

THE GLASS

NUMBER 31

SPRING 2019

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Published by the Christian Literary Studies Group, a Literary Society in association with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship. Editorial and subscriptions: *The Glass*, 10 Dene Road, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2AA.

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ISSN 0269-770X (Print)

ISSN 2515-3307 (Online)

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Editorial

Often prayer consists of words addressed to God asking him for something. In Christianity that God is the Creator and Judge, the Father of Jesus, who is sovereign over all that happens, and so on. But although in literary contexts the simple definition is largely true, there is more to prayer than the words. Silence may also sometimes count as prayer. Simone Weil wrote that 'attention taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.'

Prayer may be thought of as a human response to God as revealed, perceived and believed, and therefore as an aspect of worship or, more widely, religion. The language of prayer (ecstatic utterance aside) is necessarily the language of our human world, of culture and society; and language is a wonderful and varied human construct, a shared set of conventions. Yet from a theological perspective the divine Word came first, speech is a derivative of the humanity we have been given, and even the researches of science are thinking God's thoughts after him.

In the prayers of others, and our own, different aspects and attributes of God are inferred. We ask as to a person according to the requirements of our situation, like the wilting people and disciples before Jesus fed five thousand and more. But God may be more than a provider, he may be a rescuer, a judge, a father. Then there is the prayer of worship, expressing recognition, praise, protest, repentance, thanks and hope. There may be in the articles in this issue a kind of antiphony between the idea of prayers written to be recited in liturgy, and the spontaneous outpourings and overflows of the earnest heart, whether in public or private.

Christina Rossetti notes of Edward the Confessor that 'from his infancy he had been addicted to prayer.' We are considering here prayers pre- and post-Reformation. Ann Lewin's poem 'Disclosure'¹ is suggestive of the sometimes elusive experience of praying:

Prayer is like watching for the
Kingfisher. All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.
Often, nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible sign, only the
Knowledge that he's been there,
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But sometimes, when you've almost
Stopped expecting it,
A flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.

Roger Kojecký

¹ Ann Lewin, *Watching for the Kingfisher: Poems and Prayers* [2004], 2009, quoted with permission from The Canterbury Press.

Prayer in Anglo-Saxon England

Paul Cavill

PRAYER IS ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED ACTIVITIES IN OLD ENGLISH literature, but one of the least frequently studied.¹ We see Byrhtnoth pray in the heat of battle in *The Battle of Maldon*; there are numerous prayers of the saints in their hagiographies, both in prose and verse; there are poetic translations of the Lord's Prayer, the Gloria, the Creed, the Advent antiphons, the Benedicite, and much more extensively, the Psalms, as well as multiple prose or glossed versions. There are collects and litanies of the saints, prayers in homilies, miscellaneous collections in prayer books, prayers as manuscript colophons. There are ubiquitous instructions to pray, appeals for prayer on grave-markers, and prayers and invocations in the metrical and other charms. Prayers appear in Old English as well as Latin.

This essay will assess some examples of prayer in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England in an attempt to discover what people thought they were doing when they prayed, and what it was *for*. It will also try to answer the question of whether we can hear a genuine Anglo-Saxon inflection in prayers, not merely the echo of Latinate forms.

There are, of course, many different concepts of prayer ancient and modern. One, with which I will start, is not common in Christian communities, but in society more widely perhaps: that prayer is somehow feeble. It is what one does only when all other avenues of help have been found wanting. This attitude is not uncommon in medieval sources, particularly in stories relating to the time of the conversion in Scandinavia: here we find heroes who 'did not pray much, but trusted in their own strength'. More generally, though, in Christian sources prayer is configured as a discourse of power in everyday or extreme situations: God does things for those pray.

Today, there is perhaps a fairly general perception that prayer is more about communion with God in a spiritual sense rather than petition or intercession; words are seen as rather blunt instruments, to be abandoned as soon as possible. The evidence from the medieval period may be skewed in the sense that it mainly consists of words, but there is an urgency about the use of words and a wonder at their power that argues for their being seen as essential, sharp and effective in the exigencies of life at the most basic level, and in the pursuit of the beatific vision at the most elevated level. For over a millennium, the Lord's Prayer, with its praise, petition and appeals for forgiveness and protection, was fundamental to Christian catechism.

Prayer in extremity

Judith, a book in the apocryphal Old Testament, tells the story of the eponymous heroine who rescues the Israelites from the Assyrians by seducing the Assyrian general, Holofernes.² He gets drunk and in the privacy of his bedchamber, when he is

¹ There are of course many technical studies of sources and analogues of prayers in the liturgy and elsewhere, but relatively few of those in the vernacular. See Donald G. Bzdyl, 'Prayer in Old English Narratives', *Medium Ævum*, 51, 1982, pp. 135–151 for the latter. A recent book which frames prayer as gift-exchange in a rather similar way to the approach developed here is Stephanie Clark, *Compelling God: Theories of Prayer in Anglo-Saxon England*, Toronto, 2017.

² All Biblical quotations are from R. Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 4th edn. rev. by B. Fischer et al., Stuttgart, 1994. All translations are my own.

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asleep, she decapitates him; then she escapes and the Israelites rout the enemy army in their disarray. The story is paraphrased in the Old English poem *Judith*,³ but the English poet made changes to the Biblical story. Judith is portrayed as a virgin who is about to be raped by the drunken Holofernes, and who pleads for God's help as the general lies insensate on the bed.

Here is Judith's prayer:

'Ic ðe, frymða god ond frofre gæst,
bearn alwaldan, biddan wylle
85 miltse þinre me þearfendre,
ðrynesse ðrym. Þearle ys me nu ða
heorte onhæted ond hige geomor,
swyðe mid sorgum gedrefed. Forgif me, swegles ealdor,
sigor ond soðne geleafan, þæt ic mid þys sweorde mote
90 geheawan þysne morðres bryttan; geunne me minra gesynta,
þearlmod þeoden gumena. Nahte ic þinre næfre
miltse þon maran þearfe. Gewrec nu, mihtig dryhten,
torhtmod tires brytta, þæt me ys þus torne on mode,
hate on hreðre minum.' (83-94a)

[I want to ask, God of creation, and Spirit of comfort, Son of the Almighty, glory of the Trinity, for your mercy to me in my need. Now my heart is severely inflamed and my mind sad, greatly afflicted by sorrows. Grant me, Lord of heaven, victory and true faith, that I might strike this dealer of death; grant me my deliverance, severe Lord of men. I have never had greater need of your mercy. Mighty Lord, glorious giver of victory, avenge what is a grief to me in my heart, burning in my breast.]

The Biblical text, Judith Chapter 9, is a longer and more detailed but basically similar version of this prayer, which Judith utters before she embarks on the expedition to Holofernes' camp. In the Biblical bedroom scene, Judith merely prays, *Confirma me Domine Deus Israhel in hac hora* [Strengthen me, Lord God of Israel, in this hour, 13:10]. In both texts, Judith draws his sword, and with two strokes cuts off Holofernes' head.

Some interpreters, and students reading the texts for the first time instinctively, see this story in the Old English especially as demonstrating a sexist view that Judith is feeble, passive and dependent, and that the poet was denying her agency in line with patriarchal assumptions. This is to some extent reinforced by the Old English poet's presentation of Judith as a saintly virgin forced to be the object of Holofernes' evil intentions rather than the Biblical widow who contrives a seduction. But the same manuscript in which this poem occurs (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv) also contains *Beowulf*, and there are striking similarities between the texts that have not always been noted.

Beowulf has travelled to Hrothgar's court in Denmark to fight Grendel, the man-eating monster who has attacked the Danes for years. Beowulf presents himself and affirms he will fight Grendel without weapons so that the contest is fair, and leaves the outcome to God:

'... siþðan witig god
on swa hwæþere hond, halig dryhten,
mærðo deme, swa him gemet þince...'
Ac him dryhten forgeaf
wigspeda gewiofu, Wedera leodum,

³ Text from E. van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, New York, 1953. All translations of Old English are my own.

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frofor ond fultum, þæt hie feond heora
ðurh anes cræft ealle ofercomon,
selfes mihtum. Soð is gecyþed
þæt mihtig god manna cynnes
weold wideferhð. (685b–7, 696b–702a)⁴

[‘... then the wise God, the holy Lord, will decree glory for whichever one he thinks best...’ The Lord granted them, the people of the Geats, success in war, help and encouragement, so that they completely defeated their enemy, through the strength of one man and his own power. It is a well-known truth that mighty God has always ruled over the human race.]

Later in the poem, Beowulf goes to Grendel’s cave to fight his mother, whom he also kills. Then he cuts off Grendel’s head as a trophy and proof of his death and takes it back to Hrothgar.

There are of course significant differences between *Beowulf* and *Judith*, but the parallels are fairly marked too. Both protagonists invoke the help of God; both use a sword not belonging to them; both cut off the head of their opponent; both take the head back as a trophy; both are rewarded for their endeavours. Beowulf’s prayer is indirect and understated, but like Judith’s it is asking for something – victory in battle – and ultimately receiving it. The asking is in the context of a follower appealing to a generous lord. The relationship between the individual and God is conceived as that between a loyal warrior and their lord in a militaristic milieu, the relationship that characterised Anglo-Saxon aristocratic society. So in both cases the prayer, consigning the outcome to God’s grace, is hardly a sign of weakness, and even less a reflex of sexism, but rather the expression of a paradigmatic relationship with a lord, with the Lord.

Prayer and pattern

The examples of prayer mentioned so far reflect the pattern of secular society established in Anglo-Saxon England. But in the monasteries, prayer and life were almost indistinguishable: measured time itself was a reflex of prayer as monastics prayed the seven canonical ‘hours’ every day. This leaves its mark on religious texts, but there is also the possibility that the pattern of monastic prayer is reflected in the poem *The Battle of Maldon*.⁵

The battle was fought in August 991 between a force of Scandinavians and the army of Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex, near the island of Northey outside Maldon in Essex. The island on which the Scandinavians had landed was cut off by the tide. As the tide ebbs, the Scandinavians try to cross the causeway, and are cut down; so they appeal to Byrhtnoth for safe passage and a fair fight. Byrhtnoth allows them across, and commits the outcome of the battle to God. In the ensuing battle, Byrhtnoth is fatally wounded, and as he is dying he prays asking for the safe passage of his soul to God.

He to heofenum wlat:
‘Gefancie þe ðeoda waldend,
ealra þæra wynta þe ic on worulde gebad.
Nu ic ah, milde metod, mæste þearfe
þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,

⁴ Text from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, ed., *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn., Toronto, 2008.

⁵ Text from E. van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, New York, 1942.

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þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote
on þin geweald, þeoden engla,
mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymdi to þe
þæt hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton.' (171–80)

[He looked to the heavens: 'I thank you. Lord of the nations, for all the joys that I have experienced on earth. Now, merciful Lord, I have the greatest need that you grant good to my spirit, so that my soul might pass to you, into your power, Lord of the angels, might travel in peace. I beseech you that no hellish adversaries might harm it.']

The similarities between this and Jesus' committal of his spirit to the Father at the crucifixion, or Stephen's martyrdom in Acts, have been widely noted; and the idea that souls were vulnerable to attack by malevolent spirits on leaving the body is widespread in the medieval period.⁶ What is less obvious is a possible echo of vernacular prayers for the monastic hours.

Byrhtnoth was a supporter of the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England at a time when there was a reaction against the institutions because they engrossed land that was free of customary dues and inheritance rights in perpetuity.⁷ Dying without issue, he left his own lands to the monasteries of Ely and Ramsey. In a Winchester manuscript (British Library MS Cotton Galba A. xiv) approximately contemporary with Byrhtnoth, there is a series of prayers *ad horas* in Old English, among other entries.⁸ This is the introduction and the prayer for *none*, the hour said at approximately mid-afternoon:

Min drihten hælend Crist, ic do þe þancas ealre þara goda and þara
unarimedlicra fremsumnessa þe þu me synfullum sealdest.

None: Min drihten hælend Crist, þu þe on rode galgan ahangen wære and þone
scapan þu onfenge þe on þe gelyfde on þa fægernesse neorxnawonges gefean,
and hine mid þe feran lete ... ic bidde þe for þinre micelan mildheortnesse
þæt ic mote æfter minre forðfore neorxnawonges gatu agan.

[My Lord and Saviour Christ, I give you thanks for all the good things
and innumerable blessings that you have given to me, a sinner.

None: My Lord and Saviour Christ, you who on the gallows of the cross
were hung, and accepted the criminal who believed in you into the beauty
of paradise and let him travel with you ... I pray you, because of your
great mercy, that after my death I might have access to paradise.]

The writer here thanks God for the good things he has been given, and prays that he might be allowed into heaven when he dies. There are fairly obvious parallels with Byrhtnoth's prayer as he dies: he also thanks God for the good things he has received in life and asks for access to heaven. It is at least plausible that Byrhtnoth was in the habit of praying the monastic hours: the brief prayers in the Cotton Galba prayerbook are prayers for laypeople in the vernacular rather than the formal Latin liturgy. Byrhtnoth very likely died in the afternoon, after the turning of the tide and before the last stand of his faithful retainers, so his prayer, echoing the *none* prayer and prayed at the canonical hour, hints that Byrhtnoth's life was shaped by monastic discipline.

⁶ See further Paul Cavill, 'Interpretation of *The Battle of Maldon*, lines 84–90: a review and reassessment', *Studia Neophilologica*, 67, 1995, 149–64.

⁷ See Eric John, 'War and society in the tenth century: the Maldon campaign', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 27, 1977, 173–95.

⁸ Text from Bernard Muir, ed., *A Pre-Conquest English Prayer-Book*, Woodbridge, 1988, item 65, pp. 138–9.

Or perhaps as likely is the possibility that the poet composed in a monastic milieu and imagined Byrhtnoth's prayer after the pattern of the monastic hour. Byrhtnoth's prayer sets a seal on his life and death and gives meaning and purpose to events that otherwise would be profoundly depressing: defeat, death, cowardice, paying tribute, humiliation.

So far this essay has suggested that Anglo-Saxon prayer enacts a social rhetoric of relationship between lord and retainer, and invokes a monastic rhetoric that shapes time and eternity and reflects the pattern in one man's life. The final section pursues the idea of rhetorical patterning in a linguistic sense in Old English renderings of liturgical prayer.

Linguistic patterns

Many Latin liturgical prayers are translated into Old English, but the natural idioms and linguistic resources of the two languages are very different. Too close a translation of Latin structure and syntax sometimes makes prayers sound stilted. There are two poetic translations of the Song of the Three Children, or the *Benedicite*, from the longer version of the Biblical book of Daniel, in Old English. In both versions, the poets completely abandon the Latin structure and their versions give prominence to Anglo-Saxon concerns and ideas in vernacular verse style.

In the *Benedicite*, Daniel 3: 57 ff., everything created is urged to praise the Creator:

Benedicite omnia opera Domini Domino laudate et superexaltate eum in saecula
 benedicite angeli Domino laudate et superexaltate eum in saecula
 benedicite caeli Domino laudate et superexaltate eum in saecula, etc.

[All [you] works of the Lord, praise the Lord,
 praise him and magnify him for ever;
 [you] angels, praise the Lord, praise him and magnify him for ever;
 [you] heavens, praise the Lord, praise him and magnify him for ever, etc.]

Here the structural pattern is anaphora, with repeated verbs in the imperative (*benedicite, laudate, superexaltate*); the Lord is the object of the praise, and all the expressed pronouns are third person (*eum*). This produces an impersonal, regular structure: all things, *seriatim*, must praise the Lord. The rhetorical value of the anaphora is perhaps a sense of the comprehensiveness of the creation in heaven and earth, and its absolute duty to praise its maker.

The passage as translated in the Old English *Azarias*, from the Exeter Book, is as follows:⁹

Bletsige þec, bilwit fæder,
 woruldsceafta wuldor ond weorca gehwylc,
 heofonas ond englas ond hluttur wæter,
 ond eal mægen eorþan gesceafta.
 Bletsige þec, soðfæst cyning, sunne ond mona,
 leohte leoman, lifgende god,
 hædre ond hlutre ond heofondream
 wæstem weorðian. Ful oft þu, wuldorcýning,
 þurh lyft lætest leodum to fremre
 mildne morgenren. ...
 Wis bið se þe con
 ongytan þone geocend, þe us eall good syleð

⁹ Texts of *Azarias and Daniel* are from R. T. Farrell, ed., *Daniel and Azarias*, London, 1974..

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þe we habbað þenden we her beoð,
ond us milde meotod mare gehateð,
gif we geearniað, elne willað,
ðonne feran sceal þurh frean hæse
sundor anra gehwæs sawl of lice. (73–94)

[May the glory of worldly creatures bless you, gracious Father, and every created thing, the heavens and angels, and pure water, and all the host of earthly things. May the sun and moon, the bright lights pure and clear, and the fruits of heavenly bliss, bless and praise you, righteous King, living God. Very often you, King of glory, allow gentle morning rain to fall through the sky for the benefit of the people.... Wise is the one who is able to perceive the Saviour who gives us all good things that we have while we live here, and the gentle Lord who promises more if we deserve and earnestly desire them, when the soul has to travel at the command of the Lord, each one separately from the body.]

The Old English poet here dispenses with imperatives, and relatively quickly dispenses with anaphora. The verbs initially are subjunctive (*bletsige*), before the poet turns to relating God's generous gifts to people in the indicative (*lætest*) and reflecting on God's goodness in life and death. The pronouns are second person when referring to God (*þec, þu*), first person when referring to humans (*us, we*). There is a deliberate shift from the regularity, orderliness and impersonality of the original *Benedicite* to a strong sense of the relationship existing between earthly and heavenly things and their Creator. All things here are rhetorically permitted to worship God, who is conceived of as present and receptive of praise, as well as giving good gifts. This in turn prompts the poet to reflect on how necessary it is for us to see present gifts as harbingers of greater gifts to come after death.

A passage from the version of the *Benedicite* in the Old English poem *Daniel* in the Junius manuscript is as follows:

And þec, mihtig god, gastas lofige!
Byrnende fyr and beorht sumor
nergend hergað! Niht somod and dæg,
and þec landa gehwilc, leoht and þeostro,
herige on hade, somod hat and ceald!
And þec, frea mihtig, forstas and snawas,
winterbiter weder and wolcenfaru,
lofige on lyfte! And þec ligetu,
blace, berhtmhwate, þa þec bletsige! (372–80)

[And, mighty God, may spirits praise you. Burning fire and bright summer praise the Saviour. May night and day alike, and all lands, light and darkness, heat and cold together, praise you according to their condition. And may frosts and snows praise you in the heavens, mighty Lord, bitter winter clouds and fleeting skies. And may shining lightnings, swift as the blinking of an eye, may these bless you.]

Here the linguistic patterning is slightly more complex. There is still an emphasis on the presence of God with the second person pronoun (*þec*), but this becomes part of an Old English anaphora (*and þec* four times 372, 376, 378, 379) along with repeated subjunctives (*lofige* 372, 379), and indicative/subjunctive variation (*hergað* 374, *herige* 376). Alongside this, the poet preserves the arrangement of created things by contrast present in the Latin: night and day (374), light and dark (375), hot and cold (376). But he centres this within a larger contrast of warmth and fine weather (373–4) and cold

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stormy weather (377-80) which is not explicitly present in the Latin.

The rhetoric here is more artful, in a sense, than that of the Latin: it has less of simple repetition and more of structured variety, which evokes an awareness of the wonder of creation in its multiplicity and order. The involvement of human beings, so evident in the *Azarias* passage, is here found in the emotive vocabulary, *beorht*, *biter*, *berhtmlhwæt*: there is scarcely a descriptive adjective in the whole of the Latin text. The fronting of the pronoun *þec* 'you' emphasises that God is at the centre of all being and activity, and once again stresses the relational aspect of creatures to the Creator.

Overall, these translations of the *Benedicite* exploit the conventions of Old English language and verse structure to make the Latin text accessible to their audience. The prayer is patterned in a rhetoric that is adapted not only to the language, but also to the understanding of an Anglo-Saxon audience: praise of God, generosity and grace from God, respect and loyalty to God are central to the Old English versions. Loyalty and grace replace duty in the very language; choice replaces necessity on the part of the praiser, and acceptance replaces immutability on the part of the one praised.

Conclusion

In these rather different examples of prayers in Old English there are some common themes. Prayer is framed as asking and as praising, but in a relationship between the petitioner as a loyal follower and God as a generous Lord, reflecting the ideal relationships of Anglo-Saxon society. There are other patterns that indicate that prayer was not abstract but embedded in life: as prayer became a way of life, so life could be moulded around prayer. Byrhtnoth died as he had lived and his prayer validates not only his life but also perhaps the monastic way that he had supported. The translations of the *Benedicite* make that iconic prayer accessible in a native rhetoric that adds to its effectiveness for the Anglo-Saxon audience. So prayer was about petition and praise, but in the context of a relationship in which both of these were reflexes of loyalty and love. And this, in a variety of rhetorical forms, gives a genuine Anglo-Saxon inflection to the prayers that we find in Old English.

Poetry and prayer in medieval reclusive experience: the Wooing Group and the audience of *Ancrene Wisse*

Alicia Smith

Introduction: what is prayer like? What should it be like?

What is prayer like? Famously, George Herbert resorted to a grammatically free-floating list of more or less opaque images to attempt to describe it: 'the soul in paraphrase', 'a kind of tune', 'something understood'.¹ More recently and even more opaquely, Carol Ann Duffy depicts prayer 'utter[ing] itself' from the suggestive, half-automatic soundscapes which make up our memory and our unconscious: 'the minims sung by a tree', 'the distant Latin chanting of a train', 'the radio's prayer' of the shipping forecast.²

Medieval texts offer similarly wide-ranging and dense images for what prayer is like. Even a single genre – in this case, anchoritic instructional and related texts – yields a broad, not always commensurate range of ideas. Prayer is like flight, fire, fighting, food; like weaving, embracing, flattering, extorting; like incense, like medicine, like church bells.

But is prayer 'like' poetry? Or is there an even closer relation between them? Certainly poetry can describe prayer; none of the images listed above, however, come from explicitly poetic texts, but rather from eminently practical prose texts which aim to instruct and inspire their readers to a specific religious life.

There is a group of apparently poetic texts connected to one of these guidebooks – the so-called Wooing Group, which is my main focus in this article, is associated (albeit not uncontroversially) by manuscript history and dialect(s) with the early Middle English anchoritic guide *Ancrene Wisse*, generally dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. But the Wooing texts do not obviously attempt to describe prayer in the way that Herbert or Duffy do. Rather, they identify themselves both explicitly and implicitly *as* prayers.

For prayer to be identified with poetry – which I'm defining, in a rather rudimentary way closely (and old-fashionedly) connected with the idea of rhetoric, as text artfully shaped towards a union of beauty with meaning – was by no means an unproblematic idea in the thirteenth century. Contemporary commentators could be severe on what they saw as flowery language intruding on the purity of heart and mind required for prayer. Edmund of Abingdon, for example, fulminates that 'they do great shame and great irreverence to Jesus ... who take themselves to rhyming and curious words, and leave the prayer that He taught us', that is, the Lord's Prayer.³

¹ George Herbert, 'Prayer (I)' (1633).

