



The Emerging Catholic Literary Renaissance

An Interview with Poet James Matthew Wilson

by Roseanne T. Sullivan

A Poet by Jean Louis Ernest Meissonnier

“**Y**ou know there is, at the moment, an exciting rebirth of Catholic poetry in the United States and it’s full of talented young writers but even in this interesting cohort James Matthew Wilson, I think, is one of the leading people that you are really going to watch in the future.”—Dana Gioia, essayist, and poet.

Dana Gioia’s opinion bears a lot of weight. After Gioia earned degrees from Stanford and Harvard and an M.B.A. from Stanford Business School, he was a successful busi-

nessman for fifteen years (at General Foods) who published his writing on the side. After his essay “Can Poetry Matter?” was published in *The Atlantic* and gained international attention, Gioia quit business to pursue writing full-time.

He served as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts between 2003 and 2009 and is the California State Poet Laureate.

Another significant essay of Gioia’s is “The Catholic Writer today,” in which he wrote:

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Stated simply, the paradox is that, although Roman Catholicism constitutes the largest religious and cultural group in the United States, Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in the American fine arts—not in litera-

ture, music, sculpture, or painting. This situation not only represents a demographic paradox. It also marks a major historical change—an impoverishment, indeed even a disfigurement—for Catholicism, which has for two millennia played a hugely formative and inspirational role in the arts.”

A number of poets and publications and organizations are working to change that situation for the good, and James Matthew Wilson is prominent among them.

Dana Gioia has written that Wilson is a remarkable poet critic who brings phenomenal intellectual preparation to writing about poetry. Wilson was educated at the University of Michigan (B.A.), the University of Massachusetts (M.A.), and the University of Notre Dame (M.F.A., Ph.D.), and he is currently Associate Professor, *Department of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions*, Villanova University; Poet in Residence, The Benedict XVI Institute; Poetry Editor, *Modern Age*; and Director, Colosseum Institute.

I recently had the exciting opportunity to interview James Matthew Wilson by email for the second time. The first time was in connection with his publication of a poem cycle titled, *The River of the Immaculate Conception*¹ by Wiseblood Books. Our more recent interview was in connection with a collection of his poetry that was released on December 1, 2020 by Angelico Press, titled *The Strangeness of the Good*, which includes a series of unique and spontaneous poems called the Quarantine Notebook.

The questions and answers included in this article focus on introducing Wilson’s ideas of what poetry is, why it does it, and why it is so important to Catholics. If you would like to find out more about *The Strangeness of the Good*, new

interviews and reviews are being posted frequently online.² My own review of the book will be in the Easter 2021 issue of *Dappled Things Quarterly of Art, Ideas, and Faith*. In the meantime, you can check out this in-depth interview in a podcast from *The Christian Humanist*³.

RTS: *Dana Gioia listed three degrees of literary Catholics: 1. Writers who are practicing Catholics active in the Church; 2. Cultural Catholics who were raised Catholic, but drifted away and usually have unorthodox beliefs; and 3. Anti-Catholic writers who have left the Church but attack her real and imagined injustices in their writings. You now are in the first degree, although in your youth you stopped practicing. What made you return to faith and what makes you a Catholic writer?*

JMW: The period during which I was not a practicing Catholic was so brief as hardly to be worth mentioning. It was an adolescent revolt rather than a lasting apostasy. But, certainly, the grace of faith came to me in new ways and like a flood—or floods.

First, while still a student, I

wavered in my faith. But one day at Mass, at the moment I received the Eucharist, I received such an overwhelming act of grace, such a flood of it, manifesting to me the reality of the Sacrament that I never again could doubt. It was a confirmation of its reality, such that I understood my own personal feelings had nothing to do with anything. It was knowledge rather than a feeling, and of course knowledge has a kind of stability despite whatever our feelings happen

to be at one moment or another.

The second great wave crashing on me was Dante, who showed me that the world had a beautiful order to it and that to learn the literary tradition was to come to participate knowingly in that order. Poetry is the making of an artificial order that reveals to us the natural, created order of being. Though it took me a long while to understand what that meant, the effects of that revelation as



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far as my understanding of art and faith were immediate and final.

The third great grace came with Saint John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*. It seems an almost bashful document now, but at the time it seemed the first voice ever to announce to me

that the Church preached the truth by way of reason and intellect rather than just by beauty. I realized what I had learned from Dante was somewhat romantic and emotive, whereas the Church alone could instruct the soul with the full range of the intellect, by natural reason and by supernatural faith. Only when I read those words did I realize beauty has the authority and power that it has because it is the splendor of truth. As many of those reading this will already understand, we do not, for instance, advocate the forms of the liturgy merely because they are pretty, because their beauty pleases us. We do so because beauty of form is in itself a radiating out, a revelation of, truth.

I am a Catholic writer because of these three moments of grace, and not just because they helped confirm me, as it were, in the truths given to me in baptism. By this I mean, I acknowledge the sacramental order of the world is real or objective, as it were, rather than ideal or subjective; that beauty and tradition initiate us into a noble order of thought and to the perception of reality. And, finally, that I recognize beauty and truth as one in being, and, further, the intellect as the foundation of our souls that enables us to know the truth by

the lights of reason, faith, and, deep within these things, the aesthetic perception of beauty.

RTS: *New Formalism, which is a movement that seems to have been around since the 1980s, is described as a movement whose proponents write in traditional forms, use fixed meters and often rhyme. Wikipedia says you are one of the New Formalist writers of Christian poetry. We all know not to trust Wikipedia,*

but where do you stand in relation to this movement?

