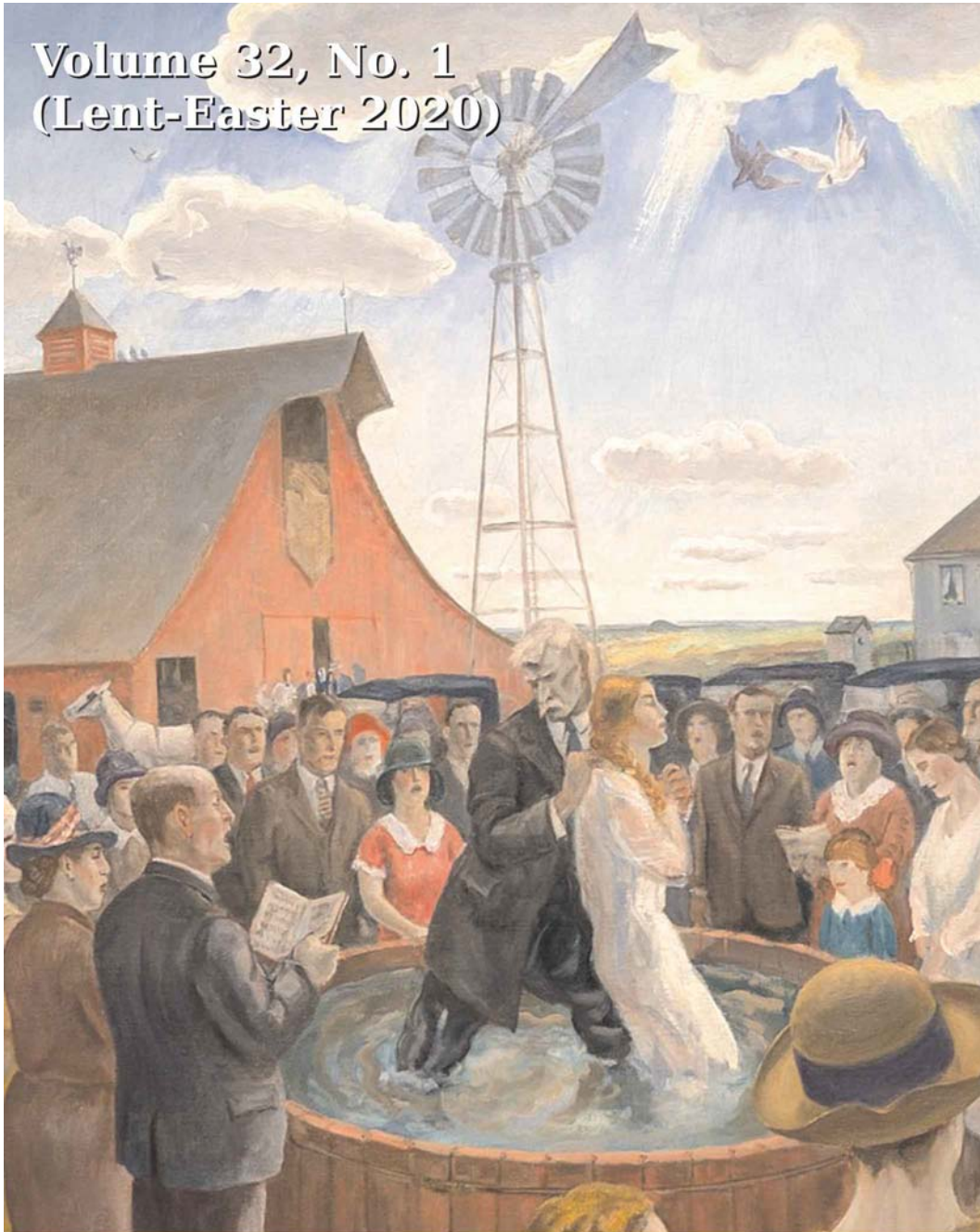


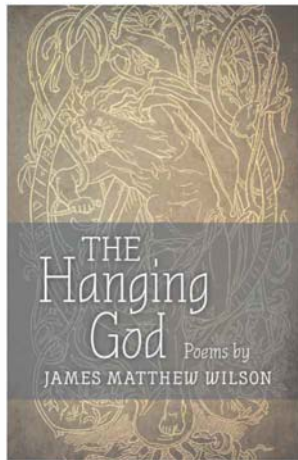
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Sacramental Life