² Carol Ann Duffy, 'Prayer' (1992).

³ Francesca M. Steele (trans.), *The Mirror of St Edmund Done into Modern English*, Burns and Oates, 1905, p.48; for the Latin, see Edmund of Abingdon, *Speculum Religiosorum and Speculum Ecclesie*, ed. H. P. Forshaw, Oxford University Press, 1973, pp.73-75: 'Ista oracio superat et excellit omnem aliam oracionem in dignitate et utilitate. In dignitate, qui ipsemet Deus illam fecit; et ideo facit ille magnum dedecus et magnam irreverenciam Iesu Dei Filio, qui sibi accipit verba ritmica et curiosa, dimittitque et relinquit oracionem quam ipsemet composuit.'

Stephen of Sawley advises, more gently, that '[i]f you spend the canonical hours in this way, you will have a greater confidence in what the Lord Jesus suffered for you during one hour than you would have from your merits or [personal] prayers.... The wondrous efficacy of this sacred activity [Divine Office] is far superior to all private prayer.'⁴

The Wooing texts, as I'll go on to show, are finely wrought, artful pieces of early Middle English devotional literature, and it is as such that they have largely been researched and analysed by modern critics. The context of their composition is difficult to judge, but their probable initial context of use was as part of the devotional library of anchoritic women: specifically, as material for their extensive and flexible prayer routine. Are these two aspects of the texts in conflict, as Edmund might have thought? In the rest of this article I suggest that they do not need to be. The Wooing Group texts enact and structure prayer, inculcating in their readers a model of devotion which relies on an essential unity between textual and prayerful engagement.

Setting the scene – anchoritism and the Wooing texts

Anchoritism is the usual term for the vocation of religious solitude which was practised by Christians from the fourth century onwards, and which was a fairly common and highly respected lifestyle in high medieval Europe. In thirteenth century England, anchorites tended to live in cells, often attached to a church, so that they could have access to the Mass through a window. They were both male and female, although in England at this time there seems to be a greater number of women from what can be inferred from the historical record.⁵ They committed to perpetual stability in the same place and to a chaste, enclosed religious life, spending their time in prayer, reading, and sometimes speaking with and advising others. *Ancrene Wisse* is our most detailed witness to this lifestyle. It is a treatise in eight parts, written by an anonymous author to a specific group of anchoritic women, probably living in the same region of either Shropshire or Herefordshire, and contains instruction on multiple practical and theological topics.

Several other thirteenth century texts repeatedly circulate in manuscripts along with *Ancrene Wisse* and share dialectal and thematic features, and for this reason are sometimes called the 'Ancrene Wisse Group'. Within this, a smaller group of short texts, known to modern scholarship as the 'Wooing Group', is my main concern in this paper. The term is a twentieth century invention, and now generally refers to five individual texts; the name comes from the longest, titled in its only manuscript copy *De Wohunge of ure Lauerd* [The Wooing of our Lord].

The other four texts are significantly shorter, and three have fairly workmanlike titles attached to one of their extant copies: 'On wel swuðe god ureisun of God almihti' [An excellent prayer to God Almighty], 'Pe oreisun of seinte Marie' [The prayer to saint Mary], and 'On god ureisun of ure lefdi' [A good prayer to our Lady]. The fifth text has no extant title but was labelled 'Lofsong of ure lauerd' [A song of praise to our

⁴ Stephen of Sawley, *Treatises*, trans. Jeremiah F. O'Sullivan, ed. Bede K. Lackner, Cistercian Publications, 1984, pp.183-84; for the Latin, see E. Mikkers, 'Un traité inédit d'Etienne de Salley sur la psalmodie', *Cîteaux* 23 (1972), 245-288: 288: 'Igitur cum ad horas canonicas taliter steteris, maiorem fiduciam habebis de his, quae Dominus Iesus pro te sustinuit tali hora quam de meritis vel orationibus tuis.'

⁵ Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their patrons in medieval England*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p.19.

Lord] by its twentieth century editor, W. Meredith Thompson.⁶

The reasons for grouping these texts together, and for connecting them to *Ancrene Wisse*, stem both from a shared dialect – the West Midlands literary dialect which Tolkien first identified, calling it the ‘AB language’⁷ – and from several manuscript associations. The four shorter texts all appear together in the Cotton Nero A.xiv manuscript, which also includes an important version of *Ancrene Wisse*. *Wohunge* appears in London, British Library MS Cotton Titus D.xviii, along with another version of *Ancrene Wisse*, and three texts from the so-called ‘Katherine Group’ in the same dialect.⁸ Two of those texts also feature alongside an incomplete version of ‘*Pe oreisun of seinte Marie*’ in British Library MS Royal 17 A.xxvii.

Wohunge is the longest of the five, and also the most formally and devotionally innovative. It addresses Christ as the beautiful courtly beloved of the soul, naming his lovely and eligible qualities, recounting his noble and loving deeds through his life and death, and performing an emotionally intense meditation on the Passion which seeks to mirror and understand his suffering.

‘On wel swuðe god ureisun of God almihti’ starts in a very similar vein, giving loving names to Christ; it goes on to lament the separation of the speaker from him, and to ask for his intercession. This love-talk model of spirituality is also referenced in ‘Lofsong of ure lauerd’, with the speaker identifying herself with the ‘meiden’ of the Song of Songs as the ‘leouemon’ of Christ, but is mostly more generically focused on the salvific power of God over sin.

The final two texts are structured more around prayer to the Virgin than to Christ. ‘*Pe oreisun of seinte Marie*’ is a loose translation of a Latin prayer by the eleventh century bishop Marbod of Rennes, following its source’s lead in its address to the Virgin and requests for her intercession, but more radically adapting the latter half into an extended meditation on the Passion. ‘On god ureisun of ure lefdi’ is the least like the rest of the Group in many ways, and



Detail from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 79 fol.9 showing a bishop enclosing an anchoress.

⁶ W. Meredith Thompson (ed.), *Pe wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, O. S. 241, 1958. All quotations in the original Middle English are from this edition, with line numbers given in brackets, except for quotations from ‘On god ureisun of ure lefdi’, which are from Carleton Brown (ed.), *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932, pp.3-8. Where translations are included, they are taken from Catherine Innes-Parker (ed. and trans.), *The Wooing of our Lord and the Wooing Group Prayers*, Peterborough, Ontario, Broadview Press, 2015.

⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘Ancrene Wisse and Hali Meidhad’, *Essays and Studies*, 14 (1929), 104-26.

⁸ The rest of the texts making up the ‘Ancrene Wisse Group’ are often referred to together as the ‘Katherine Group’: prose lives of three virgin martyrs, Katherine, Margaret, and Juliana; a treatise on virginity called *Hali Meidhad*, ‘Holy Virginity’; and an allegory of virtue and vice in the soul, *Sawles Warde*, ‘The Guardianship of the Soul’. These can all be read in translation, along with *Pe Wohunge of ure Lauerd*, in Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (ed. and trans.), *Anchoritic spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and associated works*, New York, Paulist Press, 1991.

for this reason has not been edited with the other texts until fairly recently, despite its manuscript proximity. It is the only one in rhyming couplets, has an explicitly male speaker and (presumably) author who identifies himself as a monk in the final lines, and addresses Mary primarily as Queen of Heaven rather than grieving mother of God, drawing on a courtly model of the feudal vassal to a distant, glorious lady.

What are the texts like?

The opening lines of *Wohunge* are justly some of the best known of the Group:

Iesu swete iesu . mi druð . mi derling . mi drihtin . mi healend mi huniter . mi haliwei . Swetter is munegunge of þe þen mildeu o muðe . Hwa ne mei luue þi luueli leor ? Hwat herte is swa hard þat ne mei to melte iþe munegunge of þe? Ah hwa ne mei luue þe luueliche iesu ? for inwið þe ane arn alle þe þinges igedered þat eauer muhen makien ani mon luuewurði to oðer . (ll. 1-13)

[Jesus, sweet Jesus, my dearest, my darling, my lord, my saviour, my honey drop, my healing balm. Sweeter is the memory of you than nectar in the mouth. Who would not love your lovely face? What heart is so hard, that would not melt in the memory of you? Ah, who would not love you, lovely Jesus? For within you alone are gathered all the things that might ever make anyone worthy of another's love.]

The meditative naming of Jesus, reiterative and pleasingly alliterative, suspends the speaker in extragrammatical, even extratemporal contemplation of his 'lovely face'. The device recurs in the next section:

Nu mi derewurðe druð . mi luue . mi lif . mi leof . mi luueleuest mi heorte haliwei . mi sawle swetnesse . (ll. 32-36)

Now, my dearworthy darling, my love, my life, my beloved, my dearest love, my heart's healing balm, my soul's sweetness.

There are shorter recapitulations of similar language throughout the text, constantly recalling the reader to the loving gaze of the heart. The opening of 'On wel swuðe god ureisun', as well as directly echoing some of the terms used in the opening of *Wohunge*, extends the sequence of 'names' still longer before reaching a main verb:

Iesu soð god soð godes sune . Iesu soð god . soð mon . & soð meidenes bern . Iesu min holi luue . Mi sikere spetnesse . Iesu min heorte . mine soule hele . Swete iesu mi leof . mi lif . mi leome . min healewi . min huni ter . þu ert al þet ich hopie . Iesu mi weole . mi wunne . mi bliðe breostes blisse . (ll. 1-7)

Jesus true God, true God's son. Jesus true God, true man, and truly born of a maiden. Jesus my holy love. My sure sweetness. Jesus my heart, my soul's salvation. Sweet Jesus my beloved, my life, my light, my healing balm, my honey-drop. You are all that I hope for. Jesus, my comfort, my delight, my happy heart's joy.

Anaphoric listing is another major device, with grammatically similar phrases piling up on top of one another: *Wohunge* contains a particularly vivid example at the height of its meditation on the Passion, with the speaker repeatedly exclaiming 'A nu', 'Ah, now', to introduce descriptions of the suffering of the crucified Christ:

A nu is mi lefmon demd for to deien . A nu mon ledes him forð to munte caluarie to þe cwalm stowe . [...] A nu haue þai broht him þider . A nu raise þai up þe rode . (ll. 491-504)

[Ah, now my lover is condemned to die! Ah, now he is led forth to Mount Calvary, to

the place of death! [...] Ah, now they have brought him here! Ah, now they raise up the cross!]

‘On wel swuðe god ureisun’ employs the same approach to lament the speaker’s own lack of gratitude towards Jesus, with a series of ‘Why’ exclamations describing the quality of love she wishes she had.

The overriding theme of these texts is love: centrally Christ’s love for the reader and the reader’s love for Christ, with love for and of the Virgin also crucial. The tone is intense and emotional: sweetness, on the tongue and in the heart, is an ever-present metaphor, drawing on the discourse epitomised in the period by Bernard of Clairvaux’s hymn ‘Jesu dulcis memoria’.⁹ Even ‘On god ureisun of ure lefdi’, with its depiction of a powerful Virgin enthroned above the angels, addresses her as ‘Mi leoue swete lefdi’ [My beloved sweet lady], and this adjective is attached to her name repeatedly as well as to Christ’s.

This highly emotional register, however, should not lead us to treat these texts as outpourings of unmediated feeling. They carefully guide the reader, or devotional speaker, through logical structures of thought and meditation; they arrange language in complex rhetorical patterns. Elizabeth Salter has noted that *Wohunge*, in particular, displays numerous verbal techniques drawn straight from the rhetorical handbooks being developed at the time from Ciceronian models.¹⁰ She points in particular to Marbod of Rennes’ *De Ornamentis Verborum*, whose definition of repetitio, anaphora, is illustrated by a Latin exemplar strikingly reminiscent of the lines we have just read:

Tu mihi lex, mihi rex, mihi lux, mihi dux, mihi vindex;
Te colo, te laudo, te glorifico, tibi plaudo.¹¹

Furthermore, the texts frequently employ the techniques of alliterative poetry, along with other assonances and playful verbal juxtapositions. A representative example is this line of ‘Lofsong of ure lauerd’:

Deorewurðe drihten ase þu ert redlease red. red me þat am helples ant redles. (ll. 84-86)

[Precious Lord, as you are the counsellor of the perplexed, counsel me, who am helpless and confused.]

But the obvious skill and delight in poetic language displayed by these texts is never for its own sake. The relationality so strongly conveyed by the use of the first and second person, expressing bonds of love between the speaker, Christ, and his Mother, brings the poetic language alive as prayer.

What might they have been used for?

What context, then, should we imagine for the devotional use of these texts? I have sketched out above the reasons for believing the Wooing texts to be associated with the textual community for which *Ancrene Wisse* was written. There are also, especially in *Wohunge*, aspects of imagery and devotional concern which suggest, if not absolutely prove, an anticipated reclusive audience. One of the key examples of this is the

⁹ See André Wilmart, *Le Jubilus dit de Saint Bernard: étude avec textes*, Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1944. Still sung today in the form of ‘Jesu, the very thought of Thee’.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Salter, *English and International: studies in the literature, art and patronage of medieval England*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.73.

¹¹ Marbod of Rennes, *De Ornamentis verborum; Liber decem capitolorum: retorica, mitologia e moralità di un vescovo poeta (secc.XI-X)*, eds. Rosario Leotta and Carmelo Crimi, Firenze, SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998, p.4.

description in *Wohunge* of the devotional speaker, empathising with Christ on the cross, ‘sperrd querfaste wið inne fowr wahes’ – ‘enclosed securely within four walls’, as Catherine Innes-Parker translates it.¹² The metaphor of the enclosed *bur*, bower, also appears in both *Wohunge* and ‘On wel swuðe god ureisun’, depicting both the heart of Christ, into which he welcomes the anchoress, and the heart of the anchoress, into which she welcomes Christ, as reciprocally enfolding anchorholds, patterned after the bedchamber of the Song of Songs. So an anchoritic context of reading, if not also composition, seems plausible and expected.

The manuscript of *Wohunge* contains an interesting postscript which actually suggests to the reader how to use the text:

hwæn þu art on eise carpe toward iesu & seie þise wordes & þenc as tah he heng beside
þe blodi up o rode. (ll. 650-55)

[when you are at leisure, speak to Jesus, and say these words, and imagine that he hangs
beside you, bloody upon the cross.]

Several aspects of this are interesting. The verbs ‘carpe’ and ‘seie’ are notably low-register, particularly the former, seeming to connote an easy intimacy between the reader/speaker and Jesus. The third imperative, ‘þenc’, layers a cognitive, in fact imaginative, task on top of the recitation implied by ‘seie þise wordes’, evoking the presence of the suffering Christ close to the person of the speaker.

The idea of being ‘on eise’ is also suggestive. The routine recommended by the *Ancrene Wisse* author is detailed and comprehensive, but even the most conscientious anchorite would have parts of the day where she would not have prayer or other forms of devotion scheduled; where she was ‘at leisure’, in one potential sense of this phrase. Moreover, *Ancrene Wisse* explicitly allows for more or less spontaneous devotional activity outside the structure of the routine: the author assumes that his readers have access to ‘redunge in Englisc oðer in French’ and ‘halie meditatiuns’, and encourages them to use them at their discretion.¹³ The Wooing texts seem reasonable potential candidates for material for these extralitururgical practices.

Lectio divina, the monastic mode of engaging with texts which was developed and practised over the medieval period, is at the foundation of how the Wooing texts are designed to be used. In its most basic form it was understood to involve *lectio*, reading, *meditatio*, meditation, and *oratio*, prayer – but while some contemporary treatises present this as a neatly structured hierarchy or ascent, in practice the three elements were and are difficult to distinguish, and in *Ancrene Wisse* in particular the expectation seems to be that they will inevitably blend together. One striking example of this is the author’s statement that ‘Redunge is god bone’¹⁴ – ‘Reading is good prayer’, or ‘a good way to pray’.

The Wooing texts invite this kind of dense engagement: one *says* the words, and also *thinks* of Christ in a focused, meditative way, in order to speak *towards* him, establishing the whole process as essentially relational, and therefore prayerful. It’s very clear from the ways the texts are constructed and presented in their manuscripts that slow, ruminative reading was the ideal: punctus marks litter the manuscripts, working alongside the existing stylistic preferences for listing, exclamatives, and short,

¹² Innes-Parker (ed.), *The Wooing*, p.109.

¹³ Bella Millett (ed.), *Ancrene Wisse: A corrected edition of the text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402*, Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, O. S. 325, 2005, I. 394.

¹⁴ Millett (ed.), *Ancrene Wisse*, IV. 1554-55.

memorable phrases, to scaffold the reader's breathing and attention with frequent pauses for reflection. In *Wohunge*, a refrain – 'A iesu swete iesu leue [grant] þat te luue of þe beo al mi likinge' (ll. 77-79 *inter alia*) – further punctuates the movement of the meditation, concluding each successive section. After several instances, the manuscript scribe stops writing it out in full, substituting an 'etcetera' mark, with the understanding that the reader will be able to supply the rest – just as prayers assumed to be well known are truncated or referred to by their incipits in the *Ancrene Wisse* prayer routine. Poetics is here integrated with prayer practice.

Nicholas Watson, writing on the meaning of being 'on eise', asserts that, 'The Wooing Group is a body of literature, a series of imaginative texts defined – as literary writing is generally defined – precisely by the fact that they are unnecessary: useful, pleasurable, in the case of *Wohunge* sometimes very funny, as well as urgent and powerfully moving, but not designed to be authoritative or definitive of the way of life they portray.'¹⁵ While this usefully captures the sense of delight in language and invention discernible in the texts, it is nonetheless an unhelpful formulation where it splits off the literary – the 'unnecessary', in Watson's terms – from the day-to-day anchoritic work of prayer.

Liturgy and poetry

Watson's argument rests on the idea that 'saying the prayers of the Wooing Group was easy by comparison' with the liturgy¹⁶ – the backbone of the anchoritic routine, as we see it in *Ancrene Wisse*. Certainly the 'on eise' description does seem to associate the texts with a more relaxed context. In addition there is the fact that these texts are in the vernacular, rather than Latin. It has often been assumed that this is to aid the comprehension and internalisation of the presumed female, lay audience; however, this is an explanation which can only go so far, given the clearly monastic compositional context of 'On god ureisun of ure lefdi' and the presence of Latin within *Wohunge* itself.¹⁷

Moreover, the texts themselves don't always bear out a sharp distinction between spontaneous vernacular prayer, and ritualised Latin liturgy. 'On god ureisun of ure lefdi', for example, draws extensively on musical lexis in a way which blurs boundaries between its own recitation as a stand-alone text, and liturgy as the earthly echo of the song of the angels. Its favoured verb for the action of praise is *singen*, as in this example:

Ich ouh wurðie ðe mid alle mine mihte.
And singge þe lofsong bi dai ant bi nihte. (ll. 7-8)

[I ought to honour you with all my might,
And sing you love-songs by day and by night.]

Sung praise to Mary expands out from the personal to the general, culminating in the song of the angelic court of heaven:

Murie dreameð engles biuoren þin onsene.

¹⁵ Nicholas Watson, 'Afterword: 'On Eise'' in Susanna M. Chewning (ed.), *The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2009, pp.194-210 (p. 208).

¹⁶ Watson, 'Afterword', p. 208.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Robertson's argument about the linguistic heterogeneity of *Ancrene Wisse* is apt here: 'The anchoresses experienced texts in a variety of languages ... they probably experienced the French, Latin, and English passages they encountered in the *Wisse* as interchangeable text' ('"This Living Hand": Thirteenth-Century Female Literacy, Materialist Immanence, and the Reader of *Ancrene Wisse*', *Speculum*, 78:1 (2003) 1-35: 12.)

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Pleieð. ant sweieð. ant singeð. bitweonen. (ll. 27-28)

Before you the angels merrily rejoice,
Play and make melody and sing with loud voice.

Finally, at the end of the text the speaker expresses his wish that

And alle mine ureondmen þe bet beo nu to dai.
Pat ich habbe i sungen þe ðesne englissce lai. (ll. 167-68)

And all my brothers and sisters be the better now today,
Because I have sung for you this English lay.

The identification of the text as an ‘englissce lai’ is interesting on its own in terms of genre, but to my mind there also seems to be a pun here, in the same vein as the famous story of Gregory the Great seeing English slaves and calling them not Angles but angels: the praise-song which the author has ‘sungēn’, is also sung by the angels in heaven.

The plural first person in this text, alongside the explicit monastic context as the speaker identifies himself as a *munuch*, monk, clearly suggests the identification of ‘singing’ in this context with liturgical worship. In an anchoritic context, the address to Mary potentially lines up with the distinctive Marian focus in the *Ancrene Wisse* prayer routine – the anchoresses are expected to use the short version of the Divine Office known as the ‘Little Hours of the Virgin’, and several of the structures of prayer which the author recommends focus on the Virgin, her Five Joys, and her dual identities as Queen of Heaven and mother of God. The two Wooing texts which focus on Mary, as well as portions of the other texts which also call on her, can be seen as working creatively within this specific liturgical context, bringing it alive in parallel devotional material.

‘Pe oreisun of seinte Marie’, as well as the sections of *Wohunge* and ‘On wel swuðe god ureisun’ which address her, focus on the Virgin as the grieving mother before the Cross. In this, they provide material for private, ruminative meditation on the Passion, through the powerful emotional lens of Mary’s suffering; but they also mimic the liturgical structures which organised the anchoritic day. Anchorites, like other religious, marked the hours of the morning by the progress of the Passion, culminating in Mass. The Wooing texts which trace this narrative cross and re-cross the boundaries of liturgical engagement to promote radical sympathy, an intentional entering into Mary’s pain, as they elsewhere enter into Christ’s, in order to promote wholehearted love and devotion.

Prayer, poetry, and thought

Moving into the final stage of my argument now, the concept of memory, or more specifically remembrance, will serve to illustrate a last example of the way in which the Wooing texts unite poetic and prayerful engagement. The term *munegunge*, ‘remembering’, appears twice in *Wohunge* and once in ‘On wel swuðe god ureisun’. The first two have already been referred to: ‘Swetter is munegunge of þe þen mildeu o muðe’ (ll. 3-5) [Sweeter is the memory of you than nectar in the mouth.], the *Wohunge* speaker declares, and wonders ‘Hwat herte is swa hard þat ne mei to melte iþe munegunge of þe?’ (ll. 6-8) [What heart is so hard, that would not melt in the memory of you?]. In a similar rhetorical question, the speaker of ‘On wel swuðe god ureisun’ asks ‘hwi ne cusse ich þe sweteliche ine goste wið swete munegunge of þine

goddeden?’ (ll. 79-81) [Why do I not kiss you sweetly in spirit, with sweet memory of your good deeds?].

On one level, these instances refer relatively simply to focused thought on Christ – ‘remembering’ him in the sense of thinking about him and his life. The meaning of the term, however, is not unrelated to one way of describing liturgical prayer practice, the Latin *memoria Dei*. What’s more, in these cases, ‘remembering’ Christ is not tied to the past, his life on earth, in any concrete way, but rather it evokes the atemporal moment in which the meditating reader encounters him. The metaphorical discourse of sweetness is prevalent here: the memory of Christ is sweeter than honey, eliciting sweet spiritual kisses. The emphasis is not on intercession, or even primarily on confession or praise, but on embrace, the loving touch achieved not through physical proximity but through the words on the page and in the mouth, brought alive by the spiritual efficacy of prayer.

