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Elizabeth Jennings and Poetry Reaching Out Towards Transcendence

Abstract

The article discusses how Elizabeth Jennings, having distanced herself from “The Movement,” engages her work in a dialogue with philosophy and theology, especially with regard to metaphysics and transcendence. The main focus is on the analysis of her poetic idiom based on oxymoron and silence. Jennings’ poetry is informed on the one hand by her Catholic Christianity, reflected not only in the poems’ subject matter but primarily in a religious sense pervading all her poetry. On the other hand it is empowered by Jennings’ belief in the capacity of the imaginative use of words to enter into the metaphysical realm and embody the ineffable. Jennings links human words of poetry with the Word of the divine, and in consequence bestows a sacramental value upon poetry in which she sees a human transcription of the perennial Logos shaping and illuminating the world.

The poetic debut of Elizabeth Jennings (1926–2001) falls on the mid-fifties of the twentieth-century, and it is marked by the publication of her poetry volume simply called *Poems* (1953), followed two years later by *A Way of Looking* (1955). With the exception of the first, all her twenty-three subsequent volumes of poetry are given titles which in the light of Genette’s concept of a “paratext”¹ become a meaningful extension of the entire set of poems included in each collection. *A Way of Looking* defines what it declares, i.e. it points to philosophical and aesthetic underpinning of Jennings’ poetry which bespeaks the poet’s artistic creed and her *Weltanschauung* as her own way of looking not only at the visible world but also at the invisible reality. For *A Way of Looking* Jennings won the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award in 1956. The terms of the prize required that the recipient should use the sum awarded to cover the cost of at least three months’ trip abroad. It gave Jennings a unique opportunity to spend some time in Rome, where she found not only a fascinating city of art and history, but above all she rediscovered there the fountainhead of her religion.

The term “rediscovered” is fully justified because Elizabeth Jennings, unlike some other famous English writers who were Christian converts, was a “Cradle

Catholic" (*Consequently I Rejoice*, 1977),² as she identifies herself in the title of one of her poems. During her first extended visit in Rome Jennings revitalized her Roman Catholic faith and fortified her distinct poetic voice with the impact of a religious experience. Jennings herself was fully aware of the significance of the Roman phase in her life, and she confessed her indebtedness in her unpublished autobiography: "It is to Somerset Maugham that I owe the rediscovery of my religion" (see Leader 297). Her stay in Rome, in spite of the passage of time and various upheavals in Jennings' personal life, remained a lasting experience reflected in numerous poems and aptly recapitulated in the closure of her unpublished and undated poem entitled "Going Back": "A few have died, many have moved away / But at the heart of Rome, the Rock still stands" (933).³ The glamour of Rome lived with Elizabeth Jennings through the rest of her life. "A Roman Trio" (*Tributes*, 1989), one of her later poems, in a similar tone ends with the following lines: "[...] Rome, a city with arms / Open to me then and always, a mother, the world's centre" (559). The most immediate artistic fruit of Jennings' stay in Rome was the publication of her third volume of poetry, *A Sense of the World* (1958) which turned out to be pregnant with consequences for the future shape of her poetic activity.

It is also worth noting that the beginnings of Elizabeth Jennings' poetic career coincide with the activities of a group of young Oxford poets of the mid-twentieth century known as "The Movement," or alternatively as the "Poets of the Fifties,"⁴ or else the "*New Lines* poets."⁵ "The Movement" was neither a formal school of poetry, nor did it represent any homogenous poetic programme. However, it gathered under its banners a number of interesting and promising young poets who were bound together by their declared desire to find a new expression for their own poetic sensibility. Hence "The Movement" can be viewed as a loose grouping of fellow poets who shared their own enthusiasm for poetry as well as their deep conviction that poetic activity does matter and that it needs to breathe some fresh air. The label of "The Movement" offered to its informal members theoretical support and practical assistance in promoting and, consequently, publicising of what was deemed their worthwhile poetry. "The Movement" set comprised such literary figures as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, John Wain, Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, John Holloway or D. J. Enright. In Zachary Leader's words the grouping was sustained and boosted up by the "interlocking network of academics, journalists, and editors who aided them" (Leader 2). Leader mentions among the mentors of the new emerging generation of poets such names as W. H. Auden, William Empson and Robert Graves.

