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AND
LITERATURE

PHAINOMENA

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BETWEEN IN-VOCATION AND PRO-VOCATION

A HERMENEUTICS OF THE POETIC PRAYER

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Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of poetic prayer as one that happens in the liminal space between the *in-vocation* of a close relationship with God and the *pro-vocation* of versatile responses to God's presence. The hermeneutic in-between of an experience of God—intimate, ecstatic, and absolutizing, but also unsettling, doubting, and desperate—engenders a genuine possibility to investigate the less obvious aspects of poetry as prayer, and to delve deeper into its complexities and subtleties. The

analyzed poems by G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, and R. M. Rilke disclose the inner world of a human being who yearns for God, but also has the courage to question and listen to an inner voice that torments and tears asunder. A hermeneutic reading of poetry as prayer invites us to acknowledge that an authentic and close relationship with God goes beyond an equivocal and facile response and entails what is sidelined, destabilizing, or even threatening to the safe self. The hermeneutic examination of poetic prayer also inspires us to think of the human body as a legitimate and meaningful site of the encounter between the human and the divine.

Keywords: hermeneutics, poetic prayer, G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, R. M. Rilke.

Med in-vokacijo in pro-vokacijo. Hermenevtika poetične molitve

Povzetek

276 Članek obravnava poetično molitev kot fenomen, ki se dogaja znotraj mejnega prostora med in-vokacijo bližnjega razmerja z Bogom in pro-vokacijo mnogoterih odgovorov na božjo prisotnost. Hermenevtično vmesje – intimnega, ekstatičnega in absolutizirajočega, a hkrati tudi vznemirjajočega, dvomečega in obupanega – izkustva Boga poraja pristno možnost raziskave manj očitnih vidikov poezije kot molitve in razgrnitve njene kompleksnosti in subtilnosti. Analizirane pesmi G. M. Hopkinsa, T. S. Eliota in R. M. Rilkeja razkrivajo notranji svet človeškega bitja, ki hrepeni po Bogu, a obenem poseduje pogum za spraševanje in prisluhljenje mučnemu in razklanemu notranjemu glasu. Hermenevtično branje poezije kot molitve nas vabi, da pripoznamo, kako avtentično in bližnje razmerje z Bogom presega dvoumne ter enostavne odgovore in vključuje tisto, kar je obstransko, destabilizirajoče ali celo grozeče za varnost sebe. Hermenevtična raziskava poetične molitve nas navdihuje tudi k temu, da človeško telo dojamemo kot legitimni in pomenljivi kraj srečanja med človeškim in božjim.

Ključne besede: hermenevtika, poetična molitev, G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, R. M. Rilke.

*You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.*

T. S. Eliot: "Little Gidding" (*Four Quartets*)

Introduction

Every aspect of inner and outer reality is and potentially can become an incentive for prayer for the contemplative mind. Prayerfulness is a thick film that envelops every deed, thought, and stirring of the heart of the one who seeks God and crosses the sacred/profane divide, realizing that the divide is non-existent once one perceives God as the true origin of everything and as dwelling in everything. The poeticity of human existence¹ invites us to see metaphoric meaning as self-created, burgeoning, expanding, seeking, and discovering ever new ways of configuring inherent in human linguistic expressivity. We can gather, following the three giants of contemporary hermeneutics: Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, that metaphoricity is the essential "being" of language; it is how language exists.² However, it is in the poetic word that the truth about the metaphorical character of language reaches its pinnacle. Poetry exemplifies the power of language in picturing the impossible, capturing what evades rendition, and visualizing the unimaginable. As a result, it broadens our perspective, encouraging us to pay closer attention to life's complexities and inconsistencies. It expands our awareness of the world as well as our self-understanding.

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Poetic prayer combines the intrinsic features of poetry and prayer, mingling the subtlety of these two modes of human expressiveness. Poetry's dense language, capable of evoking "the whole of our experience of the world,"³ can

1 I allude here to Heidegger's notion of a human being's poetic dwelling (see Heidegger 1971, 213–229).

2 Cf. Heidegger 2002, 44–46; Gadamer 2013, 449–450; Ricoeur 2004, 38–52.

3 I refer here to Daniel Tate's gloss on Gadamer's poetics (2016, 155–185). Tate contends: "Even today poetry must reaffirm its age-old vocation of invoking *the whole of our experience of the world* within which we encounter ourselves" (2016, 102; my emphasis).

be compared to prayer's powerful language, which attempts to reach out to God, in search of His love, mercy, companionship, and guidance. Poetic prayer is a "breathturn,"⁴ a re-turn to the primordial reality of being-in-the-world, a profound reappraisal of our existence in its originary form. Poetry as prayer is a sacramental reality, the space of an encounter between the human and the divine, imbued, however, with diverse, often unorthodox, or unexpected meanings. Those versatile meanings nourish a contemplative path of the self's deeper understanding and spiritual transformation. The poetic imagination, capturing the reality of this encounter, discloses its unrepeatable and unique character, even if, on the face of it, it seems to iterate what we already know about ourselves and our being-in-the-world. In the mystical tradition of the Christian faith, the practice of poetic prayer is expressive of the firm belief in the reciprocal nature of the relationship between a human being and God. It is a space, in which the world of a human embodiment becomes a word, predicated on the depth of the truth of Incarnation—Word becoming flesh, and a word becomes "embodied" through the evocations of the richness of the human sensory experiences.⁵