The poet Pádraig Ó Tuama has drawn a connection between poetry and prayer, offering a definition of both modes as essentially ‘thinking in the second person’: moving beyond simple self-reflection or inner meditation, towards the hope for or belief in an Other, a ‘you’ to be spoken to. To go back to the instruction in *Wohunge* for how to use the text, readers are told to ‘think’ as though Christ is beside them: the model here is decidedly not simply cognitive in the bare sense we often assign to ‘thinking’, but is also *affective*, flowing from the heart into second-person embrace of Christ as Other and Beloved. In fact, twice in *Wohunge*, ‘the heart’ acts as the grammatical subject of the verb *þenchen*: ‘hwat herte ne mai to breke hwen ha herof *þenches* hu þu þoledes’ (ll. 422-27) [‘what heart might not break when [it] thinks of how you ... suffered’]; ‘hwat tunge mai hit telle, hwat heorte mai hit *þenche* for sorhe’ (ll. 458-60) [what tongue can tell it, what heart can think it for sorrow’].

The way the affect is used here was the foundation of the flowering of late medieval visual devotion: actual, visual contemplation of images of Christ (and Mary) formed a large part of devotional life in this period, and is clearly involved in how the writers of these texts think about what they are doing.¹⁸ Here the poetry itself is both the means and the object of this contemplation. The text itself is the locus of concentrated communion with the Beloved who is named, embraced, and enclosed within its lines.

To conclude, this brief look at the early Middle English Wooing texts illustrates the extent to which, for these authors and readers, poetry was not just *like* prayer: it *was* prayer, when practised in the context of a life turned wholly to communion with God, his Mother, and his saints. The poetic approaches of these texts, which build on the existing construction of the self and way of life through liturgical practice, shape the person and her devotional life along specific lines, returning repeatedly to particular modes of thought and imagination.

While some models of prayer lean into its ineffability and mystery – Herbert’s ‘something understood’ and Duffy’s ‘sudden gift’ – the prayer life expected and modelled by the Wooing Group is at its centre disciplined and practical. Its end point has the same penitential tenor as does the theological thought of Ancrene Wisse, but this is not penance as we often think of it, dreary and masochistic. Prayer in these texts is concerned ultimately with the life of love: the paradoxical sweetness of denying the self, in order to practise, and to receive in return, the love of Christ.

¹⁸ See Sara Lipton, “‘The Sweet Lean of his Head’: Writing about Looking at the Crucifix in the High Middle Ages”, *Speculum* 80:4 (2005), pp.1172-1208, for an interesting analysis of one particular manifestation of this practice.

The Form of Prayer and the Spirit of Prayer: George Herbert and John Bunyan in Conversation

David Parry

ON 30 AUGUST 2018, THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND CALENDAR COMMEMORATED THE LIFE of John Bunyan, the Nonconformist tinker-preacher best known as the author of the allegorical journey narrative *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The collect or prayer for the day in *Common Worship* skilfully weaves together phrases and ideas from Bunyan's writing:

God of peace,
who called your servant John Bunyan
to be valiant for truth:
grant that as strangers and pilgrims
we may at the last rejoice with all Christian people
in your heavenly city;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.¹

When posted to the Facebook group of the International John Bunyan Society a few years ago, one group member replied, 'How ironic!' This liturgical commemoration of Bunyan could be seen as ironic since it was for preaching without authorisation from the established Church of England to a separatist Dissenting congregation that Bunyan was imprisoned.²

But there is a more specific irony in the commemoration of Bunyan through a liturgical prayer. This is that Bunyan's imprisonment was in least in part a product of his opposition to the Book of Common Prayer, and more broadly to fixed written liturgical prayers of any kind.³ At his first court appearance at the Bedford quarter sessions, Bunyan engaged in the following exchange with the presiding judge Sir John Kelynge:

KEELIN. But saith Justice *Keelin* (who was the judge in that court), Do you come to church (you know what I mean) to the parish church, to hear divine service?

BUN. I answered, no, I did not.

KEEL. He asked me, why?

BUN. I said, because I did not find it commanded in the word of God.

¹ *Common Worship: Festivals*, Church House Publishing, 2008, p. 175. Also available online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer/night-prayer-contemporary-thursday-30-august-2018> (accessed 31 December 2018).

² The modern Church of England has a habit of celebrating those who were its historic opponents – the Anglican calendar of commemorations similarly includes those such as Thomas More and John Fisher who died for their defence of the Pope's authority over against Henry VIII's claim to royal supremacy over the church. Rowan Williams in various places has called this a 'martyrial ecumenism', in which the Church of England seeks to recognise the face of Christ in those whose understanding of their obedience to Christ placed them in opposition to the established Church of the day. See, for instance, Rowan Williams, 'On Witness and Holiness', in Tamara Grdzeldze and Guido Dotti, eds., *A Cloud of Witnesses: Opportunities for Ecumenical Commemoration*, World Council of Churches, 2010, pp. 22–25.

³ For the context of Bunyan's imprisonment, see, for instance, Richard L. Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent*, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 127–45.

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KEEL. He said, we were commanded to pray.

BUN. I said, but not by the Common Prayer-book.

KEEL. He said, how then?

BUN. I said with the spirit. As the Apostle saith, *I will pray with the spirit and with understanding*, 1 Cor. xiv. 15.

KEEL. He said, we might pray with the spirit, and with understanding, and with the Common Prayer-book also.

BUN. I said that those prayers in the Common Prayerbook, was such as was made by other men, and not by the motions of the Holy Ghost, within our Hearts; and as I said the Apostle saith, he will pray with the spirit and with understanding; not with the spirit and the Common Prayerbook.⁴

We have this transcript courtesy of a series of letters Bunyan wrote to his supporters that were published in the eighteenth century as *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, so it may not be an entirely impartial memory. Shortly after this, Kelynge is made to look ridiculous with the words 'No, no, never fear him, we are better established than so; he can do no harm, we know the Common Prayer-book hath been ever since the Apostles time, and is lawful to be used in the church.'⁵

Bunyan's arguments while on trial are developed at greater length in a work Bunyan wrote from prison, entitled *I Will Pray with the Spirit* (1662).⁶ In the early stages of his imprisonment, Bunyan was allowed out from time to time, and Richard Greaves suggests that *I Will Pray with the Spirit* expands on his anti-Prayer Book preaching 'during his period of freedom in the late summer and early autumn of 1661'.⁷ Although rightly labelled an anti-Prayer Book tract, a relatively small portion of the work as a whole directly attacks the Prayer Book and its adherents, though the passages that do are pretty cutting. Much of the work outlines Bunyan's theology of prayer, with a particular emphasis on his conviction that true prayer must come from the heart and be inspired by the Holy Spirit. Bunyan gives the following definition of prayer, which he then breaks down into seven points which he expounds one at a time:

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the holy Spirit, for such things as God hath promised, or, according to the Word, for the good of the Church, with submission, in Faith, to the Will of God.⁸

Expounding his Pauline text, Bunyan explores what it means to pray with the Spirit and with understanding, which for Bunyan means both in one's own native language and with an experiential understanding of the need to be saved from the wrath of God, and the grace of God making the believer a child of God who can approach him in prayer.

⁴ John Bunyan, *A Relation of My Imprisonment*, in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock, Oxford, Clarendon, 1963, p. 114.

⁵ Bunyan, *A Relation of My Imprisonment*, pp. 116–17.

⁶ On *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, see Brian G. Najapfour, *The Very Heart of Prayer: Reclaiming the Spirituality of John Bunyan*, Memphis, TN, Borderstone, 2012; Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, pp. 151–59; Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2006, esp. pp. 43–45, 63–66, 76–77; and Michael A. G. Haykin, 'John Bunyan on Praying with the Holy Spirit', in Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour (eds.), *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Reformation Heritage Books, 2011, pp. 109–119.

⁷ Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory*, pp. 151–52.

⁸ John Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, ed. Richard L. Greaves, in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. II, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, p. 7.

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It is true that Bunyan sees this as precluding the use of written prayers, a position not adhered to by moderate Puritans such as Richard Baxter, who were in favour of reforming the liturgy of the established Church but not opposed to written liturgy in principle,⁹ but I would argue that it is concern about the work of the Spirit in the regenerate heart that forms the heart of Bunyan's theology of prayer, and not simply the rejection of a fixed liturgy.

Bunyan sees the conformist persecutors of godly Dissenters as elevating the form of prayer above the spirit of prayer:

And if I should say, That men that do these things afore-said, do advance a Form of Prayer of other mens making, above the Spirit of Prayer, it would not take long time to prove it. [...] look into the Goals in *England*, and into the Alehouses of the same: and I believe, you will find those that plead for the Spirit of Prayer in the Goal, and them that look after the Form of mens Inventions only, in the Alehouse.¹⁰

However, I would like to place Bunyan's account of prayer in dialogue with that of a conformist seventeenth century religious writer, the poet George Herbert.¹¹ Best known for his posthumously published verse collection *The Temple* (1633), Herbert's poems, like Bunyan's allegories, appeal devotionally to Christian readers across denominations, as well as having a literary beauty and often apparent simplicity that appeals to scholars and to general readers without Christian faith. My wife and I have been reading slowly through *The Temple* since the early days of our courtship – though we haven't finished yet, we find both literary enjoyment and devotional nourishment in its pages.

After a privileged upbringing and a Cambridge education that led to his appointment as University Orator, Herbert felt compelled by a divine call to ordination, and then to serve as rector to the village community of Bemerton in Wiltshire. It is for his three years there before his untimely death at the age of thirty-nine that Herbert is most celebrated. Herbert is sometimes called 'quintessentially Anglican',¹² and his book *The Country Parson* contributes to his image as a saintly icon of the gentle rural parish priest. Objectively speaking, Herbert is at odds with Bunyan in his adherence to the established episcopal Church, his embrace of the church calendar, and his use of the Church of England's written liturgy. However, I would contend that Herbert and Bunyan are not far apart when it comes to what constitutes the inner heart of true prayer in the life of the Christian believer.

A 2001 article in *Renaissance Quarterly* by Robert Whalen is entitled 'George Herbert's Sacramental Puritanism', and I am in agreement with Whalen that Herbert navigates between the polarities in the Church of his day by combining the Puritan focus on inward holiness with a more high church Laudian sensibility that values the outward beauty of church buildings, the liturgy and the rhythm of the church year as an aid to such devotion.¹³ Whalen argues that, 'Unmistakably inward in focus,

⁹ See Brian G. Najapfour, "'After this manner therefore pray ye": Puritan Perspectives on the Lord's Prayer', *Puritan Reformed Journal*, 4.2, July 2012, 158–169.

¹⁰ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, in MW, II:284.

¹¹ For Herbert's biography, see John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert*, University of Chicago Press, 2014, and Helen Wilcox's entry on Herbert in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹² For instance, John H. Darch and Stuart K. Burns, *Saints on Earth: A Biographical Companion to the Common Calendar*, Church House Publishing, rev. ed. 2017, p. 34.

¹³ Herbert's mediating position may at least partially account for the breadth of his posthumous appeal to both high churchmen such as Izaak Walton and Dissenters such as Richard Baxter. See,

Herbert's devotional enthusiasm is cultivated nonetheless through a fully sacramental apparatus'.¹⁴

Herbert emphasises the importance of attending the liturgical public worship of the parish church in his poem *The Church Porch*, the long instructional poem that introduces *The Temple*. Herbert appears to elevate the public prayers of the whole parish above both private individual prayer and the prayers of small gatherings of family or friends, perhaps alluding to the conventicles of the self-consciously godly Puritans:¹⁵

Though private prayer be a brave designe,
 Yet publick hath more promises, more love:
 And love's a weight to hearts, to eies a signe.
 We are but cold suitours; let us move
 Where it is warmest. Leave thy six and seaven;
 Pray with the most: for where most pray, is heaven.¹⁶

Herbert seems to elevate public liturgical prayer over preaching, in a reversal of the typical priorities for public worship in the Puritan mind:

Resort to sermons, but to prayers most:
 Praying's the end [= goal] of preaching.¹⁷

Herbert's adherence to the church calendar is apparent in the titles of some of his poems: 'Good Friday', 'Easter', 'Easter Wings', 'Whitsunday', and 'Trinitie Sunday'. Bunyan, on the other hand, is manifestly not a fan of the church calendar. He comments sarcastically in *I Will Pray with the Spirit*:

But here now, the wise men of our dayes are so well skill'd, as that they have both the *Manner* and *Matter* of their Prayers at their finger ends; setting such a Prayer for such a day, and that twenty years before it comes. One for *Christmass*, another for *Easter*, and six dayes after that. They have also bounded how many syllables must be said in every one of them at their publick Exercises. For each Saints day also, they have them ready for the generations yet unborn to say.¹⁸

Echoes of the Church of England's liturgy and even the pre-Reformation Catholic liturgy surface in Herbert's poems. For instance, Herbert's poem 'The Sacrifice' features Christ speaking from the cross with the repeated refrain 'Was ever grief like mine?' taken from the medieval Catholic Good Friday liturgical sequence known as

for instance, Sharon Achinstein, 'Reading George Herbert in the Restoration', *English Literary Renaissance*, 36.3, Autumn 2006, 430-465, and Jenna Townend, "'[S]weet singer of our Israel": Psalms, Hymns, and Dissenting Appropriations of George Herbert's Poetry', *Bunyan Studies*, 22, 2018, pp. 39-62.

¹⁴ Robert Whalen, 'George Herbert's Sacramental Puritanism', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54:4.1, 2001, p. 1274. For more on Herbert's Puritan affinities, see Jeanne Clayton Hunter, 'George Herbert and Puritan Piety', *Journal of Religion*, 68.2, April 1988, pp. 226-41, and Daniel W. Doerksen, 'Show and Tell: George Herbert, Richard Sibbes, and Communings with God', *Christianity and Literature*, 51.2, Winter 2002, pp. 175-90.

¹⁵ Cf. the early manuscript commentary on Herbert's *Temple* by George Ryley, *Mr. Herbert's Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved*, ed. Maureen Boyd and Cedric C. Brown, New York, Garland, 1987, pp. 16-17: 'be not satisfied with private or family, to the neglect of the public, worship'.

¹⁶ George Herbert, 'The Church-porch', lines 397-402, in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 61.

¹⁷ Herbert, 'The Church-porch', lines 409-410, in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 61.

¹⁸ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, in MW, II:247.

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the Reproaches.

However, despite his defence of the conformist liturgical prayer that Bunyan rejects, Herbert, like Bunyan, believes that true prayer must come from within, from the heart. Critics have noted that, although many of the poems in *The Temple* are inspired by the physical features of a parish church, Herbert consistently uses these outward objects as symbolic of the inner landscape of the human heart in which Christ must come to dwell. For instance, 'The Altar', one of several pattern poems shaped like an object, is shaped like a sacrificial altar:¹⁹

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart and cemented with teares;
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame
To praise thy name.
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine. 20

Yet Herbert's altar is explicitly identified as 'made of a heart', and Herbert elaborates, 'A HEART alone / is such a stone'.

Even in their apparent positions on written prayers, Bunyan and Herbert are not as far apart in their actual practice as they may appear to be in principle. This is especially so in their writing. Both Bunyan and Herbert are Biblically saturated writers, with phrases, images and allusions from Biblical texts pervading their writing. In Herbert's case, the Biblical language is sometimes mediated through its appearance in the church's liturgy. For instance, Herbert's poem 'Mattens' paraphrases and explores the language of Psalm 8 and Psalm 95, which form part of the Prayer Book service of morning prayer, and his 'Even-song' poem likewise paraphrases the scriptural texts in the liturgy of evening prayer.²¹ Herbert's more Puritan-like sensibilities are seen in his advocacy of plain style devotion over ornate poetry, with his poem 'Jordan (I)' concluding 'Nor let them punish me with loss of ryme, / Who plainly say, *My God, My King*'.²²

¹⁹ Incidentally, one of the Puritan objections to Laudian 'innovations' in the Church of England was the restoration of fixed stone 'altars' to churches rather than moveable wooden 'tables' for the Lord's Supper: see, for instance, Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 46–47, 95–100; and Kathleen Lynch, 'George Herbert's Holy "Altar", Name and Thing', *George Herbert Journal*, 17.1, 1998, pp. 41–60.

²⁰ Herbert, 'The Altar', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 92.

²¹ See Wilcox's notes and Noel Kinnamon, 'Notes on the Psalms in Herbert's *The Temple*', *George Herbert Journal*, 4.2, Spring 1981, pp. 10–29.

²² Herbert, 'Jordan (I)', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 200. On this poem in relation to discussions of plain style, see, for instance, Cedric C. Brown and Maureen Boyd, 'The Homely

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In the middle of a passage excoriating the Prayer Book, Bunyan explains why outward forms of prayer are insufficient:

For right prayer, must as well in the outward part of it, in the outward expression, as in the inward intention, come from what the soul doth apprehend in the Light of the Spirit; otherwise it is condemned as vain and an abomination (*Mark 7.*); because the heart and tongue do not go along joyntly in the same, *Prov. 21. 9. Isa. 29. 13*; neither indeed can they, unless the Spirit help our infirmities. And this *David* knew full well, which did make him cry, *Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise, Psal. 51. 10, 11.*²³

It is somewhat ironic that the text Bunyan cites here is one that is directly used near the beginning of both morning and evening prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, in which the priest says 'O Lord, open thou our lips', and the response is 'And our mouth shall shew forth thy praise'.²⁴

In *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, Bunyan stresses the inadequacy of human words to express true prayer, but also suggests that the presence of the Spirit to enable prayer can have a concrete effect on the kind of words used. In his exposition of the 'affectionate', meaning heartfelt and emotional, nature of prayer, Bunyan observes how this is manifested in certain scriptural texts:

Mark ye here, *My soul longeth, it longeth, it longeth, &c.*
Oh what affection is here discovered in Prayer!

The like you have in *Daniel*, Dan. 9. 19. *O Lord hear, O Lord forgive, O Lord hearken and do; defer not for thy Names sake, O my God.* Every syllable carrieth a mighty vehemency in it.²⁵

Though the repetition of 'it longeth' is Bunyan's, collating several scriptural texts, the triple repetition of 'O Lord' is in the Daniel text. The presence of the Spirit, by moving the heart, shapes the very syllables of these prayers.

More strikingly, Bunyan puts prayers in the mouths of his characters in his allegorical works. In his battle allegory *The Holy War*, prayer is figured by the citizens of the beleaguered city of Mansoul sending petitions to King Shaddai to request his deliverance. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, while it is sometimes simply recorded that characters prayed, at times the actual words of their prayers are given. For instance, when Christian traverses the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he makes use of the weapon of 'all-prayer' that forms part of the spiritual armour he has been given earlier:

And ever and anon the flame and smoke would come out in such abundance, with sparks and hideous noises, [...] that he was forced to put up his Sword, and betake himself to another weapon called **All-prayer*: so he cried in my hearing, **O Lord I beseech thee deliver my Soul.*²⁶

Christian's prayer is identified by Bunyan's note in the margin as a quotation from Psalm 116:4. On his way through the valley, Christian hears the voice of another man, Sense of Herbert's "Jordan", *Studies in Philology*, 79.2, Spring 1982, pp. 147–161.

²³ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, in MW, II:250.

²⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 241, 252.

²⁵ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, in MW, II:239.

²⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From this World to that which is to Come*, ed. James Blanton Wharey, rev. ed. Roger Sharrock, Oxford, Clarendon, 1960, p. 63 (see p. 54 for the bestowal of 'All-Prayer').

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later identified as Faithful, who becomes Christian's companion, also praying the psalms, in this case Psalm 23:

When *Christian* had travelled in this disconsolate condition some considerable time, he thought he heard the voice of a man, as going before him, saying, *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear none ill, for thou art with me.*²⁷

Here Christian and Faithful are praying the written prayers of the psalmist and appropriating them to their own situation, and Bunyan as author is recording these written prayers as a model for his readers to follow in similar circumstances, and thus arguably acting as a quasi-liturgist.

Among the poems of *The Temple* is Herbert's paraphrase of the twenty-third psalm. The psalms provide a point of continuity between the liturgical conformist worship of the Church of England, which adapts the medieval monastic tradition by assigning set psalms for each day, and ostensibly non-liturgical Dissenting worship, which often featured the singing of metrical psalms such as found in the famous collection by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins.²⁸ *The Pilgrim's Progress* also contains verse paraphrases of the twenty-third psalm. For instance, in *The Second Part of The Pilgrim's Progress* (1683), originally a separately published sequel, a suppertime singer at the Interpreter's house sings the following:

*The Lord is only my support,
And he that doth me feed:
How can I then want any thing
Whereof I stand in need?*²⁹

This is, one might think, suspiciously similar to the opening of Herbert's paraphrase, which begins:

The God of love my shepherd is,
And he that doth me feed:
While he is mine, and I am his,
What can I want or need?³⁰

However, this is not necessarily evidence that Bunyan read Herbert. Rather, both are lifting the beginning of William Whittingham's metrical version from Sternhold and Hopkins, which is almost identical to Bunyan's version except that Bunyan substitutes 'want' where Whittingham has 'lack':

*The Lord is onely my support,
and he that doth me feed:
How can I then lacke anything,
whereof I stand in need.*³¹

²⁷ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 64.

²⁸ Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins et al., *The Whole Booke of Psalmes collected into Englysh Metre*, John Day, 1562. On early modern psalm culture, see, for instance, Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2004; Linda Phyllis Austern, Kari Boyd McBride and David L. Orvis (eds.), *Psalms in the Early Modern World*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011; and Ruth Ahnert (ed.), 'Re-forming the Psalms in Tudor England', special issue of *Renaissance Studies*, 29.4, September 2015, pp. 493–680.

²⁹ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 204.

³⁰ Herbert, 'The 23. Psalm', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 594. For Dissenting adaptations of Herbert's paraphrase of Psalm 23, see Townend, "'[S]weet singer of our Israel'", pp. 42–49.

³¹ Cited in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Wilcox, p. 592.

