

A detail from Raphael's fresco 'The School of Athens' showing Plato and Aristotle. Plato, on the left, is an older man with a long white beard, wearing a reddish robe, pointing his right index finger towards the sky. Aristotle, on the right, is a younger man with a dark beard, wearing a blue robe with gold trim, gesturing with his right hand palm-down towards the earth. He holds a book in his left hand with the word 'ETICA' visible on its cover. The background shows architectural elements like columns and a floor with a grid pattern.

POETIC REVELATIONS

The Power of the Word III

EDITED BY
**MARK S. BURROWS,
JEAN WARD, AND
MAŁGORZATA GRZEGORZEWSKA**

ROUTLEDGE

Poetic Revelations

This book explores the much debated relation of language and bodily experience (i.e. the ‘flesh’), considering in particular how poetry functions as revelatory discourse and thus relates to the formal horizon of theological inquiry. The central thematic focus is around a ‘phenomenology of the flesh’ as that which connects us with the world, being the site of perception and feeling, joy and suffering, and of life itself in all its vulnerability. The voices represented in this collection reflect interdisciplinary methods of interpretation and broadly ecumenical sensibilities, focusing attention on such matters as the revelatory nature of language in general and poetic language in particular, the function of poetry in society, the question of Incarnation and its relation to language and the poetic arts, the kenosis of the Word, and human embodiment in relation to the word ‘enfleshed’ in poetry.

Mark S. Burrows is Professor of Religion and Literature at the University of Applied Sciences in Bochum, Germany. Recent publications include two volumes of German poetry in translation: Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Prayers of a Young Poet* (2013) and the German-Iranian poet SAID’s *99 Psalms* (2013); a forthcoming volume of his recent poems, *The Chance of Home*, will be published in 2016.

Jean Ward is Professor of English Literature at the Institute of English and American Studies, Gdańsk University, Poland. Her publications include *Christian Poetry in the Post-Christian Day: Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings* (2009) and a translation of Tadeusz Ślawek’s monograph *Henry David Thoreau – Grasping the Community of the World* (2014).

Małgorzata Grzegorzewska is Professor of English Literature in the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland. Her most recent book is entitled *George Herbert and Post-Phenomenology: A Gift for Our Times* (2016).

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Word Made Flesh Made Word

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Mark S. Burrows, Jean Ward
and Małgorzata Grzegorzewska



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Contributors

David Brown is Wardlaw Professor of Theology, Aesthetics and Culture at the University of St Andrews, having previously held posts at Oxford and Durham. His writings have explored relations between theology and philosophy, with a special focus on matters related to theology and the arts. He is best known for his series of five volumes on this subject, beginning with *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (1999) and concluding with *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (2008). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2002.

Mark S. Burrows is Professor of Religion and Literature at the University of Applied Sciences in Bochum, Germany. He is a medievalist by training, and his academic work focuses on the intersection of mysticism and poetics. His poems and translations have recently appeared in *Poetry*, *91st Meridian*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Eremos*, *Tablet*, *Weavings*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Metamorphoses* and *Almost Island* among others. Recent publications include two volumes of German poetry in translation: Rainer Maria Rilke's *Prayers of a Young Poet* (2013) and the German-Iranian poet SAID's *99 Psalms* (2013); a forthcoming volume of his recent poems, *The Chance of Home*, will be published in 2016.

Sir Michael Edwards is a member of the Académie française, Professor at the Collège de France and Honorary Fellow of Christ's College, University of Cambridge. He is also a poet and writer, in English and in French, and the author of numerous books developing a long reflection on the nature and finality of art, examining painting, music, philosophy, theology and especially European literature from Homer, Ovid and Dante to Geoffrey Hill and Philippe Jaccottet. His books in English include *Towards a Christian Poetics* (1984), *Poetry and Possibility* (1988) and *Of Making Many Books* (1990).

Marta Gibińska teaches at the Jozef Tischner European University in Krakow, Poland. Her specialist fields are Shakespeare studies and

translation studies. Her publications include *Functioning of Language in Shakespeare's Plays: A Pragma-dramatic Approach* (1989) and *Polish Poets Read Shakespeare* (2000). She is a member of the Polish Shakespeare Society, Deutsche Shakespearegesellschaft, International Shakespeare Association and European Shakespeare Research Association.

Kevin Grove, CSC, is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, Indiana. Grove received his doctorate in philosophical theology at Trinity College, University of Cambridge and worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at L'Institut Catholique de Paris, France. His academic work concerns memory, Christology, St Augustine and the mediation of religious experience. Grove is a Catholic priest in the Congregation of Holy Cross.

Małgorzata Grzegorzewska is Professor of English Literature in the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland. She has published extensively on Shakespeare (her two books in Polish were devoted to the discussion of Shakespeare's tragedies of revenge and the connections between metaphysical aspects of ancient tragedy and Shakespeare's drama) and the Metaphysical Poets, as well as on the connections between literature and philosophy (Kierkegaard, Marion, Henry). Her most recent book is entitled *George Herbert and Post-Phenomenology: A Gift for Our Times* (2016).

Sonia Jaworska graduated from the University of Gdańsk and the University of Warsaw, Poland. She received her MA in English Philology from the University of Warsaw. Her master's thesis investigated spatial relations in C. S. Lewis's *Cosmic Trilogy*. In addition to her research and writing interests, she enjoys trekking, travelling, playing the violin and exploring the world of digital media.

Francesca Bugliani Knox is a research associate at Heythrop College and Teaching Fellow at University College London. Among her publications are translations into Italian as well as books and articles on various aspects of English and Italian literature from the Renaissance to the present, including *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola* (2011). She was editor, with David Lonsdale, of the first volume in this series, *Poetry and the Religious Imagination* (2015), and, with John Took, of the second volume, *Poetry and Prayer* (2015). Her essay 'Between Fire and Fire: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*' recently appeared in *Heythrop Journal* (2014), and she has contributed to and edited *Ronald Knox: A Man for All Seasons. Essays on His Life and Works* (2016).