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The need to create poetic prayer highlights both the profound and insatiable desire for oneness with the divine and the necessity of using language—the only, if incomplete and imperfect, way of bridging the barrier between God and ourselves. In the Christian religion, poetic prayer has a long-standing tradition that originates from the Holy Scriptures—*The Book of Psalms* in the

4 I use this term as an echo of Gadamer's explication of Paul Celan's volume of poetry entitled *Breathturn (Atemwende)*. Cf. Gadamer 1997, 67, 128, 162. The titled breathturn, as "[...] the sensuous experience of the silent, calm moment between inhaling and exhaling" (Gadamer 1997, 73), expresses Celan's inimitable understanding of poetry and poetic practice. By extension, I indicate that poetic prayer is a breathturn that allows us to imagine and comprehend the uniqueness of an encounter with God in the poetic word—the moment of silence in poet's "inhaling" of God and "exhaling/sharing" of his/her experience of God.

5 G. M. Hopkins's poetry is one of the fine examples of the creative vitality that springs from a deep understanding of the relationship between the Incarnation, human embodiment, and the poetic word. For more on the significance of Hopkins's focus on the sensory, especially auditory experience and poetry see, e.g., Burrows, Ward, and Grzegorzewska 2017, 203–211.

Old Testament,⁶ which is a one-of-a-kind example of the intimate conversation of a human being with God. In psalms, praise is interwoven with joy and thankfulness, repentance is suffused with an unshakeable belief in God's mercy, and the drama of the human existential situation, expressed in words of profound sorrowfulness, is eventually recuperated. The deep-rooted Christian tradition of praying with psalms has given rise to a poetic prayer created by the great mystics (such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Thomas Merton) and other poets throughout history. The poetic word has become the locus of a fervent conversation with God, in which the question-and-answer paradigm has conveyed the search for an understanding of human fate.

Poetry as prayer involves a patient and vigorous unveiling of the fundamental truths of our being-in-the-world. The hermeneutic reading of poetry entails an attempt to understand the poetic prayer's irreplaceable participation in the process of the gradual disclosure of a human being's inner reality. Hermeneutic interrogation reveals that poetry as prayer acknowledges outer reality as posing a query or destabilizing the self's sense of safety and happiness. Praying with poems expresses a desire to combat the intense sense of incompleteness that is felt to be at the heart of the human predicament. The uniqueness of this form of *con-versing* with God lies in our hope as mortal beings to find ultimate completion *in* God and *through* God. Despite differences in time of publication, tone, and form, the poems of G. M. Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, and R. M. Rilke, analyzed in this study, share a similar need for a passionate conversation with God, an ardent desire to be in intimate contact with the divine, which cannot be quenched by the smallness and limitedness of earthly matters. The three selected poems by these authors exemplify the inner being of a poetic prayer and show its inimitable, religious voice, oriented towards the discovery of God, but also towards self-discovery. They invite us to walk through uncharted territories of spirituality in search of the transcendent, to unravel something important about our embodied existence for ourselves, and, therefore, to be able to fully realize that the transcendent pervades and illuminates our daily experience.

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⁶ Cf., e.g., Patterson 2008, 1–22.

The prayer of body and soul

Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) was a Victorian poet and Jesuit priest. Many of his poems are evocative of a deeply entrenched belief that the grandeur of nature expresses God’s way of speaking to a human being. Probably the greatest instance of such an attitude can be found in his poem “Windhover.”⁷ Hopkins believed that nature communicates God’s love and providential care, unfolding its messages for those who are eager to listen to them.⁸ At the same time, this unfurling entails the most subtle furling; an understanding of what is communicated is never complete. The incompleteness engages the ever-new interpretative possibilities. This is well expressed in Hopkins’s term of *in-scape*, which joins *in-sight* and *land-scape*,⁹ and conveys the idea of a hermeneutically illuminative particularity of the world of nature.¹⁰ For him, nature is the genuine locus of a gradual revelation of the mystery of the divine as well as the space of God’s intimate relationship with a human being. The core of Hopkins’s complexity and uniqueness, as well as his legacy to the Romantics and their fascination with evoking nature, can be well explained by recourse to Iris Murdoch’s investigation into the world of nature:

A self-directed enjoyment of nature seems to me to be something forced. More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals,

7 See, e.g., Knox Bugliani and Took 2015, 73–74.

8 Kathrine Bregy’s seminal words best render Hopkins’s love of nature: “Always the world was fresh to him, as it is fresh to children and to the very mature. [...] Few men have loved nature more rapturously than he; fewer still with such a youthful and perennial curiosity. There is a tender excitement in his attitude to natural beauty (whether treated incidentally or as a parable) that is very contagious. [...] Nature indeed was his one secular inspiration.” (1909, quoted in: Ryan 2004, 15.)

