

“To dwell poetically as a way of life”: James Matthew Wilson and the Goals of the MFA Program at the University of St. Thomas, Houston

by Lesley Clinton

[The Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, is now in its second year. This unique degree program immerses students in the Catholic literary tradition and offers an advanced apprenticeship in poetry and fiction. Founding Director James Matthew Wilson and co-founder Joshua Hren undertook the monumental endeavor of launching this program to nourish the contemporary revival of the sacramental literary arts. Students in the program often remark on the vision and joy with which Wilson and Hren pursue this great calling. In the summer of 2022, I conducted an email interview with Wilson to reflect on the UST MFA program’s first year and continued flourishing. —Lesley Clinton]

LC: You often speak of the Catholic writer’s responsibility to reveal the vertical dimension of human experience. I believe I have also heard you speak of literature’s power to examine what it means for us to live as ensouled bodies. Helping writers fulfill this duty is a primary goal of the MFA program as you and Joshua Hren designed it. Now that the program is in its second year, do you see your original goals being made manifest? Are new goals developing as the program grows?

JMW: I’m going to start with what is bound to seem a pedantic note. According to Saint Thomas, our bodies are not ensouled, but rather the soul is the form of the body. That means our souls are embodied, rather than the opposite. The soul is not a little pilot in the body; everywhere the body is, the soul is too, giving it shape, giving it form. Without the soul, things fall apart.

I start with this little comment because I think it goes a long way in explaining the importance of the arts. They are not just the imaginative decoration that encases the abstract nugget of information that we may discover within this or that work. Rather, art reminds us that everything is an irreducible whole. It incarnates. Yes, I can think of myself in terms of body and soul, but I am their union, and only their union is my existence. In works of art, it is the same. Form and content can be thought, but form and content

constitute an irreducible existential whole. To “dwell poetically” in the world is to insist on this actual fullness and not to pretend to get behind it. To try to do so always involves an impoverishment of one kind or another. The arts are a vital reminder to see things in their incarnate fullness and to dwell poetically as a way of life, not just when reading Longfellow. Our program was founded to apprentice writers but also to help human beings dwell poetically.

It has been such a delight to see our program filled to the brim with writers of every age and walk of life who want that existential fullness of presence, who want to make it as artisans, to reverence it as readers and critics, and who want to see the literary arts live up to the tradition and potential that they always retain, but which, sadly, in our day are seldom realized.

In brief, the program is already achieving what Joshua and I had hoped it would. Our students are already writing good work that commands the attention of the serious reader. We believe that our curriculum, mission, and spirit make this program singular in the world; we further believe (and here you might say I have thought up a new goal) that because we are so different in *kind* from other arts programs that we are also on the cusp of becoming the best of all MFA programs. The scope of our program allows us to fulfill the purpose of the MFA in a way other programs simply do not. We are small; we are modest in many ways, I know, but we have found a way to apprentice artists to the craft, tradition, and theory of literature that will bear fruit in a way most programs can only wish to achieve—or, to their discredit, would not care to achieve.

LC: Tell us about the most rewarding moments of the program’s first year.

JMW: I’ll give you three, but I could go on.

The first occurred before courses had even begun. As I saw who was applying to our program, it became clear to me that many of our applicants were already accomplished writers and editors with enviable credits to their name. They were seeking us out, not because they thought they needed a degree, but because they recognized that our program represents something much greater than ourselves. Our program represents an effort to build communion and conviviality, a republic of letters, in the service of renewing beauty in our age and restoring literature to its classical purpose of sound craft and profound insight. They wanted to be part of something, if not a movement, then at least a revival of something.

One of the first admonitions I ever received from a longstanding literary mentor was, “You should not be working alone.” How many aspiring writers work in isolation despite themselves; how often they’ve never even met someone who can understand much less share in the agony of creation. From the very beginning, our students apprenticed themselves to one another and began forging close friendships. By the time many of us all convened in Houston, for our first annual ten-day residency, it was like a family reunion. The thought occurred to me that this was a singular example of what Aristotle meant by friendship. So many of the participants in our program have defined themselves by their love of literature and of God and their friendships reflect this shared love. You can see it. They are building each other up, making one another better writers and shaping each other’s minds as they pursue what is good.