When Elizabeth Jennings was taken on board of "The Movement" by its leading spokesmen, initially it meant giving the debutante poet a sort of springboard which undoubtedly helped her to be recognised as a visible presence and important poetic voice on the literary scene of the 1950s. She naturally belonged to the literary and intellectual milieu of Oxford where she met among others

John Wain and Kingsley Amis, with whom she became close friends. Rachel Buxton in "Elizabeth Jennings, The Movement, and Rome" quotes a fragment from Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs*, where Amis referring to Elizabeth Jennings proclaims her "the star of the show, our discovery" (Leader 293). It seems that the base in Oxford, combined with the social set of friendly contacts, was the factor which probably, without in the least diminishing Jennings' own poetic merits, paved her the way to a wider public recognition through "The Movement" with which she became associated for a long time, at least in the general opinion of readers and literary critics.

However, Jennings herself showed a considerable reserve regarding the impact of "The Movement" upon the shaping of particular poetic careers. In her "Introduction" to *An Anthology of Modern Verse: 1940–1960* she speaks of "The Movement" as a construct created by journalists rather than a conscious joint enterprise of the poets themselves; and she refers to it as one of "the artificial groupings of systemizers and newshounds" (11). While acknowledging literary achievements of the individual poets of the fifties, she at the same time plays down the significance of their being part of the informal grouping, and insists that the greatness of particular poets and superior quality of their poetry will outlive the "ephemeral" publicity which they may have secured for themselves through "The Movement." Significantly, in her book *Poetry To-Day* the chapter devoted to "The Movement" poets is entitled "A Group Dispersers."

Therefore it is not surprising that Jennings fairly early distanced herself from "The Movement." Rachel Buxton points to the publication of *A Sense of the World* as a turning point which shows clearly Jennings' differences from "The Movement" (see Leader 295). Already the title of the book, a line taken from Thomas Traherne's, places Elizabeth Jennings in the long line of tradition which she lovingly embraces, contrary to the general tendencies voiced in "The Movement." The hidden allusion to Thomas Traherne, and by extension to the seventeenth-century religious metaphysical poetry, was an obvious indication of a new direction which Jennings' poetic itinerary was taking. A certain newness of Jennings' post-Rome book of poetry that did not fit the main lines of "The Movement" was noticed by Larkin, who in his review of the collection emphatically indicated the presence of "the group of religious poems at the end."⁶ Thus the Maugham-sponsored time spent in Italy, and especially in Rome, contributed to Jennings' inner transformation: she changed from an average cradle Catholic, brought up in a traditional family and torn by doubts of adolescence, into a mature believer and a patently Christian poet who derived strength and substance for her poetry from her religious belief.⁷

Elizabeth Jennings evokes two factors which in her opinion evidently excluded her from "The Movement" and in consequence gave her an independent standing as a poet: the first was her being a woman, with an implication of a clear

feminine streak in her poetic sensibility; the other, and perhaps more important, was her Roman Catholicism. The latter in particular is inextricably connected with Jennings' own poetic practice. It can be claimed that Jennings' poetry is empowered by two kinds of belief: one is her religious faith, and the other is her belief in the unique power of poetic words to reach out towards transcendence and to grasp in a verbal form the otherwise ineffable mystery of the divine. The close link between these two beliefs is a cornerstone of Jennings' poetry. If the term "a religious poet" is applied to Elizabeth Jennings it has to be treated in a much broader sense than what it customarily designates, for in Jennings' case the qualifier "religious" concerns not only a wide range of Christian, or Catholic, themes and motifs, but above all it represents the poet's profoundly religious attitude to the essential material of poetry, i.e. the imaginative use of words.

Jennings looks upon the words of poetry from what may be called a sacramental perspective, i.e. she perceives them as mysteriously participating in the Word of transcendent Logos. In Jennings' view poetic words operate in the realm of the human, but their innermost reality is anchored in the realm of the divine. That is why she assigns a privileged status to the discourse of poetry, and maintains accordingly that both verse and what she calls prose poems are powerful instruments for the attainment of a further level of metaphysical perception which gives glimpses of truth, beauty and harmony inhering in the divine order. Hence alongside many poems that bear testimony to Jennings' sensibility of a church-goer and practising believer there can be also found lines of verse where the experience of the sacrament, fundamental especially for the Roman Catholics, gets shifted to the plane of poetry which becomes a means of a metaphysical communion, and a bridge spanning the gap between the physical world and its transcendent dimension.