9 For a thorough explication of Hopkins’s term of *in-scape*, see, e.g., Waterman Ward 2002, 158–197.

10 For more on Hopkins’s understanding of illuminative particularity, see, e.g., Lindley 2019, 87–107. Lindley writes: “At the heart of their [Hopkins’s and Woolf’s] connection is a common focus on what I shall call the revelatory particular: the unique, numinous charge of meaning within each moment of conscious experience, and its place in human lives.” (89). Cf. also Hořda 2021, 157–158.

birds, stones, and trees. Not *how* the world is, but that it *is*, is the mystical.
(2013, 83; my emphasis.)

The very *being* of nature, in which the mystical resides, is the wellspring of Hopkins's continuous amazement and creative vitality.

Looking ahead of his time, Hopkins transcends Victorian poetry's worn-down clichés and breaks the rigidity of its techniques.¹¹ His nature poems are unique among his contemporaries in that they not only praise the goodness of creation but also reflect a belief in the correctness of observation through the senses, and they value physical beauty as a means of religious insight.¹² Interestingly, his influence can be found in the work of many prominent modernists, with T. S. Eliot being the most avid of his devotees.¹³ Hopkins defies the hypocritical constraints of Victorian morality by conjuring images that powerfully resonate with the findings of carnal hermeneutics that recognize the centrality of the body as the locus of understanding.¹⁴ His conspicuous references to human bodily experience aim to shatter the superficial boundary between the spiritual and the physical, the sacred and the profane. The poem "Ad Matrem Virginem" (the subject of my analysis in this study)—the moving contemplation of the Nativity as reflected and wondrously enacted anew in the Mystery of the Eucharist—shows the breaking down of this barrier, powerfully epitomizing the human spiritual and corporeal experience of God. This beautiful hymn in Latin departs from the nature theme of Hopkins's mainstream poetry and focuses on the interrelationship between the humble acceptance of the Word of God by Mary and the human reception of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. It praises Mary as the one who receives the Word and gives It to the world, while also extolling the Eucharist as the place where God is received, and soul life is begotten. The most delicate, intimate, and joyous reception of Jesus in the Holy Communion is compared to Mary's becoming pregnant with God. For Hopkins, the close affinities between these two (comm)unions

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11 Cf., e.g., Hewitt 2018.

12 Cf. "Gerard Manley Hopkins" 2019.

13 Cf., e.g., Schneider 2021, 24.

14 Cf. Kearney and Treanor, 2015. See also Kearney 2020, 1–13.

provide an opportunity to think further on their corporeal aspect as the site of the mystical encounter.

Undoubtedly, Hopkins's line of thinking accords with that which is discerned in the recent studies of carnal hermeneutics. Although it is still relatively new, carnal hermeneutics can be seen as relying on the foundations of humankind and biblical imagery. Its roots can be traced back to depictions of human creation in the *Bible*. The book of *Genesis* describes the creation of Eve from Adam's bone as a metaphor for the indissoluble union of the two genders (feminine and masculine), interpreting God's creative act as the divine spark that goes down to human carnal existence. The body is shown in the *Bible* as a source of creativity as well as a location of interpretation and understanding. Hopkins believes that the *body*—here, the Holy Body of Christ and the bodily contact between the Mother of God and Her Son, as well as the corporeal encounter between the speaker and the Body of Christ, received in the Holy Communion—is a source of the mystical understanding of the Incarnation's inconceivable truth and the impossible possibility of God dwelling in the human body through the Eucharist.

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The poem's speaker and the Holy Mother are *pregnant* with God; the spiritual birth is evocative of Mary's physical giving birth to Christ. Contemplating the moment when Mary delivers the Child, the speaker broods on her feelings and is overwhelmed by the Mother's first holding and kissing of the Child:

Da complecti illum,
Mihi da paucillum
Tuo ex amore
Et oscula ab ore.
Qui pro me vult dari,
Infans mihi fari,
Mecum conversari,
Tu da contemplari [...]

Let me hold him,
 give me for him
 a touch of your love
 and for him the touch of your kiss.
 Him who wants to give me himself—
 this wisp of a babe who would whisper
 and have me spend my days with him—
 help me keep my gaze on him [...] ¹⁵

The intimacy of the bodily contact between the Mother and the Child, worshipped by the speaker, expresses his/her awe of the truth of the Incarnation, whose seminal importance is heightened through the poem's form—a conversation between Mary and the lyrical “I” who seeks to learn about Christ: “Mater Jesu mei, / Mater magni Dei, / Doce me de Eo, / De parvo dulci Deo (Mother of my Jesus, / Mother of God so great, / tell me of him, / of God so small and sweet),” and is, at the same time, deeply aware of his/her predicament and sinfulness:

Nam tumeo et abundo,
 Immundo adhuc mundo;
 Sum contristatus Sanctum
 Spiritum et planctum
 Custodi feci meo
 Cum exhiberem Deo.
 Laesum atque caesum [...]

For I am gravid and swirling
 with worldliness still whirling awry.
 I have grieved the Holy Ghost
 and made my angel
 guardian groan,
 presenting to God,
 with my sinful flesh [...]

