

# Introduction to Symposium on Peter Lawler's *Homeless and at Home in America*

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**A** philosophical theory is often pronounced dead from intestinal incoherency; myriad contradictions among its essential premises make it unreasonable to consider resuscitation. A philosophical school or movement, however, can outlive its intellectual cogency and usefulness, requiring a peculiar brand of autopsy on an organism that is partly living, partly dead. Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity, symbolically expressed by the announcement of the death of God, was meant simultaneously as an autopsy and resuscitation. Despite the atrophy of our religious and moral bearings, which signify the decisive victory of the Enlightenment over God and nature, we moderns still cling reflexively to an entirely discredited metaphysical horizon. However, Nietzsche's assessment has turned out to be at best premature; as Mark Lilla has ruefully remarked: "The Twilight of the Idols has been postponed."<sup>1</sup> The intractability of religious belief suggests a "do not resuscitate" order and proper autopsy might be appropriate for Nietzsche and his intellectual progeny—it has recently become common to remark that the death of God has been eclipsed by a spiritual rebirth. The dogmatic antipathy toward faith that is one of the hallmarks of what Philippe Beneton calls "late modernity" demands now to be replaced by an open-minded reconsideration of the relation between faith and reason, the crux of what Peter Lawler often calls "postmodernism rightly understood."

Peter Lawler's challenging new book, *Homeless and at Home in America*, is an attempt to provide precisely this. Turning Nietzsche's perspective on its head, Lawler contends not only that belief in God is not dead but that we are "incurably God directed"<sup>2</sup>—Nietzsche and his ilk had precipitously assumed that religious belief was an accidental

versus essential characteristic of human existence. Lawler aims to counter the radical atheism of much of late modern thought with a psycho-phenomenological account of human eros: the alienation or "homelessness" that we experience in this world—otherwise describable as a persistent inclination to transcend our natural, contingent selves—necessarily "points in the direction of a personal God."<sup>3</sup> To comprehensively explicate the fullness of human existence requires an account of the interplay between our capacity for transcendence and our immanence; we are neither fully alienated nor fully at home in these natural environs. Thus, a gravitational pull toward the divine is not the philosophical detritus of earlier, benighted times, but a permanent expression of the human erotic condition.

Problematically, the theoretical core of modernity—a "particular understanding of what a human being is"<sup>4</sup>—forestalls such an account; the characteristic modern tendency has been to provide abstract and reductionist accounts of human behavior that blithely neglect the nature of real, lived human experience. According to Lawler, the two dominant strains of American intellectual life, Darwinism and libertarianism, inadequately reflect compartmentalized interpretations of transcendence and immanence. Darwinism fully integrates man into nature, insisting he is nothing other than the product of evolutionary process, whereas libertarianism fully liberates man from nature, insisting he is naturally free even to subdue nature (including his own). Although each captures a partial truth about human nature and they collectively reflect internal fissures in the schizophrenic anthropology that is the Enlightenment's bequest, neither properly depicts the whole of human existence.

The great weakness of the modern account of the individual, Lawler argues, is that its breathless exertions in the service of autonomy cut us off from the true sources of genuine individual dignity: "the modern paradox is that the individual must be vanquished for the individual *really* to

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prevail.”<sup>5</sup> According to Lawler, the most powerful evidence available for our own personal significance is to be found in the structure of human eros that, on analysis, not only points in the direction of a God but also suggests an understanding of God as a “who” in whose image we are made, versus some impersonal cosmological principle or a “what.” Thus, the project of rehabilitating the modern individual and attempt to demonstrate the “reasonableness of belief in a personal God who is rational, creative, and erotic” culminate in an “egalitarian theology of irreplaceable personal significance.”<sup>6</sup>

In my contribution to this symposium, “Peter Lawler’s ‘Faith-Based Straussianism’ and the Science of Theology,” I aim to articulate what precisely Lawler means by such a science. *Prima facie*, the terminology is somewhat misleading because it seems to engender the false expectation that a scientific account of religiousness is forthcoming, as if the categories of scientific classification could fully exhaust the experience of faith. It is often closer to the mark to describe it as a theological account of scientific activity because scientific cognition, in its desire to grasp and remake nature, imperfectly expresses, even while it denies, our transcendent attraction toward the eternal.

Although admittedly influenced by Leo Strauss’s view that the tension between reason and revelation as mutually exclusive choices is the animating dynamic of Western civilization, Lawler aims to replace it with the tension between natural and personal theology, or the impersonal God of classical philosophy versus the personal God of Christian thought. In so doing, he rejects Strauss’s austere decisionism, not only because it falsely pits reason against revelation, but also because it is based on a distorted account of human experience: the choice between philosophy as “trans-erotic solitude” and revelation understood as the total abdication of reason is tantamount to the choice between “lobotomy and serenity.”<sup>7</sup> Lawler succinctly articulates this position in his critique of Thomas Pangle’s Straussianism: “Not many creatures, it seems to me, have experienced the alternatives between blind obedience and rational independence as starkly as Pangle presents it.”<sup>8</sup> Despite Lawler’s initial qualification that his primary task in this regard is merely to show the reasonableness of faith, his project is considerably more ambitious: Lawler attempts not only to “keep alive the conflict between the natural theology of the philosophers and the personal theology of the Bible” but also to demonstrate their compatibility via a kind of Thomistic synthesis.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Lawler attempts to rekindle the fundamental Straussian tension and transform it to escape the irresolvable polarity it generates.

