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You are here: [Home](#) › [Morality & Theology](#) › “Being’s self-gift to being:” James Matthew Wilson and the Encounter with Beauty

“Being’s self-gift to being:” James Matthew Wilson and the Encounter with Beauty

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I walked in just a few minutes late to a lecture in a large classroom at Villanova University on the first full day of Spring. I had come to listen to a most interesting author I’ve come to know. James Matthew Wilson was doing something which seems to come effortlessly to him: educating others – especially young people – about things that really matter.

In his rat-a-tat speaking style, Wilson delivered a lecture called “Craftsmanship and Contemplation” for Villanova’s annual Faith and Reason Lecture, sponsored by the impressive Department of Humanities. It was a lecture, yes, but it was also a home-spun testimony, a kind of *apologia* of his development as a writer. Over the course of the lecture, he wrestled with his journey of embracing

contemplation and art over more “practical” pursuits like political activism. (One wonders why there were not more students at such an impressive lecture. Perhaps they’ve mastered the art of living well already and have moved on to higher pursuits like investment banking.)

The lecture wound its way into a kind of historical meditation on the tension between action and contemplation. Wilson walked us, his students (for I was now one at this moment) through the thought of such diverse thinkers as Pope St. John Paul II, Dorothy Sayers, Jacques Maritain, and James Joyce. In the end, he described the experiences which provided the grist for his poem “Dark Places.” He said that poetry was a technique of contemplation and comprehension because “the spiritual always exceeds our words.” “We long for the real,” he says, “but it never quite submits to what we say about it.”

After speaking with Professor Wilson after the lecture, I was able to talk to a few of the students who had attended the event. It turns out most of them are current or former students, many of them heavily involved in the Humanities Program at Villanova. I was struck by the sheer impressiveness of these students. Though they probably represented about 1% of the undergraduate population at Villanova, they were 100% on fire with the desire to live well (i.e. the goal of a liberal arts education). Many were deeply committed Christians. They had something else in common: they clearly admired the man who spoke about poetry, beauty, and eternal truth that evening. That evening encapsulates the perennial relevance of life’s most important questions. This is exactly the core of Professor Wilson’s latest book, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Available May 1st from CUA Press).

I recently sat down with him in his office at Villanova to talk about the book, among other things.

Eric J. Banecker: Why did you consider it important to write this book now?

James Matthew Wilson: One of the arguments of the book is that the whole of Western civilization is shaped by and is *one with* the Christian Platonist tradition. So if you ask, “what is Western civilization?” the answer is: it is a Christian Platonist civilization. I don’t mean this in opposition to Christian Aristotelianism or something like that, but in the broadest possible sense. Athens and Jerusalem are the founding cities, and the thought associated with those cities has comprehensively informed our imagination through history and into the present.

There are six key insights that I identify in the book with the Christian Platonist tradition. I'll mention three now. First, what makes the human person a human person is that he is an intellectual animal. The capacity to know being and, in consequence, to enter into intellectual relationship with the source of all being is the first important insight of our civilization. Without that insight, our history would have been very different. Of course, there are elements within Western civilization which precisely tried to lose it or at least render it unrecognizable. One classic instance would be Karl Marx's redefining human nature as "productive" rather than intellectual. But even there, we see traces of the Christian Platonist influence. Marx tells us that man's nature is production precisely because man is the only being that not only reproduces but produces objects of a kind of universal variety.

This is in modified form an expression of that first Christian Platonist insight. The Christian Platonist says man is ordered to know being, to know everything that is insofar as it is real. Marx just reconfigures it to make it conform to his vision of history. It's a peculiar kind of heresy within that tradition.

The next insight I'll mention is that all of reality as ordered by and to the divine beauty. God is beauty itself. All of creation, insofar as it has form, has been shaped by that divine beauty and, insofar as it has form and reality, is expressive of that beauty. Plato in the *Phaedrus* suggests that the human encounter with the beautiful in creation is the first moment of summons back to our destiny, to be in the presence of God as the divine beauty.

This leads to one culminating insight of the Platonist tradition: if the human being is an intellectual animal, and if reality as a whole is ordered by and to beauty, then the total order of reality leads the human person to the contemplation of God. One of the reasons we can talk about God in terms of beauty perhaps even more than we can in terms of truth and goodness is that this Platonist tradition has always understood beauty as the formal fulfillment of truth and goodness. You could put it reductively: some people define beauty as seeing the truth and knowing that it is good. But that doesn't strike me as quite adequate. Beauty seems to be prior in our experience to the experience of things as true or good and also posterior to it. Beauty is like a rose that enfolds truth and goodness within itself, because it is the flashing forth of being and form.