¹⁵ The fragments of the poem by G. M. Hopkins “In Festo Nativitatis Ad Matrem Virginem Hymnus Eucharisticus” (“A Eucharistic Hymn to the Virgin Mother on the Feast of the Nativity”) are cited here as translated by Philip C. Fischer (Hopkins 2020).

The intensity and gentleness of the relationship between Mary and the speaker astound us:

[...] “teach me about Him, the small sweet God.” This request, which implies the intimacy between Christ and Mary, is countered with the speaker’s unworthiness. While she brings Christ to the world in the Visitation, the speaker is the poor sinner that only shows Christ crucified back to the Father. All of these pleas for the grace to change, to “love,” to “rejoice,” to “embrace,” and to “contemplate” are all answered through the shifting attitude of the speaker, culminating in the joyous act of worship of the final line: “Praise to God always!” (Adamson 2016.)

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Alongside the increasing intensity of feelings of thankfulness and tenderness, the desire to learn more about the Mystery of Nativity grows. However, understanding does not happen through reasoning; the teaching does not come with words. Rather, understanding is sought after and satisfied on the level of the body; insights come from intuiting love as gestured and expressed in bodily care. The imagery of the Nativity’s beauty is suffused with words of adoration relating to the body of Christ. It is the closeness of the corporeal relationship between the Mother and the Child that is the true space of grasping the ungraspable meaning of the Mystery. Furthermore, this exceptional depiction of Jesus’s birth is filled with contemplative sections that probe the life of the soul receiving the Holy Communion. The two imaginative realms converge: Nativity is the Eucharist, and the Eucharist is Nativity. Hopkins’s stylish and most profound Nativity hymn leads us to recognize a deep feeling of the intermingling spheres of body and soul in a human being’s response to God’s speaking in the miracle of the Incarnation.

Hopkins’s apt foregrounding of the language of the body in his poetic prayer reveals a deep truth about the often-neglected importance of the body as the site of communication between God and us. His verse effectively underlines the inclusive quality of the hermeneutic understanding of our human condition by emphasizing a human being’s bodily experience of prayer.

2. Poetic prayer as a pro-vocation on the spiritual path. The call to understand differently

Like Hopkins, T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was a religious convert; the first converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism, the latter from agnosticism to Anglicanism. The conversion marked a watershed moment in their thinking and writing. Ordained to the priesthood, Hopkins directed his creative capabilities to the articulation of faith on two levels. His private self revealed itself in the tenderness and fullness of the poetic word, giving rise to his most famous poems, but also to his homilies for the church community, which were known as prayers.¹⁶ T. S. Eliot's conversion resulted in a resurgence of spirituality and an exploration of Christian motifs. The first major example of a poem that expressed his *metanoia* was "Ash-Wednesday" (1930).¹⁷ The two differing but overlapping religious perspectives of a devout follower of God and a layman seeking the divine inspire us to hermeneutically probe the vast regions of meaning of poetry as prayer.

Eliot's literary output, imbued with religious elements, displays a hermeneutic tension between spiritual death caused by sin and repentance interpreted as a rebirth—the gradual embrace of a new existence.¹⁸ His "The Journey of the Magi," selected for analysis here, is an Epiphany-centered piece of poetry, which, however, subverts the conventional expectation that epiphany connotes a life-changing event. Its meaning rests on the disparity/closeness between the utter significance of revelation and the possibility of remaining completely indifferent in the face of it. The liminal space between devoted faith and apathetic negligence seems to be the crux of Eliot's hermeneutic understanding of the human condition. The image of a dreary reality, already signaled in the poem's opening stanza: "A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of the year. / For a journey, and such a long journey," undermines, from the start, the value of the epiphanic moment as well as invokes doubt and hesitation as for reaching the point of destination. The imagery of bleakness and uneasiness disparages the sensation of promised fulfillment because the

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16 Cf., e.g., Dubois 2017, 50–82.

17 See, e.g., Poetry Foundation 2021.

18 See, for example, Schneider 2021, 108–128.

destination does not appear to be a true point of arrival but rather subtly suggests an everlasting journey and an experience of something always disorienting and re-orienting. Eliot's attitude toward human searching/journeying in "The Journey of the Magi" resonates with the one in "Little Gidding," the final part of his *Four Quartets* (1943), a philosophically and theologically rich reflection on temporality and the history of humankind:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (Eliot 2021.)

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The first section of "The Journey of the Magi" contrasts our belief in the Magi's seeming zeal, perseverance, and maybe emotional endurance in setting out on a journey to pay tribute to the New-Born King with misgivings, exhaustion, and a sense of burden that feature in the poem. Uncertainty, which engulfs this most extraordinary endeavor—traveling is precarious and may turn out to be futile—creates an exorbitant tension that undercuts its purposefulness. The speaker's open confession of the facts, even if disquieting, about the expedition ("the worst time of the year") establishes the tone of reluctance and trepidation that runs throughout the poem.

