

## Preface

The words 'lost in wonder', which give this collection its title, should really be extended by three so as to complete the citation from one of Charles Wesley's best known hymns. 'Lost in wonder, love, and praise' is insufficiently concise for a title, but it perfectly describes what should be expected in Christianity from the aesthetic experience. Christian aesthetics concern, above all, the beauty of God, the difference of which, in its tremendousness, from all merely natural beauties is signalled in Scripture by a more distinctive term – God's 'glory'. Lostness, understood in its positive sense, means the condition of the self when carried beyond its everyday limits by being rendered 'ec-static' (literally, 'standing outside itself') through the solicitation of some transcendent good. Such self-transcendence towards the attracting good is, in a huge variety of modes – some bewilderingly unlike others, but then 'the good' is, in its diffusion, multifarious – a feature of all aesthetic experience. I am treating the term 'aesthetic' as synonymous with the experience of the beautiful, when most deeply felt and grasped.

In the Christian context, this 'lostness' has, as Wesley indicates, its own distinctive ethos, which defines its character. It is typified by the threesome of wonder, love, and praise. *Wonder* testifies to the sheer facticity of the divine beauty; *love* to its capacity to draw to itself our desire; *praise* to our recognition of its supreme excellence. In all three respects – sheer facticity, love-arousing capacity, discernable if also superlative excellence – the beauty of God has made itself known not only in creation but, above all, in the work of salvation, centred as this is on the Cross and Resurrection of the incarnate Word, and in the consummation of creation to which the work of salvation points the way.

In the last analysis, the lostness of ecstasy belongs, indeed, with eschatology. Its cynosure is the vision of God at the definitive End. That does not, however, exclude it altogether from present resources. Such ecstasy plays a crucial part not only in the ascetical and mystical life but, I would argue, in the moral life too. It is productive not only ascetically and mystically but also morally because it breaks down the limits of the false finitude which denies that *finitum capax infiniti* and corrals the self within boundaries that restrict its openness to others – including the divine Other which lets all others be. For Catholic theology, the finite *is* 'capable of the Infinite': capable, that is, of responding to the Infinite should it call. In the single concrete order of the divine plan, nature is made for grace.

The beauty of God communicates itself generally in the cosmos – but, par excellence, in the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. For Catholic Christians, the Liturgy of the Church is the principal act of celebrating the divine beauty (hence the disaster which overcomes the liturgical life when Philistia is made to

coincide with Zion, for the divine glory needs its analogues in congruent signs). The Liturgy is the principal context in which we learn what wondering, loving, and praise-filled lostness may be. In the first three of these essays, by attention to such masters as Aquinas, Guardini, and Pope Benedict, I seek to explore further the significance of the Liturgy, and its normative practice, not least in this perspective. In the succeeding four chapters I consider the contribution which can be made by the visual and aural setting of the rites, in architecture, iconography, and music, as well as, where sacred images are concerned, their overflow into the further spaces of the home and the public highway. Lastly, I treat of the literary response to the revelation of God's glory in a sin-darkened world. Dante is the classic case, here presented with special reference to the inspiration he found in the mendicant orders (to one of which I belong). But we also need a wider poetics that makes possible Christian discernment in scanning the literature of the modern. I have found no better guide than the Russian exile whose reflections I expound. While I may have taken a title from Methodism, I owe far more, substantively speaking, to Eastern Orthodoxy which has been my accompaniment, often explicitly, since my earliest work.

The Conclusion, originally a sermon preached at St Andrew's, Deal, for the opening of the Deal Festival of Arts, draws some threads together in a way that may be helpful.

Aidan Nichols, O. P.

Blackfriars

Cambridge

Feast of our father Augustine, *doctor gratiae*