JMW: The New Formalism is best taken as referring to a sizable number of poets

in the 1980s who published poetry in rhyme and meter and who also sought to expand the range of poetry from the constraints of the modernist lyric. The term is best reserved for these poets precisely because, first, it was coined as a slur against them, an accusation of backward literary conservatism at a time when intellectual and political conservatism were ex-

periencing a great revival. This was an inane accusation—as it presumes that “conservative” is itself a slur—but it was also unfair for many other reasons. It is further best reserved

for them, because it suggests the kind of oppositional position these poets were forced to take, even as many of them also wrote free verse.

To me, therefore, it should not be applied, even though I have read with appreciation the work of many of these writers, have learned from them, and become friends or acquaintances with many of them. I write poetry in verse, that is to say in meter and, usually, rhyme, but that is not sufficient to make me or any younger writer a part of that movement or to insinuate myself into its drama and controversies.

RTS: *Why do you believe writing in traditional forms is important? Do you think it especially important for Catholic poetry?*

JMW: Meter is not necessary for writing to be good writing. But it is necessary for it to be verse. And verse is the furthest refinement of the art of rhetoric, that is to say, the art of good writing and speech. There are kinds of refinement that are merely prissy and pretty; a delicate aloofness from reality. But when I use this word in reference to verse, I mean a perfection of order, a noble discipline, a fine attunement to reality that results in sensitivity and precision.

For two hundred years people have despaired of civilization, good order, sound form, and have done so thinking that the authentic or the real could only be found in spontaneous feelings. But feelings ungrounded in reality are cheap, or worse than cheap, they are deadly. It is meanwhile impossible to admire something for being “spontaneous,” as that describes how a thing came about and says nothing about the thing itself.

I admire much that passes for poetry, even though it is not written in verse. And with almost everyone, I call it poetry. Paul Claudel was, I think, one of the great poets, and one of the handful of great modern



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Catholic poets, even though some of his poems are an overwrought, messy, formless heap.

My reasons for thinking poetry ought to be written in verse, that is, in meter, is because meter is intrinsically good. It is pleasant, memorable, disciplined, orderly, and perceptive. I think Catholics in particular ought to embrace it, because we see that it operates in a way analogous to the liturgy and to the sacraments: it makes manifest in a concrete, perceptible, or material way the great orderliness of the *Logos* of Christ as the orderer or logic-giver of reality. Poetry, even when on the most mundane of subjects, speaks to us of the capacity of God to order reality and of the person to perceive it and grasp it.

RTS: *One of the goals of the Catholic is to pray and work not only on his own salvation but also to bring as many souls as possible to heaven with him. Can Catholic poetry be a means to that goal?*

JMW: The intellect and the will require rich nourishment. The life of learning provides it. That life has always been founded in the poetic. The first great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, were effectively commentators on Homer and Hesiod. Poetry comprehends the intellectual life, because it gives us clear imitations of actions, it gives us stories, and it gives us ideas, and it does so in such a way that we sense whatever we grasp, whatever we understand, but opens up onto a still deeper mystery. Catholics know that the intellect reaches fulfillment not in science, that is, in a clear and comprehended understanding, but in a knowledge

that at once understands perfectly and yet sees there will always be an infinite excess to that understanding. Beauty conveys that: it gives us definite form, or truth, but with it, splendor. If our spiritual and intellectual lives are not grounded in poetry than that is a definite sign that we are failing to appreciate the way in which truth abides in mystery and the knowledge of God is not like a formula we can use but a light into which we wish to stare, in awe, forever. This must be why Dostoyevsky said, “Beauty will save the world.” Beauty is the dimension of reality that communicates all this to us. Once again, beauty is telling us something about being, about reality, that truth as we normally conceive it doesn’t quite.

RTS: *Some people who attend an Extraordinary Form Mass for the first time hate it because they prefer the community orientation of Ordinary Form. But many others have reported loving the Extraordinary Form exactly for its formal qualities, and because it is oriented towards God*

rather than towards the worshipping community. Do you think the appeal of poetry written in traditional meter might be related in any way to the appeal of the traditional Latin Mass?

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The Poetry Reading by Vittorio Reggianini

JMW: I do think so. That is exactly what I think. In both cases, we have refinement that is not mere ornamentation, but is the tightening of expression until, like a taut violin string, it may play an exact note. In both cases, beauty is recognized, again, as the splendor of truth, and aesthetic form is one with the form of the real, with what *is*. ✠



Roseanne T. Sullivan is a freelance writer, photographer, graphic designer, and artist. She has published articles and

photos at National Catholic Register, the New Liturgical Movement website, Regina Magazine, Homiletic and Pastoral Review, and other publications. Her blog is at <http://catholicpunditwannabe.blogspot>. James Wilson’s book *The Strangeness of the Good* is available from Angelico Press, see ad page 37.

Notes

1. Sullivan, Roseanne T. “On the River of the Immaculate Conception: An Interview with James Matthew Wilson.” *Dappled Things*, Mary Queen of Angels 2019 issue; online posting date unspecified. Retrieved 7 December 2020 from <<https://tinyurl.com/RiverInterview>>.
2. Wilson, James Matthew. “News and Events.” James Matthew Wilson. Retrieved 7 December 2020 from <<https://www.jamesmatthewwilson.com/news-and-events/>>.
3. Farmer, Michael. “Christian Humanist Profiles 208: The Strangeness of the Good.” *The Christian Humanist*, 30 November 2020. Retrieved 7 December 2020 from <<https://tinyurl.com/StrangenessOfTheGoodPodcast>>.