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(Steubenville, OH: University of Steubenville Press, 2010)

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“I believe,” remarks the poet and critic Timothy Steele, “that our ability to organize thought and speech into measure is one of the most precious endowments of the human race. To throw away this endowment would be a tragedy.” At a time when free verse reigns supreme in the literary world, Steele occupies a relatively unusual position in contemporary academe. Yet he is not entirely alone in recognizing the deep cultural value of metrical poetry: recent decades have seen the emergence of a small but active New Formalist movement among poets determined to retrieve the largely abandoned aesthetic patrimony of meter—often doing so in traditional forms such as the sonnet, the villanelle, the ballad, and the rondeau. To be sure, Steele has declined to identify himself as a New Formalist, preferring the

simple designation “metrical poet.” And yet the New Formalists have found much to praise in the poetry Steele has published in volumes such as *Uncertainties and Rest* (1979), *The Color Wheel* (1994), *Sapphics and Uncertainties* (1995), and *Toward the Winter Solstice* (2006). They have found even more to laud in his *Missing Measures* (1990), an impressive work of literary history, probing the free-verse revolution and exposing many of the aesthetic and philosophical fallacies of those who led it.

It is thus fitting that James Matthew Wilson foregrounds Steele’s commitment to meter in his perceptive introductory study of this major American poet and critic. Recognizing how “Steele’s work shows the power and centrality of meter to the poetic art,” Wilson gravitates to “poems that meditate

on the qualities of verse craft as both a means to discipline the initially unruly and as symbolic of a foundational orderliness that makes life and meaning possible." These lines from Steele's "For Vikram Seth" form part of that meditation:

The Word is Word because we share it.
 Wonder encourages our choice
 To sort out life's conflicting data,
 To come to terms with its traumata,
 To shape ourselves to nothing less
 Than reasoned self-forgetfulness.

Wilson, of course, realizes that Steele's poems deliver far more than meditations on the craft of writing them, stressing that Steele forcefully resists "the idea that the practice of traditional forms should somehow lead to the exclusion of compelling subject matter." The compelling subject matter in Steele's poems, in fact, conveys to the reader "the pathos, and the whole emotional range, of modern life," in verse manifesting "a gritty, brooding interiority." In the poet's search for a way "to reconcile the 'traumata' of divisions in our own lives," meter signals something much deeper than the anodyne assurances of Hallmark cards.

Indeed, Wilson stresses that the fact that Steele shapes this poetic search with "the beauty and integrity of meter and rhyme" does not mark him as a man who has rejected modernism. "Steele's work," Wilson insists, "has embraced the enduring contributions of modernism to literary culture." More particularly, Wilson explains, because he matured as a poet under the influence of Yvor Winters, J. V. Cunningham, and Wesley Trimpi, "Steele has extended the Stanford school of modernism."

But as Steele extends modernism, Wilson also sees him interrogating and correcting it. At the level of philosophic thought, Steele's

"'postmodern' engagement with modernism" means "answer[ing] a dualistic conception of reality with one that may rightly be termed an Aristotelian one." Winters regarded "human life as a combat of mind against nature, reason against unreason," and Cunningham fumed with a "tragic anger" at the impossibility of bridging the abyss separating the reasoned order of high art from "the wreckage of our everyday lives." But as a poet who "had understood modernism better than most modernist or postmodern poets had," Steele demonstrates how "dualisms in experience ultimately resolve into unities in reality." So completely does Steele move past the dualisms at the heart of modernism that Wilson sees him celebrating "poetry as a privileged form where thought and feeling, reason and experience, self and world, can all find reconciliation." The reader might glimpse just how such poetic reconciliation can dissolve modernist dualisms in the concluding lines of Steele's "Sunday Afternoon":

The clouds shift, the light alters and I
 pass
 Serenely through the afternoon, intent
 On nothing but the leaves and the dead
 grass.

So calm, so settled. Such peace is best.
 And sheltered in the remnants of the
 day,
 I gather what I want and leave the rest
 To the vague sounds of traffic, far away.