That unique marriage of the physical with the metaphysical, which underlies the Catholic notion of the sacrament, is a characteristic feature of Elizabeth Jennings' poetic creed, intrinsically related to the Credo of her Faith. It is well illustrated by the poem "On the Tongue" (*Times and Seasons*, 1992), which brings to mind the double significance and a twofold function of the tongue: on the one hand it is related to speech where poetry originates among the clusters of verbs, nouns and adjectives; on the other hand it adumbrates the sacrament of the Eucharist as the Host is placed upon the tongue. The poem effectively makes use of the inter-textual parallel with the language of the Bible: on God's words from the *Book of Genesis*, "Let there be light," Jennings superimposes the words uttered by "a voice" in her poem, "Let there be song." It is worth noting that "the song" in Jennings' poems is always synonymous with poetry and frequently implies the metaphysical phenomenon known as the music of the spheres. Thus with the assumption of the presence of the sacramental Word upon her tongue and by means of the human words of poetry Jennings confesses:

It is by language we live
 For the senses falter, halt and finally fail,
 But in poems and only if

We pay attention and stand
 Listening, whispering, relishing a word,
 A rhyme, we discover the end
 And purpose of art, [...] (635)

It should be emphasised that Jennings takes not only aesthetic, but chiefly ontological delight in words which are savoured and celebrated in her poems. Consequently, her poetic and philosophical stance of “stand[ing] / [l]istening, whispering, relishing a word” throws some light on Jennings’ vision of the making of poems which invariably involves the poet’s taking part in *mysterium verborum*, and embracing sundry dimensions of reality. The sequence entitled “Parts of Speech” (*Times and Seasons*, 1992) is not only a poetic rendition of well-known linguistic facts, but it is primarily a reflection on the unique potential of words which open up to the metaphysical and give body to the transcendent ineffable. For example, the verb quintessentially embodies the “first cry of awareness” (624), so the poet remarks: “‘I go,’ ‘I forget,’ ‘I exist’ / By language only and always” (625).

By sustaining the link between human words and the divine Word-Logos Jennings embraces the sacramental mode in her thinking about poetry and thus she implicitly postulates a new poetic semantics wherein the denotative surface is accompanied by a metaphysical depth. An overt allusion to the sacramental nature of the words of poetry is contained in the poem “Visit to an Artist” (*Song for a Birth or a Death*, 1961), dedicated for David Jones, a poet and painter, where Jennings recalls and endorses the words of the fellow artist:

Of art as gesture and as sacrament,
 A mountain under the calm form of paint
 Much like the Presence under wine and bread –
 Art with its largesse and its own restraint. (101)

Likewise “Questions to Other Artists” (*Consequently I Rejoice*, 1977), another poetic meditation on the nature of art which bridges two distinct but complementary planes of reality, is even more explicit in defining the sacramental status of poetry which gives a tangible and recognizable body to the metaphysical order of things. The poem addresses the problem of artistic creativity affected with alternating periods of dryness and fertility, and it speaks of a sense of gratitude which the poet feels “when words are offered / Like a Host upon the tongue” (397). Jennings’ Catholic cast of mind should leave no doubt that the sacrament means

to her much more than a mere sign or symbol because, according to the Catholic doctrine, first and foremost it embodies the represented reality. Therefore Jennings' conferring the sacramental value on poetry that can be traced in a great number of her poems, is a suggestive indication of her belief in the power of the poetic word which can make divine transcendence tangible to the human faculty of imagination, and at least partly assimilable by the intellect.