Why should we think that the destiny of all human life is the contemplation of God as the divine beauty? All Christians know – and all Christian Platonists know, even if they're not Christian – that the human destiny cannot be some merely practical activity. Everything that we do that is useful – that is some practice – is always ordered to some intrinsic good. We want useful goods for the sake of something that's really good in itself. It's very appropriate for us, therefore, to think of God as the Good. But what that doesn't fully express is this: the possession of God as Good is not really a

possession; we don't "have" God the way we have a house or have a fortune. What we are seeking when we seek to attain God as Good is to enter into his presence and to stare into his face in everlasting contemplation. And the capacity to contemplate has always been associated with the beautiful. If you turn to Aristotle's *Ethics*, you read that there are three kinds of goods: pleasurable goods, useful goods, and intrinsic goods. A pleasurable good is a good that gives you pleasure. There's no point in asking what it's good for, because you've already answered the question: it makes you feel good. On the contrary, it is very productive to ask what a useful good is for because it is only good insofar as it exists for some further use.

But what makes something intrinsically good – in the sense that it's not reducible to mere sensation or pleasure? Aristotle says quite explicitly that something good in itself is always done for the sake of beauty. So beauty transcends what is good and true not because it leaves them behind, but because it is what we see when we see truth and goodness realized in being.

EJB: People who study St. Thomas are sometimes ambivalent about beauty. They don't really know what to do with it. Goodness and truth – and thus, intellect and will – should be enough, no?

JMW: A friend of mine recently pointed out that the classical language of beauty often gets re-expressed by Aquinas in terms of goodness. This suggests that he is not only finding a new mode of expression but is actually reconceiving the contents of being. What does everything that has being have proper to itself? Thomists say that things are true and they're good, but there is no need to talk about beauty because beauty is either a kind of goodness or outside of the transcendental properties altogether.

This doesn't strike me as plausible for a number of reasons.

While we might be tempted to deny beauty's transcendental status, we have to affirm it, not just from the perspective of the Church's tradition but Aquinas's as well.

From the late 17th century, the encounter with the beautiful has been subjectivized – so that if beauty is part of anything, it is usually part of the affections, the moral sensibility. But this is not an adequate account of beauty. Beauty is not a "taste" as the enlightenment thinkers presumed. Nor is beauty primarily affective; nor therefore can it be reduced to sentiment. Rather, as Aquinas says, beauty is intrinsic to the form of a being, and form makes a being what it is. So beauty lies somewhere near that dimension of being where things get defined or actualized as what they are. Beauty is existential in this sense.

There is a temptation for those of us who love Aquinas to say that the Augustinian tradition sees the human being in terms of the Trinitarian memory, understanding, and will, while it might be better to say that a human person mirrors the *divine personhood* is just having intellect and will. But this is not quite an accurate depiction of Aquinas because Aquinas was no less a Trinitarian thinker than Augustine was. That would be frightening and improbable! In reality, Aquinas is more Augustinian than Augustine was because he's benefitting from almost a millennium of the mulling of Augustine's ideas.

And so, when we think about personhood, we get a Trinitarian image of being, intellect, and will. For Augustine, memory is already deeply identified with being. Your faculty of memory is precisely that spiritual attribute that enables you to know that your being has being, that I am the same person today that I was yesterday. This is already very close to what Aquinas is talking about when he talks about being.

So here we have a third dimension of the person. Reason is ordered to truth; will is ordered to goodness. But what does it mean to have being, what does it mean to have a memory? For the Greeks, the capacity to manifest beauty was associated with the Muses, and the Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne – the daughters of memory! Memory and being seem to be caught up with each other, and they are clearly caught up with beauty. Memory is what allows you to hear music as a form, since without memory you would only hear individual notes. Memory is the capacity to perceive the form of things – that's Augustine talking. Aquinas – it is true – doesn't set out memory as a faculty; rather, he lays it out in terms of our being and substance. And I think he's right to do that, and in doing that, he actually gives beauty an even more obviously prominent place in reality. What he's saying is that the being of things is itself revelatory of a thing's own internal proportions and qualities. It is also revelatory of its relationship to everything beyond itself. And this is exactly what beauty is. Beauty is the capacity of a form to disclose being as existing in itself and in relationship to everything else. To put it as pithily as I can: beauty is the capacity of the real to give itself to the real. Beauty is being's self-gift to other being.