But even as he helps readers to recognize Steele's philosophic resolution of modernist dualisms, Wilson illuminates the reasons that that resolution proves most forceful not in discursive argument but rather in Steele's artistry as a metrical poet. Steele, as Wilson acutely realizes, "overcomes modernist dualisms most cogently at the level of the

verse line" in large part because in his verse, Steele "has demonstrated that the discipline of meter serves as a sure foundation for an Aristotelian response to the 'dark miles' of modernist thought that have rendered art and life prey to a range of modernist dualistic misconceptions."

Steele in fact detects a dualistic misconception in the very way that the pioneers of free verse defined meter when they rejected it. Supposing that meter meant "mechanically measured temporal units in tension with the fluid, intuitive whole," the free-verse modernists "did not fully understand either what it was or what they were doing in trying to overthrow it." In Steele's poetry, Wilson sees a literary artist who transcends this modernist dualism by showing that "metrical poetry not only does not inhibit, but operates fluently in, colloquial and heightened diction alike." In the versatile fluency of meter in Steele's poetry, Wilson finds evidence that meter is not an inauthentic human artifice obscuring natural realities. Rather, this versatility of meter helps establish that "the imagination is not in competition, but in harmony, with nature," a harmony so complete that it manifests "the compatibility of nature and spirit."

To appreciate more fully the value and meaning of versatility in meter, readers might well turn from Wilson's book about Steele to Wilson's own volumes of metrical poetry. For these are impressive collections that invite the reader to reflect—taking an occasional cue from Steele and other perceptive guides—on the artistic and philosophic import of measured poetic utterance in the twenty-first century. In the first of his four masterful Verse Letters, one addressed to his father, Wilson asserts that "what our nature is" emerges in "The course from birth to death that we must wend, / To

be mere human beings." We identify our essential human nature, Wilson thus avers, through "what we learn from living through our doing, / In exodus from goods to final good." And to illustrate how we realize our true nature, Wilson invokes a metaphoric explanation of the poetic meter that beats in his Letter:

... Just as this meter
Grew gradually out of native English
stress;
Just as the cut of fabric and the stitch
Must match the body's contours if a
dress
Of worm-spun silk or suit of gabardine
Are to be worn with any elegance;
Hence to the rhythm of our lives we
learn
The steps and missteps that become its
dance.

In pointing to meter as a key to understanding our human nature, Wilson raises questions about humanity that demand answers within a broader inquiry about nature, an inquiry he acknowledges is vexingly difficult. After all, "Outside the trained world of the scientist, / Agreement on what nature is seems less / Settled." Wilson hears Rousseau affirming that "nature was / All that was wild, uncultivated, raw. / What man had made, nature was not." He hears, in sharp contrast, how de Maistre defines "nature [as] an all encompassing brute, / Crushing in power and mortality," illustrating his definition by recounting how "a boy... will hold within his palm, / A new-hatched sparrow" and will "clutch it closer in a cage of fingers / Until he feels the flutter of bones break." Wilson pauses to consider how this arch French reactionary sought "goodness... in the *unnatural* act / Of slavish turning to authority" (emphasis added).

Wilson then meditates on the wisdom of Burke, who regarded “nature *of itself* [as] cruel,” but who offered an antidote to this natural cruelty:

In [Burke’s] brief,
The counter-entropy of custom and
Tradition played their rejuvenating part.
Cultures and governments must grow
 as trees;
No contradiction there: man’s nature is
 art.

Wilson greatly respects Burke (“Burke almost had it right”), yet still he demurs:

Excurses such as Burke’s are predicated
On nature as a kind of constancy.
But it, by definition, changes always;
The lapping waves of potentiality
On actual sands. That endless mortal
 throb
Of dark descending where land slips to
 sea.

And in the final lines of this exceptionally profound and stimulating Letter, Wilson voices his hope for artistic harmony between man and nature, a hope that he surprisingly but cogently condenses into a revised version of de Maistre’s monitory tale of the boy and the sparrow:

I, like de Maistre’s boy, have grown up,
 discerned
Authority of a supernatural
Order shows much—but only to
 complete
The proper order in the human halls
We each pace leaving echoes in our wake.
And so we find that the grip of our
 pleasure
Need not choke everything it can, but
 may loose

The fist of art to fit the palm of
 nature.

