Review: James Matthew Wilson, *The Strangeness of the Good*. Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020. Pp. 118. ISBN: 978-1-62138-633-9. $22.

by Shawn Phillip Cooper

James Matthew Wilson, one of the foremost Catholic poets of the twenty-first century, traces the thread of faith through affecting meditations and personal experiences in this collection, his follow-up to the well-regarded *The Hanging God* (2018).

In 2018, when Dana Gioia wrote the foreword to *The Hanging God*, it served only to further reinforce a conclusion that would already have been clear to those familiar with the work of James Matthew Wilson: a master poet's well-deserved public recognition that Wilson had established himself in the field. Since that volume was released, the age of Covid and quarantines, of lockdowns and virtuality, seems to have changed everything. Thankfully, Wilson's prodigious talent has been spared the withering blast, even as "Quarantine Notebook", a journal-like section "included" as the third of four parts of *The Strangeness of the Good*, directly engages with the early days of the global pandemic.

A volume that begins with epigraphs from Darwin, Yeats, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux might be expected to thread its way through the contradictory—or, at least, the superficially contradictory. The first poem, "After the Ice Storm," demonstrates a Melvillean willingness to accept, rather than resolve, complications.

Opening with cracking tree limbs and a blacked-out village, the storm moves to encompass the speaker, who is soon "Burned with the dry burn of the ice". The seeming juxtaposition of burning and ice serves only as a preface to deeper paradoxes which lie beneath: the tree boughs that claw "the anguished air / To plead some hopeless case of yearning" suggest a Nature striving against itself, but insofar as it is anguished, it is also oblivious and implacable, even mute, as the final lines show the speaker listening "to wind void of song" and feeling "cold's unintended sting." And, in a line reminiscent of Frost's sorrowful "Home Burial" ("Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build"), the painstaking works of men crumble hopelessly in the background: "One night was all it took to give / What men had built back to the earth." But here, the events of mankind are not merely playing out on Nature's stage; rather it is the natural events which are foregrounded, and mankind is scarcely a footnote as ice and tree, wind and branch, contest amongst themselves like giants ignorant of whom and what they tread underfoot.

If the frosty (and perhaps Frostian) opening suggests an inclination towards a poetics of nature, the second poem in the volume, "Those Days of Weighted Solitude", with its personal interiority and its focus upon the speaker's experience with his church and the Eucharist, charts a far different course. The natural world gives way to the speaker's experience with "the inner chapel's darkness" and his thoughts of "the

apostles in their room, / Locked away with a wound of fear and failure" leads to the Eucharist, with its "dry taste". The dumb, unthinking railing of the wind against the void seems at first to contrast with the almost claustrophobic interior of the speaker's memories and thoughts about his faith. But the speaker is reticent, wondering if there will "come a time / I'd speak with golden tongue" and reflecting that "prayer came forth in one clean line of words / That carried nothing with it but its meaning". Like the wind, there is a muteness in the utterance—but unlike the wind, the speaker has the opportunity for reflection. "We do not always know when we've been blessed," he concludes, suggesting that even the ice storm's tumult might deserve reassessment. But as with the first poem, the result is not a tidy one: there is no neat resolution, for the moral-like conclusion leaves the reader only with an axiomatic acknowledgement of possibilities: a truism, perhaps, but only that.

In "All Your Life", possibilities give way to assured conclusions personalised to the reader with the insistent "you" drawn from the title. The speaker, jaded almost to the point of despair, avers that every effort of the reader will come to unhap: "You'll earn less than you feel you're worth, / Retire in debt" it begins, moving swiftly from fiscal insecurity to marital strife as, "friends forget your failings soon, / But not your wife, / Who carries them like an old tune— / Or sharpened knife." When the inevitable conclusion arrives and the reader's life (and the poem) "Ends with you dead", it is expected,

as it should be for a poem which relies throughout upon a sense of implacable determinism. By this point, the exhausted cynicism of the speaker is so weighty that the mortal conclusion of the poem seems a relief—and the poem's metre, alternating iambic tetrameter and dimeter in four-line stanzas rhyming ABAB, ensures that the short lines with their stressed rhymes read with the heaviest of treads. The experience is of a point being hammered home, both in content and form, which agreeably mirrors the way in which the described experiences serve as a life-long memento mori, but here as a promise of release instead of a threatened oblivion.

Although it is not possible, for reasons of space, to address every poem in Wilson's volume, no review of *The Strangeness of the Good* would be complete without mentioning the "Quarantine Notebook", which serves as the third section of the book. Poem titles here give way to dates, and the poems chart the slow development of the Covid-19 pandemic, in entries running from 15 March to 17 May of 2020. In the entry "March 25, 2020", the focus is upon dashed expectations, and a sense of almost absurd futility: as "The virus / Is spreading through New York. A friend of mine, / Holed up in his apartment in Manhattan, / Sends photos out of cans of beans and franks" effortlessly juxtaposing the absolute seriousness of the circumstances with the tongue-in-cheek means that human beings find to cope with the mortally dreadful: so many medieval saints cheekily winking at scythe-bearing, emaciated Death.

"I'd thought that looking back upon this time, / I'd view it as the winter without snow" the speaker notes, before observing, "We do not always read the hour rightly" in what seems to be an echo of the conclusion to "Those Days of Weighted Solitude". In Wilson's poems, there are no easy, self-assured conclusions. Instead, there is a willingness to accept the inability to understand which gives his verses not merely a sense of humility but a perceptive honesty about the human condition. It proves to be a surprising find in a collection of quarantine verse, where one expects something more news-focused, unworthy, and ephemeral—limericked headlines, perhaps? But "It is—oh, yes—Annunciation Day. / How little we expect the news we hear, / Until it comes upon us, brilliant, blazing, / Commanding we not feel the fear we feel." The gospel truth, panacæa for the spirit, strange and good indeed.

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