

Review of *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking* by James Matthew Wilson

This book is a heroic attempt to right the sinking ship of American poetry. Whether or not the ship is sinking may be debatable, but the author shows where the leaks are, and there are a lot of them.

James Matthew Wilson writes that the reason even most poets don't enjoy reading poetry is that "most poetry written and published today is produced within a body of conventions that guide poets in banal, opaque, nonsensical directions—directions that no one, save another poet looking for something to copy, would willingly follow. It is the hack work of the incompetent yet ambitious." Wilson is talking about writing which is utterly *professional* in the worst sense of the word—careerist: "The only sign of a poem's value is its publication and the publication of more like it." Faced with such professional publication-credit grubbing, Wilson shows an admirable loss of patience, proclaiming "Literature is for amateurs or it is for nothing."

For Wilson to lose patience is saying something. *The Fortunes of Poetry* devotes six chapters to "a systematic critique of modern poetic theory and practice." That must have taken some patience. It's not only the task of ploughing through piles of mind-numbing prose and so-called poetry without losing his own clarity of mind and phrasing; Wilson's patience goes deeper than that. Wilson approaches this material with openness, generosity of spirit, and curiosity. He wants to know how and why different *definitions of poetry* were arrived at. Wilson's ability to refute the often ruinous prescriptions of modern and post-modern theorists comes from his willingness to hear them out and his ability to comprehend what they're really saying, perhaps better than the speakers themselves. His chapter on the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, for instance, is so articulate a description of their work it might serve as a primer for someone inclined to try writing intentionally incoherent poetry. The chapter also includes an inspired defense of humanist society, which he identifies as the ultimate target of the Language poets' "post-humanist" theorizing.

Wilson's quixotic mission in writing this book is no less than to establish a philosophic foundation for the criticism of poetry. The gist of Wilson's argument sets a Thomistic precept against the proposition (advanced by Ben Lerner in a book published after Wilson's, *The Hatred of Poetry*) that the poem in a poet's head is doomed to fall short of the poem the poet can put on the page. The Thomistic precept is this one: "What is good seeks always to become actual, to become as real, as fully so, as it can be; this involves not the eschewal of all definition and limit, but the embracing of precisely that shape, that form, suitable to one's nature." Wilson traces the failure of most contemporary poetry to the refusal to accept *any* limitation, the refusal to *be* anything specific for fear of losing the prospect of infinite potentiality. Faced with the endless possibilities of what might be, it seems a dreadful sacrifice to choose to be any one thing in particular. The poet hesitates to sully the ideal poem in his mind by actually

writing it. And if he does reluctantly start tapping keys, he strives for the ideal of sillyputtyness, exuding a kind of matter capable of taking any shape imaginable, rather than getting trapped in a sonnet somewhere.

What makes this book such an extraordinary contribution to the discussion of contemporary poetry is not Wilson's ability to recognize the absurdity of that way of thinking about a poem, it is his profoundly insightful investigation into how we have arrived at that way of thinking.

In our search for a definition of poetry, Wilson tells us, we have been asking the wrong question. Rather than ask, "What is poetry?" we should be asking "What is poetry for?" Until the modern age, "the criterion of true knowledge about something was whether one knew what it was *for*, its purpose (*telos*); everything else flowed from this." Wilson wants to ground the the discussion in ordinary experience: "Human experience and commonsense are not a folksy substitute for knowledge of the essence of things; rather, reflection on them is the normal means by which we rise to such knowledge." We can only truly know a thing when we know what it is *for*. A wagon is for carrying a load from one place to another. We find that out from the experience of seeing someone use a wagon in the garden.

The scientific thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries dismissed that common-sense way of determining a thing's essence as inadequate. These men wanted to lay hands on the pure essence of things, unsullied by their actual existence in the physical world. They were looking for a way to define the wagon-ness of a wagon before it gets to carting things around.

The same "essentialist" spirit informs modernist efforts at poetic theory, leading to what Wilson describes as "preposterous ghost hunts after the essence of the poetic." The last place these essence hunters would choose to look would be where J. V. Cunningham points: "the body of linguistic constructions that men usually refer to as poems."

For Wilson, even Cunningham's own definition of poetry as "composition in meter" ultimately fails, as any essentialist definition is bound to fail: "What makes a poem a poem is the actualized unity of the various elements that come together to make a composite whole. It would be strange to say that some of those elements belong to the essence while others do not."

While Wilson is unwilling to agree that poetry is verse (or even that verse is always poetry), meter is of central importance to his own idea of what makes poetry poetry. Enumerating the "losses from which poetry currently suffers" as a result of being ill-defined, he points first to the attempt to "cover" for a lack of subject matter with formal experimentation. In fact, nearly all of the deficiencies Wilson finds in contemporary poetry stem from that initial mistake. By throwing out not only meter, but grammar as well, free verse did not allow for greater freedom of expression. "Grammar," Wilson

insists, “is essential to poetry because it offers real freedom, in the same way our speech offers us more freedom of expression than the grunts of a hog or the barks of a dog.”

Though Wilson will probably be dismissed as a scold for telling his peers what Yeats told the Irish poets—“Learn your trade. / Sing whatever is well-made”—there’s hardly need to defend him against the reaction he must have anticipated. He justifies his labor of love with these words: “A world of creativity, a world given over to the slow cultivation of craft, of form, and invention, that leads to growth, self-giving, and new life is one worth defending.”

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