HUMANITAS

Vol. XXXI, Nos. 1 & 2, 2018
Double Issue $14.00

Elites and Imperial Ambitions: A Symposium

The Real Thucydides Trap
Lowell Gustafson

Populism, Elites, and National Security
Michael J. Glennon

Anatomy of a National Security Fiasco: The Bush Administration, Iraq, and Groupthink
Phillip G. Henderson

History As Transcendence: What Leo Strauss Does Not Understand About Edmund Burke
Claes G. Ryn

The Neoliberal University and the Neoliberal Curriculum
Eric Adler

Straussian Witchcraft and the Need for Devils' Advocates
Michael Millerman

Gorman Beauchamp on Lukianoff and Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind* and Steven Knepper on James Matthew Wilson's *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition*

Encountering the Beautiful

Steven Knepper
Virginia Military Institute

The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition, by James Matthew Wilson. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017. *444 pp. $29.95.*

There is a modern tendency to reduce wonder to curiosity about how things work. Wonder becomes a state of ignorance, one that can be remedied by inquiry. Francis Bacon, for instance, called wonder "broken knowledge." What gets lost in this reduction, though, is a deeper sense of wonder at the mystery of being, wonder at the sheer *thereness* of it all, at there being something rather than nothing. Martin Heidegger, of course, sought to reawaken us to this mystery, but he also claimed that the reduction of wonder to curiosity had a much older lineage than Bacon. For Heidegger, this reduction—and the attendant "forgetfulness of being"—is the faulty foundation for the whole tradition of Western metaphysics from Plato onward. It issues in our contemporary predicament, where being has been reduced to use value, to an exploitable "standing reserve." Heidegger's account of the Western philosophical and religious tradition is highly tendentious. Still the tendency to reduce wonder to curiosity is indeed recurrent, as is the danger of the reduction of being—inevitably extended to human beings themselves—to a "standing reserve." Even Aristotle and Aquinas can talk about wonder as if it were merely curiosity. Yet, as Mark Shiffman and D.C. Schindler have argued, Aristotle and Aquinas also give us resources to rethink the relationship between deep wonder and curiosity, to resist reifying this relationship as a stark opposition.

Steven Knepper is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute.

Schindler argued in *The Catholicity of Reason* (Eerdmans, 2013) that the Thomist tradition at its best has held that as reason discovers more determinate knowledge about the world our wonder at it should actually deepen—not only our wonder at its sheer thereness, but also wonder at its intelligibility.

Shiffman and Schindler were long-time colleagues of Wilson's in Villanova University's Department of Humanities. (Schindler has since joined the faculty of the John Paul II Institute at the Catholic University of America.) With the publication of *The Vision of the Soul*, Wilson has joined them in recovering this relationship between wonder and reason. He does so via a rich aesthetics. Countering the argument that Aristotle champions a reductive curiosity, Wilson writes:

> But wonder cannot merely be the desire to move from an absence of knowledge to knowledge, a desire that diminishes in proportion to our arriving at knowledge. Nor, for that matter, is knowledge best understood as a kind of technical mastery. Aristotle *might* seem to suggest this is so, insofar as wonder describes the condition of wanting to know the cause of things without actually knowing them. But he also tells us of the delight we take in seeing and knowing. Is it not also to be in wonder when we take delight in knowing the truth and goodness of a thing? To delight in, to experience *as good* by taking pleasure in, a thing that is known *as true* is to see its reality as having at once an orderliness to it as well as a certain excess, a mystery. This experience of truth as good, as something we may in some sense possess but also as something that exceeds our comprehension, that becomes more mysterious the more we understand it, is to encounter the beautiful (59-60).

It is clear from this passage that Wilson's aesthetics is not merely subjective or narrowly confined to fine art. It is a recovered premodern aesthetics where beauty is an ontological property of reality—a transcendental—that stirs our *eros* and draws us out of ourselves. The beauty of the artwork is thus not cut off from the beauty of the world: "What is most manifest in the delight of an artwork is not that it is an imitation we recognize as true, but that its beauty *is itself* in part the splendor produced by a particular form's participation in a reality that transcends the thing itself" (206).

Wilson ultimately draws on Plato more than Aristotle. Beauty too can fuel a desire to know: "Aquinas contends we have a natural desire to know the cause of the effects we see. So, as we saw, Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the proposition that 'all men by nature desire to know.' As Plato dramatizes in the *Symposium*, this is not just a potency of our intellect, but the ruling object of our love, our innermost desire" (79). Much about beauty is open to reason. Wilson, for instance, stresses the importance of proportion in beauty, not only the proportions of the beautiful form itself (which have been central to the aesthetic tradition from Pythagoras onward) but also the always shifting relations to other forms. The beauty of a building, for instance, is affected by its surround-

ings. Furthermore, knowledge can deepen our appreciation of beauty. The architect can see the beauty of a well-made building better than a novice. Still, beauty exceeds complete conceptual mastery. There is always an excess to beauty. To use the language of another of Wilson's Villanova colleagues concerned with wonder—the philosopher William Desmond—beauty is "overdeterminate." It does not resist reason so much as exceed reason. Desmond claims there is something "hyperbolic" about beauty, a too-muchness. This is why for the loose "Christian Platonist" tradition that Wilson explores beauty serves as a sort of ladder. Beauty draws us out of ourselves and into the world, but its excess also directs us into the mystery of being and the mystery of the origin beyond being—it directs us to God. Our physical vision of beauty can fuel a spiritual and intellectual hunger for a more perfect "vision of the soul."