Angela Leighton is Professor of English and Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. She has published many critical works on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, including, most recently, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (2007) and *Voyages over Voices: Critical Essays on Anne Stevenson*

(2011). In addition, she has published four volumes of poetry, including *A Cold Spell* (2000), *Sea Level* (2007) and *The Messages* (2012). Her most recent collection, *Spills* (2016), consists of new poetry, memoir, short stories and translations. She is completing a book on literature and sound, as well as another on Walter de la Mare.

Bradford William Manderfield is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium. He is a member of the Research Unit of Systematic Theology and the Study of Religions. His dissertation research, 'Love and the Sublime: A Dialogue of Julian of Norwich and Jean-François Lyotard', compares Lyotard's notion of the sublime to Julian's conception of love. His interests also focus on Lyotard's conception of the sublime and its function in contemporary theological discourse.

Joanna Soćko is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Silesia, Poland. Her research interests embrace post-secular studies, geocriticism and narratology, and she is a keen reader of contemporary Polish and British poetry. Her current work focuses on the poetry of R. S. Thomas. Her articles have appeared in *Fa-art* journal as well as in several monographs devoted to post-secular thought. She has also translated essays by John Caputo and by Saba Mahmood for a collection of post-secular texts published in Poland, and has taken part in several research projects undertaken at the University of Silesia.

Monika Szuba completed her Ph.D. on the subject of strategies of contestation in the novels of contemporary Scottish women authors at Gdańsk University, Poland. She has published several articles on contemporary fiction and poetry, and is co-organizer of the International Literary Festival BETWEEN in Sopot, Poland. She is also co-editor of the *between pomiędzy* series and one of the founding members of the Textual Studies Research Group as well as the Scottish Studies Research Group at the University of Gdańsk. Her research interests include contemporary British poetry and prose.

Richard Viladesau is Professor of Theology at Fordham University, New York. After philosophical studies, he pursued his theological degrees at the Gregorian University in Rome (S.T.L., 1970; S.T.D., 1975). His work centres on philosophical theology in both Christian and non-Christian traditions, and on theological aesthetics. His latest book is *The Pathos of the Cross* (2014).

Anna Walczuk is Associate Professor in the Institute of English Philology of the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. Her doctoral dissertation was a comparative study of G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. She has also published a book on irony in the novels of Muriel Spark. Her academic interests focus upon various modes of using the potential of language to portray social and cultural reality as well as to communicate

transcendence. At present her main area of research comprises the dialogue between literature and theology, and concentrates on Christian themes and religious motifs, especially in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Elizabeth Jennings.

Jean Ward is Professor of English Literature at the Institute of English and American Studies of Gdańsk University, Poland. Her research interests include British, Irish and Polish poetry, religious poetry and problems of literary translation. Her study in Polish of the Polish reception of T. S. Eliot's poetry was published in 2001, and she has edited a collection of critical essays in Polish on incarnational aspects of T. S. Eliot's poetry (2015). Her publications include *Christian Poetry in the Post-Christian Day: Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings* (2009) and a translation of Tadeusz Ślawek's monograph *Henry David Thoreau: Grasping the Community of the World* (2014).

Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga works at the University of Warsaw, Poland, where she specializes in early modern literature. She received MAs from the Institute of German Studies (2001) and the Faculty of Polish Studies (2004) as well as a Ph.D. (2011) from the University of Warsaw. In 2014 she published, in Polish, her dissertation, *Poesis sacra: Three Poetic Cycles of the European Baroque (Angelus Silesius' Cherubinischer Wandersmann, George Herbert's The Temple, Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski's Poezyje Postu Świętego)*. She is a member of the Polish Comparative Literature Association.

Preface

The Power of the Word project, with its aim of fostering conversation among literary scholars, theologians, philosophers and poets, was inaugurated at London's Heythrop College with an international conference in 2011. This initiative subsequently gave rise to three further conferences, the second also hosted by the University of London in 2012, the third by Gdańsk University (Poland) in 2013 and the most recent by the Pontifical University of St Anselm (Rome) in the summer of 2015. These interdisciplinary conferences, ecumenical in scope, explore connections and disconnections, continuities and discontinuities between religious experience, religious practice, theological reflection, biblical interpretation, ethics and spirituality on the one hand and poetry (not always explicitly religious) on the other. Both theoretical discussion and analysis of specific texts, with reflection on the work of particular authors, poets and thinkers of different countries, cultures and religious traditions, have been welcomed from the outset; and the decision by the Advisory Board to hold the third conference in Poland and the fourth in Italy further confirmed the thoroughly international character of these events, bringing in scholars, particularly from Poland and Italy but from many other countries besides, who had not participated in the earlier conferences.

The project has been fortunate in the interest that Ashgate took in it from its inception. This has already borne fruit in two volumes of essays, both published in 2015, which reflect the themes of the first two conferences in London: *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word*, edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale, based on the inaugural Power of the Word Conference of 2011; and *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II*, edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and John Took, a selection of essays based on papers from the 2012 Conference. The present volume represents the third in this series. It is inspired by the theme of the 2013 Conference held in Gdańsk, 'Poetry: Word Made Flesh: Flesh Made Word', and has been shaped by a re-working of some of the original talks and keynote addresses which most directly reflected that theme. The range and quality of papers presented in Gdańsk also made possible a second publication on a related theme which emerged in the course of the Conference. This recently appeared as *Breaking the Silence: Poetry and the*

Kenotic Word, edited by Małgorzata Grzegorzewska, Jean Ward and Mark Burrows (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015). A third volume of essays inspired by the Gdańsk Conference, on motifs of spirit and flesh in Polish poetry from the Baroque era to the present day, is forthcoming from Gdańsk University Press.