The making of poetry is viewed in terms of a sacramental act which apparently takes place in the space of *profanum*, delineated by the human rhetoric of words, but at the same time it involves the space of *sacrum*, defined and presided over by the divine Word of Logos.⁸ "Sundowning" (*Extending the Territory*, 1985) envisages making poetry in terms of standing on a holy ground, similar to what Moses experienced during his encounter with God in the burning bush (see Exodus 3: 2–7). The figure of Moses is evoked in the opening lines of "Sundowning": "It is a Moses rush of light behind / My back and I am scalded by the sheen" (517); and the poem presents a fleeting vision at the sunset wherein the lowering bright red disc of the sun puts fire to a page, a metonymy of poetry, while the poet contemplates and silently assists at this metamorphosis:

[...] there is no puff of wind,

No sound of bird or foot. I hold my breath
And watch my page take fire. It fascinates
And claims my watching, [...]. (517)

When she speaks about her own poetry Jennings links imagination with Faith. That proximity is made patent in her poem entitled "Act of the Imagination" (*In the Meantime*, 1996) which brings to mind the analogy with the "Act of Faith" from the Catholic catechism. The poem clearly strikes a confessional note when Jennings professes:

[...] Yes, I always need

Herbert's sonnet 'Prayer' say, or that great
Giotto painting for
My heart to leap to God. I want to meet
Him in my own poems, God as metaphor

And rising up. [...]. (734)

Jennings' great sensitivity to the potential of the poetic use of words and her belief in their capacity to enter into transcendence are corroborated by a tendency ever present in her discursive and critical prose to link poetry with

mysticism. That link gets elaborated in greatest detail in *Every Changing Shape* (1961)⁹ where Jennings elucidates the relationship between the making of poems and the nature of mystical experience. She points to the common fountainhead of poetry and mysticism which comprises an intense experience of transcendence that needs to be shared, a sense of joyous rapture, the attitude of humility¹⁰ and an urge of love. Besides she underscores that both, poetry and mysticism, operate on the principle of concentration and both demonstrate the affirmative quality of special insight which gives rise to the making of a poem and the mystic's experience alike. Not only does Jennings see many analogies between poetry and mysticism, but she also strongly asserts their complementariness. The mystical experience is for her a form of illumination, though she admits that the light involved in it dazzles (see *ECS* 17). That is why the superior knowledge obtained through the mystical insight needs poetry in order to make it at least partly communicable. Therefore Jennings states: "The power of poetry is that by simply naming it can illuminate" (*ECS* 22), and in consequence she insists on what she terms "the revelatory power of poetry" (*ECS* 30). Evoking the figure of St. John of the Cross, the mystic and the poet in one person, Jennings writes: "St. John of the Cross was not prepared to say that mystical experience was totally inexpressible, but rather that poetry might provide glimpses or echoes of it" (*ECS* 143).

Unsurprisingly, mystics often appear in Jennings' poems, e.g. "Teresa of Avila" (*A Sense of the World*, 1958), or "John of the Cross," "Catherine of Siena" (both in *Song for a Birth or a Death*, 1961), while their experiences, charged with ontological paradoxes and sensuous contradictions, remain a source of unceasing fascination in Jennings' personal life, and present a great challenge for her poetic craft. Transcribing their encounter with the divine in the idiom of poetry represents an attempt to capture the absolutely logical but apparently inconsistent nature of mystical experience. In a beautiful prose poem "John of the Cross" Jennings evokes the image of transcendent light: "Not light limited by tapers, drawn to its strength by the darkness around it, not puffed out by the wind or increased by careful breath" (97). Even though St. John's light gets identified with a flame, Jennings makes it clear that it is "not the inward flame of passion, urgent, wanting appeasement, close to the senses and sighing through them: but a pure light pouring through windows, flooding the glass but leaving the glass unaltered" (97). The flame that John of the Cross senses burning becomes for Jennings the nearest embodiment of the fire of divine Logos, and it blends imperceptibly into metaphysical light which illuminates the seeking mind. Such light emerges out of darkness and inhabits the invisible space where neither light nor darkness belong to the mystic who is on the one hand only a passive recipient, "receiver, requirer" (97), but on the other hand he is endowed with a spiritual agility which makes his eyes wide open to the world. In "John of the Cross" Jennings envisages all the sensuous and intellectual faculties kept in abeyance, with their ordinary

functions deactivated in order to make room for an extra sensory and supra-rational perception:

And the senses, too, disarmed, discouraged, withdrawn by choice from pleasure. Finger not touching, crushing cool leaves. Lips closed against mouth or assuagement. Ears unentered by voices. Hands held out but empty (97).

