorry as to “what [she] did wrong” to spawn such MAGA disappointments. In Arbery’s mind, Gina (despite the flaws and even harm in her pedagogy) is a good conservative because she’s quite apolitical: her politics may be reduced to reading Herodotus, and her constitutionalism means some sort of vaguely liberal and tolerant society.

Will Arbery’s other favorite character, Emily, is mentally fatigued, physically frail, and often bedridden. Her faith is her rock, and no encounter with the ugliness of others can shake it. She asks, “Why shouldn’t you be reading liberal articles, and watching non-Catholic shows? Why shouldn’t God have put grace in those places, for you to find?” Only Emily follows Teresa’s dictum that God “makes us work out our salvation through other people.”

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Christian faith is strongest, Emily argues, when it exists in cosmopolitan diversity. “It’s having to constantly open yourself and let someone else in.” Emily alone volunteers at a birth clinic to talk black women out of having abortions. She reaches for the grotesque, and “grace always accompan[ies] the grotesque. Sometimes the moments that are the most grotesque are the closest to transcendent grace.” In the final act, she is the trope of Christ, where she empathetically takes on the suffering of the world and spews it out in a long, emotional, vulgar monologue: imagine a shattered Jesus Christ rapping Pooh Shiesty while hanging on the cross.⁷ But Arbery only uses empathetic Emily as a tool to educate his audience.

Here’s the lesson: Emily’s *absolute* empathy (while better than Teresa’s cold debates) is impossible because minority groups have particular experiences that whites can never truly feel. Emily tries to empathize with poor pregnant women as victims and defends the unborn as a form of bare preservation. Her philosophy is that all humans are good, “including people who work for Planned Parenthood, Democrats, a drag queen I know ... they’re all good.” She says of transgenders, “I don’t judge them.” Her friend who works at Planned Parenthood “is a good person. She’s kind and altruistic and she’s good.” Gina taught Emily to believe that evil resides in *patriarchy*, in males and “systems”: “The real problem is with men who abuse and rape and systems, systems that try to keep women down. The problem’s not with the women who get an abortion because they don’t know what else to do.” But in her final vulgar rant (because Arbery’s Christ dwells in the obscene interstices), Emily’s inner black woman says, “You can think of me but you cannot feel me.... You can’t fuse with me.” Emily only *thinks* that she does not judge others. She has not yet learned to accept *unconditionally*, which would mean questioning her whiteness and her faith in the possibility of absolute empathy. Of course this is just another talking point that Will Arbery has borrowed from critical theory, which rejects the ideal of absolute impartiality as a form of white western dichotomous thinking.

Central to this moral lesson is the bait and switch. By equating the Church with a teaching of unconditional acceptance borrowed from secular psychology, Arbery can then critique Catholics with terms that have no place in the tradition. Emily describes as “beautiful” Kevin’s spite for Catholic communities, “little cloisters of the righteous,” hypocritical, conformist, and sexually repressive. He blames the abuse scandals on the Church’s teachings

⁷ “Heroes of the Fourth Turning- final scene,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El4nOPCp9h0> at 4:00.

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(instead of on homosexual grooming cults that metastasized with the teaching of unconditional acceptance). Because the problem with the Church is its isolation and fear of diversity, the solution is, in the words of Kevin, the “healthy” way of the “holy fool.... To get in there, to meld, to fuse, to engage, to dance & laugh together on the street. To live our truth, in the face of theirs. To let two competing facts exist in the same space. To imagine a heaven we can all graduate into.” But Wyoming Catholic is no such space. We find from Kevin’s dream that the genderless gods have removed the “secret sacraments and commandments” of true Christianity from the college. Emily, the Christ-figure of the play, chose not to attend.

In truth Emily’s rejection of original sin and her faith in the sacred encounter with the Other is farthest from true Christendom in its strength and glory. The consequence of this tradition-less diversity is that 66 percent of Catholics no longer believe in the True Presence of the Eucharist. Among Novus Ordo Catholics, 89 percent approve of contraception, 51 percent approve of abortion, and 67 percent approve of same-sex marriage. The problem for Catholics who would love the world (I John 2:15-17) is not Western logic; it is that the Church is not nor can it ever be a body of unconditional acceptance. It has actual conditions.

THE FAILURE OF THE LIBERAL EDUCATION

Gina believes that a classical education preserves the Western tradition, but in the play her own students reveal that it has failed to do so. Will Arbery modeled his play after Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, which asks how Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky’s idealistic teachings produced Nikolai Stavrogin, a vicious pedophile.⁸ Stepan Trofimovich is comparable to Gina, the educator of demon-possessed students. She asks them, “Six years out, tell me honestly, has the curriculum served you?” Her students agree that Wyoming Catholic has “the best curriculum.” For Teresa it “was everything.” It made Justin “who I am today”: it saved his life from his divorce, war, and sexual affair. For Kevin it was “amazing ... the only thing keeping me from ... dissolv[ing].” And like Stepan Trofimovich, Gina and her husband are “trying to like save the country”; “they’re going into the world rather than retreating.” Gina states the mission of the college: “to bear witness of Christ’s transcendent light.” Her students will be “antidotes” to the profligacy and indifference in American culture.