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practices of Christian communities

Book and Screen Reviews



The Hanging God
By James Matthew Wilson
Angelico Press, 2018.
85 pages, ISBN 978-1-62138-4021
\$14.95

As Dana Gioia observes in his preface to *The Hanging God*, James Matthew Wilson is a poet who “writes in what one might call the high humanist Christian tradition.” This tradition includes explicitly religious poets like John Donne and George Herbert as well as many more recent 20th and

21st century poets with affinities to the “new formalist” movement in contemporary poetics. However, this is certainly not the currently favored style of poetry for the editors of most magazines and literary journals who tend to prefer various kinds of wildly-wheeling and fractured free verse—an aesthetic that perhaps demonstrates the disjointed nature of our so-called “postmodern” times. But as Gioia points out, the high humanist Christian tradition in poetry “remains a powerful mode, though one difficult to master since it requires historical awareness, linguistic mastery, and intellectual depth.” James Matthew Wilson has all of these gifts and more.

A devout Roman Catholic, Wilson is the Associate Professor of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions at Villanova University. His recent (2018) book of poems, *The Hanging God*, is a carefully crafted collection exploring spiritual anxiety and moral/theological issues through a lens that can be brutally

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non-sentimental. And yet, his use of rhyme and form makes even the starkest of poems enjoyable to read. For example, in the poem "In Sickness," Wilson assumes the persona of a lover planning to leave their ill partner:

I serve you tea and aspirin,
Your body sweating, fevered, chill.
I wait for you to heal, and, when
You have—I'll leave for good. I will.

For if our love sprang from my terse
Laugh and peremptory kiss, its passing
Will come more soft and be the nurse
Of an indifference far more lasting.

And there's a lot more where that came from! In another long sequence of poems, the author examines the dissolution of a love affair between a lapsed catholic and a stripper. These are not Hallmark greeting card poems by any stretch of the imagination. Many (perhaps most) of the poems in this collection are also not strictly religious, but they are all theological in the way Paul Tillich would have understood as expressing "ultimate concern." Even when Wilson is writing in an ironic or tongue-in-cheek tone, there is almost always something very serious at stake...usually the slow erosion of someone's immortal soul or at the very least, the degradation of virtue in contemporary society.

Wilson's book is divided into six different sections, but my favorite set of poems in *The Hanging God* comes in Part Four: 14 poems reflecting on the Stations of the Cross. The first one, "Jesus Is Condemned", deserves to be quoted in full:

I. Jesus Is Condemned
I tried to think for half an hour
About the face of earthly powers
That would condemn a god to die.

I listened for its menacing cackles,
The crack of whips, the clank of shackles,

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And searched for dark flames in the eye.

Through the church window I heard shrieks
Of ambulances whose techniques
Help us to forget our wounds;

The certain hum of homeward motors,
A candidate's rank appeal to voters,
In these its stare and voice I found.

For we sit kind, when comfort's here,
But draw our weapons with our fears
Should we one pleasure be denied.

The poem above is a damning indictment of the human tendency to think ourselves better than we actually are during times of ease and plenty. But given even a minor threat to such comforts, we quickly become the crowd calling for the crucifixion of others. Reading Wilson's book is not unlike the liturgical season of Lent: bracingly bare of glittering distractions or easy amusements and instead focused on lament, penance, and honest self-examination.



The Book of Kells
By Barbara Crooker
Cascade Books, Eugene, OR 2018
88 pages, ISBN 9781532606366
\$12.00

The Book of Kells is part of the Poiema Poetry Series, edited by D.S. Martin. As Martin explains: "The Poiema Poetry Series presents the work of gifted poets who take the Christian faith