The specific focus of the 2013 conference reflected the currently much debated relation of language and bodily experience with regard to both the theological concept of the Incarnation and the broader perspective of the phenomenology of flesh as that which connects us with the world, being the site of perception and feeling, joy and suffering, and of life itself in all its vulnerability. This focus evoked an inspiring range of responses, many interdisciplinary in method and approach, drawing on poets from antiquity to late modernity as well as theologians and philosophers whose work engages these matters. Certain themes received persistent attention: the nature of language as revelatory; the function of poetry in society; the question of incarnation and its relation to language and the poetic arts; the kenosis of the Word; and, finally, human embodiment in relation to the word 'enfleshed' in poetry. In the arrangement of essays for the present volume, we sought to capture the spirit of deeply engaged conversation and debate around these themes that characterized sessions at that conference. To reflect this, the book is divided into sections, each led by one of the keynote addresses of this conference, which sound the major themes that occupied our attention during these days; these are followed by four essays whose authors engaged this lead essay in order to deepen the conversation initiated in Gdańsk. The approach we have chosen, we hope, will also reach beyond the confines of the book, inviting the reader's response.

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The editors of *Poetic Revelations: Word Made Flesh Made Word* would like to thank Heythrop College and the Institute of English Studies, University of London for help in the organization of the third International Power of the Word Conference in 2013. Special thanks are due to Gdańsk University for organizing and hosting this event, on which the chapters in this volume are based, and to Heythrop College Research Committee and Gdańsk University for financial support for the conference. We are grateful in particular to the Dean of the Faculty of Languages of Gdańsk University, Andrzej Ceynowa, for his warm support for the event.

We thank the Ashgate staff who began the long process leading to publication of this volume, and particularly Sarah Lloyd and David Shervington for their courteous and kind assistance. The transitions that led to this volume's appearing with Routledge were as smooth as could have been imagined. We are grateful to Lindsey Brake for her expert copyediting; to Richard Cook, project manager of Book Now Ltd., who prepared the completed manuscript for print; and, in the final phase of editorial work with Routledge, to Alexandra Simmons, Joshua Wells, Matthew Twigg as well as to Jack Boothroyd, who oversaw the last phase of production. Above all, we thank Francesca Bugliani Knox for initiating the Power of the Word project, for her vision, generosity, constant help and unflagging zeal.

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Introduction

Poetry, Incarnation and 'the wonder of unexpected supply'

Mark S. Burrows

The title of this volume, *Poetic Revelations*, would surprise neither poets nor their readers. After all, we expect from good poems something other than a mere informing, and nothing less than a certain kind of revealing. We turn to them hoping they will disclose something essential about our lives and the world we inhabit. At their best, they steer us into deeper comprehensions of what we sometimes blithely call 'reality', reminding us that what is crucial in poems is not simply *what they mean* but *how they mediate meaning* within us, how they reveal something we might sense without having found a way to put it into words. In their revelatory nature, they often startle us by means of utterly ordinary words shaped by the poet in unexpected ways, steering or luring us toward that longed-for experience of insight.

The opening line of Seamus Heaney's 'Sunlight' is a case in point. The opening words, 'There was...', are commonplace, even dull, but the texture of the line shifts immediately with the words that follow: 'There was a sunlit absence' (ix). With such an opening, Heaney strings together five common words, yet arranges them to say something enigmatic and startling. What could it mean, we wonder, to speak of a sunlit *absence*? The poem lures us into the puzzle conveyed by this strange metaphor, one we cannot quite sort out at first glance. In the hands of a master like Heaney, the unobserved details of ordinary life collide with our expectations, producing within us that impulse of thought that alerts us to something we had not yet considered. In poems like this, as Christian Wiman recently put it in reflecting on Heaney's legacy, 'physical things acquire a porousness as if human life, and more than human life, were suddenly streaming through them' (10). This sense of being startled into a sensory *presence* in a poem that begins with a terse musing on *absence* points to the revelatory power of poetry. We turn to poems because something in us delights in such moments of 'startelement', unsettling within us as they do our habits of complacency. They serve as an antidote to the diminished expectations that too often dull us to the plenitude present in our lives, offering bursts of seeing that awaken a sense of new and renewing vision within us.

What Heaney accomplishes in this poem, at once simple and complex, points to significant meaning that can be discerned in the most ordinary

and overlooked of things – here, observations of a farmyard with its clutter of equipment and tools and, later, the kitchen where the poet's aunt is busy with the daily baking. In two short scenes, we come to glimpse a particular moment – in this case, a snapshot of labour undertaken in 'each long afternoon'. We have never been in this place, and yet recognize something essential in it amid the gathered silence that inhabits the barnyard and kitchen of an Irish farmhouse, with scones rising before their baking and the stillness broken only by the steady ticking of two unseen clocks. At each turn in this poem, one senses an incremental revealing of life's abundance, as if some particular dimension of the world – the poet's and ours as well – wants to be noted and spoken. Heaney reveals the scene to us slowly, steadily, with only a handful of images, each phrase in each line urging us forward and inward as the poet leads us into the inner texture of this scene. As the poem reaches its final stanza, which begins 'And here is love', we dimly recall the blunt force and baffling image of the opening line, and only now see that it had already anticipated an unfolding, an opening, even a confession of sorts.

The revelatory nature of poetry triggers what Robert Frost once described as a sense of 'initial delight in the surprise of remembering something [we] didn't know [we] knew' (777). In fact, we were never *there* where the poet places us, and yet recognize the place as our own through the way the poet reveals particular details, embodied moments seen in a certain manner, scenes recreated with attention to some particular aspect. How does a poem like this 'happen' in the poet? By what means does it then, in its revealing, also come to happen in us as readers? Such questions cannot be answered in an abstract way. And, strangely, they seem to occur to *us* and *in* us as we discover something essential about our own life, our own world, as the poet reveals the poem. 'Step by step', as Frost went on to say in describing the poet's process, '*the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing*', and we understand that he means this to describe the poet's work as well as the reader's. It is the 'supply' poems offer, their revelatory power, that keeps bringing us back to read them, deepening as they do our sense of meaning in our lives and the lives of others, thereby enlarging the ways we inhabit the world we share with the poet.