Reviewing applications can be a bit daunting. We only consider the applicant’s dossier of original work and the statement of purpose. We want talented artists and specifically ones who are oriented to the sacramental dimension of reality and the vertical orientation of the soul. Sometimes you take a chance on someone when the purpose seems there but the work still inchoate. In very short order, our students were mastering literary form, including verse form in the case of the poets, and were turning so-so drafts into finished works of art. The number of students in our program who began publishing their work only this last year has been astonishing to watch. I’m not talking about those who came in as seasoned writers, but those who became seasoned by submitting themselves to the spirit and the discipline of the program.

LC: How is a program founded in the Catholic intellectual and literary tradition not just for Catholics?

JMW: I could answer this in a number of ways, but here’s the easiest. To be Catholic is not to be part of a self-enclosed sect with its private account of reality and its private tastes and concerns that follow from it. It is rather to be committed by faith and creed to the fullness of reality. It is easy for a merely secular reason to confine its attentions to the immanent. But Catholics are obliged in faith to address the whole scope of reason, the whole horizon of being up to and including Being Itself. It’s a beautiful paradox that we are commanded by faith to use the fullness of reason to grasp the fullness of being—or we shall be called “anathema.” A non-Catholic or an expressly secular program limits its attentions, lowers its horizon. Rather than riding a hobby horse or nursing special

interests outside the normal scope of human life, the Church requires us to be responsive according to the whole. Therefore, anyone who seeks to see the world, to experience what the arts can disclose to us, from the minute and quotidian to the sublime and the transcendent, will find a home in our program. We might criticize other MFA programs not for failing to be Catholic, but for failing to take the scope of the fine arts seriously enough.

But let me add to that. Catholicism is an account of and an assent to the real, specifically the real as known by reason and revealed by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Many people down the centuries have appreciated the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic breadth and depth of the Church and have learned from it, even if, as it were, they enrich themselves on the account without following through on the assent. My students are, at present, reading Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names*, one of the crowning poetic and theological achievements of the Catholic tradition. It is a work that drinks deep of and gives fresh expression to classical thought as it synthesizes it with Christian revelation. It is a work that shows nothing good can be alien to the Catholic spirit. But also, when I consider that John Calvin, though bothered by that work, nonetheless admired and praised it, I recognize that those outside the Church can be richly nourished by our account of things. For the non-Catholic writer and the Catholic writer alike, the kind of account we give, the kind of formation we are giving our students is, I think, the best one possible.

There are, of course, people for whom our program would be unsuitable. There are writers who do not think artistic form is a way of knowing the truth; that beauty is a mere ideology; that the horizon of being stops somewhere just north of the molecule or the grain of dust. But those people don't belong in the literary life in any case. They should be out pursuing an MBA and getting rich while there's still time, just like the Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's story.

LC: How does the program make room for writers of various genres and styles? Who is most likely to find this program to be a good fit?

JMW: At present, our program is small. We have a large number of visiting faculty and lecturers, some twenty of whom have joined our classes for an evening during our seminars or come to Houston to spend time with our students, but our full-time faculty at the moment consists of myself and Joshua Hren: one poet, one prose fiction writer. We also emphasize the literary essay such that all our students will have two manuscripts by the time they complete the degree: a book-length manuscript of original creative work and a

second one of critical and literary essays. So, anyone who works in those genres will find a home with us.

But there's another big question. We want to offer strong guidance for those who write what is now called literary fiction and also those who write in the genres: mystery, science-fiction, suspense, and fantasy. We have built attention to those genres into the curriculum. One of my mentors was the great Notre Dame philosopher and novelist Ralph McInerney. Ralph is remembered best for his Fr. Dowling mysteries, and he wrote them with a keen sense of the form and a sharp wit. I read those novels more often than I read his essays in Thomist thought, formative as those have been for me. We want to encourage the next generation of such writers. Happily, one of our students has already published a mystery, so it kind of feels as though we've gotten off to a good start. We want to support those many writers inspired by Lewis and Tolkien and Chesterton, also, even as Joshua's and my primary inspirations probably lay elsewhere. That's hard for me to say, given how much those writers mean to me, but I think it is about right. With the founding of Chrism Press last year, whose authors we admire, we want to see both a renewal of the high literary and popular genre achievements of Catholic writing, the divisions between which are less real than I have made them sound.