And this is why – in fact – Aquinas is so important for thinking about beauty. Aquinas is the first thinker that I am aware of to systematically insist upon a crucial dimension of what makes beauty what it is.

The capacity of truth to shine forth is discloses the proportion of the human mind to reality and the human mind to the divine mind. So when we encounter some real thing and see it as beautiful, we see both its own internal proportions as well as its proportionate expression of the divine wisdom. It's only because things are beautiful that Aquinas can affirm that every instance of knowledge is an

implicit knowledge of God. (18:33) Finally, Aquinas speaks most expressly of beauty when referring to the Son as Second Person of the Trinity, for there we see the expressive proportion of God to Himself and, in history and through the Incarnation, to man.

EJB: I want to read an excerpt from one of your poems. This is from your reflection on the first Station of the Cross, "Jesus is Condemned to Die:"

Through the church window I heard shrieks

Of ambulances whose techniques

Efficiently undo our wounds;

The certain hum of homeward motors,

A candidate's rank appeal to voters,

In these its stare and voice I found.

Is poetry your attempt to get beyond party politics? For Saul Alinsky, or anyone who thinks we can solve our problems through political activism – is poetry and beauty your response to that?

JMW: Let's think of poetry for a second as a liberal art. A liberal art is any kind of activity intended to put the human being as an intellectual animal into proper relationship with reality as a whole, including God as the font and destiny of all reality. And so, this is the one thing that every understanding of the arts from the ancient world to today has in common. We often reduce the arts to their particular historical manifestations. But if you do that, you'll wind up saying something untrue; namely, that it is only in the modern age that we think of the "fine arts" as this separate "thing" that's just for its own sake. In fact, what is distinctive about the fate of the arts in the *modern* world is that it is one of the few places which almost all modern people are in agreement that we can enter into contemplation. For Kant, there is no contemplative dimension to the philosopher or to the moral life. The only place Kant reserves for contemplation is the beauty of nature and the beauty of the fine arts. Thus, here we see a total shriveling of what is supposed to be the highest and central activity of every human life to a very rarified and marginal, "back alley" little activity which one occasionally undertakes.

We need to conceive of poetry and all the fine arts as standing as a particular mode of the liberal arts. The fine arts are those acts of making that have a particular contemplative dimension to them. They are meant to open us to the fullness of reality. So it is not as if poetry is some last-ditch effort to resist politicization. It is the case that the arts in our age will be occasional admonishment to an age so obsessed with various kinds of activity, whether it is activity of usefulness, of business, or the activity of politics. All of those things are just useful goods. There are intrinsic goods to be discovered in the world, and there is the Good Itself which is reflected through those things. The fine arts remind us of this, but we have to understand their role as one among the liberal arts and the liberal arts as various expressions of the fundamentally contemplative character of all created reality.

In the case of the poem you mention, that is part of the Stations of the Cross sequence of poems. This was an attempt to unite as fully as I could the poetry as a liberal art (where the poem itself becomes an object for contemplation) with poetry as a devotional art, where the poem points beyond itself to the Divine. In both cases, we are transcending politics, but that was an attempt to transcend politics in a distinctive kind of way which I'm not always trying to do in poetry.

EJB: Let's talk about an issue of current affairs. Obviously, universities by and large are still the places where the liberal arts are engaged in a serious way. We have the orchestra hall, the cathedral, the art museum, but this direct engagement generally takes place in a university setting. With that in mind, how do we evaluate the backlash against free inquiry which is happening in certain places? Is that because we've turned our universities into degree factories?

JMW: We've turned them into a number of things that are not universities, and that's one of them. I talk about this in Chapter 16 of the book ("the Consequences of Our Forgetting"). I like the various places you mention. All of those places should have one thing in common: they're all at the very least privileged, possibly all sacred, places. And they are sacred insofar as in each of them, the human person is called to enter into contemplation for itself. We can talk about free inquiry, but that sounds like you are just free to investigate things as much as you want. That's not free enough! Genuinely free inquiry is inquiry in which you are so dedicated to basking in the presence of truth that you have nowhere else to go. "Free" in the sense of being on holiday, in the sense of "above all use."