Like many other poems by Eliot (the most renowned being "The Waste Land," "Ash- Wednesday," or "Gerontion"), "The Journey of the Magi" alludes to the spiritual crisis of modernism.¹⁹ The evocation of the Magi's perilous journey, more broadly, carries the universal meaning of a human life journey, which is beset with obstacles, suffering, hardships, the loss of hope, and despair. Eliot supplants the formulaic fabulousness of the Magi's journey with the realism of the lived experience of being on the road to seek God in its unsettling and demanding nature. Resonating with the tradition of Christian mysticism and the theology of the dark night of the soul, this poem speaks of the effort a human being must take to reach God.²⁰ The speaker enters its

19 See, for example, Menand 2007, 5–6.

20 Cf. John of the Cross 2012 (see especially: Book 1, 1.1). See also John of the Cross, as cited in Matthew 1995, 1, 51, 55–56.

non-vivacious aspects, defying the myth of the apparent nicety and ease in the human search for God. Accordingly, highlighting the humbling effects of the quest, the poem employs suspicion and hesitancy as genuine prerequisites for a deeper understanding of a human being's existential situation and his/her relationship with God. Speaking hermeneutically, Eliot's poetic prayer is an *invocation*, but also a telling *pro-vocation*²¹—an appeal to think more, to think-the-difference,²² to not succumb to self-complacency in responding to God. It summons us to a deeper and more involved attitude towards God revealing himself to us, which helps us acknowledge that the disturbing *pro-vocation* is our true *vocation*—we are continually called to a greater apprehension of our rapport with God.

The poem shifts the lived experience of oppression and hesitation from the periphery to a legitimate position, and this stance seems to truly express a human way of being with God. Eliot's *pro-vocation* encourages us to hermeneutically configure and reconfigure the life/death paradigm, and thus to dismantle the univocal messages of death and life:

[...] were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. (Eliot 2020.)

Birth, understood as bitter agony, is connotative of the death to one's former lifestyle, not concurring with God's ways—one that instantly reminds us of St. Paul's or St. Augustine's conversion as powerful examples.²³ The demise of the former life is not easily achievable when accompanied by "people clutching their gods." Crucially, although anticipated in the title, the name of the Christian God does not appear in the poem. Instead, there is a reference to

21 The word "vocation" comes from Latin: *vocationem*—"a calling, a being called" (cf. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "vocation").

22 For a thorough explication of the Incarnation as a space of thinking-the-difference see Wierciński 2019, 91–126.

23 Cf. Augustine 2007, especially books VII and IX.

gods (pagan deities), which seems to heighten the significance of the confusing and toilsome search for God. The enigmatic line: “Birth [...] like Death, our death,” most probably indicates the state of a meaningful holding in contempt one’s sinful existence and struggle, which pertains to the new way of being-with-God—epitomized in the birth of the Child.

288 Oddly enough, in Eliot’s narrative poem of the Nativity, the Incarnated God is neither visible nor tangible. It is the God, almost unrecognized, whose epiphany poses more queries than it provides ready or univocal answers. Eliot’s evocation of Epiphany is a hermeneutic challenge for a perceptive reader rather than a faithful representation of a religious dogma, which would induce an uncomplicated response to the undeniable power of God revealing Himself in His Son. The astuteness of the poet’s *pro-vocation* lies in prompting us to think more, to think-the-difference, to ponder the way that does not easily comply with the abiding mode of thinking. Eliot’s prophet-like call on us, the readers, disassembles the former to create the new, following the trajectory of a belief through disbelief to a renewed belief. The belief/disbelief/belief scheme discloses the poet’s hermeneutic sensibility and looms large as a captivating invitation to reconsider the already understood, precipitating a more profound understanding. His use of this paradigm resonates strongly with Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic insight into mimetic representation, particularly his notion of the three-fold *mimesis*: prefiguration/configurement/reconfiguration, which accounts for a deeper understanding of the complexities of representing reality and inspires us to reorient our thinking to notice the necessity of the reconfiguration stage.²⁴ The reconfigured reality is the reality of our learning anew about that which is. However, thanks to it, we do not see things in their complete and radical newness, but rather we recognize the very core of reality as it is—its originary shape. The reconfigured thinking about reality incites a new way of describing it and, thus, begets a redescribed reality that informs us about more than one possibility of understanding.

“The Journey of the Magi” is an implicit hermeneutic conversation with God whose presence is shadowed by the details of the materiality of being:

24 Cf. Ricoeur 2012, 52–90.

The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow [...]
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches [...] (Eliot 2020.)

The journey of the Three Kings in the poem, like the biblical narrative that features this expedition, leads to a discovery of God's being *there*: "There was a Birth, certainly. We had evidence and no doubt." However, the sober, unenthusiastic, and almost scientific rather than an intimately tender approach to God revealing Himself encourages us to delve deeper into the delicate nature of the divine presence as embodied in the poem. God's presence is shown as a possible and meaningful inner *absence* since the Magi remain almost unaffected by the Birth of the Child.²⁵ The speaker's conversation with God takes the form of a silent prayer, fraught with troublesome thoughts that convey the precariousness of human fate.