LC: One aspect of the program that I have found to be enriching is the strong community you and Joshua Hren have intentionally built through the optional in-person residency, the informal virtual gatherings, and the graciousness with which you interact with us students. Because the program is almost entirely online, fostering collegiality is no small feat. Why have you prioritized the formation of relationships, and what fruits have you seen from cultivating a robust and joyful community?

JMW: I'm glad to hear this. As I said before, this really has been one of the joys of the program as a whole. I would reemphasize what I said before: Aristotelian friendship. Modern persons in general feel a great dearth of friendship; the theologian and public policy advocate Philip Blond once said to me that loneliness is the chief political problem of our age. We all know what Augustine says about love. Our selves, our communities, our culture and way of life, are defined by what we love. True friendship is ordered by what we love, as well, and merely loving one another's company is not enough. How much better for the love of being around one another to flow naturally out of our shared love of art, craft, the life of the spirit, and Christ himself.

To see this fulfilled and in the flesh in Houston really felt like a miracle. The first time I walked into our evening reception before dinner and found everybody immersed in conversation and laughter, I thought, this is what I was dreaming of. And here it is. Right here. It's not just fun. It's communion.

LC: As a student, I found the summer residency to be deeply enriching. This feature of the program gave us ten days to interact with world-class authors, attend illuminative workshops and seminars and gather for conviviality. What benefits have you witnessed from the residency?

JMW: The summer residency allows us to accomplish things that many traditional residential graduate programs do not. Although only ten days long, it is a drenching immersion in the literary life, from morning until night. One of the things I learned early is that both the artistic and the intellectual life really are *ways of life*. They constitute not things one does, whether as a vocation or avocation, but rather ways of being in the world and pursuing the good.

During the residency, we really got to live with one another, to deepen our minds in discussion and lecture and also to improve as writers, all in good company and friendship. On the poetry side, I was especially pleased by the unique opportunity the residency allowed: each poet got one dedicated day to that poet's work. For others to read a good batch of new poems and to shape a richer critique of the work as a whole rather than just the individual poem bore fruit. On the fiction side, we had the great Canadian novelist Natalie Morrill with us as our first annual writer-in-residence. I think the complementary perspective she was able to bring to the work of our fiction writers and also her keynote reading will be one of the lasting and best memories for many of our students.

LC: You once said that the writers in this program are going to do a great deal for humane letters. How do you see this taking place? What gives you hope?

JMW: Day to day, each writer just has to worry about being a good writer, and that means, really, just making a good work. It is generally not desirable to have grand and abstract schemes clouding one's vision when the work is right at hand and in need of concentration. But, yes, we are helping students become better craftsmen, but we are also trying to initiate them more deeply into a vast and long intellectual and literary tradition.

We're helping them become a distinctive kind of writer, but also a distinctive kind of intellectual and distinctive kind of person—all formed by the Catholic tradition. The first test for our program is naturally whether there is any new, good work coming into being as a result of our efforts. Early though we are in the life of this program, I think we can already say that is happening. Katy Carl's first novel, which in so many ways embodies the spirit of our program, has been very well received. Our poets have published very strong work in the little magazines, and our students are publishing literary essays that are renewing the critical conversation about writers of the past, such as Paul Claudel, and about the new work of Christopher Beha and other contemporary novelists.

LC: How do you find your critique process developing as a result of your work with MFA student writing?

JMW: It has developed down to its most basic mechanics. I read a student's poem once and scratch a few notes; read it again and scratch a few more and then try to provide a complete written account of what I think the poem is doing and what it is not doing well. Then, during the workshop, I hear the poem and almost always discover something new about it that needs addressing.

Having this become such a regular part of my life has been rewarding. I've learned to a new extent patience and listening to the work. We emphasize on principle in our program the artistic freedom of our writers and also the integrity of the individual work. A workshop serves not to make a work into something else, perhaps something closer to one's sympathies, but rather to try to help that particular work become true to itself, as Horace says in his *Art Poetica*. That kind of receptive listening is nourishing. It is also salutary, as it helps one keep those broader commitments one has as an artist at once wholly present and yet distinct from one's engagement with this-or-that other poet's work.