Our universities may have become degree factories, that is, places where students pay money for some kind of certification in order to get a job. But I don't think they became so visibly that until after they had ceased to be what they had historically been in the first place, which is places arranged for the contemplation of truth. Long before students were concerned about getting certified so they could get a lucrative job, professors had already denied the possibility of the

contemplative life. If I were an undergraduate student, and I came into the classroom of most contemporary professors, I more likely than not would be greeted by a kind of instruction that tells me this: human life is, in fact, significantly less than you previously made it out to be. In fact, we're just power-hungry animals driven by desire, and the university exists simply to enable your desires.

I see no difference between the business school and the Marxist professor. Insofar as universities become business schools, they are being very forthright and honest: "Everybody's out to get something. We're out to help you get yours." The Marxist says, "isn't it awful that everybody's out to get something?" One out of every ten students says "yes, that is awful," and vows to stop people from getting things. The other nine say, "then I'd better go get mine" – and they go major in business. [Laughter] There seems to be nothing outside of the pursuit of power for either the accountancy professor or the historian of capitalism's depredations. The difference between these types, however, is that there are plenty of good accounting professors who know that the world needs accountants no matter how virtuous the people are, but that that is not all the world needs. It also needs God.

EJB: Your writing – both your poetry and your more analytical writing – has a certain quality of reverence to it. I'm sure you've noticed that at some point. And it's not just because the subjects you pick often have to do with ecclesiastical things. I think there is something about the world that you describe in a reverent way. Do you see that in your own writing?

JMW: If the world is ordered by and to beauty, and beauty is the capacity of being to give itself – to be known – then the only appropriate response to beauty is to receive with reverence and gratitude the gift of reality itself. I've written quite a lot of satire over the years, and I hope that [sense of reverence] comes through even there. The Irish writer Thomas McGreevy once complained about the early 20th century satirical mode. He thought it was thoroughly lackluster compared to satirical works of the past. The difference, said McGreevy, is that satire in the 18th century satirized deviations from a perceived order of goodness. Modern satire, on the other hand, is simply trying to mow things down. There is no recognition of any good outside of it. It's just unrighteous indignation in the face of atrocity (or of idiocy). I hope that even at the bitterest of the things I have written, people can see that the reason I condemn one thing is because I have something better to love.

EJB: In *the Confessions*, Augustine has his epiphany moment and calls God "beauty" ("Late have I loved you, O beauty ever ancient, ever new..."). The moment he can finally grasp the concept of immaterial being: this is the moment of his conversion. How does a university professor go about helping his students come to that kind of realization?

JMW: I take up that challenge with students who really have to be brought to that realization when I teach our Spring freshman seminar. The first thing I teach is *King Lear* followed by Hobbes' *Leviathan*. I teach them Shakespeare's *Lear* because there are three interpretations of that play which Shakespeare puts in competition with each other in the text. There's the Classical pagan interpretation. There's the interpretation, which lies at the very margins but which wins the day in the end, the Christian vision. But the most obvious view – which gets the most stage time to be sure – is an Epicurean one. It says that reality is nothing but atoms and motion, and human beings therefore are nothing but meat with wills.

I teach the students *Lear* introducing all three readings, but giving clear preference in the classroom to the Epicurean one. And I say, if this is the correct reading of the play, then we need to know what it means to live in such a world. And then I teach them Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Hobbes – as far as I can tell – outlines with a rational clarity that has yet to be bettered what it would mean to exist in a world that is only matter and motion. Usually by the time the students have encountered Hobbes' account, they no longer want to live in a world like that, even though they probably arrived as freshmen accepting – knowingly or otherwise – all of Hobbes' premises.

Hobbes' world is incredibly convenient, but it is also a totally meaningless and awful place as well. And that seems to be the world that most modern people occupy: a very convenient, totally meaningless world. So, if I can show them the consequences – the “laws” which undergird the experiences they take for granted – then they are already in a position to ask “what more could there be?” And at that point, I start to introduce genuine great answers to that question: Pascal, E.F. Schumacher, T.S. Eliot.

EJB: Your concept of the meaningless world reminds me of Ratzinger's almost prophetic vision of the future of the West (“But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, and answer for which they have always been searching in secret.”) How far away are we from that?

JMW: Genuine Christianity looks absurd and cruel to most contemporary people. If a contemporary person encounters someone engaged in devotion, he's probably not going to ask, “Oh, why are you doing that?” He's more likely going to ask, “Why are you doing *that*?” This is asking in a manner which is totally dead to wonder. That's already here! It's been with us a long time. Every time you hear someone say something like “everything in moderation!” – misquoting Aristotle – you're already in a world dead to wonder and incapable of recognizing the Gospel when it sees it.

