

This poem begins with the famous story of St. Augustine and the little boy (angel?) on the beach, trying to scoop all the water out of the ocean with a shell. Again, the human friend and divine friendship are linked. The spirit, through friendships good and bad and often complicated, searches for the infinite Sea.

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Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds

by James Matthew Wilson (Word on Fire, 2024)

Readers of James Matthew Wilson's earlier books of poetry and criticism will find much here to celebrate. His mastery of poetic forms, especially sonnets and blank verse, has long characterized his impressive corpus. Wilson's artistry has always been in service to larger themes of ontology and purpose; he remains an unabashed enthusiast for poetry as a vocation in the fullest Catholic sense of that word. In contrast to post-modernism's tendency to view formal poetics as undue constraints on artistic expression, Wilson's commitment to poetic tradition exhibits a necessarily binocular perspective: form refers both to poetic shape or style and to what he calls the "inner truth" of things. To speak of poetry as a vocation, then, is to be willing—and able—to speak of permanent themes, of truths that transcend the vagaries of surface novelty or artistic preening. Thus,

The ordered man appears as his work seems
Fixed with a permanence to outlast death.
Cathedral glass has color and firm border,
As do such men conformed by love to order.
(“For Russell Kirk”)

But *nota bene*: Wilson's commitment is not some blindered effort at aesthetic nostalgia. As he poses the question to himself in a recent interview: “How do you create an art that's both rigorously traditional but also remorselessly contemporary?” One way to understand the excellence of this collection is to appreciate its cumulative power in answering Wilson's own question. In poem after poem, Wilson marries form and substance in ways that are mutually enriching, spelling out the varied

implications of our hunger for transcendence. Despite the claims of a regnant scientism, all our efforts at mastery must confront the persistence of truths that remains beyond them. "Thus does the minute judge the hour, / Dismissing that primordial truth / That only speaks with figural power" ("Sunlight").

Those familiar with Wilson's earlier *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking* will recognize both the challenge and promise of his traditionalist commitments. In that critique of the relativism at work in much of current poetry, he challenged readers to confront the metaphysical question post-modernism eschews as either meaningless or unanswerable; viz., what are the organic connections between poetic style and ontic truth? In this book, by succeeding, poem after poem, in revealing such connections, Wilson offers a compelling counter to the conceits (in both senses) of a subjectivism that dismisses such larger matters as encroachments on artistic autonomy. He expresses his judgment in this regard in the concluding lines to "A Withered Tree":

But, say we had just swept away
All that was found by those before,
Just to allow a freer play
To our desires, and nothing more.

Yes, say we had. Indeed, we did,
And stand in arid poverty,
Our anguished gestures vain amid
A furrowed field with withered tree.

Wilson ranges widely across often seemingly ordinary occasions with a deep attention to the world's complexity. His ruminations in "The Garden" are hardly the rhapsodic simplicities of a cheery romanticism: thus, "every order— . . . / . . . / Is rooted in a broader spread profusion / Than any easy measure we may make." The poem that provides the collection its title, "Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds," finds Aquinas considering his avian fellows in darkly allegorical terms as "myriad things that whistle arcane truth / To please old minds and to instruct raw youth," yet ends with Thomas "on his broken knees to pray / For such a world that had so much to say." The world, for all its darkness, remains instructive for both Aquinas and Wilson because allegory and metaphor rely upon an order of transcendence by which they achieve their purposes. And all such revelations, however veiled, retain at least hints of God's initial purposes in creation, despite (or even because of) their fallenness.

Wilson is equally adept in addressing the complexity of our own moral strivings. In "Ambition," he reviews various instances of that trait and concludes, a bit ruefully, that only time will bring a clarity to our

assessments of its mixed aspects: “But there’s no prior assurance; just the late / Judgment, once we’re past change and stooped to read / Our life’s spread book.” At many turns, Wilson muses on our enduring incapacities to accomplish our own redemption. Such insufficiencies include, among others, the sins of institutional religion (“From *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*”), the darkness of warfare (“Waking in Dresden”), the ambiguities of endless busyness (“Sloth,” “For Martha”), and the chasm between our observations and our actual knowledge of others (“Elegy for a Tow Truck Driver”).

Through it all, Wilson retains a chastened faith. This is a fine collection, excellent in its marriage of form and substance. It is impossible, in brief compass, to do justice to Wilson’s powers or the importance of his commitments. Let me end, then, simply by encouraging readers with the same directive Augustine once heard in a different context: *tolle et lege*. You will be richly rewarded.

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In Ghostlight by Ryan Wilson (Louisiana State University Press, 2024)

In the summer of 2023, I listened to Ryan Wilson give a reading of his work, a John Deere cap stuck into the back pocket of his cargo pants, his boot-shod foot tapping out each stressed syllable. Some of the poems were translations from Latin, Greek, French and German, and he quoted from each language with ease.

The speaker of Wilson’s “One of Many Centurions” wonders at Christ’s “Redneck paradoxes.” The description is apt for Wilson as well. Rooted in tradition and in place, *In Ghostlight* shows Wilson to be, proudly and paradoxically, a hillbilly classicist.

Both of those terms have strong roots, in place especially as a hillbilly (which Wilson has used to describe himself), and in history both as a classicist and as the hillbilly son of hillbilly fathers and mothers. There is a lineage of the different meanings of culture, of land and art. Wilson is well-aware of these different usages and their connection to each other, and he takes full advantage of this. The masterful use of forms, for example, some