One Biblical text that poses difficulties for anti-liturgical Nonconformists such as Bunyan is the Lord's Prayer, an undeniably scriptural form of prayer given by Christ himself. However, Bunyan, along with some Nonconformists (though not all) rejects the idea that Christ intended the Lord's Prayer as a 'stinted form' to be recited word for word, pointing out that the versions in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel are not identical.³² Bunyan particularly objects to teaching children to pray by parroting the Lord's Prayer and other prayers, although Bunyan's book of children's verse *A Book for Boys and Girls* curiously includes a close poetic paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer.³³

Rather, Bunyan advocates a good dose of hellfire to teach both children and adults to pray authentically:

Oh how far short are those people of being sensible of this, who count it enough to teach themselves and children, to say the Lords Prayer, the Creed, with other sayings; when as God knows they are senceless of themselves, their misery, or what it is to be brought to God through Christ! Ah poor souls! study your misery, and cry to God to shew you your confused blindness and ignorance, before you be so rife in calling God your Father, or learning your children either so to say.³⁴

It is the sense of desperation about sin and its consequences that drives people to true prayer. This is so for Hopeful, Christian's second companion who takes the place of Faithful after Faithful's martyrdom at Vanity Fair. Hopeful later recalls that it was Faithful who encouraged him to come to God for mercy, and to pray what looks remarkably like an early form of what some modern evangelical Christians would call the sinner's prayer:

I told him that I knew not what to say when I came: *and he bid me say to this effect, *God be merciful to me a sinner, and make me to know and believe in Jesus Christ; for I see that if his righteousness had not been, or I have not faith in that righteousness, I am utterly cast away: Lord, I have heard that thou art a merciful God, and hast ordained that thy Son Jesus Christ should be the Saviour of the world; and moreover, that thou art willing to bestow him upon such a poor sinner as I am, (and I am a sinner indeed) Lord take therefore this opportunity, and magnifie thy grace in the Salvation of my soul, through thy Son Jesus Christ. Amen.*³⁵

The beginning of this prayer once again appropriates the words of a scriptural prayer, that of the publican/tax collector in Jesus' parable who went home justified rather than the presumptuous Pharisee. However for Hopeful, praying this prayer does not bring an immediate assurance of salvation, but is rather the beginning of a lengthy wrestling in prayer.³⁶ When Christian asks '*And did you do as you were bidden?*'

³² For varied Puritan attitudes to the Lord's Prayer, see Najapfour, "'After this manner therefore pray ye": Puritan Perspectives on the Lord's Prayer'. On Bunyan and the Lord's Prayer, see David Gay, 'The Nameless Instrument: Bunyan's Representation of Prayer in *The Holy War*', *Bunyan Studies* 12, 2006/2007, 88–104, and David Gay, 'The Name of the Prayer in *The Holy War*', *Bunyan Studies*, 19, 2015, 98–117. I am not yet persuaded that Gay gives sufficient evidence to establish that the Lord's Prayer is the 'nameless instrument' of Bunyan's battle allegory *The Holy War*, but much of his wider discussion of the issue is helpful.

³³ John Bunyan, 'Upon the Lord's Prayer', *A Book for Boys and Girls*, in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. VI, ed. Graham Midgeley, Oxford, Clarendon, 1980, p. 204.

³⁴ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, pp. 252–3.

³⁵ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 142.

³⁶ In an influential though contested claim, historian David Bebbington sees differing expectations around assurance of salvation as a key point of contrast between the Puritans and the heirs of

he replies, 'Yes, over, and over, and over', and continues 'So I continued Praying until the Father shewed me his Son.'³⁷

The sense of desperation motivating true prayer is evident in *The Second Part of the Pilgrim's Progress* in the touching depiction of Mercie, who, though a travelling companion to Christian's wife Christiana, doubts whether she has a true summons to come to the king. This leads her to knock at the gate with a startling fervency that leads Christiana to conclude that Mercie prays better than she does.³⁸ This kind of desperation is also modelled in many of Herbert's poems, such as 'Affliction (III)', which begins 'My heart did heave, and there came forth O God!'³⁹

Bunyan's *I Will Pray with the Spirit* dwells on Paul's words about the Spirit interceding with groans that cannot be uttered, commenting 'The soul, I say, feels, and from feeling, sighs, groans, and breaks at the heart'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Herbert's poem 'Prayer (I)', seeks to verbalise that which goes beyond words. As critics have frequently noted, Herbert's poem is a single sentence that lacks a finite verb and so remains grammatically incomplete, but it comes to rest by gesturing to a resolution beyond the power of language to articulate:⁴¹

Church-bells beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.⁴²

I would argue that, despite his defence of the forms of prayer rejected by Bunyan, Herbert shares the spirit of prayer that Bunyan commends, and despite his conscious rejection of written liturgy, Bunyan is a liturgist despite himself. Both Bunyan and Herbert have a Biblically informed liturgical imagination, and, although my theological sympathies generally lie with Bunyan against his persecutors, I agree with Judge Kelynge, as Herbert would, that 'we might pray with the spirit, and with under-standing, and with the Common Prayer-book also'.

the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival: 'Whereas the Puritans had held that assurance is rare, late and the fruit of struggle in the experience of believers, the Evangelicals believed it to be general, normally given at conversion and the result of simple acceptance of the gift of God.' (David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, 1989, rep. Routledge, 2003, pp. 42–43.)

³⁷ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p. 142.

³⁸ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, pp. 187–90.

³⁹ Herbert, 'Affliction (III)', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 265.

⁴⁰ Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit*, in MW, II:237. On the motif of groaning in early modern prayer, see Naya Tsentourou, 'Sighs and Groans: Attending to the Passions in Early Modern Prayer', *Literature Compass*, 12.6, 2015, 262–273 (esp. p. 268 on Bunyan, and pp. 269–70 on Herbert).

⁴¹ See, for instance, E.B. Greenwood, 'George Herbert's Sonnet "Prayer": A Stylistic Study', *Essays in Criticism*, 15.1, January 1965, pp. 27–45, and Mario Di Cesare, 'Image and Allusion in Herbert's "Prayer (I)"', *English Literary Renaissance* 11.3, September 1981, pp. 304–28. The final phrase perplexes critics. Some take it as leaving the poem unresolved (e.g. Greenwood, 'George Herbert's Sonnet', p. 28), while others see the poem as pointing to a transcendent resolution beyond the ability of human language to articulate (for instance, Di Cesare, 'Image and Allusion', p. 323; R.E. Hughes, 'George Herbert's Rhetorical World', *Criticism*, 3.2, Spring 1961, p. 89).

⁴² Herbert, 'Prayer (I)', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, p. 178.

Poetry and the Language of Prayer and Worship

David Jasper

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A SHIFT IN ACADEMIC ATTENTION TO THE MATTER OF liturgy and its study. As many perhaps know I grew up in the world of Anglican liturgical revision in the late twentieth century. My father, Dean Ronald Jasper, after his years as an Anglican observer at the Second Vatican Council, was Chairman of the Church of England Liturgical Commission, leading to the approval and publication of the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980. Liturgical scholars then were, by and large, trained as historians, with an occasional literary contribution on the Commission from people like Professor David Frost, a scholar of English Renaissance literature. Much more recently liturgical studies have taken a more philosophical turn in works like Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1998) and Nicholas Wolterstorff's very recent *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (2018). Important for my own thinking in the past few years has been the French Catholic thinker and priest Jean-Yves Lacoste's book, translated as *Experience and the Absolute* (2004), in which is explored a phenomenology of the liturgy, asking the profound question, 'What is it to exist liturgically, and does the place of prayer matter?' Lacoste describes liturgy as 'transgression', moving further than Heidegger's notion, after the German Romantic poet Hölderlin, of 'dwelling poetically' as, in Lacoste's words, 'liturgy exceeds being-in-the-world and the relation to the earth.' He describes this more precisely in terms of a decision that we make.

To dwell liturgically in a place is ... born of a decision we make. On our relation to place, this chosen path has perhaps one last word to offer. Liturgy may hold the secrets of the topological. But the God with which liturgy confronts us does not necessarily belong to the field of experience. Liturgy exceeds being-in-the-world and the relation to the earth.... Let us propose, in order to qualify this excess, a hypothesis we will have to justify: it is perhaps by transgressing it that liturgy is integrated into topology.¹

Lacoste and I share one thing – we are both priests who regularly celebrate the liturgy. But he is a philosopher and I am not. I will therefore take my own more literary liturgical path from here on and explore Lacoste's suggestion concerning dwelling liturgically and the transgressive through what I have called a 'ritual poetics', in my recent book *The Language of Liturgy* (2018).

Much of that book, which was a kind of mixture of dedication to my father's work and a kindly reaction against it, centred upon that moment of communal utterance in the Eucharist Prayer called the Sanctus, and here you must forgive me if I speak specifically from the 1982 liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church which I use each week. The early history of the Sanctus is obscure and debated, though its liturgical use may be as late as late first century and it was certainly well established in the liturgies of Antioch, Jerusalem and Egypt by the fourth century. The Sanctus is a hymn of praise to God, our words uttered simultaneously, as it were, 'with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven'. But the physical place in which we speak or sing – church, chapel, hospital ward and so on – is transcended and becomes one with

¹ Jean-Yves Lacoste. *Experience and the Absolute*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skeban, New York, Fordham University Press, 2004, p. 22.

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heaven: a moment in prayer that the poet George Herbert once described as ‘heaven in ordinary’ (the title of my most recent book²). The utterance of the Sanctus is at once a meeting point and a drawing together of all times and all places, both immanent and transcendent at once, an intersection in a timeless moment.

A poetic description of such a timeless moment that is both in and beyond time is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s celebrated description of the symbol in his Lay Sermon entitled *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816). It is familiar, precise and worth revisiting:

a Symbol (ο εστιν αι ταυτηγορικον) is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all, by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.³

Coleridge is always careful in his choice of words, and his use of ‘translucence’ is important. The universal and the eternal shine through and are made visible in the general and the temporal. The symbolic is thus a moment of revelation and a revealing of that which yet remains mysterious and hidden. Earlier Coleridge comments upon the power of metaphor, remarking that ‘it is among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no medium between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*. Faith is either to be buried in the dead letter, or its name and honours usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds SYMBOLS with ALLEGORIES’.⁴

While he was serving on the Liturgical Commission that produced the *ASB*, Professor David Frost once remarked on the ‘desperately literal’ nature of contemporary English. But this has not always been the case. The late Middle Ages, and after them Cranmer’s in the sixteenth century, were not only ages of metaphor but, even more, it was held that all experience was bound together in a metaphorical understanding that was quite different from our contemporary bifurcated and highly ‘literal’ universe. The language of metaphor embraced all things in heaven and on earth, and this unity overcame in the liturgy even the differences between one language and another.

Now, it has to be said, that as an Anglican I am not one of those who follow the dictates of the Prayer Book Society, lamenting the loss of the Reformation *Book of Common Prayer* and going back to the often unkind and vociferous debates that surrounded the publication of the *ASB*, evidenced in such shrill publications as *No Alternative* (1981) and *Ritual Murder* (1980). These works denounced people like my father with excessive outbursts such as the proposed addition to the Litany: ‘From the Dean of York, and all his detestable enormities: *Good Lord deliver us*’. Such poor wit is unworthy of civilized discussion among Christians.

But I do want to suggest as misguided a principle that is expressed in the Preface to the *ASB*, and which has been the seed of much unfortunate revisionary liturgical practice in the Church of England subsequently. We read in that Preface:

But words, even agreed words, are only the beginning of worship. Those who use them do well to recognize their transience and imperfection; to treat them as a ladder, not a goal; to acknowledge their power in shaping faith and

² David Jasper, *Heaven in Ordinary: Poetry and Religion in a Secular Age* Cambridge, The Lutterworth Press, 2018.

³ S. T. Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816) in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 6, Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*

kindling devotion, without claiming that they are fully adequate to the task.

I have a greater and stronger faith in language and words than this suggests. Long ago John Dominic Crossan wrote a little book entitled *In Parables* (1973) that is worth returning to. In a passage on metaphor Crossan makes a remark that will be familiar enough to literary critics (after Coleridge's celebrated description of 'poetic faith' as 'the willing suspension of disbelief'):

When a metaphor contains a radically new vision of the world it gives absolutely no information until after the hearer has entered into it and experienced it from inside itself. In such cases the hearer's first reaction may be to refuse to enter into the metaphor and one will seek to translate it immediately into the comfortable normalcy of one's ordinary linguistic world.⁵

The point is that poetic language, the language of metaphor, is, in a word once used by Austin Farrer, 'irreducible'. It does not allow simpler alternatives, translation or merely external review. And Herbert Marcuse once remarked of the poet that 'if what he [sic] says could be said in terms of ordinary language he would probably have done so in the first place. He might say: "Understanding of my poetry presupposes the collapse and invalidation of precisely that universe of discourse and behaviour into which you want to translate it."' It is this world of poetic discourse that I wish to enter liturgically, and then take one step more. For if Crossan speaks of experiencing it from the inside, then Lacoste, in his language of dwelling liturgically, proposes that after the decision has been made (that *willing* suspension of disbelief), 'the God with which liturgy confronts us does not necessarily belong to the field of experience. Liturgy exceeds being-in-the-world and the relation to the earth.' That is why a 'liturgical poetics' is different, exceeding the poetic, and why so often poets who were enlisted to help the Liturgical Commission in their work were rarely successful. Nevertheless it is a poet, the American Marianne Moore, who memorably expressed this complexity in a famous line (taken out of context, I admit) about 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. Think about us singing the Sanctus in these terms, no great act of imagination for Anglicans who delight in describing themselves as 'miserable sinners' – though a bit hard on toads, perhaps. Liturgically the commonplace and immanent sings within the eternal and the transcendent.

Now I turn to some words written by Michael Perham, later to become Bishop of Gloucester, written just prior to the publication of *Common Worship* in 2000 in a book entitled *Towards Liturgy* (2000), that 'the main texts of any future service book will be in modern English, *not unlike the style of the present book*.'⁶

I do not, in principle, have anything against 'modern English' as such, but I do think that the language of worship is odd and not that of everyday usage or communication – the style of the present book. Nor is this a merely contemporary phenomenon. Theodor Klauser, in his book *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (1979) remarked that in the third century 'the language of the liturgy in the West was at variance with that of the people. In those days, too, there had already come into being that cleft between the language of the liturgy and the language of the people which is giving such trouble today.'⁷ This is, I think, true – though the last phrase is oddly

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 13.

⁶ Michael Perham, ed, *Towards Liturgy 2000*, SPCK, 1989, p. 67.

⁷ Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy*, second edition, trans, John Halliburton, OUP, 1979, p. 21.

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expressed. Cranmer wrote in a measured English, written for a kind of performance and heightened by the forms of classical rhetoric and centuries of poetic lay devotion in the vernacular, perfectly well aware of the power of language to 'speak' beyond mere understanding of the meaning of the words. Cranmer's liturgical English was not normal. Indeed, liturgical language has always been, in its way, troubling and transgressive, and it must be inasmuch as it exceeds our being-in-the-world, to a degree apophatic, though not therefore abandoning profound meaningfulness, but with ties to particular and accessible 'meaning'.

I have not mentioned so far the place of theology in liturgical language. Although the Church of England has its Thirty Nine Articles of Religion (now a curious Reformation left-over and not acknowledged in my own Episcopal – and Anglican – Church in Scotland), it is in the practice of worship that the belief and faith of the church is maintained and sustained. The Eucharistic Prayer of the Scottish 1982 liturgy is a carefully articulated expression of Trinitarian theology and the work of creation and salvation in Father, Son and Holy Spirit; a Biblical anamnesis and acknowledgment of the power of the Holy Spirit in the church in the epiclesis. Compare this theological refinement with the Introduction to the 2015 *Additional Baptism Texts in Accessible Language*, authorised for use in the Church of England. Here we read:

The alternative Baptism Texts have been prepared and authorized in response to a motion by the Liverpool Diocesan Synod requesting texts in language that is more accessible to those who ask for baptism. It was recognized that the Decision and Prayer over the Water in the Common Worship: Initiation Rites were particularly difficult for many.

The Introduction continues to articulate the problem that the 'language of faith' lies within a 'culture of understanding', yet this is shared by many who continue to have a 'deep spiritual yearning and to ask for baptism because they want the very best for their children or for themselves'. It takes a lot to shock me, but I do find this quite shocking for many reasons. What can possibly be meant by making the language of the mystery of baptism more accessible? It betrays a simplistic, indeed patronizing, view of understanding of the 'secular' culture – and worst of all, the profound and theologically embraced mysteries of the Christian faith are here reduced to the utterly vague idea of a 'deep spiritual yearning' and wanting the best for our families, like taking out an insurance policy, having a nice holiday, or making sure they are well provided for after your own demise.

The result is that the language of these texts is reductive, literal and wholly lacking in the profundity of what St. John Chrysostom called, paradoxically, 'the awesome mysteries about which it is forbidden to speak'. And yet, with awe, we do speak.

The late sixteenth century Anglican divine Richard Hooker wrote that prayer is nothing less than a duty to our neighbour, but maintained by 'the zeal and fervency' of the priest, for:

If he praise not God with all his might; if he pour not out his soul in prayer; if he take not their causes to heart, or speak not as Moses, Daniel, and Ezra did for their people: how should there be but in them frozen coldness, when his affections seem benumbed from whom theirs should take fire.⁸

Hooker's parson, kindled with the fire of God's love, is clearly akin to the country

⁸ *The Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. John Keble, vol. II, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1865, p. 120.

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parson of George Herbert's manual *A Priest to the Temple* (posthumous 1652), written 35 years after Hooker's work was published. Herbert's prose resonates with the insistences of the language of the *Book of Common Prayer* – and there is no reason why we should not rediscover that language of mystery for our own day. It is yet possible.

Any who have heard me speak before know my partiality for the poetry of that gentle Anglican priest of our own time, David Scott. Here is one of his brief poems about one of those early morning communion services in a cold church with few people – the sort of service where the rationalists among us ask why we bother at all, and what is the point of it. Such a church is dying on its tottering feet and has no future. But perhaps it is not that simple. Scott's poem is not in the language of worship, but it shares poetically in its simplicity combined with precision, obedience to the command, and a sense of the reserve of the mystery that makes it – I hesitate to use the word – 'valid'. This communion service is an imaginary garden with real toads in it.

Checking times the day before by brushing
blown snow off a leaning board, I guessed
that eight o'clock would chime
on a handful of us, and the priest.
The service was according to the book,
the only variables being
my random fist of coins scooped into a bag
and the winter jasmine above the holy table.
For the rest, we knelt where it advised us to,
ungainly but meaning it, trusting to the words set
(on paper difficult to separate)
that what we did was acceptable.⁹

That last word is important. The words and language of prayer are offered, an oblation, and therefore must be acceptable – something that is worthy of being received by God. They are not words for our understanding or satisfaction or even expressive of any deep spiritual yearning. They are the language of heaven in ordinary, not to be comprehended, but finally something understood.

David Scott's poetry takes me back, ineluctably, to the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and above all to those Anglican divines – Herbert, Donne and Traherne. They knew a thing or two about the language of worship and the liturgy, being saturated in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and at times their verse almost transcends poetry and takes on the aspects of a ritual poetics. In our own time no one has understood this better than the poet and critic, the late Sir Geoffrey Hill, whose own prose is as extraordinary as his verse. Hill's book of essays entitled *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language* (1991) should be compulsory reading for all concerned with our subject here. Hill is most at home with the poets of the seventeenth century, knowing that the real heart of their verse is always just out of reach, always beyond – the language a meeting point of different levels that exist simultaneously, creatively and in figures of displacement. Of the poet and priest John Donne, Hill writes:

The knotty riddling of Donne's verse and prose moves from, and
through, rhetorical bravado and 'alarums' (he himself enters that caveat)
to an engagement with meta-poetics, a profounder poetry than that

⁹ David Scott, *A Quiet Gathering*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe Books, 1984, p. 38.

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recognized by conventional instructors in rhetoric and conduct.¹⁰

Then Donne's familiar line, punning upon his own name, 'When thou hast done, thou hast not done', elicits this from Hill:

There is none the less an irreducible paradox or oxymoron in the mundane constitution, and the literary paradox is a formal submission that 'things' are so: 'they have been written in an age when anything is strong enough to overthrow [truth]'.

That last word, 'truth', is written by Hill in square brackets, shared with Donne. It bites perhaps especially in our own time which can make 'post-truth' the word of the year for 2016 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In Hill, as in Donne, we are on the edge between a poetics and a ritual poetics, caught between times, acknowledging in dense language the irreducible paradox, the strange within the mundane that insists that 'things are so', and the voice spoken in the enemy's country against the overthrow of truth. David Scott understands this within the liturgy of his parish – words spoken by the book so that what we do is 'acceptable'. In another poem entitled 'After Mass', Scott remarks quietly, 'The mass is done./ Another day is satisfied.'

The language of liturgy does not need to be strident or loud. It has many tones and a wide register, but its nature is particular to itself. It is a language of mystery, demanding an intelligent faith that acknowledges the limits of expression and understanding within that which is finally, in Herbert's word, 'understood'. It is uttered between two worlds, or rather, in utter contradiction to Matthew Arnold's image in his poem 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse' (1855)¹¹, within both at once, both in and out of time, a moment of kairos within the chronology of history. It never despairs, but it enjoys and demands precision in its employment of the tropes of rhetoric and encourages us in the use of the imagination.

There are many enemies, both within and without, to the words we use in prayer – both solitary and communal, both formal and informal. For our prayer can often encourage sentimentality, inert conservatism or outlandish enthusiasm. We can allow ourselves to become engrossed by it so that we forget that the words of liturgical utterance are finally God's words, and not for our own satisfaction or betterment. Geoffrey Hill has a biting poem on the taming and middle-class respectable domestication of liturgical language. The first Word is written with a capital 'W':

The Word has been abroad, is back, with a tanned look
From its subsistence in the stiffening mire.
Cleansing has become killing, the reward
Touchable, overt, clean to the touch.
...
Each eye squats full and mild
While all who attend to fiddle or to harp
For betterment, flavour their decent mouths
With gobbets of sweetest sacrifice.¹²

You hear the echoes of what I have been saying. Here are the dangers of the language that is 'touchable' (accessible), and safe – normalized: the dangers of seeking for 'betterment' (wanting the very best for their children and themselves). Hill is merciless.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 59.

¹¹ Arnold writes in his poem of himself as: 'Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born.'

¹² Geoffrey Hill, *King Log*, André Deutsch, 1968, p. 14.

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There is no reason why we cannot find a proper language for worship today – without simply having historical recourse to the undeniable genius of a Thomas Cranmer or the English Reformation. But the nature of such language today has not been thought through, or indeed, it may perhaps be, sufficiently prayed. It is a language of mystery, uttered to and before God, revealing that which remains mysterious in revelation. James Olney in his book *Metaphors of Self* (1981) got it right and at the same time completely wrong – for he was writing of the self and not of God – from his self-centred concerns we turn absolutely to the theocentric. I suggest some changes in Olney's words, and here is my revision.

These highest peaks of self [awareness], when the largest areas of the vague unconscious are brought to an intensity of consciousness, when the whole potential of humanity seems realized in the individual [God], cannot be analyzed or explained but only experienced ['known'] and, if the artist's [believer's] faith is justified, perhaps re-experienced ['known again'] in metaphors and symbols [sacraments].¹³

And so we move from poetry to worship and its utterance.

¹³ Quoted in Crossan, op.cit, p. 122.

Elizabeth Jennings and the Praying Words of Poetry

Anna Walczuk

CAN ONE THINK ABOUT POETRY IN TERMS OF THE WORDS USED IN PRAYING? THIS query and the title of the article derive from a conversation about religion and literature, and has led me to further questions such as: What is the nature of the interrelation between poetry and prayer? Are there any specific requirements which should be met in their dialogue? What strategies are called for when literature crosses the borders and comes into close contact with religion or, when religion is intimately tied up with literature? If these general issues concerning literature, and in particular literature inclined towards religion, are brought down to the discussion of poetry they give rise to a fundamental and overarching question: Can a poem become a personal prayer? This query can be split into two further questions. Firstly, can a poem be a prayer of the poet? Secondly, can a poem be conducive to putting the reader in the mode of prayer? If the latter question is considered on the literary plane it becomes in fact a question about the employment of rhetorical strategies, and ultimately about the power of the poetic word. Consequently, the positive answer to any of these questions prompts an inquiry into the specific circumstances and conditions, including rhetoric, in which poetry and prayer are likely to overlap.