It is part of Jennings' poetic creed that epistemologically elusive realities can be at least partly grasped by the medium of poetry, and that is one of the reasons of her fascination with mystical literature. Evoking the figure of St. John of the Cross, the mystic and the poet in one person, Jennings writes: "St. John of the Cross was not prepared to say that mystical experience was totally inexpressible, but rather that poetry might provide glimpses or echoes of it" (*ECS* 143).

Elizabeth Jennings puts poets side by side with mystics for they both touch and bring transcendence to the realm of the human. In "Hermits and Poets" (*In the Meantime*, 1996) she observes that imagination shapes poems, where "a few lines hold a hint of heaven" (733), and likens the poet's use of imagination to a "perfect meditation" (733). The main reason for the inclusion of a chapter on Teresa of Avila in *Every Changing Shape* is the centrality and significance of imagination in communicating the experience of the divine. In her discussion of Teresa of Avila Jennings maintains that Teresa's *Life*, i.e. her spiritual autobiography, "is a kind of half-aware tribute to the potency of imagination" (*ECS* 61). Accordingly, she praises Teresa for her leaning on images with the intention to describe "the most difficult thing any writer can attempt – namely contact with God in the mystical experience" (*ECS* 50). Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross are simultaneously mystics and poets, and hence they have a special appeal for the artist as they demonstrate the fulfilment of the potential which Jennings wants to see in the art of poetry. In "Seers and Makers" (*In the Meantime*, 1996), while registering similarities as well as differences between mystics and poets, Jennings underscores the important parallel between poetic creativity and prayer:

Self disappears when man becomes his prayer,
Likewise man and his art,
And both aim at perfection and will share
Any wound or hurt. (732)

For Jennings the mystic and the poet are both visionaries, aided by imagination, who share the same experience of leaving the network of mental categories and paradigms of logical thinking so as to enter into the superior realm, where thought and senses need not name anything but can touch the Real and taste the Absolute. Vision as a property of all great poetry is the leading theme of Jennings' book of essays, *Seven Men of Vision* (1976), presenting seven great writers

in European literature: W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell, St-John Perse, David Jones, Antoine de St-Exupéry, and Borys Pasternak. The book, like its predecessor *Every Changing Shape*, makes it clear that the bond between the poet and the mystic concerns the poet *per se*, as the maker of poetry, regardless of any religious belief or disbelief. That is why in *Every Changing Shape* Jennings looks upon the non-believing Wallace Stevens as a poet with a mystical slant of mind and places him beside Julian of Norwich, Thomas Traherne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Charles Péguy and other committed Christians among literary figures. The title of the chapter devoted to Wallace Stevens, "Vision without Belief," is very significant, for it draws attention to Jennings' deepest conviction that the capacity of reaching out towards transcendence is intrinsically connected with the art of poetry as such, and therefore no poet is barred from a visionary experience on the grounds of the lack of Faith.

In Jennings' view visionary poetry bears some resemblance to mystical writing in that it attempts to touch transcendence and convey a sense of the metaphysical in the poetic idiom. A great number of Jennings' own poems build up space for the experience that cannot be otherwise explicitly expressed in verbal terms, and so it requires special rhetorical strategies and devices. Many of them can be found among what Jennings enumerates as the characteristics of the prose poem¹¹. The most effective rhetorical strategy frequently employed in Jennings' own poems is the grand figure of oxymoron which is perfectly compatible with the sacramental view of poetry, and particularly fitting to communicate the transcendent ineffable. The oxymoronic vision¹² quintessentially combines otherwise irreconcilable opposites and hence naturally becomes the basis for poetic imagery which aspires to render all the paradoxes inscribed into human metaphysical yearnings and physical confinements. Closely related to paradox, oxymoron operates on the intersection of the aesthetic plane with the metaphysical. Its biblical origins can be traced back to numerous descriptions of the divine entering the realm of the human, such as the fire that burns but does not consume the bush, or light which blinds and simultaneously illumines, like in the case of Saul who recognised God and became Paul when he was deprived of the faculty of seeing. Oxymoron not only organises much of Jennings' poetic imagery, but also her conception of poetry is couched in the paradoxical terms of oxymoron, for she links the power of poetry with words while simultaneously asserting that the power of poetry lies in taking one beyond words.

