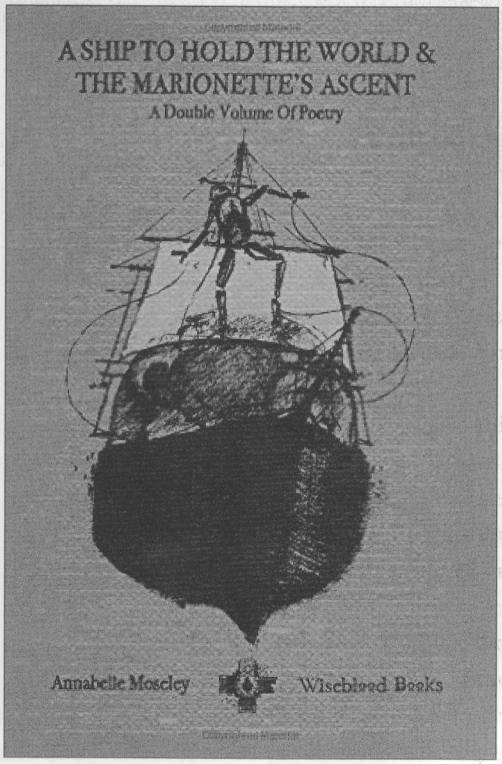
Reviewed by Hannah DeRocher

A Ship to Hold the World & The Marionette's Ascent
By Annabelle Moseley
Wiseblood Books, 2014
153 pp., $16.00
ISBN: 9780692290002

Some Permanent Things
By James Matthew Wilson
Wiseblood Books, 2014
143 pp., $16.50
ISBN: 9780692258644

The daring and deeply aesthetic new publishing house Wiseblood Books has published two works of poetry: *Some Permanent Things* by James Matthew Wilson and a double volume by Annabelle Moseley called *A Ship to Hold the World* and *The Marionette's Ascent*. Both authors display aptitude of pen and magnitude of thought. I will consider them severally, however, in order to address the fresh insights of each.

Firstly, then, Annabelle Moseley's books are shocking and fittingly grotesque in the Flannery O'Connor sense. In Wiseblood's double volume, the first part, *A Ship to Hold the World*, brings to life the stories of the Old Testament. In her "Afterword", Moseley claims that she "tried to inhabit each character I wrote, whether it meant poetically dwelling with unhinged envy, shame, forgiveness or love."[1] Moseley accomplished what she intended. Here is a wealth of reflection for readers of Scripture. Here the familiar characters of the Old Testament loom as large as life, and come sometimes dressed in modern garb, as with the Serpent hissing his temptations in Vegas, Job selling his possessions at a garage sale, and Potiphar in the guise of a golfer. The images that Moseley's poetry conjures up bring the Biblical stories to new vividness. The story of David and Bathsheba, for instance, leaps to life in Moseley's simple style: "His nod / was like a whole note, eager as a psalm."[2]

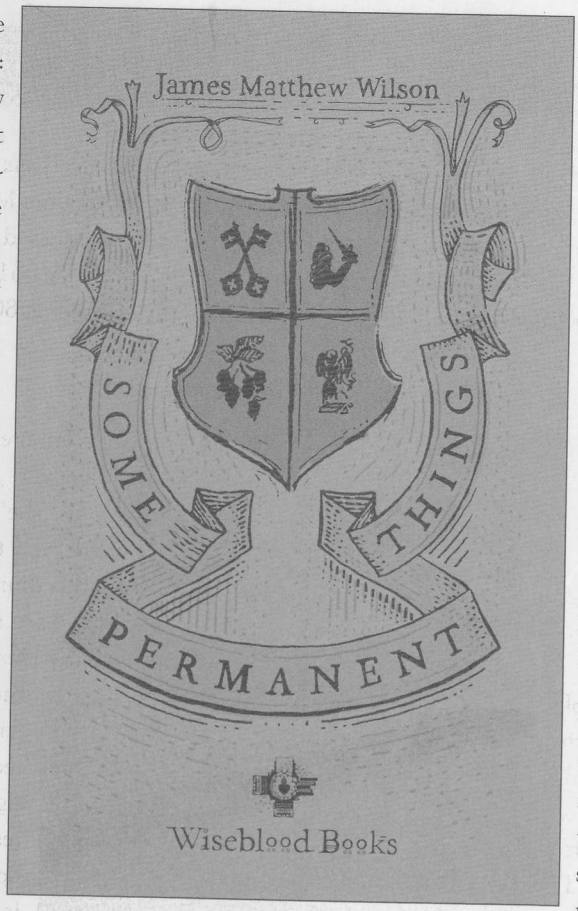


The striking thing about this poet is that she does not make use of figuration. The words and images speak for themselves, with hardly any attention to tropes. This allows the extremely narrative character of her poetry to resound, lending a sort of immediacy to the images within the poems. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention the one poetic device she uses, which is peculiar to Moseley, as far as I am aware. Rhyme and loose meter, for the most part, suffice for Moseley's constructions, apart from a number of poems that are chiasmatically structured. In other words, the poem begins normally and then repeats itself in backwards order—for instance, in "Lot's Tribute", the first few lines are: "This shot is for my wife. Bartender, salt. / Rim this thumb with that mineral of tears, / The only kiss she'll give me now. . . ."[3] The last few lines, on the other hand, read thus: "The only kiss she'll give is brined with fault. / Rim this thumb with that mineral of tears. / This shot is for my wife. Bartender, salt."[4] Note the similarity in the repeated lines—they are nearly identical apart from the reversed order and the description of Lot's wife's kiss. The difference within the similarity causes the reader to look back and ponder what the significance of the change might be. As a result, the experience of the chiasmatic poems can be overly cerebral, as opposed to intuitive, but it certainly fuels lingering reflection on the words.