The following analysis is based on the assumption that poetic forms and imagery are capable of generating a singular space that is suited to a meditative dimension which can both accommodate and encourage prayer. The engagement of poetry with matters of faith and theology may be taken for granted, as from time immemorial poetry has established its position as the most effective medium to convey the richness and convolutions of spiritual life. I propose to look upon the intricate and subtle relationship between poetry and prayer in the light of the poetic practice of Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001), whom Emma Mason, the editor of Jennings' up-to-date and most comprehensive volume of *Collected Poems*, called 'one of the most discerning and lyrical Christian poets of the twentieth century' and 'one of the most significant Christian poets to emerge from post-war Britain.'¹ The following discussion is going to concentrate on two aspects of Jennings' poetic creed both of which are crucial for the examination of the component and tone of prayer which are embedded in her poetry.

The first aspect concerns Jennings' deep-seated, and frequently articulated, conviction about a special power and unique status of the poetic word which through its mystical link with the Logos – the Word of God – can probe the metaphysical and reach towards transcendence. In Jennings' idea the relation between the Word of God and words of poetry involves more than the poet's participation in the creativity found in God. Jennings elaborates her view of the poet as being God's collaborator, and of poetry as an extension of the Divine creativity, in her works of prose, for example in *Every Changing Shape*, when she claims that 'all art is a participation in the eternal act of creation',² or in *Christian Poetry* when she proclaims in similar vein: 'man is a maker, whether a craftsman or a great artist. By the act of making, he shares in the Divine Act of Creation.'³ For Jennings a poem, through its link with the Logos, has the capacity

¹ Emma Mason, 'Preface' and 'Afterword' in *Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems*, Carcanet, 2012, pp. xlii, 961.

² Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape*, André Deutsch, 1961, p. 30.

³ Elizabeth Jennings, *Christianity and Poetry*, Burns and Oates, 1965, p.115.

to participate in the Divine mystery which is most compellingly represented in the sacrament which, according to the Christian Catholic belief, not only symbolises but primarily embodies metaphysical reality.

The other aspect is based on Jennings' perception of a poem in terms of a communicative act which involves the relationship of sharing between the poet and the Other. Significantly, the Other as conceived by the poet refers not only to the reader who is the implied addressee, or interlocutor, in the paradigm of poetic communication, but also to God as the permanent frame of reference and the silent ever-present recipient of poetic words. Jennings overtly acknowledges the presence of the sharer in both the content and the form of her poetry. She does it either through explicit references to the Other with the employment of relevant rhetorical strategies, or through various formal devices such as the use of the plural 'we', as the grammatical subject instead of the more self-reflexive singular 'I'. The Other usually figures as the conceptual framing of her poems, as in 'The Feel of Things'⁴ in which the poet affirms: 'The poem is a way of making love / Which all can share. Poets guide the lips, the hand' (p. 584).⁵ The Other, either human or divine, is positioned in the realm of 'beyond', which frequently recurs in Jennings' poetic idiom. In 'Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits'⁶ Jennings envisages the painter who, somewhat paradoxically, does not look primarily at himself: 'You stare / Into yourself, beyond', and she continues commenting on the artist's 'love of the art and others': 'You stared beyond / Your age, the times' (p. 324). Jennings seems to be particularly fond of the word 'beyond' which carries in itself a semantic marker of two states indispensable for prayer, that is stepping out of mere self-concentration and recognising the metaphysical realm of transcendence which lies outside, or beyond, the palpable material reality.

These two factors, the belief in the mysterious and mystical link of poetic words with the Word of God on the one hand, and on the other the awareness of the communicative potential of the poetic expression with the presupposition of the Other, significantly contribute to Jennings' vision of poetry. In consequence, a poem represents for Jennings a merger of form with corresponding imaginative expression inscribed into a prayerful disposition either directly experienced or indirectly sensed. Taken together they account for the overall impact as well as some rhetorical aspects of her poetry.

In one of her poems Jennings defines herself as a 'cradle Catholic,' baptized and brought up in the Roman Catholic Church and tradition. She deepened and strengthened her allegiance to the Church and religion during her mature years, and especially during her stay in Rome in the fifties of the twentieth century after she had been awarded the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award⁷ which involved a considerable sum of money to be spent on travel and a stay abroad of at least three months. The religious background in the poet's life partly accounts for a distinctly Christian perspective which is adopted in much of Jennings' poetry, and expounded in

⁴ In Jennings, *Tributes*, Carcanet, 1989.

⁵ For this and all subsequent quotations from Jennings' poems the page numbers, given in parentheses in the main text, refer to Emma Mason's edition of *Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems*, Carcanet, 2012.

⁶ In Jennings, *Growing Points*, Carcanet, 1975.

⁷ Jennings won the Somerset Maugham Award primarily for her volume of poetry entitled *A Way of Looking*, André Deutsch, 1955.

her prose.⁸ Barry Sloan discussing the interconnection of poetry and faith in Jennings' work sees in her 'a writer whose Christian faith and denominational allegiance to Catholicism are repeatedly explored in her poetry.'⁹ However, Jennings made it clear that poetry neither seeks to convert nor intends to preach religious doctrines, as its foremost task is to give an experience.¹⁰ And it is precisely on the plane of giving an experience that poetry may approach prayer.

Yet, the symbiosis of poetry and prayer is not self-evident. Speaking of poetry as a singular space for prayer means putting side by side two concepts which on the face of it are essentially different because prayer is a distinctly religious activity and poetry is primarily an artistic activity. Henri Bremond, in *Prayer and Poetry. A Contribution to Poetical Theory* (1927), discusses the intricate relationship between poetry and prayer claiming that although the poetic experience (linked with mysticism) verges on prayer it does not actually become one; instead it arouses a prayer-like attitude in the reader of poetry. Therefore Bremond speaks of a 'strange and paradoxical nature of poetry: a prayer which does not itself pray, but which makes others pray.'¹¹ Hence, in Bremond's opinion, when they are viewed in conjunction – and the entire oeuvre of Elizabeth Jennings undoubtedly encourages such an approach – an obvious dichotomy is exposed. Even though both activities, artistic and religious, have as their common denominator the involvement with the transcendental, that apparent common ground and resulting similarity do not at all make the dichotomy disappear completely. On the contrary, even their partial overlapping highlights the divergence and, in consequence, underscores the demands put upon the poet and the reader alike to span the gap between the *ars poetica* of a particular poem and the underlying *Credo* of the poet's religious faith, without detriment to either.

The intertwining of poetry with prayer gets more complicated and presents further problems when viewed from the vantage point of freedom. Poetry by its nature is an art of freedom for, with the exception of occasional minor formal restrictions, on the whole it does not impose any significant constraints upon the artist. It does not take away the freedom of interpretation from the reader, either. Prayer on the other hand, though dependent on personal freedom of choice, is always inscribed into the paradigm of the religious creed. What is more, it presupposes the existence of the Divine who is positioned infinitely higher than any praying subject, and whose law controls and regulates the freedom of the individual. Therefore the achievement of a successful marriage of poetry with prayer, the merger of the religious with the artistic activity, presents a challenge to the poet and the believer. And Jennings was both: a poet wholeheartedly dedicated to the art of poetry, fully aware of the power of the word, and at the same time an ardent believer and practitioner of the Christian faith. In this context Jennings' reservations concerning poetry preaching a religious

⁸ Elizabeth Jennings' *Every Changing Shape*, Andre Deutsch, 1961, may serve as a good example. In this book Jennings, as she states in the Foreword, is 'concerned with three things – the making of poems, the nature of mystical experience, and the relationship between the two', p. 9.

⁹ Barry Sloan, 'Poetry and Faith: The Example of Elizabeth Jennings', *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 55, no. 3, Spring 2006, p. 393.

¹⁰ See e.g. Jennings' 'Introduction' to *The Batsford Book of Religious Verse*, Elizabeth Jennings (ed.), London, Batsford Ltd., 1981, pp. 9-10. Jennings concludes her Introduction saying: 'Poetry, whatever its theme, offers experience, not sermons.'

¹¹ Henri Bremond, *Prayer and Poetry. A Contribution to Poetical Theory*, Algar Thorolod (transl.), London, Burns and Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1927, p. 197.

doctrine are important and illuminative, for they show how the poet distances herself from turning a literary work of art into a mouthpiece of religious propaganda. Undoubtedly, Jennings' tender lyricism and a tone of personal intimacy, masterly conveyed by the apparatus of subtle rhetorical devices, effectively safeguard against the traps of indoctrination.

At this point some general explanation of the terms used in connection with poetry and prayer is required. In common discourse poetry most frequently functions as an axiom that does not need a definition. The notion is so comprehensive and self-evident that it can be defined in a variety of different ways,¹² or else stripped of any explanatory formula. The freedom which is the essential component of poetry to some extent accounts for the axiomatic character of the conception of it which cannot be easily contained within any definition. Prayer, on the other hand, has been extensively elaborated and defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. According to its theological and doctrinal wording prayer is 'a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God';¹³ it is 'the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God';¹⁴ it is 'being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him'.¹⁵ In all these definitions prayer is viewed in terms of the praying subject's intentional entering into a space saved for a meeting of the human with the Divine. Hence prayer necessarily involves a semantic code and corresponding rhetorical strategies viable in that space and appropriate for such an encounter. Close and careful reading of Jennings' poetry shows that in her poetic space the poet remains in the presence of God, even if particular poems do not evoke the Divinity directly. Jennings' poetry not only acknowledges the existence of a metaphysical realm but it also gets engaged in an explicit or implicit verbal intercourse with the Divine, which constitutes the nature of prayer. Since in a considerable body of her writing Jennings meditates on the nature of poetry and the life of faith, the reader is justified in seeking in her work an answer to the question about the feasibility of the convergence of poetry with prayer.

Significantly, in Jennings' poetic vision poetry and prayer are never kept apart. Their proximity is illustrated, for example, by the poem 'An Age of Doubt'¹⁶ which is a personal record of her adolescence seen as a time of transition from the faith couched in her childish beliefs through a period of doubt, where reading 'books of philosophy ... gave further doubts' (p. 655), to her adulthood of mature faith, fortified by the contemplation of the beauty of the world and nourished by the power and appeal of poetry, both of which she had experienced from her early childhood. The poem ends with what can be interpreted as the blurring of the boundary between poetry and prayer and the blending of the poetic form with the indiscernible, because wholly internalised, form of prayer in which the poet stands in the presence of the Divine, and speaks of her 'poems / Whose rhythms sometimes moved to the tide of creation / And felt the touch of a God' (p. 656).

In much of her prose and in a great number of poems Jennings emphasises the importance of imagination which empowers rhetoric. She thinks of her poems

¹² For example, Dana Gioia, an American poet, literary scholar and critic, sees poetry as an art of enchantment. See his *Poetry as Enchantment*, North Dakota, Wiseblood Books, 2016.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, subsequently abbreviated as CCC, IV.2558.

¹⁴ CCC, IV 2559.

¹⁵ CCC, IV 2565.

¹⁶ In *Times and Seasons*, 1992.

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in terms of acts of imagination and, accordingly, she gives the title 'Act of the Imagination'¹⁷ to one of them. The title is highly meaningful, especially that in the Christian tradition such wording may be naturally linked with a traditional Catholic prayer called 'Act of Faith'. That link is subtly suggested in the opening lines of the poem: 'Surely an Act of the Imagination / Helps more than one of Faith' (p. 734). The resemblance of the poem's title to the title of the prayer brings into focus both the spiritual affinity and the intertextual relation operating between these two modes of personal expression. 'Act of the Imagination' is first and foremost Jennings' confession of her need for art and poetry to support her relationship with God. But it also contains an overt acknowledgement of the presence of the Divine in the poetic space which, in consequence, is perceived by the poet as a space filled with words immersed in prayer:

... 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.... (p. 734)

Jennings' poem 'Act of the Imagination', like the Catholic prayer comprising 'Act of Faith', presupposes a relationship with God who in reality represents much more than merely a matter of figurative speech and elevated rhetoric ('God as metaphor'). The Divinity who is the crucial point of reference in the poem is 'rising up' (p. 734), a forceful hint reminding of Christ's Resurrection. At the level of rhetoric the metaphor in Jennings' poetry often functions like an icon which points and leads to the Real Presence of the living God Incarnate, and the omnipresent and most potent 'Other' whom the poet continually encounters in her poetic space.

The reference to the Other is one of the fundamental constituents of Jennings' poetic Credo. She sees poetry as a spiritual communion and looks upon poetic activity, including a great range of the poet's experience, in terms of sharing. That belief, sustained throughout all her life, gets articulated already very early in her career. In her first widely acclaimed volume of poems, *A Way of Looking*,¹⁸ in the poem entitled 'A Sense of Place,' Jennings declares: 'Now we cannot hold a sense of place / Entirely by ourselves, we need to share, / Look round for hands to touch' (p. 31). In her prose study of visionary aspects of literature, *Seven Men of Vision*,¹⁹ Jennings, having asserted that poets are essentially 'articulate visionaries', proceeds to claim that 'all articulate visionaries, whatever the nature of their vision, desire to share it' (p. 118). In the same vein she fondly evokes St. Thomas Aquinas' statement that 'the fruits of the contemplation are to be handed on to others' (p. 219). Jennings' ideas about poetry and her entire poetic work invite a proposition that for her poetry is like contemplation for Aquinas, and they both bear similar fruit which, 'handed on to others,' evocatively points to transcendence.

In Jennings' view poetry involves not only recurrent acts of imagination but also incessant acts of communication while the poet inwardly stands face to face with the

¹⁷ In *In the Meantime*, Carcanet, 1996.

¹⁸ *A Way of Looking*, 1955. In this volume, as in many others, the title is also significant because the entire collection published at the beginning of Jennings' poetic career provides an introduction to her poetic oeuvre that defines the poet's way of looking.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Jennings, *Seven Men of Vision: An Appreciation*, London, Vision Press, 1976.

Other and feels prompted to share. It is not surprising therefore that a confessional note may be detected in some of her poems. However, it should be emphasised that her highly personal poetic confessions are free from the blemish of unabashed self-exposure, which effectively excludes Jennings' creative output from the category of confessional poetry. Jennings' poems invite a reconsideration and reformulation of the notion of confessionalism.²⁰ In her case being confessional means being empathetic and humane along the horizontal line of interpersonal relations, whereas, on the other hand, along the vertical line of the relation between the human with the Divine, it simply means being prayerful. Consequently, Jennings' sense of sharing is addressed not only to the reader, another human being or the neighbour in the Christian and Biblical terminology, but it involves a spiritual communion with God, that is the Divine Other, who in the paradigm of the Christian prayer, always listens although he does not always answer, and sometimes responds with a silence pregnant with meanings.

In Christianity silence is an indispensable component in contemplation and in prayer. Accordingly, it plays an important function in Jennings' poetry. Jennings sees silence as a path leading to the communion with God. This perception is recorded in one of her distinctly personal poems, 'Making a Silence':²¹

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. (p. 288)

Jennings uses various rhetorical strategies to introduce silence into her poetic space. Apart from using different kinds of pauses, like dashes or trails of dots, the poet slows down the pace of the poem by means of the superlative, as for example in the poem 'Whitsun Sacrament',²² where the Christian struggle between doubt and belief culminates in the final admission: 'When we most need a tongue we only find / Christ at his silentest' (p. 320). Silence is a corollary of the tension between the expectancy of words and the incommunicability of experience. That is why in Jennings' handling contemplative wordlessness never means emptiness resulting from the lack of words as conveyors of meaning, but it rather suggests a new category of meaningfulness with a richness and plenitude of significations. In "'Hours" and Words'²³ Jennings thinks of silence in laudatory terms as 'full of blossoming hints,' and she writes:

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. (p. 777)

Another method of making silence resonate in a poem involves the repetition of a word so as to prolong its reverberation in the poetic phrase. As mentioned earlier one of Jennings' favourite words, frequently repeated in her poems, is 'beyond',

²⁰ See e.g. Jane Dowson, 'Towards a new confessionalism: Elizabeth Jennings and Sylvia Plath.' *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, ed. Jane Dowson, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 62-81.

²¹ In *Relationships*, Macmillan, 1972.

²² In *Growing Points*, 1975.

²³ In *Praises*, Carcanet, 1998.

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which stretches the line of verse into the area of silence, and in addition points to the vertical vector of communication between the human and the Divine thus implying transcendence. For instance, in the poem dedicated and at the same time entitled 'For Paul Klee'²⁴ Jennings thus speaks of the power of art which in her vision converges with prayer:

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

Silence is not only a rhetorical strategy frequently used in Jennings' poems, but it also represents a large and important thematic area in her poetry. There is nothing unusual about it, for Jennings considers silence as a prerequisite which is important for the creation of the poetic space intended to accommodate the encounter of the human with the Divine on the platform of prayer.

No matter whether the praying subject is answered or not by the Divine Other, the prayer as such always has a dialogic structure, and Jennings insists on having the imperative for a dialogue embedded in her poetic space and conveyed to the reader. In the poem entitled 'Narcissus'²⁵ and referring to the myth of a youth who fell in love with his own reflection in the mirror of water, the poet, conscious of the dangers residing in excessive self-absorption, pleads:

But it is not enough,
Not enough. We need to go beyond that translucence
And beyond the delightful waters
See others, see others. (p. 283)

In a much later poem in the sequence 'Sonnets to Narcissus'²⁶ Jennings hints at 'happiness' which lies outside the constraints of the ego and springs from a dialogic relationship with the Other:

Such happiness
We gain indeed when our own selves start going
Outward. Be wise and break the looking-glass. (p.736)

Jennings' faith tells her that the praying subject is somebody 'united with a living God' (p. 737), while her experience and practice as a committed Christian believer underscore the value of silence in seeking a communion with the Other, God or man. Hence making silence and going out of oneself towards the Other are the fountainhead not only of Jennings' poetry but also of her understanding of prayer. That is why in 'Sonnets to Narcissus' she speaks of the 'Holy ones who have always sought to find / A place of silence' and who 'search beyond themselves' (p. 737). A great number of her poems demonstrate the subtle interweaving of prayer with poetry to the effect that her poetic words acquire a new dimension and become the praying words of poetry.

The third precondition which poetry and prayer alike demand from their practitioner is humility. It is worth noting that a humble pose is a distinctive feature of Jennings' poetic persona²⁷ who constantly stands in awe and gratitude before what

²⁴ In *In the Meantime*, 1996.

²⁵ In *Relationships*, 1972.

²⁶ In *In the Meantime*, 1996.

²⁷ Humility was a characteristic personal trait of Jennings. Erwin Stürzl alludes to it in his study, 'Here Is Humility at One with Craft': The Thematic Content of the Poetry of Elizabeth Jennings,

Rudolf Otto calls *mysterium tremendum*:²⁸ the mystery of God and the numinous in Nature. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches that humility is a crucial factor in prayer.²⁹ The undercurrent of prayer is conspicuous in Jennings' Nature poems in which the visible world is perceived as a marvel of Creation full of transcendent significations in front of which the viewer stands in a humble stillness and silent prayer.

In 'Seers and Makers'³⁰ Jennings points to one quality which 'Artists and men of prayer' have in common, and that is that they are 'Eager to disappear / Within the words, paint, sound, and praying' (p. 732). All the three components of Jennings' poetic discourse: silence, dialogic structure and the attitude of humility constitute the rhetorical foundation of her poetry, and they are in various ways incorporated into her poetic idiom.

In contrast to many other religious poets Jennings' poetic persona neither argues with God nor revolts against the decrees of the Divine. Instead, she assumes the tone of a humble and respectful acceptance attuned to God's inaudible voice and invisible presence. In many of her poems, especially those contemplating and celebrating the beauty of Nature, Jennings adopts a poetic strategy which corresponds to the bearing of a praying girl from one of her latest poems, 'Girl at Prayer'³¹, who:

need not search for words
 ...
 All she need do is copy the sun's behaviour
 Or the moon's silent entry at night. (p. 813)

In Jennings' sacramental thinking articulated, for example, in 'Questions to Other Artists'³², '[poetic] words are offered / Like a Host upon the tongue' (p. 397). The Logos comes into view when in 'Hermits and Poets'³³ she refers to poetry in terms of 'a few lines [which] hold a hint of Heaven' (p. 733). The most straightforward and compressed expression of Jennings' conviction of the metaphysical link of poetic words with the Word of God can be found in her poem 'A Metaphysical Point About Poetry':³⁴

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

Jennings' 'Metaphysical Point About Poetry' restates her perception of poetry as a form of personal expression which through its communicative inclination is mysteriously related to the Divine. In consequence of this awareness, she builds up

On Poets & Poetry: Fifth series (27:5), James Hogg (ed.), *Salzburg Studies in English Literature*, Salzburg, Institute für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1983, pp. 63-96. The quotation in the title comes from Jennings' poem 'Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits' (*Growing Points*, 1975).

²⁸ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, John W. Harvey (transl.). Oxford University Press, [1923] 1936, pp. 12-41.

²⁹ See e.g. CCC IV.2559 and IV.2631.

³⁰ In *In the Meantime*, 1996.

³¹ In *Timely Issues*, Carcanet, 2001.

³² In *Consequently I Rejoice*, Carcanet, 1977.

³³ In *In the Meantime*, 1996.

³⁴ In *Praises*, 1998.

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in her poems a singular space imbued with a sense of prayer. This space, constructed with the fabric of rhetoric, gets defined in 'The Poem in Itself'.³⁵

It is a gift, a spell, a fabric wrought
Seamless. It also is a way to pray
By which I mean it's ceremonious thought

Spoken through you. (p. 670)

These words accord with an evocative metaphor used in 'Inner and Outer'³⁶ which well depicts the dialogic structure of the poetic space for prayer and its anchorage in the poet's communion with the Divine: 'every poem is a kind of letter / Posted to stars yet somehow sent by me' (p. 658).

Literary scholars and theologians will always argue about subtle differences or striking similarities between poetry and prayer. But even if in that debate no final consensus is achieved as to how far a poem can be a prayer, still the example of Jennings' poetic oeuvre shows that poetry may reverberate with the poet's praying words and so invariably bespeak the potential of prayer. Jennings' life and her writing career demonstrate a fusion of the religious *Credo* with *ars poetica*, where prayer is nourished by poetry, and poetry is born out of prayer.

³⁵ In *Times and Seasons*, Carcanet, 1992.

³⁶ In *Times and Seasons*, 1992.

Prayer and the role of the ‘Soul-Artist’ in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Historical Fiction

Elizabeth Ludlow

IN HER 1852 TRACT, *EARTHLY CARE A HEAVENLY DISCIPLINE*, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE reasons that since ‘worldly care forms the greater part of the staple of every human life, there must be some mode of viewing and meeting it, which converts it from an enemy of spirituality into a means of grace and spiritual advancement.’¹ Critiquing the strands of Christian Platonism and Calvinism which see discontinuity between the worldly and the eternal, Stowe emphasises the continuity between ‘worldly care’ and ‘spiritual advancement’ with her reading of how the ‘Bible tells us that our whole existence here is disciplinary; that this whole physical system, by which our spirit is connected with all the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, and wants which form a part of it, is designed as an education to fit the soul for its immortality’ (ibid.). She moves on to ask readers to ‘suppose’ that

the glorified form of some departed friend should appear to us with the announcement: ‘This year is to be to you one of special probation and discipline, with reference to perfecting you for a heavenly state. Weigh well and consider every incident of your daily life, for not one is to fall out by accident, but each one shall be a finished and indispensable link in a bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies.’ (p. 14)

Should readers have this experience, Stowe suggests, they would look upon ‘every incident of our daily life’ in an entirely different light. While in her first novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), Stowe imagines the strength that Tom takes from the vision of Eva in glorified form, I suggest that it is through the heroines of her later historical fiction that she more explicitly expresses the continuity between the earthly and the heavenly.