The 'wonder of unexpected supply' is what a poem like Heaney's 'Sunlight' offers, whether or not we have ever held in our hands a 'helmeted pump in the yard' or 'a tinsmith's scoop'. The presence of this poem, against the grain of the opening line with its mention of 'sunlit absence', brings us to look at the familiar world close to us with a similar care and respect: 'here is a space / again', Heaney writes, describing the scene as the scones made by the unnamed woman – whom we know to be his aunt, but it could equally be someone we know ourselves – wait while the yeast silently brings the dough to rise. As readers fortunate to find poems as good as this, we sense the inner presence in such moments, whatever the outer sense of absence, which seems to be revealed not so much *to* us as *in* us. This is the way we

come again and again, in and through such poems, to an awareness that reveals something important and abiding within us, making us aware of a certain plenitude in the world which we come to sense through the attentive language a poet employs. Such a revealing suggests how it is that a poem brings us to – or *into* – meaning.

But such a revealing of meaning in and through words remains a gain immanent to our human experience. How, if at all, is human language fraught with such significance related to ‘the Word’? To pose this question, at least in late modernity, raises a host of questions, which might variously be greeted as vehicles or obstacles to understanding, depending on one’s theological point of view. On the positive side, Christian theologians from antiquity to the later Middle Ages borrowed the philosophical categories of Neoplatonism to construe a continuum between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’, since they understood the *logos*, or ‘Word’, as a transcendent intelligence creating human language and meaning and imbuing words with the capacity to reach beyond themselves. Augustine (d. 430) thus describes his conversion to Christianity not in terms of an abrupt change but rather as a realization of the ‘weakness’ displayed in the Incarnation, by means of which God, the ‘Word’ as ‘eternal truth ... built for himself in the inferior realm a humble dwelling place from our clay’ (*verbum enim tuum, aeterna veritas ... in inferioribus autem aedificavit sibi humilem domum de limo nostro*; see *Confessiones* VII.xviii [25]; my translation).

For Augustine and the long tradition of western theology that followed his lead, the sense of order conveyed by Neoplatonic metaphysics stood as a reliable structure for matters of communication between the human and divine realms. In this regard, the doctrine of the Incarnation with its descending pattern – summarized in the claim *Verbum caro factum est* (‘The Word was made flesh’, Jn. 1:14) – became the *modus operandi* for the ladder of ascending knowledge, beginning with the ‘lower’ realm of inferior things and leading up to the ‘higher’ realm of divine truth. Human language for Augustine was thus the ongoing instrumentality of this ascent, based on the reversal of this hierarchy in the ‘descent’ of the Word into human flesh so that this Word might offer itself in and through the ‘clay’ of human language. He concludes, in a characteristically elegant rhetorical argument, that this divine self-humiliation enables *us*, despite our weakness, to ascend from our lowliness, for ‘in our weariness we prostrate ourselves in [the enfleshed Word], which rises and lifts us up’ again to God (*et lassi prosternerentur in eam, illa autem surgens levaret eos*; *Confessiones* VII.xviii [25]). For Augustine, the incarnation of the Word is the divine means of affirming and ultimately overcoming our weakness, precisely by entering into it in order to take it up and thereby elevate it – and *us*. In this sense, the divine Word enters the realm of human words, making it possible for words to be raised up again: Word becomes flesh (or ‘enfleshed’ word) becomes word (or ‘inspired’ word).

Within the resilient tradition of Christian Neoplatonism, a shaping force in western theology until the dawn of modernity, few put the matter as

boldly as John Scotus Eriugena when he claimed that ‘theology is in a certain sense poetry (*theologia veluti quaedam poëtria*), because it teaches – as does the latter – by means of an imaginative fiction (*fictis imaginationibus*)’ (146). His use of the word ‘fiction’ here, uncontroversial in Neoplatonic discourse, is precisely what prompted some theologians in later modernity to bristle at the notion of placing poetry and theology on an equal plane, insisting as they did that a chasm separated the two; we shall return to this point in a moment. What we mean when we speak of poetic *revelations* here is not an attempt to reassert such an identity, but to consider more precisely exactly what Eriugena meant when he described poetry as a form of ‘fiction’. For the word ‘fiction’, from a Latin root meaning ‘to make’ – with its Greek counterpart the word *poïesis* – shaped later notions of ‘fiction’ as these came to be understood in modernity. This shift began already in the later Middle Ages when the old French word *ficcion* had come to mean an ‘invention’ or ‘fabrication’, a meaning that carried into modern usage to suggest something unreal, imagined or ‘made up’.

When Eriugena introduced theology as poetry ‘in a certain sense’, what he was pointing to was the manner in which poetry, dealing with ‘imaginative fictions’, worked to disclose meaning not directly through reasoned argument but rather indirectly through the play of metaphor and image. That is, poetry sought to disclose meaning through embodied language; it was not a conveying of ‘fact’ but closer to what we would think of as the construction of story. It was, to recall Heaney’s description, a kind of ‘digging’, not as an archaeologist might search for buried objects but rather like a kind of ‘looking for finds that end up being plants’ (*Preoccupations* 41). Does theology, in its own way a ‘dig’ for treasure, have a purpose any different than this? Such a way of approaching poetry – and, for that matter, theology ‘as in a sense poetry’ – need not presume that it is, as a literary form, one and the same as truths of Christian revelation. But neither is it to retreat, in the other direction, to a blunt notion of poetry as a quaint or foolish undertaking that has to do with what is *merely* human. The parallel, at its best, suggests how poetry is a kind of ‘divination’, as Heaney went on to put it, which he explained ‘as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself’ (*Preoccupations* 41). Through such revelations ‘the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing’ in and through a poem’s way of ‘making sense’. In this sense, poetry and theology join in revealing something essential to us, about ourselves and our world.