The tenor of the whole set of poems is an incredibly conversational, relevant one to the modern reader. There is a reflection on the "still small voice" of God to Elijah that hits home: "That's why it's important to be loud / . . . Make sure you are exhausted before sleep. / Play music when you're by yourself, / And talk more than you listen. Talk much more. / Leave prayer like dust, collecting on the shelf / . . . Think only of how much there is to do."[5] Moseley effortlessly describes the evasion of self and circumstance that defines the lives of most of us. The rhyming couplet at the end, both by sound and meaning, perfectly accomplishes the purpose of the author: to force the reader to realize that accepting constant noise as a norm will cause him to miss out on reality: "The whisper is the source of change, the knife. / You must avoid it. Just like death. Or life."[6] The quick, almost breathless sentences strike the mind and suit the analogy between "knife" and God's voice—He does not want us to be comfortable, but to grow.

In many ways the second part of the volume—*The Marionette's Ascent*—deserves more attention, partly because of its premise, and partly because of its execution. Yet, the complexities here are immense, and it may be best to say a few things only. First of all, the

striking concept of the poems as a whole is an embodiment of truly Catholic art: bringing the new to the old in such a way that one does not destroy the old, but deepens and refreshes it. Moseley's "re-write" of what is almost certainly the greatest poem of Western Civilization, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, demonstrates a great deal of thought about the human condition—strangely enough, through the depiction of a marionette protagonist. As the marionette progresses from Purgatory (earth?) through Hell and then Heaven, Moseley portrays the growth in the marionette's conception of the world run by the hands of a Manipulator, until there is a sort of "release" with the discovery of Christ as "Death's own marionette, until he rose."[7] By the end of the "Paradiso", Marion has embraced the possibility of her own freedom, and attempts to "dance through her constraint", by learning "to splinter all my grains of wood to prayer."[8] There is deep understanding here of our own limitation and enslavement to sin, to the devil who (as Marion says) "sometimes made me think I needed fear."[9] Clearly, Annabelle Moseley has forged her poetry with great care and insight. Overall, the book is a helpful aid to reflecting on Scripture stories and the Christian life as a whole.



The other Wiseblood poetry contribution is not as directly focused on the Christian life, but speaks of *Some Permanent Things* that cause us to turn our heads towards grace. An excellent picture is painted, for instance, of an "Old Man in a Café", which Wilson uses to remind us of the need to contemplate, though not judge, what we don't know: "And then consign, along with caricature, / This imagistic obverse charity / To the blank coffee darkness of unknowing, / Those places where what's there cannot be said."[10] The commonplace occurrence of "people-watching" has been transformed via Wilson's poem into both a delightful image and a reminder of the need for remembrance of mystery. Within the four "verse letters" Wilson includes in the book—one to his father, one to his mother, and two to his brothers—are many gems, but one of the most striking bits seems to me to sum up his underlying vision: "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. . . ."[11] Through the singulars, the whirl of circumstances, sights, and sounds that surround us, Wilson asserts that a "fullness" exists—that each part can only be understood as a part of a whole. He shows this beautifully in his work by weaving together the pieces of his own memories and observations to display to the reader the wisdom he has gleaned from them, and the awareness of God directing all. He has a great sense of the connectedness of things: for instance, the blackberry bush in "Bunches of Blackberries"[12] serves as an analogy for the growth and "ripeness" of a poem, as well as its tangled nature.

Although almost all of Wilson's poetry stems from the natural sphere, there is one explicit prayer among the lot, which stands out starkly. It perfectly captures the spirit of Raissa Maritain, that wondrous wife of the Thomist Jacques Maritain, in whose style it was written: "The world You fashioned coruscates with stars that overawe, / And the abyss in which You set them terrifies my soul. / From those abyssal depths, I cry to You, My God, my goal."[13] Wilson confesses his holy terror at the ways of God, at the strange distance between our understanding and our Maker's. It is the sensitivity to this distance, and God's paradoxical closeness in the sensible, loveable things around us, that reveals to the reader a poet who "feels the wound of everything. . . ."[14] How truly rich is such a man, and the art flowing from him!

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References

1. Annabelle Moseley, *A Ship to Hold the World & The Marionette's Ascent* (Milwaukee, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2014), p. 146.
2. Ibid., p. 53.
3. Ibid., p. 24.
4. Ibid., p. 25.
5. Ibid., p. 60.
6. Ibid., p. 61.
7. Ibid., p. 131.
8. Ibid., p. 142.
9. Ibid., p. 132.
10. James Matthew Wilson, *Some Permanent Things* (Milwaukee, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2014), p. 80.
11. Ibid., p. 107.
12. Ibid., p. 53.
13. Ibid., p. 78.
14. Ibid., p. 78.