Such Platonism has often been charged with reducing the material world to the bottom rung of the ladder. It has been accused of being world-denigrating or even world-denying. There is some truth to this, especially in the case of Plotinus (though even here there is good reason to think that this is truer of his biographer Porphyry, as the work of Stephen R.L. Clark suggests). Yet seeing the world's beauty as the ontological splendor of the Good or God also invests the world with deep meaning. Wilson offers a provocative reading of the philosopher's return to the cave in Plato's *Republic*: "He sees the good of the absolute and that of the relative which is the good's effect; he is able to return to and know the goodness of appearances and the truth they manifest for the *first time*" (290). We might also think of the *Timaeus* where the demiurge crafts the world to maximize beauty. Pseudo-Dionysius likewise understood the world as a theophany, and this was echoed in some of the great medieval theologians, such as John Scotus Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, and St. Hildegard of Bingen. This is the vision that inspires the great cathedrals. But Wilson crucially stresses that the widely held premodern conviction that beauty has ontological significance resonates with common experience. When we see a beautiful landscape or a beautiful painting, we often feel that it is saturated with worth. We may feel a sense of reverence. In this regard, premodern accounts are not just mystical speculation. They take the experience of beauty and of how beauty discloses itself seriously. They seek to save the appearances.

The towering figures of modern aesthetics—Burke, Hume, Kant—offer important insights but also treat beauty as subjective. (Wilson argues there are deeper roots to this in late medieval nominalism.) Beauty no longer has ontological purchase. This drains the world of worth, and it ends up undercutting art as well. From one angle art flourishes in modernity with its newfound autonomy. Yet art is also less and less un-

derstood as disclosing or attuning us to reality. Instead the artist imaginatively crafts purely subjective worlds or invests our world with meaning. Either way the meaning comes from the artist. This makes it easier to dismiss art as mere entertainment. Wilson notes that in the early twentieth century there was renewed interest in ontology and art among both artists and philosophers. Heidegger is a key figure here. Wilson's main interlocutor from this period, though, is Jacques Maritain, who offered a distinctly Neoplatonic Thomism in early twentieth century Paris. Indeed, the middle chapters of *The Vision of the Soul* offer a detailed (and at times critical) account of Maritain's aesthetics, one that may generate renewed interest in this neglected thinker. Maritain had a profound influence on artists as different as Eric Gill, T.S. Eliot, John Cocteau, and Flannery O'Connor, but the early twentieth century "ontological turn" did not reverse the trajectory of art in modernity. Subjective aesthetics would win out, with art increasingly becoming either obscure or self-referential in the quest to be "avant-garde" or politicized in the quest of fleeting relevance. Wilson has explored these tendencies at length in his study *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking* (Wiseblood Books, 2015), which makes good companion reading to this volume. A notable absence in this section of *The Vision of the Soul* is Hans-Georg Gadamer, who critiqued modern aesthetics and recovered key insights from Plato and Aristotle.

Wilson devotes the last section of his study to narrative. Again, he hopes to recover the ontological significance of something often treated as merely subjective. Wilson argues that narrative is a foundational reality for humans: "For the form—the essential, intelligible meaning—of a human life is always a story-form" (315). Our lives always have a beginning and an end, and our task is to give the plot between a meaningful shape. Of course, postmodern philosophy has stressed the importance of narrative too. Reason is always just a narrative in the end. Wilson would agree that our reasoning always takes place within narrative structures, but this does not mean that narrative undermines reason. He instead wants to overcome the opposition of *mythos* and *logos*. This involves going back to Plato, who is often read as setting up this opposition. Wilson points out that, despite the *Republic*'s critique of *mythos* and championing of dialectic, it ends with the myth of Er. Many of Plato's dialogues are built around myths, and the dialogue form itself is a narrative. Wilson argues that the Platonic dialogues suggest an intricate interrelationship between *mythos* and *logos*: "As Plato observes in his discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus,* writing (as rhetoric or *mythos*) truly severed from its origin in the reason of its author itself ceases to be rational. Similarly, were *logos* to attempt to cut itself off entirely from the *mythos*, the lived stories that occasion its questions, arguments, and conclusions, then it too would

be deprived of rationality" (298). Augustine is also important for Wilson's account of the links between *mythos* and *logos*. The *Confessions* is "perhaps the best known and most richly exemplary text that gives full reign to reason as the vision of the soul and takes *mythos* as the foundation and condition of reasoning [. . .]" (308-309). Fundamentally we need narratives of formed lives as exemplars to live our own lives well. Indeed, we need to be able to reason about such narratives, about the insight they provide about the proper ends of human life. Here Wilson echoes the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, which argues "that all ethical arguments become incommensurable and so interminable unless they can occur in the context of a community's reflections on the nature of the human *telos*, that is, on the form of the achieved good life for man" (317).

Wilson suggests that a conservative politics in the fullest sense would sustain and be sustained by the long legacy of Christian Platonism. It would be a politics that does not ideologically instrumentalize beauty and narrative, but that takes its bearings from their ontological importance. It would be a politics of proportion, contemplation, and meaningful story, one that works to preserve both the goodness of Creation and our communities but also directs us to the Good that transcends them. This kind of conservatism is far removed from the platforms of either the Republicans or Tories today, but it resonates with Burke and Kirk (and more recently with Wendell Berry and Roger Scruton) as well as a long line of artists that have kept alive the "vision of the soul" in hostile times.