Other strategies that frequently get incorporated into Jennings' poetic discourse which stays close to the visionary exploit the potential of ellipsis and most of all silence. In "Lazarus" (*Song for a Birth or a Death*, 1961) Jennings envisages Christ's friend risen from the dead as one who "[r]efused to answer our questions" (104), adding with a subtly implied oxymoron, that it was only "the smell of death that truly / Declared his rising to us" (104). The silence of Lazarus is confronted with tormented and inquisitive minds which desire answers and are

“hungry for finished faith” (104). But Lazarus stays unmoved in the sphere of silence, and the poem ends on a note of an exquisite oxymoron where death gets equated with birth:

He would not enter our world at once with words
That we might be tempted to twist or argue with:
Cold like a white root pressed in the bowels of earth
He looked, but also vulnerable – like birth. (104)

Silence is not only a crucial component of the poem, but it also represents an important trait of the spiritual make-up of the poet. For Jennings it is primarily the experiential space in the poet’s mind that gets transferred to the body of the poem in the act of its making. It can be traced back to the mental disposition which unites the poet and the mystic, for in both of them alike it involves the silencing of the self and dwelling lovingly upon the contemplated object in the intellectual poise of complete surrender so as to let oneself be possessed by the thing contemplated. The desire to be possessed by the thing contemplated gets voiced in much of Jennings writing both in prose and verse. In “Greek Statues” (*Song for a Birth or a Death*, 1961), for example, she muses on how one feels while contemplating crumbling ancient monuments of Greek art:

Odd how one wants to touch not simply stare,
To run one’s fingers over the flanks and arms,
Not to possess, rather to be possessed. (108)

The poet’s inward silence, which becomes a path towards a communion with the divine, is recorded in a highly personal poem “Making a Silence” (*Relationships*, 1972):

So many silences
[...]
But the greatest one of them all
Is a gift entirely unasked for,
When God is felt deeply within you
With his infinite gracious peace. (288)

In Jennings’ poetic space silence not only illuminates but also hurts. It hurts with an acute pain arising from the tension between the expectancy of words and the difficulty in communicating the experience of transcendence; it illuminates with its healing power which nourishes words and makes room for them to take root in the body of the poem. Within the frames of the oxymoronic vision silence becomes an indispensable condition for the gift of tongues. In “Whitsun

Sacrament" (*Growing Points*, 1975) Jennings speaks from the vantage point of a believer who passes through the rites of Confirmation struggling between doubt and belief to conclude in the end: "When we most need a tongue we only find / Christ at his silentest" (320). Likewise in "'Hours' and Words" (*Praises*, 1998) she evokes silence that is charged with meaning, or "full of blossoming hints" which give rise to poems and their metaphysical intimations:

Let there be silence that is full
Of blossoming hints. When it is dark
Men's minds can link and their words fill
A saving boat that is God's ark. (777)

Silence in Jennings' poems does not signify wordlessness, or a mere pause in the flow of words. It is rather a well-structured space built into the verbal body of the poem and set aside for contemplation. Jennings uses various methods of introducing silence into her poetry. It may be achieved by stretching a word, or a phrase, so as to make room for a meditative sojourn, which is made possible, for example, through the extension provided by the suffix of the superlative as in "Christ at his silentest" (320) in "Whitsun Sacrament." Another method consists in repeating particularly significant words, not for the sake of emphasis, as is customarily done, but rather as an invitation to taste the word, and as an opening of its profoundest layers of meaning. For instance, in the poem "For Paul Klee" (*In the Meantime*, 1996) the word "beyond" gets repeated when Jennings pays tribute to artistic and metaphysical pursuits of the painter:

A brush can be a wand
Which can be potent over sun
And, like a prayer, can reach beyond beyond (735).