In my experience with other MFA programs, a kind of period or institutional style tends to emerge and then squelch the differences between writer and writer. In my youth, the Iowa Writer Workshop's domination by the spirit of Raymond Carver and, then, later, the spirit of "lyrical realism" are both exemplary of this. Most writers feel their work narrowing in MFA workshops, as they learn primarily what *not* to do so as not to be susceptible to critique, rather than learning what it is essential to do in order to make a good work. I like reticence in poetry, for instance, but I have seen that a lot of the clotted reticence among contemporary poets stems from their having been apprenticed in an MFA workshop where the

working assumption was that people don't really like poetry. So, in consequence, one has to let little poems leak from one's clenched lips, and hope they escape whipping.

This is a broader, and inevitable, problem with the academy, I should add. Academic life is intrinsically conservative and is about retaining and passing on knowledge more than it is about making anything new. When it tries to do the latter, things generally go sideways. A theologian I know who left the academy for magazine publishing once remarked that scholarly life teaches people "how not to be wrong," but does little to help them take a risk on truth. Although we are a graduate program within academia, we are trying to keep our vision and ambitions aimed at the larger culture including the man on the street and the millennia-long culture and audience of the Church. We want our students to become capable of writing works that will startle the soul of readers, that will change lives, and that will most certainly take a risk in the pursuit of truth. It's not safe, but it's certainly good to do so. We are learning how to help our students run these risks, to think of their work as writers not as a method to be followed, but as a gift to be offered and, often enough, as a gauntlet thrown down at the feet of mankind. So, this has been a great bit of learning on my end: to help students master craft without reducing craft to method; to help students pursue wherever their sense of vocation as artists is leading them, but to make a point of directing them to the broader literary culture and to change it. It's a joy.

LC: Has your experience with the program spurred you to investigate more deeply a prosody of free verse? What might such a prosody look like?

JMW: To do so would be to go in pursuit of a chimera. I have always been able to appreciate free verse, and it's no less a pleasure to work with our students who work in free verse than with those who work in meter and rhyme. But, of course, I have only interest in writing in verse (in meter and, often, rhyme) in keeping with our literary tradition. Works of free verse often borrow from the metrical tradition in one analogical or fragmentary respect or another (in fact they are always doing so, or we wouldn't recognize free verse as poetry). Sometimes a poem will faintly resemble a sonnet or a villanelle, even though it is not really in the form. Sometimes a poem will have slips of rhyme or isolated instances of meter, where these things become part of the content of the poem rather than serving, as verse normally does, simply as a formal principle in some sense independent of the content of the poem. In all these instances,

the free verse poem is borrowing formal elements and making them accidents present in this or that individual poem. They remain outside the essence, and it would, therefore, make no sense to try to create a broader prosody out of what are isolated features varying from poem to poem or poet to poet.

I think it's of the essence that free verse repels any larger prosodic theory, although some people have not been daunted from trying to formulate one. Just to offer one incidental example in point of case: in a metrical poem, it is sometimes desirable for the poem to be end-stopped, where each metrical line is also constituting an independent grammatical unit. Barnaby Googe, for instance, begins his poem, "Of Money," "Give money me, take friendship whoso list." Most of the lines are similarly end-stopped, and the metrical unit of the line and the grammatical unit of the sentence coincide almost perfectly. This can be used to brilliant effect, though it can also become tedious, and that's one reason that most poets modulate their work by setting at least slightly at variance their grammar and their meter by means of caesura, enjambment, a various vocabulary, and a variety of syntax and sentence structure.

But imagine a free verse poem where each line, whether short or long, coincided precisely to the chief clauses, or even the complete sentences, of the grammatical unit. Something absurd appears there. For some reason, in free verse, the surface has to be roughed up a bit to avoid this too identical measurement of line length and grammatical unit. You can do something in verse that you can't do in free verse, here, and that's because free verse seems to need to repel clear symmetries of order. Its prosody is to repel a discernable prosody.

There's another case, a third case, however, found for instance in those poems that imitate the parallel structure of the psalms and other poetic forms in Scripture. Consider, for instance, Dana Gioia's "Prayer at Winter Solstice," which begins:

Blessed is the road that keeps us homeless.
Blessed is the mountain that blocks our way.