In what follows, I explain how the two historical novels that Stowe serialised in the *Atlantic Monthly* – *The Minister’s Wooing* (December 1858-December 1859) and *Agnes of Sorrento* (May 1861-April 1862) – present a radical theological challenge to the legacies of Christian Platonism and Calvinism, and were quick to see the earthly in terms of depravity and sin. Prayer is central to this discussion as it is represented through both novels as the horizon where the eternal converges with the everyday and where the emotions and desires of protagonists are shaped. When Stowe invites the reader to view the historical events that she describes from the perspective of this horizon, the details of the everyday – and the bodies through which the Divine is experienced – take on particular significance and become links in what she perceives as the ‘bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies’.

Historical fiction and the rhetoric of prayer

According to Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* between 1909 and 1938, the magazine was launched to ‘promote good literature and speak out against

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Earthly Care a Heavenly Discipline*, Cincinnati, American Reform Book and Tract Society, 1852, p. 4. Online version by Steven Railton, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in American Culture*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/christn/chfihbsat.html> (accessed Jan 8, 2019), p. 4.

slavery'.² Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of American Transcendentalism and one of the founders of the *Atlantic Monthly*, envisaged the way in which its content would 'guide the age' (ibid, p. 214). While both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* exemplify the aims and premises of the magazine in their critique of religious and social strategies of oppression in eighteenth century New England and fifteenth century Florence, they also attest to the dictum, repeatedly attributed to Emerson, that 'fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures'.³ Through both novels, truth is revealed through the narrative not in epistemological description but in the accounts of things which transform and re-orientate the individual. My purpose here is to show how it is through prayer that the female protagonists re-orientate vision and exert an influence that outweighs the reach of the historical figures of the religious and political establishment with whom they come into contact.

Like every other major novelist of the period, Stowe's conception of historical fiction was informed by the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott. As Joan Hedrick recounts, it was not long after Lyman Beecher had permitted his children to read the novels that Scott 'became a family institution'.⁴ *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* take their structure from Scott's *Waverley* (1814) in that they are centred on a fictional protagonist who is imagined at a particular moment of historical change. However, Stowe's protagonists are not – like Edward Waverley – active participants in battle but are instead young women whose lives remain on the margins of the established historical record.

Stowe's prefaces provide a helpful context for understanding her contribution to the debates about the role of historical fiction and her resistance to expected teleologies at a time when, as Harold Orel explains, the historical novel faced a crisis over the relationship between fiction and historical source materials, and over the development of scientific worldviews.⁵ Introducing *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe is quick to offer a disclaimer to the exacting reader who is looking for historical accuracy. Although some of the characters in *Agnes of Sorrento* are also historic, Stowe uses the preface to warn readers that 'whoso wants history will not find it here, except to our making, and as it suits our purpose'.⁶ In her article connecting Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento* with Eliot's *Romola*, both of which centre around the fall of the fifteenth century monk and reformer Fra Girolamo Savonarola, and both of which were serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine*, Robin Sheets suggests how, 'for both writers, history gives way to hagiography as the idealised heroine achieves heroic stature equal to or even exceeding Savonarola's'.⁷

² Nancy Koester, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2014, pp. 213-4.

³ Qtd. in L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*, Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, p. 62. For a discussion of how *The Minister's Wooing* 'constitutes Mrs. Stowe's "conversation" with the authors of readers for the *Atlantic Monthly*' see Dorothy Z. Baker, 'Harriet Beecher Stowe's Conversation with the *Atlantic Monthly*: The Construction of *The Minister's Wooing*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 28.1 (2000), 27-38 (p. 28).

⁴ Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, OUP, p. 20.

⁵ Harold Orel, *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes toward a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*, Macmillan, 1995, p. 25.

⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Agnes of Sorrento* [1862], Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899, p. ix.

⁷ Robin Sheets, 'History and romance: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento* and George Eliot's *Romola*', *Clio*, 26.3 (1997), 323-346 (p. 326); *Agnes of Sorrento* was serialised in the *Cornhill* from April 1861 to May 1862 (simultaneously to its run in the *Atlantic Monthly*), and *Romola* was

What I suggest, however, is that while Stowe does depict heroines who are saintly, history does not so much 'give way to hagiography' as invite the reader to interpret history from within the horizon that the two heroines enter in prayer: the horizon where the transcendent converges with the everyday. From the perspective of this horizon, 'all things [become] sacred' and the prayers of the women who are silenced by the historical record are shown to be powerful tools of transformation.'⁸

The Minister's Wooing

In *The Minister's Wooing* (1858-9), Stowe uses her female characters to critique the legacies of Calvinism and to convey the kind of theological messages that her sister Catherine had put into her 3-volume work of systematic theology, *Common Sense Applied to Religion, or the Bible and the People* (1857). As Hedrick explains (quoting from Kathryn Sklar's 1976 study of Catherine Beecher), this work 'attacked the Calvinist notions of original sin, conversion, and God's grace as aberrations introduced by Saint Augustine'.⁹ I argue that while in *The Minister's Wooing* Stowe takes a less combative approach than her sister, she does raise more radical theological challenges in her reflections on the significance of women's ministry and her critique of disinterested and abstract systems of theology. Rather than rejecting Augustine's theology, I suggest that she reframes it in a way that is empowering for women. As such, she offers a more compassionate vision of God than that offered by 'the clear logic and intense individualism of New England', which she critiques for '[deepening] the problems of the Augustinian faith' while '[sweeping] away all those softening provisions so earnestly clasped to the throbbing heart of that great poet of theology' (p. 341).

After describing the theological difficulties that the small New England Puritan community of the 1790s were working through following the presumed death at sea of the heroine Mary Scudder's cousin and beloved, the sailor James Marvyn, Stowe compares the rigid Calvinism practised by the minister Samuel Hopkins (based on a real figure who was a student of Jonathan Edwards) with the 'softening provisions' Augustine gives in his discussion on the prayers for the dead (p. 340). Through the novel, it is the female characters who express the value in the prayers and intercessions that Augustine recommends. As they do so, they embody the convergence of the 'Church above and on earth' and undercut the 'systems' of the 'hard old New England divines' with their sympathetic responses (p. 25). 'Where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance,' Stowe writes, 'woman often follows with bleeding footsteps; – women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks' (ibid). Through their informal ministry and their prayers, the women she represents embody Christ in the way in which they touch the sacred in the seeds of ordinary things and respond to the revealed truth that is about love rather than about doctrines.

Although James notices a similarity between Mary and 'a picture he had once seen in a European cathedral, where the youthful Mother of Sorrows is represented' (p. 36), it is Mary who is shown to be the true artist. Stowe describes her as among the 'soul-artists' who

serialised from 1862 to August 1863),

⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* [1859], Boston, James R. Osgood & co, 1875, p. 110.

⁹ Hedrick, p. 278.

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go through this world, looking among their fellows with reverence, as one looks amid the dust and rubbish of old shops for hidden works of Titian and Leonardo; and, finding them, however cracked or torn, or painted over with tawdry daubs of pretenders, immediately recognise the divine original, and set themselves to cleanse and restore. (p. 131)

Such 'soul-artists', she reasons, are 'God's real priests' because their 'ordination and anointing are from the Holy Spirit' (ibid.).

The power of Mary's intercessory prayers for James – which come from her recognition of the latent but 'divine original' person he has been created to be – are expressed when he unexpectedly returns and declares himself a Christian the day before the planned marriage between Mary and the minister Hopkins. In the letter James wrote to Mary which was delayed and arrived when he returned, he describes his experience of encountering God after identifying with Jacob:

[Jacob] saw a ladder in his sleep between him and heaven, and angels going up and down ... he saw that there was a way between him and God, and that there were those above who did care for him, and who could come to him to help him. (p. 517)

Ladder imagery runs through the novel and, as Kristin Wilkes comments, Stowe revises the ladder metaphor in Plato's *Symposium* to argue against the disinterested benevolence of Hopkins, and to indicate how 'a person moves upward from natural, earthly loves to selfless love of God'.¹⁰ In comparing the solace that Mary and James find in recognising the social and communal aspect of the spiritual journal to the individualist approach taken by Hopkins, Stowe comments:

There is a ladder to heaven, whose base God has placed in human affections, tender instincts, symbolic feelings, sacraments of love, through which the soul rises higher and higher, refining as she goes ... This highest step ... had been seized upon by our sage as the *all* of religion. He knocked out every round of the ladder but the highest, and then, pointing to its hopeless splendour, said to the world, 'Go up thither and be saved!' (p. 87)

Although Wilkes does not mention Augustine in her discussion of how Stowe repairs the ladder by presenting 'romantic and familial love as rungs that can be ascended toward a loving God', I suggest that her engagement with his theology and complex legacy is helpful in understanding the way in which she repairs the ladder and refutes the traditions of Platonic Christianity and Calvinism.¹¹ Central to this in both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* is her appropriation of the prayers of Augustine's mother Monica.

We only know Monica's name because Augustine gives it in the prayer which concludes Book 9 of the *Confessions* when he asks that those who read his words may, 'at Thy Altar remember Monica Thy handmaid'.¹² Her death comes just days after she had shared with Augustine an experience of spiritual ascent. In spite of the negative attitude he expresses towards women elsewhere in his writings, Augustine

¹⁰ Kristin Wilkes, 'Repairing the Ladder to Heaven: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* as a Secular Novel', *Christianity & Literature*, 67.3 (2018), 436-453 (p. 443).

¹¹ Wilkes, p. 443.

¹² *The Confessions of St Augustine Revised from a Former Translation*, trans. Edward Pusey, Oxford, John Henry Parker; London, J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1843, 9.13.37. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text including book, part, and section.

shows in his recollection of this ascent how an ordinary uneducated woman can attain the same intellectual and spiritual insights about divinity as an educated man.¹³ Directly afterwards, Monica tells Augustine that her work in life is done and that her hope in this world – that she might see her son a Catholic Christian – has been fulfilled (9.10.26). Her reflections demonstrate that the vision she had thirty years previously had been fulfilled. This vision is recounted in Book 3 of the *Confessions*:

For she saw herself standing on a certain wooden rule, and a shining youth coming towards her, cheerful and smiling upon her, herself grieving, and overwhelmed with grief ... answering that she was bewailing my perdition, he bade her rest contented, and told her to look and observe, 'That where she was, there was I also.' And when she looked, she saw me standing by her in the same rule. (3.11.19)

When Augustine haughtily dismissed Monica's rendering of the vision so as to excuse his behaviour, and said that its true meaning was that she would convert to his religion of Manichaeism, she was quick to reply: 'No; for it was not told me that, "where he, there thou also"; but "where thou, there he also"' (3.11.20). It is only in Book 9 that, having worked through his frustration, Augustine comes to the recognition that in her pursuit of him, it was God who was speaking to him and revealing to him the possibility of his redemption. Rather than see – as many commentators have done – Monica's declaration that her work in life was to see her son a Christian as indicative of her lack of independent identity and of Augustine's 'self-absorption', Stowe models an approach that involves finding in Monica's prayers and vision a basis for an understanding of female empowerment.¹⁴

The Minister's Wooing is the first of three novels in which Stowe alludes to the vision that Monica had of her son sharing the same wooden rule.¹⁵ We are told that it is because of Mary's love for James and her gifting as a 'soul-artist' that she is able to see him standing – as Monica saw Augustine – on the rule of faith and she indicates how Monica's vision offers a challenge to the Platonic tradition that finds expression in the Puritan beliefs in New England:

Once, in an age, God sends to some of us a friend who loves in us, not a false imagining, an unreal character, but, looking through all the rubbish of our imperfections, loves in us the divine ideal of our nature, – loves, not the man that we are, but the angel that we may be. Such friends seem inspired by a divine gift of prophecy, – like the mother of St. Augustine, who, in the midst of the wayward, reckless youth of her son, beheld him in a vision, standing, clothed in white, a ministering priest at the right hand of God – as he has stood for long ages since. (p. 130)

As a result of constant prayer, Mary exemplifies – and is able to maintain – the transformative and prophetic vision of the 'soul-artist' that Monica models in the *Confessions*.

¹³ As Kim Power explains, Augustine uses his characterization of Monica to chart an alternative route to wisdom and holiness to that of educated men. See Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, p. 88.

¹⁴ Clarissa Atkinson, "'Your Servant, My Mother": The Figure of Saint Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood', in C. Atkinson, C. Buchanan, and M. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female Image and Reality*, Crucible, 1987, pp. 139-72 (141).

¹⁵ In addition to *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, Stowe alludes to Monica's vision in *Oldtown Folks* (1869).

Agnes of Sorrento

Stowe began writing *Agnes of Sorrento* (1861-2) when she was on a holiday in Italy during her trip to Europe to secure copyright for *The Minister's Wooing*. As in *The Minister's Wooing*, a historical male clergyman (this time Savonarola) is shown to hold a faulty theology by a female lay character who foregrounds the spiritual significance of romantic and familial love.

Since the novel is set in the Middle Ages when Catholicism was the Church, one of the issues that Stowe addresses is the identity and place of the True Church. Throughout, she invites Protestant readers to balance a right critique of the corruptions of the Catholic Church with an appreciation of the context of the religious practices of the time. 'Let us not,' she reasons, 'with the better appliances which a universal press gives us, sneer at the homely rounds of the ladder by which the first multitudes of the Lord's flock climbed heavenward' (p. 97). She asks readers to appreciate that whereas 'in our times a conversion is signalized by few outward changes', in the Middle Ages, life was 'profoundly symbolical, and always required the help of material images in its expression' (p. 33). While the heroine Agnes is described throughout as a work of art and likened to 'some of the Madonna faces of Fra Angelico' (p. 18), it is in her role as a 'soul-artist' that she, like Monica of Hippo, glimpses the sacred in the ordinary and sees Christ in others.

From the start of the novel, Agnes is linked to the Virgin Mary. The narrator accounts for her prayers to the Virgin by a recognition of the fact that the holy dead were not gone from the earth but were in close and constant sympathy. Agnes's prayers are therefore not seen as idolatrous; instead her connection with the Virgin and the saints is perceived as truly sympathetic and indicative of the connection between the church Triumphant and Militant. For Agnes, the painting of the Virgin was representative of a 'dear friend who smiled upon her, and was watching to lead her up the path to heaven' (p. 72).

When Agnes's uncle, Father Antonio, an artist, monk and disciple of Fra Angelico, finds in Agnes the inner and outward spiritual beauty and meekness of the Virgin Mary, he expresses a desire to depict her as the Hail Mary in his Breviary (p. 91). The connection he makes between Agnes and the Virgin means that when she describes her dream of an angelic visitation, he is quick to identify him as Gabriel, 'the angel that came to our blessed Mother' (p. 114). However, when Agnes explains that the angel had the features of the cavalier who had asked for her prayers, he suggests that the dream might be interpreted through the frame of Monica's vision of Augustine sharing the same wooden rule. He tells her:

It may be that the holy angel took on him in part this likeness to show how glorious a redeemed soul might become, that you might be encouraged to pray. The holy Saint Monica thus saw the blessed Augustine standing clothed in white among the angels while he was yet a worldling and unbeliever, and thereby received the grace to continue her prayers for thirty years, till she saw him a holy bishop. This is a sure sign that this young man, whoever he may be, shall attain Paradise through your prayers. (p. 115)

Following this association between Agnes's dream and Monica's vision, Father Antonio then asks Agnes whether this is the first angel she has seen. As they discuss angelic visitations, he suggests that she 'should see the pictures of our holy Father Angelico, to whom the angels appeared constantly' (ibid.). Later in the novel, when

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Angelico and Agostino (the cavalier) meet Savonarola in Rome, they find him in 'pensive contemplation before a picture of the Crucifixion by Fra Angelico' (p. 264). Such paintings, we are told, 'were painted by the simple artist on his knees, weeping and praying as he worked, and the sight of them was accepted by like simple-hearted Christians as a perpetual sacrament' (ibid.). While Father Angelico takes on a dual role of artist who paints sacraments for the eye, and monk, who distributes the sacrament of the Eucharist, I want to suggest that by framing Agnes's vision of and prayers for Agostino in terms of Monica's vision of Augustine, we are invited to recognize her as a fellow artist and a participant in revealing the sacramental and in embodying the presence of the divine.

By having Agnes marry Agostino at the end of the novel, rather than entering the convent as both she and her uncle had initially intended, Stowe stresses the value of the Protestant marriage plot and further consolidates Agnes's association with Monica, who lives an ordinary life compared to the other holy women of antiquity whose lives have been recorded. Moreover, the marriage affirms the spiritual value of 'human affections' that, in *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe had argued form a rung on the 'ladder to heaven', and in her *Earthly Care a Heavenly Discipline*, she described as links in the 'bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies'.

To conclude, in both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, Stowe emphasises the power that her heroines have as 'soul-artists' in praying for the men who shape the course of history and in revealing – in a sacramental and Christ-like sense – the sacredness of the earthly. Coinciding with her recognition of the shaping power of Monica's prayers for Augustine, Stowe uses both novels to show how a re-visioning of women who have been sidelined by the historical record can be key to the revelation of how God's Providence through history is worked out in the daily incidents of life.

Why Take?

Why take a journal's blank demanding page,
A yearbook's, a birthday's absent past, and make
Of them a potent sign that all forsake,
Be caught in self-pity's tearful cage?
Because none tells us of our worth, the stage
Rehearsal's set, where we have to fake
The silent accolade for which we ache,
Not only in our youth, but in our age.

A silken vest lies washed by sand;
That doesn't mean the past's another land.
Pardoning erasures must be made,
Tidal in their potency for telling grace
Against which unappeasing ghosts be laid;
Then we can look into Rabboni's face.

David Barratt

Book Reviews

Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*, Baylor University Press, 2017, 712pp., \$49.95, 9781481306089; other formats: pbk, ePub, Mobi/Kindle, web pdf.

Iain Provan is nothing if not ambitious. His big map of Bible reading past and present tramps its hugely extending way along as a would-be Key to All Protestant textualities. At one of his many points of Biblical approval he heralds Bible narrative for its quality of succinctness (nothing new about that, of course, and Provan's business is frequently with the well-known, the well-rehearsed, as if his audience is a Freshman class, perhaps even in some off-piste Bible College). But succinct Provan is not; his narrativity is heroically different from the Bible's in its refusal of terseness. He abounds. He repeats; repeats others; repeats himself. He's much given to self-recall, which involves much self-qualification, even self-contradiction. So this very big bag of polemical, dogmatising, point-making Biblicizing stuff, past, present, and future too, is a quite awesome salmagundi, awesomely mixed, sternly mixing it, even mixing it up.

Provan's large aim is to identify what he calls a modern Protestant hermeneutic. Protestant, because inspired by, modelled on, the reading assumptions of the great Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin. Proper – the 'right reading' of his title – in the face of inapt and inept pseudo-Protestant modern practices. He targets four defective modern 'Ways': the 'historicism' which, he claims, undermines the authority of the Bible texts; free-for-all 'post-modernist' reading which spurns the given-ness of Bible text and meaning in favour of readers constructing their own meanings; 'Chicago Constituency' Biblicism, the hyper-literalist, modern-scholarship suspicious, assumptions of the compilers of the recent *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*, chief among them J.I. Packer, a founder of Regent College, Vancouver, where Provan teaches (and whose name – interestingly – never occurs here); and 'Counter-Reformational Protestantism', the position of Provan's Regent College colleague Hans Boersma – whose name does crop up quite a lot – a reversion to medieval beliefs in hidden spiritual meanings and the allegorizing ways of the pre-Reformation, a distortive and utterly bogus refusal, as Provan has it, of the open, plain-speaking, perspicuous, unmistakably clear textuality which the 'great Reformers' are admired by Provan for advocating. Against which fourfold catena of bad reading ways Provan offers his Fifth Way: the 'seriously literal interpretation of Scripture'. This is the *right* way. It will be inevitably schooled by a lot of modern, even modernist, scholarly knowledge and precepts, but still 'consistent with Reformation principles and practices'. That's a difficult blend, which puts the repeated 'literal' under a lot of strain; but then, refining literalism to make it 'serious' where what he calls the 'literalistic' fails to be, is a main Provan project.

Obviously a fundamental question for the serious literalist is what texts are in play, and Provan rightly devotes a lot of space and energy to the evolution of the canon of the Old and New Testaments and to editing and translation history. The Vulgate is no good, but Erasmus is sound, and Luther, Geneva and the AV are all good, not least because of the Reformers' knowledge and use of original languages (Provan preaches at length the necessity of the contemporary reader knowing Hebrew and Greek – whistling in the dark, of course, but aimed with some force at the modern pastor and every Bible College, indeed at every Theology and Religion department).

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The Reformed editors and translators are good because they follow in the good footsteps of Jesus and the Apostles in their close reading of the Old Testament. The great chain of Church Fathers Provan inspects in his large roster of potted histories (rather large pots) – Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Theodore, Augustine, and the rest – were shakier exemplars, good where they were literalists, but woefully given to allegorizing. Provan is a keen deducter of marks for the sin of allegorizing. Origen – worst case of a medieval churchman contaminated by un-Christian Greek hermeneutic and the awful example of Provan’s hated allegorizer Philo – gets *nul points*.

Hermeneutic exemplarity across all of church history is Provan’s quest, which of course leads him into modern times, where he feels compelled, and rightly, to take in some of the force of post-Reformation knowledge and scholarship, the yonks of ‘higher criticism’, especially Protestant German scholarship, our increased knowledge of how the Bible texts were made, and what they actually are (not least after Qumran). And so, not unimpressively, Provan weighs the merits, and demerits, of Source and Form criticism, of Redactivity and Rhetorical critique. He speaks up for genre recognition and contextuality and historicity, pressing on to look at structuralising and post-structuralist Biblicism, the arrival in Biblical studies of reader-response, and narrative criticism, and feminism, and deconstruction. There’s a good deal, as ever, of potted historiography, and a lot of the old yes-butting. Not being taken in by the egregious Stanley Fish on the reader-construction of texts is a big plus. He does share the common US failure to grasp the nature of Saussurean binarism, and he fails utterly to note Derrida as a canny Bible reader, but still it is rather arresting that his literalism can grant something of the textual gappiness that post-structuralist analysis is very keen on. And it is altogether not displeasing that Provan’s ‘literalism’ should prove such a large umbrella, sheltering so much that is beyond what ‘Chicago’ thinks of as good hermeneutic, and, of course, as Provan has to admit, a lot beyond the Reformers’ scope.

