UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME | DE NICOLA CENTER FOR ETHICS AND CULTURE

A School of the Catholic Imagination

9:00-10:15 a.m. | Friday, November 1 | McKenna 216

Chair: James Matthew Wilson (University of St. Thomas, Houston)

Artistic Apprenticeship as an Aesthetics of Ascent

James Matthew Wilson (University of St. Thomas, Houston)

Bio: James Matthew Wilson is the Cullen Foundation Chair in English Literature and the founding director of the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Saint Thomas. The author of fourteen books, his most recent collection of poems is *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds* (Word on Fire, 2024). In addition to his role at the University of Saint Thomas, he serves as poet-in-residence of the Benedict XVI Institute, scholar-in-residence of Aquinas College, editor of Colosseum Books, and poetry editor of *Modern Age* magazine.

Abstract: Contemporary liberal education has to some extent recovered the traditional conception of learning as a way of life and education as a formation of the whole person. Apprenticeship in the arts may seem resistant to that conception, because of its focus on the work to be made rather than the character of the artist as its good. The MFA program at UST has attempted a curriculum that really does serve as a kind of artistic, spiritual, and intellectual formation that leads its apprentice writers through the particularities of their genre's craft, through the history of its practice, and beyond through a philosophy and theology of art and beauty that follows the pathway of ascent first presented in the work of Dionysius the Aeropagite.

A School of the Catholic Imagination: Change in Order to Remain the Same

Joshua Hren (Wiseblood Books; University of St. Thomas, Houston)

Bio: Joshua Hren is founder and editor of Wiseblood Books and co-founder of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. Joshua regularly publishes essays and poems in such journals as *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *First Things*, *America* and *Public Discourse.* Joshua is the author of ten books, including *How to Read* (*and Write) Like a Catholic*; the novels *Infinite Regress* and *Blue Walls Falling Down*; and the theological-aesthetical manifesto

Contemplative Realism. Joshua's *More than a Matter of Taste: The Moral Imagination and the Spirit of Literature* is forthcoming.

Abstract: Taking very seriously John Henry Newman's insistence that when contemplating any change we exercise "conservative action" upon the past, I will discuss the way in which those who hold firmly to the permanent things can sometimes refuge in a "false conservatism" that becomes reactionary and nostalgic, as if all that's great and good has happened in the past, and anything new, anything happening *now*, is part of societal decadence or decline. But can we live solely off the culture of the past, even if it is rich? When we are talking about changes in sacred art, music, or architecture, the answer should be different—with much more of an emphasis on Newman's "conservative action upon the past" in order to ward off fleeting and vacuous novelty. However, Newman also insists that, paradoxically, the shapes of enduring truths must sometimes "change . . . in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Philip Rieff's suggestion in *My Life Among the Deathworks* is well-worth mulling: every generation needs new spies of the sacred order, "dedicated to the proposition that the truths have been revealed and require constant rereading and application in light of" the particulars of our moment. Taken in a misguided manner, this could lead to a cavalier presentism that would remake solid things in order to sell them as relevant. Undertaken prudently, it is the essence of persuasion—rooted in what's lasting but appealing via the available means, the language that will reach a real audience. I will discuss the way in which the curriculum reflects this tension: for example, fiction students read St. Thomas Aquinas' *Treatise on Human Acts* to better grasp human nature, they read Augustine and Dante and Flannery and Tolkien and the classic Catholic writers, but they also study carefully contemporary fiction by well known writers like Donna Tartt and David Foster Wallace.

St. Thomas and the Whole Horse

Ryan Wilson (The Catholic University of America)

Bio: Ryan Wilson is the author of *The Stranger World* (Measure, 2017), winner of the Donald Justice Poetry Prize, of *How to Think Like a Poet* (Wiseblood, 2019), winner of the Jacques Maritain Prize for Non-Fiction, of *Proteus Bound: Selected Translations* (Franciscan UP, 2021), and of *In Ghostlight: Poems* (LSU, 2024). His work appears widely in periodicals such as *Best American Poetry*, *First Things*, *Hopkins Review*, *The New Criterion*, *Sewanee Review*, and *Yale Review*. Editor Emeritus of *Literary Matters* and co-editor, with April Lindner, *Contemporary Catholic Poetry* (Paraclete, 2024), he is Associate Professor of Poetry at The University of St. Thomas-Houston.

Abstract: "A thought to Donne," as T.S. Eliot, in "The Metaphysical Poets," famously writes, "was an experience; it modified his sensibility." Of course, Mr. Eliot is here championing *integritas*, or "wholeness," as a poetic virtue. Indeed, Aquinas characterizes Beauty as possessing *harmonia*, *claritas*, and *integritas*. But what is meant by "wholeness," or *integritas*? In the M.F.A. program at The University of St. Thomas-Houston, we focus on the three transcendent attributes of Beauty mentioned above, and this focus distinguishes our program. In my talk, I'll discuss how we incorporate the idea of *integritas*, or "wholeness," into our curriculum via literary history, aesthetics, and spirituality.

Positionality, Prophecy, and the Artist of Faith

Katy Carl (Word on Fire; University of St. Thomas, Houston)

Bio: Katy Carl is editor at Word on Fire Literary, writer in residence at the University of St. Thomas—Houston, senior affiliate fellow of Penn's Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, and editor emeritus at *Dappled Things* magazine. She is the author of *As Earth Without Water*, a novel; *Fragile Objects*, short stories; and *Christopher Beha: Novelist in a Postsecular World*, among other works. Her writing has appeared in both religious and secular outlets including *Church Life Journal*, *Ekstasis*, *Evangelization & Culture*, *Genealogies of Modernity*, *Fare Forward*, *Notre Dame* magazine, *Public Discourse*, *St. Louis* magazine, *Windhover*, and others.

Abstract: For a working writer, the problems of market awareness, audience capture, and authorial identity have never appeared more vexing than they do in a digital age. A prevalent temptation, to which many have succumbed, is to learn to "perform" what already "works" (in the sense of fitting mimetic categories and garnering easy attention) rather than to explore what once worked, what might work, and what ought to be done whether it attracts present plaudits or not. How can a writer of faith navigate these questions while, as often happens, also laboring under intense internal and external pressures which a more secularized writer might be thought not to endure? How might writers of faith actually be working at an unrecognized advantage: i.e., how can working from a center of identity "hidden with Christ in God" liberate us (in ways we may not immediately spot) from subservience to presentist currents of fashion, opinion, and externalized self-definition? Put another way, how might an accurate theological anthropology liberate the creative mind from states of anxious, despairing, circumscribed self-consciousness and open a path into integrated, prophetic self-transcendence?

Four Conversations

Brigid Pasulka (University of St. Thomas, Houston)

Bio: Brigid Pasulka's debut novel *A Long, Long Time Ago and Essentially True* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) won the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Barnes & Noble Discover Award, and the Polish American Historical Society Creative Arts Award. It was translated into six languages, including Polish. Her second novel, *The Sun and Other Stars* (Simon & Schuster) was a *Chicago Tribune* Editor's Choice and an Indie Next Pick. Pasulka's short stories have been published in various literary journals. She lives with her husband and son in Northern Michigan and teaches fiction workshops for the MFA program at the University of St. Thomas-Houston.

Abstract: The faith-based fiction writer must remain in a constant state of formation. The essentials of formation can be organized into four ongoing conversations, which change in priority over two separate phases of writing.