While it is doubtful that such an argument, even if stripped of its Neoplatonic framework, would find much resonance among literary critics in late modernity, the imprint of this circularity – namely, that the ‘Word becomes flesh becomes word’ – remains with us, at least among the poets explored in the essays collected here. Despite considerable differences of style and form, they seem to agree in accepting the conviction that meaning as shaped in and through language is porous, allowing us to speak through it – in the midst of its finitude and fluidity – toward an ultimate meaning

which earlier theologians attributed to the *logos* or Word. This is already a more modest ambition than Augustine or Scotus wagered in their day, no longer rooted in the assumption that the Word speaks through our words. But even given this retreat, the legacy of such a claim – at least as a metaphor for how understanding functions – still remains with us, and poets are among those who assume such a continuum, if not formally then at least in their presumption that finite meaning is vulnerable to higher insight. Here, one might go so far as to widen Eriugena's claim to suggest that poetry, 'in a certain sense', could be viewed as a form of knowing akin to theology. That is, even if poets would rarely claim to contribute to what we have come to call 'revelation' proper, many among those examined here presume some manner of connection. Heaney's startling claim, in the final stanza, which moves the concreteness of the scenes described to a deeper level of meaning, 'digs' in this direction: 'And here is love...'.

One might go even further in saying that poetry's capacity to point to and even establish such a continuum of meaning – from 'Word' to 'flesh' to 'word' – suggests a crucial dimension of its revelatory powers, and this is surely one of the chief reasons we return to poems that can transport us in such a way. Poet and essayist Jane Hirshfield points in this direction when she claims that 'one of art's most mysterious by-gifts is the increase of reach' (273). In this 'certain sense' it is revelatory, disclosing to us through language what lies in and yet at the same time beyond 'ordinary' experience, and in so doing revealing *to* us something essential *in* us. Such revelatory power happens by means of the 'imaginative fiction' of language, moving us to encounter vestiges of the divine not in spite of but rather precisely through the plenitude that belongs to words. This power of poems, by which we experience them 'as elements of continuity' (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 41), gives us a sense of the 'flesh' as carrying a transcendent dimension, carrying us to that verge of meaning where we sense a larger whole in the midst of the fragments of our experience.

If all this needs no justification among poets and their readers, the circularity of this logic – that is, of the Word becoming flesh becoming word – has not met with criticism by secular literary critics alone. A strong theological tradition in modernity came to view such a claim with caution if not distrust, ascribing to dogmatic convictions that exalted revelation as distinct from 'human' forms of knowing, including that conveyed in poetry. This opposition brought together otherwise unlikely allies: leading voices of the anti-modernist movement led by Pope Pius IX (d. 1914), which elevated theology as the 'science' of transcendent truth over merely 'immanent' forms of knowledge, found common cause in the theology of Karl Barth (d. 1968) and the Protestant movement influenced by his thought which came to be known as 'Neoorthodoxy'. Such theologians sought to distinguish 'revelation' as a special category transcendent to human knowledge, literary or otherwise, insisting that the former had priority over the latter in terms of both its origin and its purpose.

To speak of poetic ‘revelations’, as these essays do, moves in a quite different direction. These studies focus on poets, many but not all from the period of modernity, who turned from or simply ignored such theological or philosophical unease which limited the ‘reach’ of poetry. Their presumptions and practices agreed with Jeanette Winterson’s apt reminder that ‘the fiction, the poem, is not a version of the facts, it is an entirely different way of seeing’ (28). But such a claim, ambitious in its own way, does not yet clarify what *way* of seeing this is. If a poem is ‘revelatory’, what form of revelation does it offer? Is this simply to suggest that poems ‘dig’ up insight or meaning into human existence, and thus remain ‘immanent’ to our natural experience, or does it go further to engage the question of transcendence, at least as such theologians have understood ‘revelation’ to entail, in and through the ‘natural’?

When we say that poems ‘reveal’ an essential kind of knowing, we are saying little more but also nothing less than that they enlarge our awareness, and carry us to understandings we might have sensed without being able to express. Thus, Wallace Stevens, dismissing every claim of transcendence outright, could claim that poetry has to do with ‘the imagination of life’, by which he means to suggest how ‘a poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one’s thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it’ (684). He goes on to illustrate this by describing what happens when we look at something like the ‘blue sky’ as if for the first time, such that we ‘not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there’ (684).

But what exactly does Stevens mean in speaking of the ‘non-geography that exists’ within the ‘geography’ of such poetry? For him, the work of poetry points to what he called ‘the imagination of life’, and by this he meant a way of seeing or being in the world in which ‘a particular of life is so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it’, such that it comes to reveal what he calls the ‘world of [our] own thoughts and ... feelings’ (684). When we make such a discovery ourselves, or ‘remember’ it when we encounter a poem, we come to know something distinct and important, not merely about the world we inhabit but rather, in and through this ‘physical poetry’, about our very selves. We find something ‘revealed’ *in* us, ‘something’ that might even reveal itself *through* us in our poetry if not in our very lives. Within the orbit of this circularity, the word becomes flesh becomes word. Augustine sees in this pattern a means by which our ‘language’d’ experience enters into the logic of the Incarnation, for ‘in our weariness we prostrate ourselves in [the word], which rises and lifts us up’.

Such seeing, such attending or ‘musing’, in the poetic sense of this word, reveals something at once particular and shared, something very close to us and yet not confined to the peculiarities of our perception. It opens us to what Stevens quite deliberately restricted to ‘the world of [our] own

thoughts and the world of [our] own feelings', but just as surely – at least as the long tradition following Augustine would remind us – invites us into a larger communion with the thoughts and feelings, perceptions and ideas, experiences and expressions of others, and perhaps that of the divine. In this particular sense, the poem's revelations edge close at least to the realm that theologians have reserved for revelation 'proper', not in the sense of firm intellectual knowledge, but in terms of a certain kind of knowing that has to do with 'feelings and emotions', as Heaney put it, and in this sense 'the poem ... must not submit to the intellect's eagerness to foreclose' but rather 'must wait for a music to occur, an image to discover itself' (*Government* 92). Poems offer a kind of revealing that 'enlarges' us, as Jane Hirshfield puts it, since they, like all good art, offer us what she describes as 'an experiment whose hoped-for outcome is an expanded knowing'. In just this sense, good poems offer us an experience she describes as 'an enlargement of being, the slowed and deepened breath that comes with the release of fixed ideas for the more complex real' (Hirshfield 33). Such poems are revelatory in guiding us toward this 'more complex real', not by forcing an insight upon us but rather by helping release us from the 'fixed ideas' that diminish us. For this reason, as Hirshfield concludes, the art of poetry 'lives in what it awakens in us', and is revelatory not in some general sense but rather in the ways it lives *in us*. On this account poets in an earlier age were considered as 'seers', offering an inspired kind of vision that sees things in a deeper way than others.