⁸ Kevin says several times that “there’s a demon in [him]”; on Dostoevsky, see Dreher, “Will Arbery’s Heroes.”

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But when alone, Emily asks Justin, “Does this school actually ... make good people?”: “Kevin is so wildly confused. And Teresa seems so cold.” Despite Justin’s assurance that they represent only 1 percent of the students (we never see the happy 99 percent), Arbery presents classical education not as preserving the West but as a cloister and even an assembly line for mangled souls. And what if he’s right? Those educated to be elites of an older stripe—all that Greek and Latin—and to cite Plato are also supposed to have cosmopolitan tastes. But what if those tastes and manners, all that profundity, conflict with the Western tradition itself? What if cosmopolitan habits corrode the conditions for liberal education, resulting in elites who, disillusioned with provincial virtue, aspire to be Kevin’s “holy fools” but lack the courage to do so and so either flee into repressed monasteries or sponsor radical politics?

But if Kevin is a symptom of a sick education, then Will Arbery is its death rattle. Unlike Kevin, Arbery had the courage to flee Catholicism for Kenyon. Precisely because Arbery embraces a godless cosmopolitanism, he can’t see its assault on the liberal education. Today he exhorts conservatives to become holy fools, to enter the progressive space and attend a “musical about a young black gay man in New York City.” But the way of the holy fool in Dostoevsky’s *Possessed* is no solution; it is meant to show the impossibility of uniting Russian Christianity with godless cosmopolitanism. Arbery’s adulterated result is a comedic farce: not one who retains the Western tradition in his soul and habits, but an urbane intellectual who, dabbling now and then in Flannery O’Connor, confuses wisdom with ambiguity in little phrases like “begotten not made,” which in the play is supposed to enlighten us about transgenderism. In the play and in numerous interviews, Arbery confuses diversity of opinion and sophomoric conundrums with profundity of thought; indeed, he treats this confusion itself as insightful. Produce some lines that contradict, let that sink in, and hmm ... profound.

This rift in the liberal education explains how the play has been received by the educated Catholics that it caricatures. Catholics who are vital, with strong spirits, don’t recognize themselves in the play’s damaged characters, and they feel no need to praise it. *Imagine a review by Fulton J. Sheen!* Trump, for many Catholics, was simply a better choice for president. There was no handwringing or confession. The Democratic Party had marked their people for destruction. In a few years, they would see mobs desecrate their churches,

⁹ Rob Weinert-Kendt, “Playwright Will Arbery on the restless Catholics of ‘Heroes of the Fourth Turning,’” *America: The Jesuit Review*, November 01, 2019.

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pseudo-intellectuals exploit racial division, and the president defend the administration of puberty blockers to sterilize young girls and castrate young boys. Hillary Clinton, they knew, was simply the enemy of their tradition. But Arbery cannot imagine and admits his anger toward those who are strong—who without pangs condemn their own sins and the sins of others. Thus he is a tiny prophet in identifying the putrid smell emitting from Catholic intellectuals. The real source of their anguish was not Donald Trump but the contradictions that MAGA exposed between educated Catholics' talking points and their cosmopolitan sentiments shaped by their occupations in corporate America, academia, law, and health care. As long as conservatism lost, they posed no threat to their quirky, fun LGBTQ coworkers, fashionable pro-abortion friends, and respectable colleagues. And they kept their status. Catholicism could remain in its little box, like Will Arbery's quaint, distant memories of praying the rosary. More than a few educated Catholics left the faith—they say because of Trump, Covid-19, and the hypocrisy of a politicized Church. But they had long ceased to be Catholic in their habits, even as now they show great *empathy* for BLM and LGBTQ issues. MAGA provincials only brought their hypocrisy to consciousness.

Will Arbery says he next wants to write a play about *whiteness*. Indeed *all of his plays*, he says, are about “unpacking whiteness.” Just what America needs: more thoughts by a privileged white millennial about unconscious racism. Maybe we'll hear that some of Gina's “best friends are black.” Or that whites outwardly project their inner fears of racial integration. But the most disturbing part about “Heroes of the Fourth Turning” is not its now-banal and tiresome reflections on “whiteness” but its assault on Wyoming Catholic College, which seems to be one of a few truly Catholic colleges left in America. Its president, faculty, graduates, and students do not deserve this thinly-veiled slander. Still, the president's son writes a play that portrays the college as manufacturing broken souls, and Catholic intellectuals rush to embrace it. I suspect that it's not those at Wyoming Catholic who are broken. Despite Arbery's unctuous praise of his upbringing, the whole play is an impious critique of his parents and what he deems to be their failed school of poetic imagination, which reproduced Dostoevsky's *Possessed*, this time in MAGA country. And just as Stepan Trofimovich concludes his failure as a teacher by wandering into the countryside to find the “real people” and the “true Russian life,” maybe Will's Gina is crawling through Brooklyn drag shows in search of Mother America.