This works perfectly well. It does so because one senses a form giving shape to the language: a syntactical form, rather than a metrical form, so it imposes content along with itself, but it is a form, nonetheless. (I should note that these lines scan as pentameter, but the rest of the poem is not.) But, with free verse, if the shape of the line much informs the syntax or the meaning, it begins to sound ham-handed, clumsy, predictable and dull. Free verse's essence, such as it is, is to repel being formed. In considering

this, it has helped me appreciate why verse is so valuable: it allows for the perfect forming of lines, for the measuring out of sound, without imposing on the content or limiting the variation within the measurable rhythm of sound. It has also helped me appreciate more how free verse works—and what does not work for it as well.

LC: How does this MFA differ from others? What makes it exceptional?

JMW: I suppose I have addressed this before, but I want to say it again and more clearly and briefly in answer to the simplicity of this question. We believe that the Catholic tradition does not constitute a special niche or a corner coterie of the literary world or the literary tradition as a whole. It is rather the commitment to openness to the fullness of being, the openness to truth, goodness, and beauty, which is the light of being, that guarantees our program and the writers who pass through it will themselves remain open to the fullness of being. Rather than writing a “special” kind of literature, the Catholic tradition keeps the gates of the soul open to the fullness of what great literature has always done, from the ancient world up to this very hour: it manifests aesthetic form, which is itself a manifestation of being, and this manifestation of being is an encounter with what is, a way of coming to know what is real.

This is what literature has generally always done, in every civilization. In ours, however, the horizon has lowered, the aims have become less than fully human, the concern for and respect for form has become ambivalent, insincere, incomplete. The result has been a contemporary literature of modest achievement, stunted aims, and shallow insights. It does some things well, even really well, but not enough of them.

We want to help a new generation create not a new, special kind of literature but rather to recover the full freedom of the artist to ascend to the heights with Dante, to descend to the underworld with Odysseus (and Er), to work through doubt and emptiness with Pascal and Kierkegaard, but also to abide within the fullness of being, where each thing declares itself like a brilliant light as made in the splendor and image of God, as Hopkins and Newman, as Augustine and Eliot so often have shown us. We want to recover the full range of storytelling proper to the prose fiction writer, including the genres, but we also want to recover the variety of poetic expression too, including narrative poetry, the epigram, the satire, song, and ballad.

We want a literature of careful craft and great themes. We want a fully human literature, a humane letters, but with the

recognition that Aristotle argued for long before Christ revealed it as the unmistakable truth: to be fully human, one must go beyond the merely human. We are by nature called to the contemplation of being, including the principle of Being who is God the Father, and the *Logos* of being, who is Christ the Son, and the prodigal, promiscuous generosity of being that the Holy Spirit reveals in showing that love itself is the principle of existence. Love and Being are one. Even the person who thinks himself an unbeliever knows that it is the mortal stakes, the existential openness, of literature that makes it at once a thing worthy of contemplation for its own sake and also a way of knowing the world and changing one's soul. Even those who don't believe they have souls want their souls to be saved. Literature is one of the chief ways we explore that desire. Those involved with our program are not afraid to say it.

And we can say it: we can throw down a gauntlet in favor of what transcends literature in such a way that it vouchsafes our concern for literature as a good in itself, as a form with an integrity proper to itself. Because we trust Being, we have a particular commitment to respect, to be docile before, the particular being of the work of art. A century and more ago, the "aesthetes" pretended to have a love for Beauty Itself. But they in fact did not respect beauty, they liked merely the feelings beauty set tingling in their nerves. Catholics are the true aesthetes: they respect this beauty here, knowing full well that it is a light, a fragment, of the divine beauty. They can let works of art realize themselves as individual beings, because they first trust Being Itself.

James Matthew Wilson is Cullen Foundation Chair in English Literature at the University of St. Thomas, Houston, where he directs the MFA program in Creative Writing. His most recent book of poems is *The Strangeness of the Good* (Angelico, 2020).

Lesley Clinton's chapbook of poems, *Calling the Garden from the Grave* (Finishing Line Press, 2020) won second place in the 2021 National Federation of Press Women Communications Contest. Clinton's poems and reviews have appeared in publications such as *America*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Presence Journal*, *THINK*, *The Windhover*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and *Ekstasis Magazine*. She holds a B.A. in English from University of St. Thomas and an M.A. in Teaching from Grand Canyon University and is pursuing an M.F.A. in Creative Writing at University of St. Thomas. Clinton teaches English at Strake Jesuit College Preparatory. She also serves as a board member of Catholic Literary Arts.