Once again, we find ourselves edging toward the ancient Neoplatonic continuum that Augustine offered as an inheritance to the West, though translated here from a metaphysical framework to the kind of knowing that emerges from the physical arena of our lives. Heaney speaks of this as the power vested in poets, from antiquity, 'to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit', and in this 'revision of the Platonic schema', as he calls it, 'art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly sphere but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms: art does not trace the map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it' (*Government* 94–95). Such poets might speak of these 'elements of continuity' (Heaney, *Preoccupations* 41) differently than Augustine had done, perhaps without recourse to Neoplatonist metaphysics, but the thrust of their assumptions points to a continuity of meaning between the finite and, if not the 'eternal', then surely what Hirshfield describes as the 'more complex real' (33) in our lives. On the strength of such a premise, we might think of poetic revelations as 'in a sense theology', even to the point of standing in a 'certain' relation to the formal theological category of revelation, as this has been understood within the arc of an ancient and enduring Christian tradition.

Such wonderings lie at the heart of the essays collected in this volume, suggesting as they do how poets and theologians, in various ways and across a wide cultural spectrum, approached poetry as an enlarging form of

knowing. The authors of these chapters – all contributors to the third ‘Power of the Word’ conference, this one held at the University of Gdańsk (Poland) in September, 2013 – include theologians and philosophers, poets and teachers of literature, among them British, continental European and North American scholars. Devoted to the theme ‘Poetry – Word Made Flesh: Flesh Made Word’, each chapter explores how poems could be understood as revelatory, and how poetry and theology in their distinct ways contribute to ‘an enlargement of being’. Despite their form as literary-critical or critical-theological (or -philosophical) essays, they also evoke something of ‘the slowed and deepened breath’ that helps to release us from the ‘fixed ideas’ for what Hirshfield calls ‘the more complex real’ (33). Inevitably, this finds expression in myriad and not always complementary ways; such, after all, is the nature of intellectual inquiry, and surely also a measure of the complexity of this theme.

Some of these essays take theology or philosophy as their primary entry into the discourse of poetics, while others begin with literary texts in order to suggest how these sources are, if not theology ‘in a sense’ at least, then surely spiritually alert and theologically engaged. Both, in other words, work in the fertile intersection of theology and literature, exploring the borderlands where the human and divine meet. In both cases, if in quite varied ways, these studies explore the pattern by which the word became – and becomes – flesh, and how this, in turn, becomes ‘word’ again. And if, as in Augustine’s case, this could be seen in terms of the Neoplatonic pattern of descent and ascent, modern poets continue to frame this movement through experience into language, sometimes even as in the case of Frost describing this as what he called ‘the wonder of unexpected supply’ (777). Is such an approach not finally something like a secular variant of an earlier theological tradition? Perhaps. This surmising seems at least close to the poets, theologians and philosophers whose work these essays take up, and animates in quite varied ways the writers whose essays comprise this volume. Yet if we might think of this as an ‘incarnational poetic’, this would reflect the humility of Eliot’s claim, in ‘The Dry Salvages’, when he spoke of the Incarnation as ‘the hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood’. It is our hope that these essays, in the ways they engage the revelatory power of the poetic, will contribute something important to our sense of this ‘hint’ and encourage in us our reception of this ‘gift’.

* * *

Each of the three main sections of this volume together with the concluding essay by Professor David Brown were invited keynote addresses at the third ‘Power of the Word’ conference. The essays gathered in each of these three sections, joined by a common thematic interest, enter into explicit conversation with the lead essays. The essays collected in Part I, ‘Word made Word: poetry and the re-making of the world’, explore what it means that the poetic ‘word’ fashions the world in revelatory ways, suggesting a

plenitude of meaning in the midst of often ambiguous occurrences. The lead essay by Sir Michael Edwards examines the question of ‘Poetry human and divine’, suggesting that speech is both what connects God and humanity, as recounted in the biblical drama of creation, and what separates us: ‘God’s creation of the world in speech is beyond our understanding, as is the relation between the book of life and our own man-made books’, he reminds us, going on to suggest that poetry exists ‘in part to reveal the sound of sense, the rhythm of meaning, the profundities of language that relate it to bodies full of mind and to a reality vibrating with *logos*, with intelligence’. The poetic word bears the power of the Word becoming flesh, an echoing of a past event (Incarnation) that leans toward a future consummation. In this sense, the Word calls poets and artists, according to Edwards, ‘to recreate the world as best [we] can, with a view to the infinitely more glorious Recreation to come’.

How the Incarnation relates to the ‘making’ of language which we know as poetry is what occupies each of the four chapters included in Part I. In “‘The Word spoke in our words that we might speak in his’: Augustine, the Psalms and the poetry of the incarnate Word”, Kevin Grove, CSC, takes up Edwards’s suggestion that we consider the ‘permeability of our world, though fallen, to another’, taking as his test case Augustine’s reading of the Psalms. He argues the Psalms ‘helped Augustine see not only that this world was permeable to another, but also that he was being led and shaped – he preferred “transfigured” – by that other. The “other”, of course, was Christ.’ As he goes on to suggest, the poetry of the Psalms, at least as Augustine understands it, ‘moves us to a speech of the heart that is beyond spoken words’, one that is a kind of transfiguration. Grove concludes by suggesting how, for Augustine, the reality of our being ‘in Christ’ points to how ‘both the broken utterance and the unutterable were not effaced but transfigured’.