Provan’s persistently admired Reformers: who are, in fact, not got altogether right in Provan’s kept-up polemical keenness on Protestant resistance to medieval re-reading. That traditional finding of meanings beyond the merely literal – moral, anagogical, and allegorical meanings. Metaphorical stuff – fodder for Provan’s maligned Greeks, and their modernist rhetoricising followers, and, for that matter, for Calvin himself. The text as full of secrets, opacities, hidden spiritual depths, to be dug out by the late-coming interpretative eagle-eye. Riches of meaning for midrashi. For Jesus, in fact, and Peter and Philip and Paul. Especially for the Paul of Galatians – the plain-speaking of Galatians 4.24: ‘which things’ – the Old Testament story of Abraham’s two wives and two sons – ‘are an allegory’. A proof-text for allegorizing. Paul patently an allegorist. As such he did, of course, discomfit Martin Luther, and he utterly gobsmacks Ian Provan, who spends ten desperate pages – climax of his several preceding failed attempts to argue Peter and Philip and Paul were not OT re-readers – questioning the meaning and force of Paul’s verb *allegoreo*, blithely alleging it can be translated otherwise than literally. Paul, says Provan, can’t possibly mean by allegory what the Greek rhetoricians hostilely quoted by Provan understood – ‘the trope that says one thing but signifies something other than what is said’. He tries to discredit the unquestionable Greekism of Greek-educated Paul by opportunistically quoting the mistranslating *New International Version*: where the genesis story ‘may be taken figuratively’ (the NIV, that dubious translation mastered by the shaky translation theories of Ralph Nida, whom Provan at this point refers to approvingly). But there’s

no may be about this. As the Reformed, Calvinist, translators of the Geneva Bible, those thoroughly expert Reformed scholars, knew. 'By which things another thing is meant' is their translation of Galatians 4.24, more or less quoting the standard Greek rhetoric books in the matter of allegory.

At which place and on which core New testament matter Provan is simply traducing the Reformed tradition he professes to admire; proving himself a twisted hermeneute, a bad dealer in Biblical rhetoricity, and of course a failed literalist. It casts a very long shadow over his advocacies.

Valentine Cunningham

Susan M. Felch (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, xii + 289 pp., hb. £57.99 9781107097841, also pb. and e-Book.

Do we expect literature to surprise us, to change our minds with the force of an unveiling? 'Revelation characterizes the world just as much as natural laws do.' This statement by the pioneering literary theorist and Christian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin, is an intriguing epigraph for Susan M. Felch's vital addition to the Cambridge Companion series. It suggests that earthly life is characterized by both mystery and the possibility of new understanding. A 'revelation' also implies dialogue, the activity of speaking and listening. The enterprises of literature and religion have frequently been perceived as rivals: according to this view imaginative writing is a kind of upstart pretender to the historical authority of institutional belief. Indeed, in the late nineteenth century Matthew Arnold famously argued that 'mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. [...] what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry'. This big claim, in the modestly titled 'The Study of Poetry' (1888), has been enormously influential. It is easily quoted as evidence of the irrevocable secularization of Europe. However, there is also a large, and growing body of research, that resists such tempting simplification. This collection is an exciting contribution to a long critical conversation that, at its best, is alert to the rich complexity of the ways in which literary art and religion are connected to each other.

The sixteen essays, divided into three sections ('Reading Practices'; 'Intersections'; 'Traditions'), offer, in the editor's words, 'a companion for those who want to read literature and religion within the same intellectual and affective frame'. Although Felch is clear that the volume makes 'no pretence of offering a comprehensive map' of these 'capacious fields', it engages with an impressive range of perspectives and practices. The book is unusual in the study of literature and religion in giving space to traditions outside of Christian and Jewish forms of belief: the final section includes essays on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The diverse range of chapters is linked by a refreshingly straightforward critical method of pairing exploration of spiritual or theological mode with a 'literary' text or constellation of texts. The breadth of choice is impressively catholic: James Matthew Wilson's essay on 'Confessional Reading', for example, gives a virtuoso reading of Oscar Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Zhange Ni's examination of 'Postsecular Reading', by contrast, focuses on Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-10) trilogy of novels for young adults. Felch's own essay ('Ethics') reads Mary Gordon's *Pearl* (2005) as a study in the 'difficult

relationship of purity and plurality' and places it in conversation with the medieval 'Pearl' poem and Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' (1843). Julia Lupton's chapter on 'Dwelling' reads Heidegger, Shakespeare's *Pericles* and the book of Jonah to think about human connection and needs. Such literary range is one of the collection's virtues since it embodies an idea that 'religion' is not something that is applicable only to writing that is either overtly pious or which defines itself in radical opposition to established forms of belief.

This is a distinctively American collection: significantly, the note on individual contributors reveals that 14 of the 17 essayists are based at US institutions. I mention this geographical detail not as a flaw but because it is worth thinking about the ways in which conversations about religion and the arts might reflect unspoken national priorities and anxieties. Chapters on 'Protestantism' by Willie James Jennings and 'World Christianity' by Susan VanZanten are particularly good at addressing the ideological conflicts that shape contemporary religious practice. Jennings, for example, explores the vital but shadowy figure of the translator within Christianity and builds a nuanced, devastating reading of colonial and 'possessive' appropriations of the Bible that have been used to oppress. He addresses the politics of reading and translation with particular reference to the history of slavery in America. Jennings identifies a 'legacy' of what he terms 'the Protestant literary imagination' that is 'mixed': 'translation, pedagogy, and nationalist visions can prove both liberating and, when infected with the racial semiotic, enslaving'. This is energetic, complex material that quietly challenges interpretations that abandon either attention to history or understandings of the different ways in which communities have chosen to read the Bible. Similarly, VanZanten challenges the 'historical myopia that associates Christianity solely with European Christendom' and builds a compelling set of arguments via close readings of Afua Kuma's long poem *Jesus of the Deep Forest* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). Matthew Potts' essay develops its critique of 'Imagination' with a perceptive, political and highly persuasive reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a novel he describes as 'about the task of imagining a livable future while burdened by the weight of a dead past'. Potts also tracks the ways in which his own reading of the novel has changed and been challenged with the process of re-reading to a far less reassuring vision. It is rare but impressive to see a critic confess to this kind of unsettling change of mind in published work.

One significant exception to the US affiliations of the majority of contributors is Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Dr Williams has made a significant contribution to the developing conversation about literature and theology in critical work, including *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (2008), and his own poetry. Here his essay 'Theological Reading' is a characteristically elegant and sophisticated piece of writing, and a good choice as a first chapter. His reading of three plays staged in London – David Edgar's *Written on the Heart* (2011), Mick Gordon and A.C. Grayling's *On Religion* (2006) and *The Faith Machine* (2011) – identifies the ways in which each drama evokes 'some of the areas in which religious believing and belonging continue to attract, repel, challenge, and baffle a secular culture'. The chapter opens up complex questions regarding ethical obligation, agency and the mysterious nature of community. Williams develops a conclusion that is, I think, a vital challenge for all who seek to understand how, as he puts it, 'theology educates us as readers in the widest sense'. 'We learn,' he suggests, 'not to look for religious

echoes, doctrinal subtexts, or symbolic residues but to ask about how a text proposes a world whose internal connections are deeper and more troubling than the world as it is, as it has been made.'

This is an outstanding volume: diverse but coherent, demanding but always clear. The individual essays are strong, but read as whole the book is even more powerful. It is required reading for any scholar working in the wide and complex field of literature and religion.

Andrew Tate

Mark Knight (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, Routledge, 2016, 464 pp. hb. £185 9780415834056, eBook from £21.

As editor Mark Knight observes in his introductory essay, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* represents an attempt to 'host a conversation' between scholars reflecting a broad range of methodological, theoretical and theological perspectives on the relationships between literature and religion. Conversation, Knight argues, requires not only attentiveness to different voices, but also openness to the unpredictable and sometimes uncomfortable directions in which such interactions might lead. The essays included here provide an examination both of the historical emergence of literature and religion as a field of interdisciplinary study, and of the kinds of critical practice by which that field is constituted in the twenty first century. The volume necessarily eschews a chronological or canonical structure and does not attempt to be comprehensive in its coverage of writers: there are essays on the musician and poet Leonard Cohen and on the Methodist preacher and former slave Fannie McCray, for example, but none on Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Marilynne Robinson. This collection is not primarily an introduction to religion in the canons of English literature, but rather to the range of critical practices involved in the contemporary study of literature and religion. As such, it represents not only a point of entry for new readers, but also a valuable opportunity for scholars already involved in this critical conversation to take stock of its recent developments and directions.

The essays in Part I, 'The Modern Story of Literature and Religion', chart the emergence of this conversation in the nineteenth century and its developments through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Inevitably, the figure of Matthew Arnold looms large. The first two essays, by Joshua King and Dayton Haskin, explore Arnold's legacy for the increasingly ambiguous and contested place of religion in public and political discourse, and for the emergence of English as an academic discipline. This initial focus on Arnold brings into view some of the central concerns that run throughout the book: modern relationships and tensions between religion and the secular; competing accounts of religion as private or public discourse; modern disenchantment and the 'return' of religion. The remaining essays in Part I continue the modern 'story' of literature and religion through Modernism and the Inklings, to 9/11 and the postmodern challenge to the secularisation thesis, along with a detailed consideration of what now constitutes the field of literature and religion based on analysis of articles published in its three most prominent journals (the authors of this latter essay, Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, note rather intriguingly that 'the purported debates on defining the "field" are mostly characterized by the lack of genuine debate'). If the book as a whole seeks to host a conversation about, or between,

literature and religion, this opening section locates that conversation in the contexts of a secularised academy and a recognition of the frequently uncomfortable place of religion in the public sphere. In an insightful contribution, Devorah Baum invokes Derrida's call to 'admit into scholarship what has been too often excluded ... those hidden dimensions of our modern discourses that deconstruction has shown such hospitality towards.' This is, I think, a helpful way of understanding the aims of the book as a whole. Across a variety of theoretical perspectives, literary periods, genres and faith traditions, the collection seeks to understand and reveal the religious not as a discrete 'theme' of literature, but rather as a mode of discourse and practice that persistently inhabits and is inhabited by literature.

This approach is reflected in the choice of topics included in Part II, 'Theory'. Largely absent here are the theoretical schools typically found in introductory volumes on literary theory. The first essay, by Lori Branch, examines the challenge of a secularised literary criticism and the case for the postsecular as a framework for a renewed critical engagement with religion. The essays that follow represent a variety of the ways in which this engagement is currently taking place, focusing on topics including hermeneutics, reception theory, political theology and aesthetics. Part III, 'Form and Genre', takes a similarly eclectic approach; again, the aim is not a comprehensive survey of familiar material, but an introduction to diverse and innovative ways of thinking about the relationships between theology and literary language. Alongside essays considering religion's relationships to epic, tragedy, comedy, elegy, Gothic fiction and the realist novel, Stanley Hauerwas considers how to write a theological sentence – a task, Hauerwas argues, that requires 'seeing through the sentimentalities we use to hide our mortality from ourselves' – and John Schad imagines a dialogue between St Augustine, Derrida, Edith Stein and other voices.

Part IV, 'The Literary Afterlives of Sacred Texts and Traditions', considers presences and readings of sacred texts in a variety of literatures. The range of religious texts discussed in these essays moves beyond the primarily Christian focus of the earlier parts of the book. Literary engagements with the Bhagavad Gītā, the Qur'an and Jewish midrashic texts are examined, while James Najarian reflects on the multiple versions of Buddhism that feature in Western texts and the ways in which this diversity of interpretation might complicate and obscure understandings of a religious tradition. Also explored in this section are popular forms of devotional literature often neglected by literary scholarship and the implications of rewriting sacred texts in, or as, fiction. The attention to multiple faith traditions continues in Part V, 'The Politics of Literature and Religion', which includes essays on Judaism in medieval England and Islamism in twenty-first century Arabic fiction. Interfaith conversations emerge as a more overt consideration, with essays on religious pluralism in the Beat generation and on Leonard Cohen's interfaith dialogue. The challenges of interfaith dialogue are brought into view by Colin Jager's fine essay 'Reconciliation in South Africa: World Literature, Global Christianity, Global Capital'. Reflecting on two novels from post-apartheid South Africa, Jager points out the tensions inherent in the application of a concept of reconciliation rooted in Christian thought as a universal model of justice and national healing.

Beyond the consistently high quality of the individual essays, the most striking aspect of *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* is its willingness to take seriously the distinctiveness of the faith traditions and theologies that it discusses. There is no flattening out of specificities or universalising of 'religion', but rather an

openness to questions of what the reading and writing of literature might mean in the context of particular faith traditions, and what complexities might be involved when conversations about literature and religion are conducted between, as well as within, different religious and theological perspectives. Readers new to this conversation might be surprised by what they find here; for those already involved, this book offers a significant opportunity to reflect on the range of our current conversations and on the directions in which they might move next.

Simon Marsden

Dana Greene, *Elizabeth Jennings: 'The Inward War'*, OUP, 2018, 258pp., hb. £25, 9780198820840.

Do religious and markedly Catholic poems achieve traction in the anglophone culture of the late twentieth century? Elizabeth Jennings, who died in 2001 aged 75, read English at Oxford and attended lectures by Helen Gardner, David Cecil and C.S. Lewis. She was on friendly terms with Kingsley Amis, a fellow student in the B. Litt. class for Elizabethan handwriting. Amis published some of her poems in *Oxford Poetry*, the organ of the Poetry Society, together with those of Philip Larkin and John Wain. She was encouraged to keep on, and her poems appeared with theirs in an anthology edited by Robert Conquest, *New Lines* (1956). In fact she had pride of place, contributing the first ten poems in the volume whose contributors were, not by their own wish, dubbed 'The Movement'. It's a claim to fame, and one made early, although Jennings would later declare herself to be a lyrical poet expressing what she felt, thought and understood, but not as a religious poet. Then again she would say, 'my poetry has always been a development of my religion, even though I have only occasionally written specifically "religious" poems.'

As a child she and her elder sister Aileen were taken to the Roman Catholic Church of St Gregory and St Augustine in north Oxford. Both would play with Prisca, the daughter of J.R.R. and Edith Tolkien, who like the Jennings, were a Catholic family. Prisca would be a lifelong friend. But it was for the young Elizabeth an unhappy time, when 'fear of her father and God the Father dominated her psyche'. Her second volume of poems won the Somerset Maugham award, and she was able to take three months leave from her job in the Oxford City Library to go to Rome. Suddenly Catholicism was normal, it was normative. This was, she said, the happiest time of her adult life. In a poem to David Jones she sees poetry as having a sacramental function with sacred signs and symbols revealing and praising God's creation. In Rome she found a less harsh form of religion than she had known in north Oxford. God was also loving. She resolved to go to confession fortnightly. She quit her job in February 1958 aged 32 to try to live as a writer following her poetic vocation. Was she in some way being saved by her poetry?

Greene's book is the impressive product of a considerable labour mining a large number of disparate sources, MSS, memoirs, collections of papers in various libraries, and the thousands of poems, published and unpublished. 'Fragments of an intricate puzzle.' Usefully, she places Jennings' published volumes of poems into their chronological context giving a sense of the contents and of their reception at publication, so that we get a picture of a growing reputation. The problems of her life – relations with her parents and elder sister, romantic or quasi-romantic attachments

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to Catholic men like Hildebrand James, a felt need to beg friends for accommodation, to solicit money from friends like the historian C.V. Wedgwood ('Liz' and 'Veronica' were friends for fifteen years) and from acquaintances like (Catholic) John Gielgud, her gambling, drinking and periods of mental illness and instability – these are set out with sympathy and sensitivity. Hero worship, she said at one point, was the highest form of love, in turn the remedy for loneliness. After the death of Hildebrand James her attachment to Wedgwood (who was in a long-standing lesbian relationship with Jacqueline Hope-Wallace) intensified. Jennings wrote scores of poems about her, and Greene keys the poems, or some of them, there were so many, to the relationships, often troubled, of the frequently lonely woman. So much for her claims in theory that her poems were autonomous and not autobiographical.

Unfulfilled sexual longing characterised relationships with, for example Sebastian Bullough, later a lecturer in Hebrew in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge. There are poems to 'S' and 'B'. In 1961 she went to Tenby, a seaside town in south Wales, on holiday with Hildebrand James. They both enjoyed betting on horses and playing the slot machines. James was Prior of Blackfriars in Oxford, and her spiritual director.

Aged 35 she sank into anxiety and depression. Sylvia Plath's suicide occurred in February 1963, and Jennings took drug overdoses and put her head in a gas oven, attempting suicide three times. She was told by Freudian psychiatrist Seymour Spencer that she had no choice but to be admitted to the Warneford Hospital, where she remained from the summer of 1963 to the end of 1965. Her parents were leaving Oxford for Eastbourne on her father's retirement, and she feared to be alone. She dreaded the two-hour sessions with Spencer, who derided what he called her self-pitying, childish attitude, and wanted to administer Electroconvulsive Therapy. She managed to keep her treatment to drugs supposed to control depression and anxiety, and, when she lost a lot of weight, insulin. In poems she hit back:

Ring-a, ring-a-roses
Freud is picking posies
Guess what he will use them for?
To make a sexual metaphor.

Graham Greene's estranged wife Vivien would visit her and take her out, and invited her home over Christmas 1963. In the hospital she penned as many as eight or nine poems a day. Another fellow Catholic, Ettie Synan, was an Irish nun and nurse at the Warneford, and her interest, care and concern contributed more than Spencer to her recovery. She too would follow the horses, and she gave Jennings a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*. There were fits of weeping, hysterical outbursts, even a period when she did not recognise her mother.

Her mental instability was never completely cured: paranoia, depression and acute anxiety continued. John Wain and Kevin Crossley-Holland secured for her an Arts Council grant of £750, and she went again to the Spanish Mediterranean coast with Hildebrand James. Poems such as 'Prayer' are from this period.

Shall I seek opposites as Herbert did
To reach the truth? I need the Spirit to
Leap through flesh. Language must be rid

Of all half-meanings. Christ needs words to show
He's dying. O indeed now he is dead

But I shall need the words that rise also.

She went on numerous holidays abroad with James. In 1970 they spent five months in Sitges, and in June 1971 when they were in Guernsey James, 69, died suddenly of a heart attack. Jennings was devastated.

By the time of her death in 2001 Jennings had published forty-eight volumes of poetry, prose and anthology, selling over 200,000 copies. Today there remain 30,000 unpublished poems. She was awarded the C.B.E. in 1992, and shortly before her death was selected to receive an honorary doctorate by Durham University, where there is a useful website: www.elizabethjennings.dmu.ac.uk Dana Greene's excellent biography opens to the reader not only the milestones of Jennings's troubled progress, but gives revealing glimpses of their hinterland. The themes of her poems, childhood, friendship, nature, religion, time and love are given their context in life. 'For Jennings the function of poetry is to discover order in a post-Edenic world marked by chaos, time, decay and darkness.'

Roger Kojecký

Anna Walczuk, *Elizabeth Jennings and the Sacramental Nature of Poetry*, Krakow, Jagiellonian University Press and Columbia UP, 2017, 302pp., \$50/£41.95, 9788323343431.

Helen Gardner's 1972 *Faber Book of Religious Verse* has no poem by Elizabeth Jennings, although two by D.H. Lawrence appear. Only one of Jennings' poems is included by Donald Davie in his 1981 *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, while Jack Clemo is accorded four. Philip Larkin finds space for five in his *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). In anthologies of 1950s verse she, the only woman, was published alongside The Movement poets: Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, John Wain and others.

An enabling basis for this study of the poems is Emma Mason's *Elizabeth Jennings: The Collected Poems* (2012, enlarging on Jennings' publisher Michael Schmidt's *New Collected Poems* (2002), but its 1,016 pages and 1,509 poems contain by no means all of Jennings' voluminous output). Walczuk's discussion of the poems proceeds not by the chronological succession of published collections but by topic, and she is knowledgeable about Catholic teaching on, for instance, the incarnation and the eucharist, doctrines which held a central place in Jennings' life and her poetry. 'The wine and bread protect our ecstasy' ('Harvest and Consecration').

Kingsley Amis, remembering The Movement of the 1950s, wrote that 'the star of the show, our discovery, was Elizabeth Jennings', but although the association contributed to her public recognition, she, like other poets credited with membership, disavowed any loyalty to it, and she struck out her own path. 'I was a woman and also a Roman Catholic, which meant I wanted to write about subjects which were simply uninteresting to most Movement poets.' In 1956 when she was thirty, Jennings used a literary award to spend three months on a trip to Rome. It made a deep and formative impression, and she afterwards referred to Rome as her second home.

'Sacramental' has specific reference in Catholic doctrine to seven rites, including for example baptism and penance. Jennings wrote that poetry is 'a kind of secular sacrament'. Sacraments may be regarded as symbols in the human world of some truth in the spiritual. To the believer they are a means of grace, so that what is

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sacramental may make the heavenly present on earth. C.S. Lewis wrote about what he termed 'Transposition': 'Transposition is not always symbolism. In varying degrees the lower reality can actually be drawn into the higher and become part of it.' Of light depicted in a picture: 'It is a sign, but also something more than a sign ... in it the thing signified is really in a certain mode present. If I had to name the relation I should call it not symbolical but sacramental.' ('Transposition' in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, 1949.)

Jennings wants to see poetry in this kind of light, and see it expressing and forging connections with Catholic ideas, with the spiritual. She sees her lifelong writing of poetry as analogous to a religious vocation. The material form, the words, of a poem may mediate transcendent reality. 'The images are only rungs on a ladder; they are necessary stages towards an experience which transcends imagery.' Her poems, which take the form of well-turned thoughts, short meditations, are a record of experience as well as (many of them) a form of prayer, and she sets store by intensity, rationality and a version of impersonality as propounded by Eliot. Those of her poems 'containing autobiographic [sic] reverberations are free from a suffocating subjectivization of experience.' The Christian poet's words are a 'sacrament of the Word of God'. Walczuk's approach, and indeed Jennings', is in the tradition of Henri Bremond, whose *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* (1927) conflates poetry and mysticism.

Anna Walczuk's account evidences a profound sympathy with Jennings' Catholic theory of poetry, or *ars poetica* as she tends to call it, but she has very little to say about the down to earth poems that neither mediate the transcendent, nor reach towards it, and the formal characteristics of the poems are given little attention. 'Box Room' and 'Never Going' are examples of the down to earth from the 1975 collection *Growing Points*. Her book's subtitle should perhaps refer to the sacramental nature of her, Jennings', poetry.

Walczuk respects Jennings' view that readers of 'fine' writing need not much concern themselves with the writer since the work is sufficient. Accordingly when discussing Jennings' love life in the poems, in 'No Child' for example, she mentions that it is a love that cannot be consummated in marriage, but gives no further explanation. In these poems Jennings enters into 'an interpersonal dialogue with the other', but to know that the other is a priest (Sebastian Bullough, a Jesuit at Blackfriars) we have to turn to the afterword in Emma Mason's *Collected Poems*, or to Dana Greene's biography.

'The periods of sadness, depression and disillusionment in Jennings' private life never strike the dominant chord in her poetry.' So in the poem 'Into the Hour' 'grief begins to flower / Into a new love' and 'Behind that love another which is running / Around, ahead. I need not ask its meaning'.