How much Gospel should you infuse into your “life balance?” Long before it became a matter of public policy polling to make it an advantage for the Democratic party to persecute Christians because it actually scored points with their base, religion was being reduced to the therapeutic, and Christian practice was being assimilated for a therapeutic mindset.

From the moment that life becomes about *your well-being*, and you are no longer viewing your happiness as being conditioned by an end that transcends you, every distinctively Christian activity can only look grotesque. T.S. Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral* is illustrative in this respect, in fact. That play was written in 1935, long before our culture became openly hostile to Christian life. So we have been a creative minority for quite some time. But we haven’t successfully reconstituted ourselves to the point where the surrounding culture sees the Church as an attractive alternative to its own abyss.

EJB: It seems to me that this is the point of the book. Newsflash: human beings have a soul. Is the book an attempt to encourage people to keep striving for that? Or is it to remind people that this is the reality?

JMW: I think it’s three things. One is to demonstrate that we have souls, and that any alternative to our being spiritual beings ordered to the contemplation of truth is demonstrably false. There’s no argument in favor of materialism. All you can say is that if materialism is true, we would know nothing of it, because our minds would be mere material and so incapable of “knowing” anything. It takes a non-material principle to know reality as such. Two, it is to provide an instructive outline of the fundamental contents of what that reality must be. What does it mean to talk about truth, goodness, and beauty? Three, it has elements of being a sort of primer into the intellectual life. It is a kind of summons or how-to guide.

I hope it accomplishes all three of those things, because all good philosophy and all good theology does all of those things. The best works of philosophy are usually works of philosophy about the activity of philosophy. The same is true of theology. The reason for that is related to the fact that every poem is also about the act of making a poem. What we’re doing in artistic activity – and the liberal arts – is engaging in activities that are good for their own sake. And insofar as we do this, we are reminded of the transcendent which is good for its own sake: the Divine. Every intrinsic good is in its nature a reflection of the Divine nature. So, contrary to Kant’s opinion, which I mentioned earlier, *every activity* has a contemplative dimension, and it is that dimension of it which is the most permanent part of it, the part which is ordered to God.

EJB: There's this small growing trend toward classical education even at the elementary level. There has also been a lot of discussion in the Church on the role of families, as well as the importance of friendship. I'm going to ask you to comment on your own work again: where does this latest book fit into these attempts at recovering something of the Western tradition.

JMW: I hope the book will be a resource for every classical school, and for anyone who is attempting to rehabilitate the liberal arts in our day. In fact, parts of it were first delivered to classical school audiences. If I hadn't been in some classical schools, I wouldn't have thought to write some of the things I did write.

The reason we talk about all of those things in our day and age is by and large we've forgotten what they are. Plenty of people complain about the modern nuclear family as having lost this extended sense of kinship, and I agree with all of that. I certainly prefer a family that's a clan than a small unit. However, that's not the transformation that caused us to forget what the family is.

What all three of those have in common is that we've forgotten what it means to be genuinely part of community. We tend to define community today in terms of one or two things you have in common with someone else, such that it is possible to be part of the "stamp collecting community."

EJB: "The Apple community."

JMW: That's right, "the Apple community" – that's exactly right. Josef Pieper understood this better than anybody else, and I understand it only insofar as Josef Pieper explained it to me in *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*. The foundation of culture is *cult*. What is *cult*? It is the ordering of the temporal world – the about-to-be-inculturated world – to the divine. When you share a culture with someone, that's community, because you both share the same orientation toward the divine. If you can't imagine what it means to live a life contemplating the divine truth, then you probably can't imagine what it's like to live in community, either.

James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in the Western Tradition*, published May 1st by CUA Press. Available [here](#).

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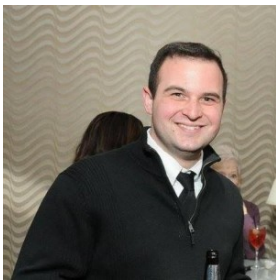
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About Eric Banecker

Eric Banecker is in his fifth year as a seminarian studying for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. The editor of *Seminarian Casual*, Eric's work has also appeared in *First Things Online*, *Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly*, and the *Daily Pennsylvanian*. A native of Philadelphia, Eric attended Roman Catholic High School and the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a B.A. in English and Classical Studies in May 2011. When not editing this blog, Eric enjoys reading the Classics, trying interesting micro-brews, and attempting to golf.

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