Krystyna Wierzbicka-Trwoga’s essay, ‘The Word of God woven into the poetic word: the idea of *Logos* in the poetry of George Herbert and Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski’, takes this theme up in relation to poems by Herbert and Lubomirski, arguing that both presumed a connection between the divine *logos* and human language – and, above all, its expression in poetry. How it is that poets utilize words to ‘convey’ the divine Word was a preoccupation both shared. In their poems, each suggests how our speech is meant to ‘awaken love’ in the reader’s heart, and thus lead them on their journey into the mystery of God – in, through and finally beyond language.

Sonia Jaworska turns to the poet Richard Crashaw in “‘Eternity shut in a span’: the Word being born and giving birth in the poetry of Richard Crashaw”, suggesting how Crashaw viewed the divine Word as having ‘created the abundant world, including the reality of language, while poets’ words try to present this Word in its own abundance, and in terms of the abundance of the *world*’. Her interest falls particularly on how Crashaw interprets the flesh as the locus where divine and human love meet, exploring

this in terms of the erotic as the experience of ‘wooing and love-making’, parenthood and child-rearing and, finally, ‘God’s bountiful name’. In all such modes of human experience, we come to see how the human relationship with God is ‘intimate, tender, passionate, and full of mutual love, delight, sacrifice and care’.

In the final chapter in this section, ‘Elizabeth Jennings and the mysticism of words’, Anna Walczuk probes Edwards’s notion that poetic language is part of human language, ‘with all the limitations and the potential of its rhetorical resources’, while also deriving its power from ‘intimations of the Word’ such that our speech ‘gives onto a world transcending ours’, as Edwards suggests. In the case of Jennings’s poetry, Walczuk explores how ‘poetry itself, by virtue of its use of words, [is] predisposed to participate in the mystical communion with the divine principle of being, encompassing both time and eternity’, and thus carries within itself what she describes as a “transfigurative” power’ by which human speech comes to bear witness to – by participating in – the divine Word. This ‘common fountainhead of poetry and mysticism’ comprises for Jennings an intense experience of transcendence, in the language of poetry as in poetic practice itself. Here, too, we find a poet drawing on the teaching of the *logos* to establish what Walczuk sees as a ‘mystical’ link between the divine and the human, since the very nature of language participates in the divine reality which is transcendent and yet immanent in and through human words – and, in a heightened manner, in poetic language.

In Part II, ‘Flesh made Word: poetry as the shaping of the self’, we find this interest carried in another direction to consider how the poetic word participates in shaping human identity – ‘in, with, and under’ the Word, to recall Luther’s way of describing the divine presence in the Eucharist. The lead essay in this section, by Richard Viladesau, explores the theme of ‘Revelation and inspiration among theologians and poets’. His interest is in suggesting the connections that relate (or unite) poetic and theological conceptions of revelation and inspiration, drawing on modern understandings of evolution to suggest how the theological understanding of the Incarnation ‘intersects significantly’, to his mind, ‘with poetry and poetic creativity’. Viladesau draws on the Hindu notion of the avatars of Vishnu to suggest what is distinctive in this doctrine, since Christian theology confines the incarnational power of the divine to the single instance of the Word becoming flesh in Jesus the Christ. And yet this power extends outward into the world, a point he illumines by calling upon the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Here, he finds ‘the idea of a “natural” dynamism toward God, combined with the affirmation of the actual gift of divine grace, establishes the basis for an evolutionary and historical theology of revelation’. Finally, he turns to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova to suggest how it is that ‘the Act of making’ can be understood as ‘the veiled Muse of creative art and poetry’ as is the case in her poem ‘The Muse’. In this sense, one might construe with Akhmatova, he suggests, a link between the theological

notion of ‘inspiration’ and the force of this in the poet’s work. The chapters that follow in this section probe this possibility with reference to a range of poets, from Shakespeare and Rilke to Eliot, with a long side-glance at the Irish philosopher William Desmond, whose work takes up this question in terms of the phenomenology of ‘guessing’.

In the first chapter in this section, ‘Word made flesh made word: on the poetic force of *Macbeth*’, Marta Gibińska considers at the outset Viladesau’s suggestion that ‘humanity has an “obediential” capacity to be raised above itself’, interpreting this to point to what she sees as ‘a [human] capacity which is essentially open to the mystery of God’ and thus related to ‘our poetic capacity’. Her broad focus on the theatre probes what it means in a dramatic performance that the ‘word’ of the playwright ‘becomes flesh’ on the stage – and, importantly, for the audience (or readers of a play, as the case might be). Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion’s distinction of ‘flesh’ as the ‘essence of self’ and thus the internal ‘sense’ of what it is to be human, she suggests how it is that a play takes ‘form’ in the performance, whether within a reader or among members of an audience. To explain this point, she rehearses the vivid scene leading up to Macbeth’s deadly act, and thus how ‘the actor must give the words much more than body’ by ‘mak[ing] the words become flesh’. She steers her discussion toward a final claim that the performance of a play like *Macbeth* suggests how ‘the flesh can take body, can appear in human words whose desire is to reach back to God’, an event that she describes as an epiphany.

In “‘Like a word still ripening in the silences’”: Rainer Maria Rilke and the transformations of poetry’, Mark S. Burrows discusses how Rilke’s imaginative *poïesis* ‘makes the world’, as the poet put it, offering an instance of Viladesau’s notion of an ‘ontological openness [which] is closely related to our poetic capacity’. Burrows sets the framework for interpreting Rilke’s view of the poetic by drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of the dream, pointing to how images not only take shape within us, but come to ‘shape us’ in the act of the poet’s and reader’s imagining. For poetry, as Rilke experienced it, becomes the means of ‘sensing something of the “whole” of which we experience only broken parts, glimpsing at best fragments or “moments” from the larger patterns of our lives’. Poetry reflects the transformations that occur in us above all through the power of the images we carry – and poets are those who offer us such transformative images, returning us to Viladesau’s notion of an ‘obediential capacity’ that we carry within us.

