

The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition

James Matthew Wilson

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James Matthew Wilson's *The Vision of the Soul* is organized into three sections that treat goodness, beauty, and truth. The first part consists of two chapters that address "The Real, the West, and the Good." These chapters are crucial for establishing the centrality of both the role of intellectual (or, spiritual) "vision" and "the Christian Platonist tradition." Near the end of the first chapter Wilson "meditate[s]" on the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as an account of "the whole history of hunger and happiness (56). The delight we take in our senses testifies to the universal hunger for knowledge, the happy meeting of our desire and the self-donation of "the reality of the things of this world. (57)" For Wilson, vision has a privileged place in this economy of gifts given and received. It indicates, against the teachings of the regnant prophets of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, and others), that human nature is defined by its capacity to wonder at the gratuitous goodness of things, to delight in the truth of reality, and to discern the beautiful "shining forth of form" that holds these together (60).

Wilson locates the mutual inherence of these transcendental properties of being in the "Christian Platonic" tradition (63). He rallies a diverse array of thinkers towards an articulation of the essence of this tradition and argues passionately for its enduring relevance. Here, Wilson emphasizes the human person's place within a beautifully ordered whole that is capable of being known and loved because that whole "is itself ordered by and to Beauty" (73). Wilson enthusiastically celebrates the heroes of this tradition, admirably defends the breadth of their legacy, and denounces with rhetorical flourish those who would undermine it. Throughout these opening chapters, however, I was left with a certain unease with how easily the objects of our desires are discerned, how transparent to reason's gaze this ordered whole appears, and the extent to which Wilson lyrically praises all the beauty to be found therein without acknowledging the prevalence of damage consequent upon the Fall. Wilson comes close to such an acknowledgement in his discussion of Pascal and Eliot (40-42), but dismisses far too quickly "the icy and stark light" in which both of these thinkers cast the plight of fallen humanity *as such* (not, as Wilson seems to suggest, humanity under modernity's sway) (41). Hopkins's poetry, not to mention Wilson's own, strikes the right balance in "hurrahing" a world that is "barbarous in beauty," dotted with the "lovely behaviour of silk-sack clouds" that evoke the poet's praise

("Hurrahing the Harvest," ll.1-3), but is also marred by the work of "the sour scythe" that makes us "cringe," and the "the blear shame" that evokes lament ("The Wreck of the Deutschland," II, l.8).

In Part II, Wilson argues that beauty is not merely "a matter of sensation or taste," nor is it exhaustively accounted for as the "psychological" or even "spiritual experience" of individual subjects (151). Rather, beauty is something intrinsic to the ontological "form" of things. The explicit political themes of Wilson's "Introduction" and the essays of the first part are deepened here as conservatism is described as "something of a literary movement" ultimately concerned with "beauty, particularly literary beauty" (125). Although Edmund Burke is Wilson's founding hero, his most engaging essays consist in a kind of dialogue between Theodor Adorno and Jacques Maritain.

Wilson reads Adorno as deeply committed to both the truth and beauty of art, which derives not from the particular socially imposed "ideology," but from "the intelligibility of the cosmos" (155). While Adorno's historical (rather than ontological) theory of art and beauty falls short of Maritain's more deeply Christian Platonist account (161), Wilson admires Adorno's defense of "the integrity of artworks as manifesting truth in their inherent form" (167). Adorno's "provisional" account of art and beauty affirms the seriousness of both, while gesturing inchoately towards the need for a "metaphysics of being" supplied by Maritain. In *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain enables the recovery of an understanding of the nature of art as "intellectual virtue" that "finds its finality in a beauty that is one ('convertible') with truth" (189). Moreover, Maritain offers "an enduring and satisfactory account of beauty as a property of being" with three intimately related conditions (193-4): integrity, proportion and clarity. Wilson argues convincingly that Maritain overstates the importance of clarity at the expense of proportion, which Wilson considers to be the genus of which both integrity and clarity are species (202, 209, 214-22). For Wilson, the primacy of proportion highlights how the inner proportion between the form and matter of a substance gives itself to the beholder within what Umberto Eco calls a "dense network of [proportioned] relations," the whole of which point towards the analogical "proportion" between created being and the Act of Being Itself (qtd. in Wilson, 214).

Unfortunately, these hermeneutically rich essays are preceded by the weakest essay in the book on the greatest figure of the Christian literary tradition, Dante. In this chapter, Wilson defends the metaphysics of Dante's *Commedia* against both "materialism" and "dualistic idealism." In its execution, however, Wilson never presents the reader with any significant engagement with Dante's poem, which is quoted only once (145), and there only

to elucidate Matthew Arnold's view of "culture." The upshot, that Dante "holds open the possibility that the imaginative contemplation of beauty may lead us however gently beyond itself to an encounter with what is real," is well taken (150), but it would have been far more compelling had Wilson interpreted the poem, or even just a few of its arrestingly beautiful moments.

Part III is concerned with truth and the ways in which "narrativity" and "rationality" relate to one another in its communication. Wilson thinks that the "conservative intellectual tradition" is distinct in not only "offering a narrative of its own," but also in "defending story itself as the essential, unmatched means to knowledge about truth and goodness" (237). Here, Wilson defends the narrative form of the arts, against (post-)modern attempts to "liberate" art from the conditions of time and narrative, working through examples of the failure of those attempts to do more than make narrative "exogenous" to the works in question (256-57).

In Wilson's end is his beginning: the conservative intellectual tradition is the best hope for the recovery of the Christian Platonist worldview in which the vision of the soul is fundamentally ordered by, to, and from beauty to the recognition of a goodness and truth worth conserving and cultivating. *Vision of the Soul* merits the studied consideration of a wide audience, particularly those searching for a compelling case for conservatism, as well as those at the beginning of their intellectual journey. Students of literature, art, philosophy, and theology will find in Wilson's *Vision* an insightful reflection on perennial questions besetting the human condition and a thoughtful engagement with some of the central texts that have informed the Christian Platonist tradition of inquiry into those questions.

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Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology

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Vincent W. Lloyd's *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* is a long overdue riposte to secularism's encroachment upon the power of black theology. Lloyd joins a growing chorus of post-secular

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