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Significantly, the poem's structure, which includes a distinct division visible in the choice of lexical items in the stanzas depicting respectively the voyage to Bethlehem and the return journey, serves to conjure a forward and backward movement. The poem's composition potently indicates Eliot's hermeneutic sensibility and, more specifically, his implicit recognition of the importance of the hermeneutic arc in reaching out for understanding. Only in retrospect can one appreciate the significance of journeying more fully. His lyrical narrative captures the details of the physical voyage, which leads to more involved thinking about the spiritual journey; the forward and backward movement indicates the very nature of a human being's spiritual journeying—progressing and regressing. The progress and regress paradigm of a soul life resonates

25 One may call here upon Heidegger's understanding of absence as a mode of presence. See, e.g., Backman 2015.

here with another one—the interplay of concealment and unconcealment in the revelation of truth that is discernible in language (especially in the poetic word).²⁶

In Eliot's narrative poem, what is veiled for the travelers is soon unveiled, only to be veiled anew. The provisionality and contingency of human existence (the Magi's perilous journey) obscure a complete grasp of the Nativity's revelatory occurrence. As a result, the truth of Epiphany is depicted in the poem not as a momentous, far-reaching, and life-changing reality, but as an incident, with which the Magi should wrestle, approaching it patiently and not passing quick judgments: "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation." Importantly, in the poem's closing line, the speaker's voice shifts from the plural "we" to the singularity of "I": "I should be glad of another death." This most enigmatic *gladness* and its polyvalent meaning prompt a hermeneutic interrogation. Certainly, the sentiment of being glad about death subverts a natural, instinctual impulse to avoid it at all costs, to defy its murky grip. Moreover, the speaker disjoins his/her approach from that represented by the community. Does this assertive stance express a sense of superiority over other mortals, or a different, non-conventional understanding of death? Defying the readers' expectations, the poem does not provide an obvious and unequivocal answer to this query, but rather heightens the level of ambiguity and magnifies its opaque meaning.

The pervasively skeptical tone of "The Journey of the Magi," which continues till its very end, inspires us to seek the reasons for human confusion and apprehension. Undeniably, the sharp contrast between the illuminative truth of Revelation—the event of Epiphany—and the dark reality of doubting prompts a deeper dive into the nature of human understanding, which, as the poem reveals, is volatile due to the inevitability of the conditional, provisional, and finite character of our being-in-the-world. Skepticism and suspicion are not held in contempt, but rather they are seen here as legitimate, even if discomfiting, forms of *belief* inherent in non-*belief*. The poem thematizes the

26 The interplay of concealment and unconcealment (*Verbergung/ Entbergung*) of Being in poetic language was thoroughly explored by Martin Heidegger. Cf., e.g., Heidegger 2002, 34–36.

human search for truth, which, if genuine, is not disentangled from doubt, misgivings, and second thoughts. The patient hermeneutic reading of “The Journey of the Magi,” which is sensitive to the poem’s opacity and complexity, allows one to fully appreciate it as a prayer of a soul seeking enlightenment while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations on the path to understanding.

3. Poetic prayer, meditative gaze, and the aporia of seeking the holy

Rilke’s “Pieta,” the last poem selected for analysis in the present study, is a potent example of a hermeneutic insight into human faith and prayer, disclosing not only the less apparent but also the disturbing aspects of the search for God and our being-with-God. This literary masterpiece exemplifies Rainer Maria Rilke’s (1875–1926) spiritually profound poetry, riven with tension and doubt. It also evokes the aura of modern skepticism and a problematic quest for the holy.²⁷ Unlike Hopkins’s “Ad Matrem Virginem” and Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi,” which are concerned with the birth of Jesus, Rilke’s poem thematizes Christ’s death. The choice of “Pieta,” expressing a shift in the religious theme, encourages us to view the poetic prayer as encompassing a wider range of meanings and attitudes than is apparent at first sight.

The poem is an unusual and disquieting portrayal of the first-person speaker’s cordial rapport with the Beloved Body of Christ after his death on the cross. Instead of the expected, tender, and grief-stricken holding of Jesus’s Body on the knees, the lyrical “I” addresses the Beloved with affectionate words, embracing the Body with his/her vehement, meditative gaze, which highlights the poet’s keen interest in the power of looking.²⁸ Images of reverence and devotion to the Holy Body are intertwined with those that show the physical and rather astonishing aspect of love; timidity coexists with the robust expression of bodily contact.²⁹ The washing of Christ’s feet, full of

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²⁷ Cf., e.g., Guardini 2019.

²⁸ On the significance of *schauen* (“looking”) in Rilke’s poetry, see, for instance, Louth 2020, 9–10; cf. also: eNotes Editorial 2015.

²⁹ Commentators indicate the erotic nature of the bodily encounter featured in the poem. In Leo Steinberg’s *Michelangelo’s Sculpture: Selected Essays*, we read: “The erotic tenor of Rilke’s poem is so intense that the poem was first published under the bowd-

veneration and mournfulness, as well as their drying in the speaker's hair, suggestive of loving care, are also unsettlingly connotative of the biblical scene of an adulterous woman washing Jesus's feet with her tears and drying them with her hair (Luke 7: 36–50):

And so I see your feet again, Jesus,
which then were the feet of a young man
when shyly I undressed them and washed them;
how they were entangled in my hair,
like white deer in the thornbush.³⁰

Rilke magnifies the effect of closeness between the speaker and Christ using a potent simile: the hair is compared to a thornbush in whose thickness the feet, like white deer, get entangled. Moreover, the image echoes the *Old Testament* story of Abraham who finds a lamb in the bush to sacrifice it when God saves his son, Isaac.³¹ Both the white deer and the lamb are evocative of Christ's innocence.