In these lines, Wilson—like Steele—reconciles disparate perspectives on man and on nature in a recognizably Aristotelian response to those perspectives. In both the explicit reasoning leading to that Aristotelian harmony and in the implicit persuasion of his own poetic art, “the discipline of meter serves [just as it does for Steele] as a sure foundation.” So important is that foundation that readers will want to ponder deeply both what Wilson says *about* meter and what he does *with* meter. Such pondering will do much to help readers to share the profound aesthetic wisdom inhering in Wilson’s concluding image of the once-destructive boy who has matured into a man who has learned to “loose / The fist of art to fit the palm of nature.” A metaphor for restraint—*measured* restraint—this image invites sustained reflection on how “the discipline of meter” may play its part in transforming the callow boy who, naturally enough, crushes a bird in hand then develops a *different* nature in coming of age as a poet who responds to the bird in hand with appreciative restraint.

Wilson himself teaches us much about what a maturing creative mind might learn from meter in the sartorial metaphor he develops in his Verse Letter to his father. Meter *is* like clothing. Indeed, in comparing meter to clothing, Wilson goes beyond Robert Frost’s famous jibe that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down. All mature humans need clothing; no one *needs* the particular form of recreation found in tennis. Meter connects with our human identity in a way no country club sport ever has.

In developing his meter-as-clothing metaphor, Wilson sagely stresses the need for a fit—a natural fit—between the body and

the garment. But the reader might pause a moment to acknowledge the importance of what Wilson takes for granted: mature humans wear clothing. Clothes wearing is so fundamental to our uniquely human nature that we might define man as the “clothes-wearing animal.” True, a young child sees no need for clothing: as parents know well, a two- or three-year-old child will happily dance nude before strangers. Likewise, Adam and Eve were shamelessly nude in the Garden. But ever since Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6–7), mature humans have been covering their nakedness with fig leaves of one sort or another. To fail to do so is to deny the reality of the Fall and therefore, childishly or sinfully, to deny either what we are as humans or the nature of the postlapsarian nature we now inhabit.

Wilson simply assumes that mature humans realize they need clothing to define and dignify their public presence; he simply assumes that mature humans would be ashamed to appear in public without clothing. In the exceedingly strange reality of our increasingly neo-pagan twenty-first century, however, a growing number of adults do not share these assumptions: witness the growing number of patrons frequenting nude resorts, where they shamelessly cavort like unfallen creatures in the Garden of Eden. In his perceptive comparison of meter to clothing, Wilson in fact helps us realize that the impulses prompting the free-verse revolutionaries to throw aside meter are recognizably similar to those prompting today’s patrons at nude resorts to discard their clothing. True, writing a free-verse poem hardly breaches our sense of human norms to the *degree* that appearing publicly nude does. But those who join the free-verse revolutionaries in programmatically—not just occasionally—rejecting meter as an ele-

ment of poetry do resemble nudists in either childishly or willfully failing to recognize our need for *clothing*, broadly understood as any deliberately crafted external form giving external shape and form to our raw inner humanity.

Why do mature poets *need* meter? Why do mature humans need clothing? We need clothing to shield us from shame and to lift us from barbarism. Even Virginia Woolf—no great advocate of formalism in art—acknowledged that neither Shakespeare nor Marlowe nor Chaucer could have written their masterpieces without “those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue,” a taming accomplished, of course, largely through meter.

Clarifying just how much poets need meter’s civilizing effect, W.H. Auden (an acknowledged influence on Steele) expresses appreciation for meter in his ode dedicated to the Roman god of boundaries, Terminus. In this carefully wrought verse essay, Auden explains that humans inhabit a world where “all species except the talkative / have been allotted the niche and diet that / become them.” The talkative species—Man—inhabits no such naturally allotted niche. The human species thus desperately needs the boundaries in “games and grammar and metres,” the boundaries Terminus graciously grants us. The gift of boundaries, Auden indicates, “saves our sanity” and prevents us from “sink[ing] into a driveling monologue” and from sliding into “colossal immodesty.” Auden does not mention clothing in this poem, but surely clothing, again like meter, defines a boundary that protects us from such immodesty.