Lawler often characterizes modernity as anxiously obsessed with the specter of death, incapable of grasping clearly the real nature and significance of our mortality. In his searching article “The Use and Abuse of Thanatos in Life,” Marc Guerra carefully contrasts Lawler’s view of the modern response to death (“late modern man’s often unspoken desire to flee from—or eradicate the existence of—the various antinomies that characterize embodied human life”) with his own attempt to revivify an engagement with death that “prods us to wonder about the mysterious—but

nonetheless real and discernable—connections between mortality and morality, logos and eros, and our desire for perfection and experience of contingency.” Guerra explains that Lawler tries to avoid the Heideggerian approach to face death resolutely by de-legitimizing the question of our relation to others and eternity and the modern biotechnological approach that fecklessly attempts to mask our finitude with the ceaseless striving for bodily improvement and prolongation of life. Guerra artfully captures Lawler’s endeavor to do justice to the real pain and misery that can result from the experience of alienation while also emphasizing “not only what is good about our experience of alienation but also to accentuate the goodness of those things in human life that this experience mysteriously reveals.”

Lawler often argues that, despite all modern attempts to refashion human nature, its recalcitrance to decisive revision means that we are stuck not only with some measure of misery and alienation but also “stuck with virtue” and the conditions that render it possible. In his article “Democracy and Human Nature: Lawler and Tocqueville on the Modern Individual,” Yuval Levin takes issue not only with Lawler’s interpretation of Tocqueville’s sanguinity regarding human nature but also with the basis of Lawler’s optimism. Although Lawler claims to follow Tocqueville’s “fundamental belief” in our “inability to eliminate completely, through our own efforts, the contingency of our being human and our longing for God,” Levin finds in Tocqueville a darker pessimism regarding the possibility that “our permanent misery will permanently express itself in an ennobling longing for transcendence.” Levin’s article, equally illuminating with respect to Tocqueville and Lawler, notes that the distinction between the two hinges on their respective interpretations of human nature; whereas Tocqueville seems to believe that the flourishing of human nature is “made possible by an immense contrivance of political and social institutions,” Lawler argues that “no amount of cultural degradation and civic miseducation” can permanently extirpate the possibility of its expression. In his final analysis, Levin concludes that the disparities between Lawler and Tocqueville on this issue are just as edifying as their points of agreement: “Tocqueville, then, agrees with Lawler that man’s keen sense of his homelessness is deeply tied together with his capacity for being at home in his world; but he does not share Lawler’s sanguine confidence that this sense, and this capacity, are a permanent and ineradicable feature of our nature and our circumstances in this world.”

Lawler acknowledges in the introduction to *Homeless* that this is a “very pro-American book.”<sup>10</sup> For Lawler, our openness to spiritual responses to modernity make American life a uniquely helpful prism for interpreting human nature: the universality of the “greatness and misery of our way of life” finds support in “our singular ability to be a home for the politically homeless everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> Patrick Deneen argues, in his article “A House Divided: Peter Lawler’s America Rightly Understood,” that whereas Lawler acknowledges that Locke’s abstract, radical individualism is not only in many regards the “basis of modern ideology” but was also insinuated into the American founding. He also finds elements that reveal the “deep sources within

the natural law tradition from which the Founders unwittingly drew.” Deneen explains instructively how Lawler uncovers, prior to and deeper than the “ultimately false and destructive” philosophical foundation espoused by Locke, a “providential constitution” that captures an “original and plausible understanding of America that rests deeply on the basic insights of a submerged American Christian and even Catholic tradition.” However, Deneen detects reasons within *Homeless and at Home in America* to believe Lawler’s thesis is more “wishful thinking” than proffered sincerely. Lawler often acknowledges those elements of the founding, especially evidenced in the Declaration and the Constitution, that betray his Thomistic rendering. Lawler’s approach, in Deneen’s interpretation, can be understood as “tactical and rhetorical” in the service of emphasizing those components of America’s mixed political constitution that counterbalance, but do not contradict or conquer, its genuinely Lockean heritage.

In many ways, *Homeless and Home in America* functions as an excellent introduction to Peter Lawler’s considerable and ever increasing body of work; many of his most original insights and pressing concerns can be found in this veritable compendium of his thought. Lawler’s combination of political and philosophical analysis and uniquely discursive mode of presentation make his important intellectual imprint resistant to casual categorization.

Although his work is certainly indebted in many and sundry ways to Strauss’s project (which Strauss once described as a “sociology of knowledge”), it is probably closer to what Chantal Delsol means by a “sociology of mind” and aspires to what she calls a “spiritual sociology.” This magisterial work is an indispensable point of departure for anyone concerned with the fate of the individual in modernity, the many obstacles modernity opposes to the conditions for love and virtue, and the unusual opportunities for human dignity that arise despite—and sometimes even because of—the modern circumstances that often prove inhospitable to its flourishing.

## NOTES

1. Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 3.
2. Peter Lawler, *Homeless and at Home in America* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 27. This is reminiscent of Tocqueville’s account of man’s belief in God as an “invincible inclination.”
3. *Ibid.*, 32.
4. Peter Lawler, “Conservative Postmodernism, Postmodern Conservatism,” *The Intercollegiate Review* 38, no. 1 (2002): 55.
5. Lawler, *Homeless*, 82. Emphasis in the original.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 39.
8. *Ibid.*, 35.
9. *Ibid.*, 26.
10. *Ibid.*, 1.
11. *Ibid.*