

The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking

James Matthew Wilson



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The adjective "magisterial" is too frequently misapplied in reviewing scholarly books, but if ever a literary study merited it, James Matthew Wilson's The Fortunes of Poetry does. -Helen Pinkerton Trimpi

I know of no contemporary scholar possessed of his breadth of learning and clarity of expression, who is at the same time a poet in love with the art, loving it with true intellectual passion. Wilson attempts no less for poetry than the recovery of a full range of human experience, thought, and religious faith for its content, and a clear philosophical grounding for its form . . . From Plato and Aristotle to Philip Sidney and Matthew Arnold, from Bacon and Descartes to that grayest of eminences grises, John Dewey, from Dante to Mallarme to Dana Gioia, Wilson shows us why we should love poetry, and why we should scorn all those who in the name of the pragmatic or even the poetic have sold her down the river of oblivion. -Anthony Esolen

What is poetry and what is poetry for? To ask the first question is to ask the second. To answer both questions in light of the western tradition stretching back to Homer, and against much modernist and postmodernist poetic theory and practice, is the goal of this remarkable book. Poetry's final end is nothing less or other than to arouse in us a profound sense of wonder in coming to know, as Wilson says, that "Reality as a whole is formed as the good-world-order, the intelligible beauty showing forth from [the] cosmic circle of procession and return." With this in mind, Wilson clearly demonstrates that poetry has become deficient not only in form but also in matter—and in logic and grammar as well. How far poets have fallen away, both in theory and in practice, from an understanding of the nature of metrical composition is the subject of this book's earlier chapters—chapters filled with Wilson's razor-sharp wit, skillfully employed in his analysis of what too often passes for poetry at present. -David Middleton

Though the author and publisher believe James Matthew Wilson has written the sad tale of poetry's fortunes in our age of idol (and poetry idler) worship, it is really that great art's misfortunes he chronicles with wit and panache and Thomistic learning. Perhaps this stirring call to turn around a culture gone adrift means we will hereafter have to refer to the author as James Matthew Arnold Wilson. -Len Krisak

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