With good reason, critic Edward Callen views the boundary-affirming Auden as a poet who resists “the Narcissistic infatuation

with the depths of the pool of Self.” Auden indeed gives thanks for meter as a much-needed check on the self: “Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free us from the fetters of self.”

That Wilson shares Auden’s understanding of the human need for boundaries, including those in metrical rules, becomes quite clear in his poem “At the Public Pool,” one of the penetrating works in *The Violent and the Fallen*. It is hardly accidental that meter informs this poem, in which the poet acknowledges—but deliberately resists—the potentially destructive pull he feels as a consequence of a now-routine form of modern immodesty. The poet pulls his daughter out of water into which she had “dropped face-forward through the water’s plain / Into a silent world of light, whose grip / Held her in thrall until undone by mine.” And then he soberly muses:

Did she, a moment, feel that long caress

Toward which we’re pulled and which
we can resist?

The tanned, bikinied lifeguard stared
at me,

The soft dark of her thigh another lure
Into another kind of fatality.

I clutched my daughter, but my eyes
searched *her*,

And dreaded what, a moment, I could
wish.

The careful metrical craftsmanship of these lines implicitly reinforce the poem’s explicit warning about the fearful cost of *not* resisting a carnal pull made particularly strong by the near-nudity of a modern female lifeguard. In prosody as in clothing, humans very much need the restraints imposed by boundaries.

The champions of free verse typically do not see the peril of ignoring boundaries as they dive headlong into the pool of Ego, a pool with dark and turbulent depths. With good reason, Steele cautions us against the dangers when modern aesthetic theorists prompt us to “collaborate with the very forces we should resist.”

But no perceptive reader of Steele and Wilson would praise their metrical artistry simply as a check against their narcissistic and base impulses. That metrical artistry is itself a positive good that delivers poetic pleasures quite absent from free verse. Though grounded in a venerable aesthetic tradition that carries its own sufficient authority, modern neurophysiology has delivered surprising evidence of the poetic pleasures unique to metrical poetry. As it turns out, listening to metrical verse triggers the release of “an endorphin payload”; listening to free verse does not. As poet Brad Leithauser remarks, “Something innate within the matrix of the human body—some complex concatenation of heartbeat, respiration, and, especially, synaptic firings within and between the two hemispheres—contrives to impose on any sort of poetry demands that run deeper than the language of [its] composition.” Leithauser thus plausibly reasons that “Given the demands and restrictions of the human body, it may well turn out that free verse is inherently barred from the very grandest heights of poetry.”

It should surprise no one that even as neurophysiologists are finding that metrical poetry delivers “an endorphin payload,” sociobiologists are concluding that participation in worship likewise occasions the neurologically pleasurable release of endorphins. The relationship between these two findings comes into sharper focus in the reasoning of I. A. Richards, who believed that poetry ultimately depends on a magical view of

the universe, a view premised on a belief in spirits, in inspiration, and in the efficacy of ritual. Not all metrical poetry is ritual, of course, but most rituals do pulse with the regularity of meter.

Predictably, sociobiologists have mistakenly supposed that the endorphin-inducing effects of worship *explain* religion—or rather, *explain it away*. But why would a gracious God *not* make our brains biochemically responsive both to religion and to the kind of metrical cadence that typically sustains religious ritual?

Atheists can, it is true, write metrical poetry that gives readers the biochemical pleasure of endorphins. And they can write it well—as we see in the poetry of, say, a Philip Larkin or a James Thomson. For such unbelievers, the pleasures incident to meter ultimately carry no more meaning than that delivered by the wine of Omar Khayyám, doing nothing for lovers of poetry but deadening the pain of living and dying in a pointless universe.

But Wilson is a believer, one who (in the Verse Letter addressed to his brother John) affirms that “the Incarnate Word redeems our fears.” And his faith allows him to see more in meter than merely a temporary anesthetic against the pains of an absurd universe. In the acknowledgements in *The Violent and the Fallen*, Wilson raises his “voice in gratitude for the guidance of the Saints, Thomas and Augustine in particular, whose geniuses have helped to give these poems their form and measure.” An appreciation for the ultimate origins of meter thus helps make him cognizant that, as he notes in his study of Steele, “the world is pregnant with divine meanings, permanent truths.”