Bradford William Manderfield’s essay on the Irish philosopher William Desmond explores what he calls ‘The *logos* of the guess’. Taking as his point of departure Viladesau’s discussion of how the *logos* supports a view of the human experience of inspiration, Manderfield suggests – as a philosopher rooted in phenomenology – that the human act of guessing stands as an instance of this, an example of what Viladesau calls the ‘ascending model’ of the Incarnation. ‘The indeterminate nature of the Incarnation as a theological

“object” of faith’, Manderfield suggests, ‘requires an indeterminate faculty like guessing’. To probe this claim, he draws on Desmond’s notions of ‘equivocity’, ‘univocity’ and ‘suffering’ as categories that clarify what constitutes the guess and how its function might have a bearing on theological argument and poetic practice. On the basis of Desmond’s approach to equivocal thinking, Manderfield suggests why the guess is the most fitting means of approaching a reality ‘as indeterminate as the Incarnation’, a form of what he calls ‘new-knowing’ – an instance of what the Apostle Paul, in the opening of his First Letter to the Corinthians, describes as God’s ‘foolishness’.

Finally, in ‘Still-born words and still life worlds in the poetry of T. S. Eliot’, Małgorzata Grzegorzewska explores what she describes as the ‘woundedness’ of speech, its means of ‘carrying’ a memory of the Incarnation but in a manner that leaves us with the ‘struggle with words and silence’, as the poet Eliot put it. Her approach considers Eliot’s treatment of this theme from the early ‘Gerontion’ to the late *Four Quartets*. She, too, draws on Viladesau’s emphasis on the ‘ascending’ view of the Incarnation, by which theologians spoke of the ‘flesh’ being ‘made word’, setting the ‘glory’ of Resurrection and Ascension within the frame of the *kenosis*, or ‘emptying’, of the divine birth in human flesh. Exploring elaborations on this theme among theologians of late antiquity, Grzegorzewska traces how Eliot follows a similar course, refusing – already in his early work – to cast the birth of the Word in ‘a falsely sentimentalized pastoral mode’. This discussion moves from what she describes as ‘The word within a word’ in Eliot’s early writings to the subtle manner in which the poet comes to see the mystery of the Incarnation in his later writings as an instance when ‘the silence of the Cross finishes the mission of the Word made flesh’. In this sense, we come to ‘the Word without a word’, since at the crucifixion the divine Word enters another silence, one Grzegorzewska finds mirrored in the *Quartets* by Eliot’s suggestion that here words reach ‘the other side of speech: the silence and stillness beyond time’.

Part III, ‘Word made flesh: the poem as body enclosed in language’, opens with Angela Leighton’s ‘Incarnations in the ear: on poetry and presence’. Here, she wonders, following the peculiar logic implied in the subtitle to this collection, whether ‘the relation of theology and poetry [might] be reversible, and thus circular’? Drawing on a wide range of playwrights, poets and theologians in her exploration of the ‘sounding’ of words in poetry, she focuses on the prominence of hearing among the empirical senses, wondering whether ‘the work of the ear’, though ‘the least provable of the senses’, might be ‘for that very reason the most faithful conveyor of presence’. She tests this case by turning to the poems of the Australian writer Les Murray, suggesting how it is that ‘[his] God is not out there, attending to poems like an imaginary external audience, an answer to a plea, but is in them, like a verbal instance of the thing itself – an incarnated presence’. She takes us into the intricacies of Murray’s imagined world, where, in our poetizing and in our listening to the sounds poems make, we find ourselves drawing nearer

to what the poet once described as '*a rare ear, our aery Yahweh*'. Here, the poet does not presume the divine presence in and through language, but leans toward it through the sounding of words, convinced as he is that '[r]eligions are poems' which 'concert / our daylight and dreaming mind, our / emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture / into the only whole thinking: poetry'. This is the theme that the chapters in this section take up and explore with a view to poets as diverse as T. S. Eliot, David Constantine, R. S. Thomas and David Jones.

In 'T. S. Eliot on metaphysical poetry and the case of Prufrock', Francesca Bugliani Knox traces the development in Eliot of his notion of poetry as 'sensuous thought', from his early essays in literary criticism to the later Clark Lectures of 1926. She then turns to a close reading of his 'Prufrock', suggesting through a layered reading of this early poem how Eliot sought already in his early writings to align himself with the tradition of metaphysical poetry, which he would later describe as 'true philosophical poetry'. She suggests, against the grain of Pound's dismissal of this work as 'the quintessence of futility', that it 'signals Eliot's sensitivity towards higher truth'. In the final section of her essay, she suggests what Eliot understood as 'metaphysical poetry' – or the 'word made flesh' – in his own work, which he understood as having the capacity to 'elevat[e] sense for a moment to regions ordinarily attainable only by abstract thought' and 'on the other hand cloth[e] the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delight of flesh'. Here, though, Eliot sought to distinguish mysticism and poetry, for the latter is shaped by a form of creativity that, 'at its best, like that of Dante, can lead readers to the threshold of the mystery; but it cannot carry them over that threshold'. The argument, or rather the poem, points toward the Word in the ways it descends into 'flesh' and signals, at least, an ascent which we await in hope.

Monika Szuba turns our attention to the contemporary Lancashire poet David Constantine in "'The poem's muscle, blood and lymph": David Constantine's poetic bodies'. His poetry lingers in 'liminality', as Szuba suggests, mingling the realms of the corporeal and spiritual which we often keep quite separate; here, plants and animals, humans and angels freely mix, and such intermingling seems essential to his poetic style. In turning to his love poems, Szuba points to the influence Graves has had on his writing, particularly his notion that 'poetry is rooted in love, and love in desire, and desire in hope of continued existence'. His poetry exemplifies an attribute prized by Leighton: namely, the manner in which poetic language 'conjures presence'. His writing 'inhabit[s] the spheres in-between', 'combining the material and immaterial'; his is poetry that we sense as 'a shifting form, then, a living body, grounded in life', coming to us as a 'body' of its own that transgresses boundaries, opening us through forms of language that interpenetrate the realms of body and spirit.

In the chapter that follows, 'Divine eloquence: R. S. Thomas and the matter of *Logos*', Joanna Soćko takes us into what she describes, following Derrida, as 'the strict interdependence between voice and presence'. Her interest