This twofold 'beyond' represents an epitome of Jennings' view on poetry which more or less overtly always looks towards the metaphysical and the divine. "Greek Statues" is one of many poems which endeavour to render the poet's experience that can be located on the borderline between the aesthetic and the metaphysical. At the same time it bears witness to Jennings' tendency to endow her poems with the sacramental dimension by insisting on the mystical link between objects of human art and transcendent Logos of the divine. Hence the ancient statues in the poem are associated with the Christian sacramental Word made Flesh, and the poetic persona sees in them "other" Incarnations ("Incarnations are elsewhere and more human, / Something concerning us; but these are other," 108). The poem closes with a momentary vision of the other dimension of reality whereto, according to Elizabeth Jennings, all art is a pathway and a bridge:

It is as if something infinite, remote
 Permitted intrusion. It is as if these blind eyes
 Exposed a landscape precious with grapes and olives:
 And our probing hands move not to grasp but praise. (108)

If one were tempted to give a definition of poetry which emerges from the entire corpus of Jennings' writing including verse as well as prose, it might be expressed as follows: Poetry is the touching of the metaphysical with the fingers of imagination; it is transcribing in human words the perennial Logos that illumines everything and becomes an object of the poet's contemplation; it is a participation in the sacramental communion in which the verbal body accommodates the supreme transcendent reality in the aesthetically pleasing formula of beauty.

Towards the end of her life Jennings wrote a poem bearing a significant title, "A Metaphysical Point About Poetry" (*Praises*, 1998), wherein she reiterates and sums up her profession of poetic faith:

[...] I wish to say that God
 Is present in all poetry that's made
 With form and purpose [...]. (775)

Notes

- 1 Andrzej Weseliński makes an insightful analysis of the paratext in "The borderlands of the text" (*PASE Papers in Literature and Culture*, Joanna Burzyńska and Danuta Stanulewicz, eds., Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2003, 417–421).
- 2 In the subsequent discussion the titles of respective volumes of poetry are given together with the dates in the brackets after the titles of the poems referred to.
- 3 Included in *Elizabeth Jennings. The Collected Poems* (2012), edited by Emma Mason. Page numbers for all subsequent quotations from Elizabeth Jennings' poems refer to this edition.
- 4 The Movement label was coined by J. D. Scott, a close friend of John Wain and Kingsley Amis, and it was first used in the title of a leading article in the *Spectator* (1 October 1954). Several months earlier Anthony Hartley, Scott's assistant, published in the *Spectator* a review entitled "Poets of the Fifties" (24 August 1954) where he refers to the same group of poets, later identified as the Movement. Allegedly the Movement was anticipated by the grouping of several undergraduates of St John's College, Oxford, known as 'The Seven' among whom there were Larkin and Amis. For a detailed study of the Movement from a time perspective see Blake Morrison, *The Movement*:

- English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (1980) and Zachary Leader, *The Movement Reconsidered* (2009).
- 5 The phrase “*New Lines* poets” is used by Elizabeth Jennings interchangeably with “The Movement poets,” and it is connected with the title of the 1956 anthology, where some of the Movement poetry was published. See e.g. Elizabeth Jennings, *Poetry To-Day (1957–60)*.
 - 6 Philip Larkin, “Reports on Experience.” *The Guardian*, 5 September 1958, 6.
 - 7 Jennings as a distinctly Christian poet is amply discussed in Jean Ward’s *Christian Poetry in the Post-Christian Day: Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings* (Peter Lang, 2009).
 - 8 Michael Edwards discusses the relationship between human creative use of words and the divine Logos in *Towards a Christian Poetics* (1984) and *Poetry and Possibility. A Study in the Power and Mystery of Words* (1988), and especially in the essay “Poetry Human and Divine,” forthcoming in: *The Power of the Word, Vol. III. Poetic Revelations: Word Made Flesh Made Word*, ed. Mark S. Burrows, Jean Ward and Małgorzata Grzegorzewska. Ashgate, due in 2016.
 - 9 Henceforth for quotations and reference abbreviated as *ECS*.
 - 10 Elizabeth Jennings highlights humility as a crucial disposition of the mature poet in many works of her discursive prose. It becomes most conspicuous in *Let’s Have Some Poetry!*, which was originally intended as a handbook for aspiring poets and a guidebook for the readers of poetry.
 - 11 Elizabeth Jennings often refers to the so-called prose poem in her critical writing. She gives its most extended description in *Seven Men of Vision*, where in the chapter “St-John Perse. The Worldly Seer” she explains what distinguishes the prose poem from both *vers libre* and prose (see pp. 110ff.).
 - 12 The term “oxymoronic vision” is used by Joseph Hynes in his essay “Muriel Spark and the Oxymoronic Vision,” in *Contemporary British Women Writers. Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer, Jr., 161–187.

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