Yet the poems do both interpret the poet's own life and reflect on how the human may seek access to the divine:

My mind is raided by a dazzling light,
Sun is where I belong
But I'm an expert on night. ('The One Drawback')

I do not know but I know I must touch
And it is by flesh the spirit lives. ('Thought and Feeling')

There are occasional infelicities of style in the book, such as 'like' habitually used in place of 'as' ('For Jennings like for Chesterton ...'), 'rendition' for 'rendering' ('In

some of her poetic renditions of the ineffable divine morally good and numinous exist side by side'). There is an index of the poems referred to, and a bibliography, but no index of subjects such as love, imagination, the seasons, or the stars (a pervasive image). There is however a table of contents which names the topics discussed in the 370 poems referred to. In this book Walczuk provides a sensitive guide to Jennings' oeuvre.

Roger Kojecký

Norm Klassen, *The Fellowship of the Beatific Vision: Chaucer on Overcoming Tyranny and Becoming Ourselves*, Cascade Books, 2016, 234pp., £25.00, 9781498283687, other formats: eBook.

In *The Fellowship of the Beatific Vision* Norm Klassen invites us to a richly and intensely theological encounter with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. And in so doing he participates in what he sees as Chaucer's invitation to us: to see humanity, in all its variety, infidelity, absurdity, blasphemy, drawn into fellowship in the light of Christ's incarnation and redemption within a narrative that never ceases (and cannot ever cease) to make reference to, and so reveal and inhabit, the Word of God.

Klassen writes what is explicitly not a work of medieval scholarship, or a literary monograph: and yet in placing Chaucer as a theologian, in bringing his thought into the context of patristic, medieval and contemporary theology – through and alongside close textual readings – this book is of galvanizing interest for both literary and theological readers. A work of contemporary theology in its own right, it extends the twentieth and twenty first century project of *ressourcement* and radically orthodox renewal at the wells of pre-modern thought to this new source in perhaps the most famous work of English literature before Shakespeare.

The parallel with Dante, to which Klassen returns throughout the book, is an important one: Klassen argues persuasively and powerfully for a treatment of Chaucer that takes him with commensurate theological seriousness to that which Robin Kirkpatrick and Vittorio Montemaggi, amongst others, have recently reclaimed for Dante. Klassen reframes what is often recounted as an opposition between the figures – where Dante's visionary pilgrimage is seen as imbued with unity and clarity, Chaucer's with 'non-judgemental variety' and 'secular' difference. This view is treated as being based on an inadequate or reductive grasp of Chaucer's theology.

At the heart of Klassen's response to the invitation he finds in Chaucer's poetics is the claim that its unity is not at odds with its variety. The rich riotousness of Chaucer's pilgrims and their tales – in all their juxtaposition of the scatological and the scandalous, the banal and the absurd, the sententious and the sober – have invited scholars to give account of Chaucerian relativity, difference, subversion, 'non-judgemental' variety and a kind of worldliness. Klassen argues that there has been, in the tendency to treat the undoubted variety of the tales through individual readings, an under-emphasis on that which is hidden precisely by its evident presence: the pilgrimage frame of the work and, above all, the unexpected, dialogical yet never-broken unity of the pilgrim band itself: their fellowship.

Crucial to this reading is the theme of participation – this is the basis, rather than propositional adherence – for membership of the 'fellowship of the beatific vision', the band of the Church which the pilgrims are. This is an important corrective to

readings which might emphasise Chaucer's satire and subversion of the Church in the deep and evident flaws of some of the figures who represent the clerical and religious life – Klassen breaks through such arguments by stressing the theological context, the always-already-not-yet of salvation. Klassen assumes, in a way very helpful for an understanding of Chaucer, the incommensurability of the categories of 'secular' and 'sacred', what is within and without the church, with Chaucer's understanding. He argues that the pilgrimage framework identifies *all* of these figures travelling towards Canterbury with the Augustinian image of the people of God, the Church, as a pilgrim body on this earth, travelling towards the vision of God. And through the understanding of creation itself as oriented towards God and to a final destination. This makes the bare reality of the pilgrims' fellowship in itself the social image of the hope towards which they are drawn, its instantiation more crucial than their moral, intellectual and indeed aesthetic failures.

Underpinning this is what Klassen unfolds, drawing on Henri de Lubac, as a late-medieval re-framing of the relationship between nature and grace. De Lubac found these to have been too radically and falsely separated, in such a way as to found an understanding that there could be a human dignity separate from its created relationality, participation, holding in God. Klassen's understanding of the inclusivity of Chaucer's vision, which for others defines its secularity, does not make it for him any the less a sacred vision – for the sacred is the most inclusive reality of all.

The unity of the Word, Klassen argues, is the true underpinning of all things. Hence it is the referent basis even where we see it referred to precisely through the comic incongruity, conflict, blasphemy, or imperfect understanding demonstrated by the characters and their tales. It is only when we bring to bear the most generous possible understanding of what the incarnation is for humanity that we can see this – and at the same time Klassen shows through close reading how the truly governing narrative of redemption is pointed and attested throughout. This is a 'sacramental or participatory ontology' which for Klassen underpins all attention to specificities.

One of the most important insights Klassen makes in this book of many is that readings which emphasise ambiguity and paradox are no less Christian for so doing. Medieval literary scholarship has rightly resisted the kind of readings of medieval texts which are allegorical in the sense of what Klassen calls 'grid-like correspondence' which has a rigid account of an accessible spiritual reading, reducing mystery to proposition. Klassen suggests this may in fact be a product of the inheritance of neo-scholasticism, and re-asserts instead the much more properly theological context of a Christian infinite mystery which is participated in rather than parsed.

The breadth of reference in Klassen's book, and the depth of its discussions of De Lubac, Williams, Augustine and so forth might sometimes – especially to a literary reader – leave Chaucer as too much a token of the whole. And yet this is balanced by focused and skilled readings which more than compensate; although they can (and will) of course always be contested by other readers with different emphases. However, the ecumenical generosity of Klassen's account itself allows for this possibility as a response to the invitation to creative encounter Chaucer extends – in both their understandings never outside the participation of the reality of the Word in which context all learning and engagement cannot but take place.

The intentionality and passion with which Klassen writes is itself worthy of comment – this is a very brilliant, and never neutral work which besides the readerships I have already mentioned should be considered as amongst those works of theology

which are in themselves spiritually invigorating invitations to live and learn anew in the participation in God's word, the fellowship of the church, and through these to the hope of 'becoming ourselves' before God's face.

Arabella Milbank

Nancy Rosenfeld, *John Bunyan's Imaginary Writings in Context*, Routledge, 2018, 254 pp., £105, 9781138555464.

Rosenfeld's introduction reflects on the changes and developments in scholarly approaches and methods in the last half century enabling critics of Bunyan to explore his writing from a 'more broadly contextualised view of Bunyan's *oeuvre*.' No longer do we need to categorize it as either fiction or non-fiction, viewing for example, *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a proto-novel, with its variety of characters and 'interesting, credible community in which the characters live and interact'. Rather, the 'blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, between literature and history, or perhaps, in the case of Bunyan, between imaginary literature, i.e. fiction, and theological writing', is now entirely legitimate, enabling scholars of English Literature to view Bunyan's writings in a 'double context': 'his fictional works vis-à-vis his own non-fictional writings, and his fictional writings in the context of written materials by other authors – books, tracts, spiritual autobiographies, and poems – generally available to such a one as Bunyan.' An additional development in scholarly approaches and methodology, observes Rosenfeld, is technological. Digital technology enables the scholar to access and search extant published materials, making potential connections and influences much easier to locate.

This book, in Rosenfeld's own words, 'constitutes an attempt at delineating the context of Bunyan's fictional writings by viewing Bunyan's own imaginary works in tandem with his non-fiction writings'. At the same time, Rosenfeld explores Bunyan's fiction in the context of other writings available to him, both Scriptural and secular.

It is worth noting that Rosenfeld has deliberately chosen to use the word 'imaginary' rather than 'fiction' in the title of her book. The word 'fiction', states Rosenfeld, is often interpreted as the opposite of reality but for Bunyan, the life of his mind (his imagination) was an important part of the *reality* of his life and work. The word 'imaginary', therefore, better reflects the overall theme and purpose of her book.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each focusing on a different theme: The Bible as Literature; John Bunyan, Soldier; From Allegorical to Individuated Characters; One Character; Two Preachers: Donne and Bunyan; John Bunyan and Jewry; Facing Mortality: Sickness and Deathbed Repentance; and Martyrology and Humour. The Epilogue, very fittingly, focuses on the theme of John Bunyan, Pilgrim. For the purpose of this review I will comment briefly on two of the themes – The Bible as Literature and John Bunyan, Pilgrim.

Bunyan, states Rosenfeld, 'would probably have viewed as sacrilegious any attempt to read the Bible for what Western literature has come to regard as literary'. Yet, she contends, Bunyan 'seems to have done just that'. Bunyan, therefore, could be seen primarily not as a theologian but as a literary artist who looks on the Bible as literary. For Bunyan, states Rosenfeld, the Bible was his main 'literary experience' while 'the world of books, plays, poetry, learning' was beyond his purview. We know there were other books available to him but these resources would have been hugely

limited due to his poverty, lack of formal education and lengthy imprisonment. There follows a brief but interesting discussion on the texts available to him, his potential ability to respond to these literary texts, his familiarity (or not) with popular culture, and the practice of reading among seventeenth century dissenters.

The latter part of the chapter examines Bunyan's use of the frame story in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Parts I and II) and of the dream as a framing device. Rosenfeld brings into the discussion Bunyan's most famous literary contemporary John Milton and his poem *Paradise Lost*, as well as examples of the frame story from the Bible (e.g. Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) to demonstrate Bunyan's familiarity with the device. Commenting on the dream as a particular framing device, Rosenfeld contends that this allows the narrator 'blamelessly to express ideas which may otherwise be discomfiting, or even offensive to the reader' (from Bunyan's own 'Apology' to *The Pilgrim's Progress* we are aware that he knew of the potential of his allegory to offend). She also argues that Bunyan's use of the dream was inspired by Scripture, citing Jacob's ladder and the book of Revelation as examples of the use of the dream as a framing device in Scripture. She concludes the chapter with a brief discussion on the use of dreams in *The Pilgrim's Progress* Part II.

The narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Parts I and II) 'flows seamlessly between dream frame, omniscient third-person narrative and dialogue between the dreamer and one of the characters.' Bunyan took these from Scripture and made use of them in his own imaginary writing.

Having read, taught and studied Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Parts I and II) for various purposes (practical, theological, spiritual, academic), I found Rosenfeld's reflections on the theme of pilgrimage particularly interesting. Her concluding chapter, which also serves as her epilogue, concludes with 'a review of ways in which *pilgrimage* provided Bunyan with a context both for his writing and for a view of his life and work'; and focuses on the work with which she started, Bunyan's world-famous allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Rosenfeld notes that pilgrimage, as a religious and cultural rite, is recorded in texts as ancient as the Pentateuch. Pilgrimage provided important (and regular) opportunities for 'male-bonding', something which Rosenfeld claims is characteristic of Christian's experience in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Rosenfeld observes that pilgrimage is both a *process* and a *result*. Whilst scholars sometimes focus on the culmination of the journey, the journey itself is no less important. Bunyan depicts pilgrimage as circular rather than linear: 'The experience of the "new existence" is not a one-time event, but is rather repeated year after year.' It is perhaps worth noting here that conversion is also depicted in *The Pilgrim's Progress* as both a process and an event, taking different forms for different people. Compare the conversion of Christian, for example, with Hopeful. (My unpublished thesis, 'Christian's burden as symbolic representation of sin: outmoded theology or timeless, spiritual necessity?' (2014) is at Spurgeon's College.)

Bunyan develops the idea of pilgrimage from actual/physical (an idea/experience he would presumably have rejected as 'redolent of idol-worship') to internal/spiritual; an idea/experience having meaning, 'not as a religious rite publicly performed, but as a metaphor for what goes on in the mind.' This 'virtual pilgrimage', states Rosenfeld, 'was reflected in Bunyan's depiction of his spiritual state during his lengthy imprisonment, as well as in his construction of pilgrimage in both parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.'

Rosenfeld concludes her book with a brief discussion of two of Bunyan's works in relation to this theme: his *Exposition on the First Ten Chapters of Genesis* as an example for the believer of an earthly pilgrimage through the holy texts; and *The Pilgrim's Progress: Part II*, a pilgrimage or 'trek' with a much greater 'sense of reality, of down to earth tramping along the road'. It is great to read a discussion of Bunyan that focuses as much on the lesser known texts as the famous.

I enjoyed reading this book and have benefited from Rosenfeld's many and varied observations. At times I felt there was a lack of clarity with regard to the exact aim/purpose of the book, and Rosenfeld's train of thought was not always logical, clear and/or suitably developed, leaving the reader (in my humble opinion) sometimes frustrated with the brevity of the argument. However I found the book challenging and thought-provoking; the themes and the approach a refreshing and necessary contribution to the analysis of Bunyan's 'imaginary writings'.

As a Christian, I find it hugely helpful to be intellectually and spiritually challenged by observations stemming as much from academic/literary perspectives as from the purely theological/spiritual. Such observations, I find, simply serve to develop and strengthen my faith rather than weaken it. Any discussion, therefore, which includes the historical, literary, sociological and psychological aspects of Bunyan's life and works, especially that which provokes reflection and challenge as this book does, is welcome and I thoroughly recommend this book.

Ruth J. Broomhall

Philip Ryken, *The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings*, InterVarsity Press (USA), 2017, 160 pp., \$16 pb, 978 0 8308 5372 4

Despite J. R. R. Tolkien's 'cordial dislike' of allegory, *The Lord of the Rings* has proved fertile territory for readers looking to draw out Christian themes (myself included, having written my master's dissertation comparing the worldview of Tolkien's epic with that of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* through the lens of King Arthur). While Tolkien denied any intentional allegorical scheme in his fantasy epic, he nonetheless said in a letter that he saw it as a 'fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision'.

In this vein, Philip Ryken's *The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ's Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings* explores how Gandalf, Frodo and Aragorn respectively embody Christ's roles as prophet, priest and king. As Ryken acknowledges, this pattern has been noted previously by other scholars such as Peter Kreeft, whose *Philosophy of Tolkien* explores many philosophical and theological themes and underpinnings in Tolkien's writing. But Ryken dives deeper into this particular theological schema, looking at how the *munus triplex* or threefold office is woven into Tolkien's fantasy epic. He delves into the history of how different theologians have understood Christ's ministry through this lens. As such it offers an engaging exploration this theme both in *The Lord of the Rings* and in historical theology.

Ryken sets out to consider 'how reading Tolkien can help us live out the prophetic, sacerdotal and regal dimensions of our own calling as Christians.' One aspect that I found particularly helpful is Ryken's emphasis that Christian maturity involves the integration of all three roles. A few years ago, there was a trend in some

quarters for applying ‘triperspectivalism’ to church leadership by identifying prophet, priest and king as three distinct giftings. The integrative approach here strikes me as healthier and more Biblical than one that encourages people to identify only one as their calling or personality type.

To illustrate the applicability of the threefold office, Ryken uses his own calling as president of Wheaton College as his main example, looking at its prophetic, priestly and royal aspects. But this example has its limitations. I find it relatively easy to see the relevance of the threefold office to a senior leadership role such as college president, but Ryken emphasises that ‘the threefold office defines every Christian’s calling’. How does the threefold office inform the calling of, say, a stay-at-home mum, a plumber, or a middle-manager? While Ryken draws out some useful general principles around the threefold office, his ideas would be clearer and more widely useful if more and broader examples were used.

This is also a very Protestant theological reading of Tolkien, and I wonder what Tolkien would have made of, for example, Martin Luther being likened to Frodo as an exemplar of the priesthood of all believers, as Ryken does in Chapter Two. I think this volume would have been stronger and more respectful of Tolkien’s own convictions if it had been more willing to note differences and disagreements between Tolkien’s Catholic perspective and Ryken’s own Protestant viewpoint. It seems to me that Ryken perhaps falls into the common trap of treating Tolkien as an honorary evangelical. Evangelicals’ enthusiasm to embrace Tolkien as a Christian writer can obscure his Catholic theological commitments, just as C. S. Lewis’s high church leanings tend to get overlooked or minimised.

Another area where Ryken could perhaps have made a more nuanced, critical reading of *The Lord of the Rings* is in Tolkien’s romanticising of ‘sacral kingship’. In Chapter Three, Ryken praises the spiritual value in Aragorn as a symbol of divine kingship, and as an imaginative aid to appreciating Christ’s regal office. But it seems to me that Tolkien’s portrayal of kingship carries a political charge. Our current global political situation is one in which many American Christians support President Trump as a King Cyrus figure. Is it possible that *The Lord of the Rings’* glorification of kingship might have contributed to the appeal of strong man leadership? This would be an ironic unintended consequence since Tolkien wrote in opposition to fascism and the corrupting influence of power. But in beautifying kingship, apart from the constitutional checks and balances that guard it against degeneration into tyranny, might he have inadvertently stirred imaginations to be more receptive to authoritarian leadership? The valorisation of ‘unconstitutional monarchy’, a form of unrestrained political power, deserves more robust interrogation than Ryken gives it here.

Ryken’s analysis is predominantly theological rather than literary in broader terms, though it may be unfair to judge a book for what it isn’t. On its own terms this volume largely succeeds in its aims. But for a book exploring a text as rich and expansive as *The Lord of the Rings*, Ryken’s path might have been a little less straight and narrow, and he might have paused now and then to look out on the wider landscapes it passes through. However, theologically-minded readers of Tolkien will find much to appreciate in its insights into how Christ goes incognito in *The Lord of the Rings* as prophet, priest and king.

Caleb Woodbridge

Notes on Contributors

David Barratt with Roger Pooley and Leland Ryken edited *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory*, Apollos/Baker Books, 1995. The second edition of his *C. S. Lewis and his World*, retitled: *Narnia: C. S. Lewis and his World* appeared in 2005.

Ruth J Broomhall is a published author. Having enjoyed an extensive and varied career in education, she successfully completed her Master's in Christian Faith and Practice at Spurgeon's College, London, graduating in 2014 with distinction. Since then she has published *The Pilgrim's Progress: A Curriculum for Schools* (2016), *To Be A Pilgrim* (with Dr Peter Morden, 2016), and *James Hudson Taylor: Called by God Into the Heart of the Dragon* (2018). She is currently working on a bright new version of *The Pilgrim's Progress: Part II*.

Dr Paul Cavill is Lecturer in Early English at the University of Nottingham. He has published widely on Old English literature and the Christian tradition, books including *Anglo-Saxon Christianity* (1999), *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England* (ed., 2004), *The Christian Tradition in English Literature* (ed. 2007), and articles including 'Anglo-Saxon saints' lives — and deaths', in Roger Kojecký and Andrew Tate (eds.), *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text* (2013).

Awarded the OBE 2017 for services to scholarship and the understanding of the humanities, **Professor Valentine Cunningham** is Emeritus Professor of English Language and Literature and Emeritus Fellow and Lecturer in English at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. He works widely across literary, historical, and cultural periods and genres, in addition to his studies in literary theory. His books cover such diverse topics as Victorian poetry, the Spanish Civil War, and *King Lear*.

David Jasper is Emeritus Professor in the University of Glasgow, and was formerly Professor of Literature and Theology. He has been an Anglican Priest for more than forty years and is Canon Theologian of St. Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow. His most recent book is *Heaven in Ordinary: Poetry and Religion in a Secular Age*, 2018.

Dr Roger Kojecký's *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism*, revised (2014) for the Amazon Kindle format, contains first publication of a paper on the role of the clerisy contributed by Eliot to an elite discussion group, The Moot. He is among the contributors to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP). He is Secretary of the Christian Literary Studies Group and has lectured recently at universities in Toronto, Xiamen and Shanghai.

Dr Elizabeth Ludlow is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University. She is the author of *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints*, 2014.

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Dr Simon Marsden is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Liverpool. His research focuses on literature and theology from the nineteenth century to the present, with a particular focus on Gothic literature. He is the author of *Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination* (2014) and *The Theological Turn in Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (2018).

The Revd Dr Arabella Milbank is currently the assistant curate of the Team Parish of Louth. She has just completed her doctorate in the English Faculty at the University of Cambridge on religious fear in Middle English, and is studying towards a further degree through the Divinity Faculty, working under Rowan Williams on seventeenth-century literature and angelology. Her most recent article is on Julian of Norwich's eucharistic theology.

Dr David Parry is a Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. He is currently writing a monograph entitled *Puritanism and Persuasion: The Rhetoric of Conversion and the Conversion of Rhetoric*, and has published several articles on sixteenth and seventeenth century topics. Until recently he has been a member of the committee of the CLSG and Associate Editor of *The Glass*.

Alicia Smith is working towards a DPhil at the Queen's College, Oxford, focusing on the prayer practices of anchorites and how they reflect on historiographical praxis and time.

Dr Andrew Tate is Reader in Literature, Religion and Aesthetics in the Department of English & Creative Writing at Lancaster University where he is also associate director of the Ruskin Research Centre. His books include *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (2008), *The New Atheist Novel* (co-authored with Arthur Bradley) (2010) and *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017). He is also the co-editor, with Jo Carruthers and Mark Knight, of *Literature and the Bible: A Reader* (2013) and, with Roger Kojecký, *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text* (2013).

Caleb Woodbridge holds an MA in English Literature from Cardiff University, with a particular focus on children's literature and medievalism. He has worked in editorial and digital support roles for Hodder and Stoughton and Scripture Union, and is currently Digital Development Champion for the University of Buckingham.

Anna Walczuk is Associate Professor at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków. She is the author of publications on G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, Muriel Spark, and T.S. Eliot. Her *Elizabeth Jennings and the Sacramental Nature of Poetry*, reviewed in this issue, appeared in 2017.

News and Notes

Autumn conference

You are invited to attend, or offer to read a paper, at the CLSG autumn conference at Oxford on Saturday, 2 November 2019. A call for papers (deadline 31 May 2019) will be sent to members of the e-list and posted on the websites of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) and the University of Pennsylvania Calls for Papers. The CLSG website *clsg.org* gives the fullest information and will be progressively updated.

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Keep in touch

Send in news of events and of your publications, appointments and other items likely to interest list members. Even if you are not a CLSG member you are invited to join the email list and receive occasional information about developments relating to Christianity and literature. There is no charge for membership of the e-list. Email *secretary@clsg.org* to be added.

Contribute to *The Glass*

Members don't need to wait to be asked. For example, send an idea or proposal for an article any time up to 30 April, then write it during the summer months. Send ideas and contributions to the Editor, Dr Roger Kojecký, *editor@clsg.org*.

The optimum length for articles is 5,000 words, and for reviews 1,200 words. All contributors should consult the Style Guidance notes in the Journal section of the website *clsg.org* and should append a short biographical note. Submit copy as an email attachment, but a short item can be sent in the body of an email, preferably with HTML formatting preserving italics etc.

Back numbers of *The Glass* can be found in some of the UK Copyright Deposit libraries, and the British Library has a near complete file, from 1986, at the principal St Pancras site. As of 2018 we have an ISSN for a digital version (see this issue's masthead on p. 1). Issues since No. 10 (1997) are in the form of Open Access PDFs in the Journal Archive section of the CLSG website. Similarly, past conference topics and leaflets with details of the speakers and brief bibliographies can be found in the Conference section of the website. While most of the PDFs are read-only, constituent articles are available to current members on request.