Meter, in fact, enables Wilson to discern the world’s pregnancy with divine meanings, permanent truths, even when he seems far, far away from “the very grandest heights of

poetry.” In, for instance, “Living Together,” Wilson fashions three perfectly crafted quatrains—metrical, rhyming—out of what looks like mere detritus. Beginning where “flecks of fabric tangle with your hairs, / Trimmed nails, the dry husks of dead beetles, bottle / Caps flipped into a corner off our beers,” he moves, with perfect cadence, to a conclusion in which he realizes “The skein of dust before my level eye / Is your self with my own absently blent / In life’s terse record: its sloughed but faithful sty.” Even in describing a scene bearing the unmistakable marks of the Fall, metrical patterns that Wilson acknowledges as gifts from the Saints help him to glimpse powers that can redeem us from that Fall.

Indeed, relying on meter, Wilson elsewhere moves toward “the very grandest heights of poetry,” heights from which readers can see, at least fleetingly, divinely redemptive powers. In “The First Sunday of Advent,” for instance, he voices a “hope once other hopes have failed,” a hope embodied in migrating birds:

The southerly birds head toward an age
of daylight.

But when? The glorious letter in the
mail

With words of rustling bells?

When? The permanent heat in the cold
land?

Our limbs are aching and our feet are
flat,

Our thoughts encumbered by the gravitas
Of each body’s weight. Our fall
Was hard and like no other. Will the
soft

Wing of some other life lift us toward
daylight?

Readers find a similar strength of spiritual vision, sustained by metrical artistry, in the

Verse Letter Wilson addresses to his mother. Here Wilson draws inspiration from lines by Louis Montfort addressed to the Virgin Mary, who, though part of a terrestrial reality, “leaps always upward like a rising flame.” These lines from Montfort kindle in Wilson a vision not only of his own mother “but mothers generally” as divinely ordained guides to help children find the very beginnings of the path that leads from low chaos toward heavenly order. His thoughts of his own mother thus connect him with

. . . the
 Transcendent Mediatrix come to guide
 Created children through prayer, poetry
 And contemplation. More than just a
 choice
 Of individual or idolatry.
 We sense the singularity of things,
 Encounter each as each, but given the
 time
 To know them in their fullness beyond
 things,
 They start to cohere like stanzas out of
 rhyme:
 The world within the made world comes
 to being.

Though Wilson does not ascend to the Empyrean with Dante or Milton, his religious faith does flash through his poetry often enough that he merits praise that we cannot give to Steele. As Wilson notes in his study of Steele, *Modern Age's* poetry editor David Middleton has justly concluded that “Steele’s humane sensibility and Aristotelian moderation,” though admirable, “signal a limitation in his work,” a limitation that makes it impossible for him “to ‘rise into ontological zones’ of human beings’ highest religious concerns.” In his Verse Letters to

his mother and brother and in poems such as “The First Sunday of Advent,” Wilson rises above this limitation.

The most elevated metrical poetry—like our finest clothing—thus not only hides our baser parts but also puts on fuller display our glory as the only terrestrial creature created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; 5:1–2). It would, of course, be a great mistake to value too highly even our most heavenly metrical poetry or our most elegant clothing: the idolatrous worship of graven images can insinuate itself among the lovers of literature just as it can surface among the devotees of the high-fashion catwalk. With good reason, although Wilson implicitly endorses the high possibilities Steele holds out for poetry, he cautions against “the notion that poetry might be a substitute for, rather than a complement of, religion and philosophy.” Indeed, in the concluding lines of “A Prayer for Livia Grace,” Wilson acknowledges that despite his deep commitment to poetry, such poetry finally matters less to him than some other divine gifts:

My daughter’s teething, needs her gums
 rubbed with liquor,
 Which stops my language, calls me
 from my office.
 I go. May I have more of this child, less
 poetry.

Wise readers will recognize—and endorse—the priorities expressed in these lines. But how can any lover of poetry not hope that the author of these lines will find a way *both* to spend time with his precious daughter and to write *more* of his wonderful metrical poetry? †