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“The watching over and adoring” of “this night of love” opens the way for a one-of-a-kind encounter between the first person lyrical “I” and Christ. The ambiguity of the thus described loving relationship, as well as the poem's uncommon point of view, undoubtedly necessitate a hermeneutic interrogation. We are astounded by the poem's ambiguous implications; the speaker's intense desire for an arcane relationship with Christ continues in a completely unorthodox, even anomalous, or blasphemous manner:

But look, your hands are torn—:
beloved, not from me, not from any bites of mine.
Your heart is open and anyone can enter:
It should have been the way in for me alone.

lerizing title “The Magdalene.” (2018, 187.)

30 The English translation of “Pieta” is cited here after: Rilke 2021.

31 See Genesis 22: 1–12.

Even if it appears to be so bizarre at first glance, one can perceive that the tremendous yearning for the Beloved must have some rationale behind it. Readers are probably bewildered and upset when the pious attitude toward God's passion ("your hands are torn") mingles with the distressing evocation of an animalistic, if not carnivorous, behavior ("bites of mine"). As unbearable as it is, the blatant and provocative embodiment of the iconoclastic entwining of the spiritual and the corporeal startles while giving rise to more queries. What is the hour that the speaker mentions, and why do the loving parties perish?

Now you are tired, and your tired mouth
 has no desire for my aching mouth—.
 O Jesus, Jesus, when was our hour?
 Now we both wondrously perish.

The speaker disassembles the reader's expectations of the image of affectionate and pristine contact with the Body of Christ as the strong, carnal underpinnings of the pietistic, spiritual love for Christ deconstruct the obviousness of devotion. Dwelling in the liminal space between the God-fearing and the profane, the poem's description of the close contact with Christ, satiated with language that displaces the established form of adoration, creates subversive meanings of this congenial encounter:

And I see your never-loved limbs
 for the first time, in this night of love.
 We never lay down together
 and now we have only adoring and watching over.

In a similar vein to Eliot, Rilke questions the evident character of the message standing behind the Christian motifs, and, through a series of unexpected estrangements, calls the reader to think more and to intuit the polysemic nature of passion, (mis)comprehension, and distortion. "Pieta" is a prayer uttered in an experience of being lost. The desperate clinging to Christ is an inner, loud cry, which finds expression in the exigency of bodily contact; exaggeration or even perversion arises from some deeply felt and unfulfilled need. Possibly, the poem is the shocking epitome of possessive love.

“Pieta” refers to the *Old Testament* narrative of Jacob wrestling with the Angel (“I will not let thee go, except thou bless me”) (Genesis 32: 26) and its deep symbolic meaning by evoking an intense “night of love.”³² The poem’s final verse powerfully alludes to Jacob’s fight and the wound that he is afflicted with—a limp hip—by invoking God’s exhaustion and the speaker’s pain (“aching mouth”):

Now you are tired, and your tired mouth
has no desire for my aching mouth—
O Jesus, Jesus, when was our hour?
Now we both wondrously perish.

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Importantly, the encounter between the speaker and Christ occurs at night, which can imply a soul’s massive struggle in its inner darkness but also the best time for an intimate conversation, as it does in biblical narratives that often embody a human being’s earnestness and persistent prayer. It is worth recalling the episode of Nicodemus’s coming to Jesus at night, which exemplifies a human yearning for an important conversation to be enveloped by silence and darkness (John 3: 1).

“Pieta” is a biblical intertext, inspiring us to investigate the intricate aspects of prayer, which is portrayed as an excruciating struggle rather than a complacent soliloquy. Rilke captures the inner conversation with God in its drama and irresistible force. The exclamatory and questioning tones of the poem’s last but one line amplify the aura of the necessity to find a solution to some query. Like the *Old Testament* narrative, this poem reveals a human being’s urge to understand, which takes the form of an intense striving. The concluding line of “Pieta,” “Now we both wondrously perish,” is a conundrum rather than a clear denouement. Why does the struggle to understand, perhaps to self-integrate, end with the perishing of the two parties? Can this weird “perishing” connote the fusion of their horizons and the end of the fight that results in some form of fulfillment? The question of whether the mysterious act of perishing represents a longed-for completion remains unresolved. Without a shadow of a doubt,

32 All citations from the *Bible* are taken from *King James Bible Online*.

the poem is a cogent invitation to hermeneutically ponder the importance of prayer as the “face-to-face” encounter that is both terrifying and consoling as it engenders the possibility of having one’s life saved in its course. Jacob’s life is spared, despite his seeing God. Rilke’s choice of “gaze” as an important form of communication generates powerful resonances with the biblical story of Jacob’s “facing” God. Instead of offering an unambiguous ending, the poem’s resolution—the experience of a miraculous and enigmatic oneness: “[...] we both,” which might be suggestive of some curious contentment—inspires us to reconsider the nature of the speaker’s inner cry and to investigate its polysemic meaning. The polyvalence of senses engages a meticulous re-thinking of the poem’s prevalent idea.

In its vivid representation of a bodily sensation as interwoven with the life of a soul, Rilke’s poem meaningfully dismantles the duality of spirit and body. Demystifying this dichotomy, well-established in Western thought, this poetic prayer indicates that the body is both the site of interpretation and the interpreter. From the start, evoking the spiritual experience—an adoration of Christ—, “Pieta” concentrates entirely on the sensations felt *in* and interpreted *through* the body, and, thus, it can be read as a “corporeal inscription” of the passionate reaction to the object of love. This distinct approach accords with the findings of carnal hermeneutics, which not only avows the unity of body and soul but credits bodily experience as the legitimate space of an interpretation of human existence.³³

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The body in Rilke’s poem plays the roles of both the interpreted and the interpreter as the first-person lyrical “I” speaks through the body, recording minute details of his/her “bodily conversation” with Christ. Significantly, “Pieta” upholds the somewhat neglected or denigrated aspect of prayer—bodily expression and posture. This inclusive attitude encourages us to appreciate Rilke’s hermeneutic sensibility, which exemplifies the capacity of hermeneutics to embrace more—its propensity to recognize and approve of the existence of that which is marginalized or confusing (possibly, even embarrassing). The poem alludes to the tender and fascinating intimacy between a human being and God, which is the outcome of God’s initiative—

33 See Kearney and Treanor 2015, 10–27.

the event of the Incarnation. Predicated on the truth of the Incarnated God who enters the history of mankind, the hermeneutics of embodiment inspires us to fully acknowledge the significance of the body in interpreting our being-in-the-world. Understood in the light of the Incarnation, the body is no longer a territory that is threatening or deserving of contempt, but rather a space of conversation with God, and even the locus of the sanctity of being.³⁴

Conclusion

296 Poetic prayer involves an important expansion of our understanding of being-in-the-world. Not knowing, carrying tension as the light, which is not easily accepted but powerfully beckons down our intellectual pathways, having the courage to seek new answers, is what precipitates the hermeneutic unfolding of understanding in poetic prayer. Its creative realm is stranded between veneration and skepticism; admiration coexists with befuddlement. Revisiting Christian themes, the non-conventional poems of Hopkins, Eliot, and Rilke shed light on the inseparability of divinity and humanity and address some fundamental aspects of the human condition. Nurturing the less expected or the wholly unexpected, poetic prayer allows for the ineffable to gain a new voice and vitality. Poetry as prayer reveals the inner, mystical, dialogic, and transformational character of that which happens in a human heart. It discloses something essential about our spirituality: the pattern of belief and disbelief—a human being’s capability of a desperate yet hopeful seeking of God but also of an iniquitous abandoning of Him. Praying with poetry is the space of interaction of the many voices that a human being discovers to be dwelling in the innermost depths of his/her soul. In its non-univocal texture, this kind of poetry is the outcome of the urge to *in-voke* the loving presence of God and of encountering the many, also contradictory, and *pro-vocative*, responses that this presence occasions. In its versatile and complex character, poetic prayer can be a response that fails to concord with the intrinsic call to live in God’s presence; it can be, and often is, a prayer of loss, lamentation, and despair.

34 See St. Paul’s explication of the sanctity of the human body: “[...] for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” (1 Cor 3:17.)

Since God's reality is different from ours, we are continuously searching for Him and trying to understand His ways. In this search, we gradually come to an understanding that the hermeneutic *in-between* is the very space of the impossible possibility of an encounter with God. The unquenchable longing for being-with-God is the subtle tissue of poetic prayer. Hopkins's devotional poetry, Eliot's verse calling us to understand more and in a different way, God's thinking, which is painfully not ours, and Rilke's almost blasphemous, subversive evocation of a relationship with God inspire us to delve deeper into the gentleness and magnanimity of God's seeking a human being and the versatility of a human being's response.

Poetry as prayer is not always a place of long-awaited reconciliation and peacefulness but is rather the site of a massive struggle and disquiet. The various tones adopted by the poets analyzed in this study invite us to re-think poetic prayer's exceptional role in expressing human anxiety and longing for God. Hopkins, Eliot, and Rilke demonstrate that the constructive unrest that ensues from a hermeneutic belief/disbelief/belief paradigm and pertains to poetic prayer is not about a solidified and univocal response to what God invites us to see and understand, but rather it implies that the encounter between God and a human being is potentially always varying and unpredictable. The beauty of the poetic prayer's ambiguity—its often-unforeseeable message—encourages us to seek and follow all possible paths to encountering God, and perhaps not only encountering, but of being in love with Him.

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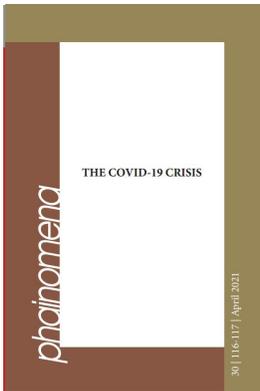
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