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Images of the child and childhood in Elizabeth Jennings' poetic world

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Abstract

The many poems Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001) wrote for children and about childhood, and her appreciation of the young as an audience are evidence that the child's perspective is an important aspect of her poetic sensibility. Contrary to what most critics seem to think, however, this is not a theme that can be removed from the framework of reference of Jennings' Roman Catholic faith. This discussion examines several poems in which a child's experience of the world, including the experience of the sacraments, is recollected with deep feeling and incorporated, with respect and compassion, into the experience of the adult. Some of this is evidently autobiographical, but the confessional aspect never prevents the poet from seeing personal experience in a wider context; nor does it hinder her in relating such experience to the mystery of the God who became Man as a little *child*. Though the vision of childhood that emerges in Jennings' poetry is far from being unequivocally paradisal, the attention paid to it seems to reflect the poet's conviction that only by reflecting on childhood experience in the light of the Incarnation can we learn as adults how to "become the *kind* of child God wants us to be", as she wrote in her unpublished *Pensées*.

Key words

child's sensibility, child's experience of religion, unpublished *Pensées*, sacraments, adult's incorporation of childhood experience, complex simplicity, Incarnation

Obrazy dziecka i dzieciństwa w świecie poetyckim Elizabeth jennings

Abstrakt

Perspektywa dziecka jest ważnym aspektem poetyckiej wrażliwości Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001), która napisała wiele wierszy dla dzieci i o dzieciństwie, a także ceniła dziecięcych odbiorców. Wbrew opinii większości krytyków, tematyki dziecięcej nie można oddzielić od religijnego kontekstu katolicyzmu poetki. Artykuł analizuje kilka wierszy, w których dziecięce doświadczenie świata, łącznie z doświadczeniem sakramentów, wywołuje głębokie emocje i zostaje włączone – z szacunkiem i współczuciem – w doświadczenia dorosłego. Niektóre z wierszy mają niewątpliwie charakter autobiograficzny, ale ich konfesyjność nie przesłania poetce szerszego kontekstu osobistego doświadczenia, ani nie utrudnia łączenia go z tajemnicą Boga, który stał się człowiekiem w małym *dziecku*. Jennings nie tworzy jednoznacznie rajskiej wizji dzieciństwa, ale wydaje się sugerować, że jedynie refleksja nad dzieciństwem w świetle Wcielenia pozwala dorosłemu zrozumieć, jak „stać się takim dzieckiem, jakim chce nas widzieć Bóg", co zapisała w swoich niepublikowanych *Pensées*.

Słowa kluczowe

dziecięca wrażliwość, dziecięce doświadczenie religii, niepublikowane *Pensées*, sakramenty, integracja doświadczeń dziecięcych przez dorosłego, skomplikowana prostota, Wcielenie

> It is strange how for years one can think one is adult in every way yet still be not a child (that would be good) but an utter beginner, an ignoramus in matters of religion. Paradoxically we can only become the *kind* of child God wants us to be by exercising every adult strength and faculty to "know, love and serve God". This is what Eliot means by "Ardour, and selflessness, and self-surrender". Innocence is an unselfconscious given in childhood. When we are grown-up it is a gift we are only offered if we are willing to accept it. And accepting it means the renunciation of *every* kind of possessiveness. (*Pensées* 91)

The many poems Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001) wrote for children (as exemplified in the collection *A Spell of Words: Selected Poems for Children*, which gathers together poems from all stages of her preceding poetic career) and about childhood, and her appreciation of the young as an audience (Orr 94), are evidence that the child's perspective is an important aspect of her sensibility as a poet. This, of course, has not passed unnoticed. However, the attention paid by critics to images of childhood in the poet's work sometimes suggests that it is a theme that can be isolated from her religious outlook (e.g. Sage 1999: 349). I have argued elsewhere that no aspect of Jennings' oeuvre can be properly understood outside the framework of reference of the faith which she declared to be, alongside her poetry, the most important thing in her life (qtd. in Wheeler 1985: 104; see Ward 2009: 150). The passage from her unpublished *Pensées* quoted above may indicate that this is particularly true of the theme of childhood in her work.

Jennings' *Pensées* – the title, of course, alluding to Pascal – is a series of numbered, sometimes highly intimate though generalised reflections which reveal a variety of aspects of the poet's thinking and inner experience. Besides the remarks quoted above on the relationship between childhood and adulthood, we find thoughts on many subjects which might not seem to be much related to this question, for example on

her personal sense of the trial of loneliness or the value of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. We also find references to the writers she disliked (the Catholic writers Waugh and Greene among them) and to the artists and art that inspired her. I wish to suggest that in fact many of these apparently disparate matters are connected at a deeper level with the poet's vision of the child and childhood. To illustrate this, let us consider *Pensée* 92, which immediately follows the statements quoted above, where Jennings seems to move to an entirely different subject, writing of the "terror […] at the heart of all great art". She gives as examples not only "*The Waste Land*, *Paradise Lost* (despite its peaceful close), […], Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* [sic], *Lear*", but also, emphatically, "*all* of Hopkins". *All*, Jennings writes; but nowhere in the "great art" of this nineteenth-century Jesuit poet do we find the sense of "terror" so clearly expressed as in the so-called "terrible sonnets" of the last period of his life. The language of these poems is at moments more shrieks and cries than words: in the "pangs" of wrenching pain, grief, desolation and despair, the tormented speaker tells of the mind's terrifying "mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed", rebuking the insensibility of those who have not experienced such things: "Hold them cheap / May who ne'er hung there" (100).

There is no doubt of the importance that Jennings attached to Hopkins and his poetry. She included a chapter on him in her study of Western mystical poetry *Every Changing Shape*; she wrote a critical biography of him which remains unpublished, as the editor of Jennings' *Collected Poems*, Emma Mason informs (2012: 964); she named him specifically in the titles of two poems ("Hopkins in Wales", 2012: 238; "Homage to Gerard Manley Hopkins: After Receiving Communion in Hospital", 2012: 801); and she used quotations or near-quotations from the sonnet I have mentioned as titles for at least two others ("The Mind has Wounds", 2012: 843, and "'No worse, there is none'", 2012: 834, two poems from 1957-1966

which remained unpublished until the newest collection, edited by Emma Mason), as well as of the volume *The Mind has Mountains* (1966). This is one of her most painful collections, born out of her experience of mental breakdown and hospitalization (it is an ugly, inhumane word, but one that seems appropriate in the context) in a psychiatric institution.

But what has Jennings' admiration for Hopkins' poetry to do with her vision of childhood? Precisely this: for anyone who might be expecting that vision to be unequivocally paradisal, it is instructive to note that one of the places in her oeuvre in which she most obviously alludes to Hopkins, indeed to the very sonnet I have referred to above, is a probably autobiographical poem about the experience of a *child*, or at least of someone on the cusp of childhood and adolescence. The young person whose experience of confirmation is described in "Whitsun Sacrament" is bewildered, terrified and lonely; the poem explores a depth of desolation equal to what is expressed in any of Hopkins' terrible sonnets, and it is not for nothing that we find here an echo of "No worst, there is none". Hopkins' speaker, "pitched past pitch of grief", cries out in his abandonment: "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" "Comforter", of course, is one of the names of the Holy Spirit, whose gifts are conferred in the sacrament of confirmation which is the subject of Jennings' poem: Whitsun, Pentecost, being the appropriate moment for its celebration. The line "Spirit, Spirit, where / Are you to be caught now and where be heard", though it repeats not "where", but "Spirit", is sufficiently reminiscent of Hopkins' despairing question as to call it very clearly to mind. "Whitsun Sacrament" emphasises the negative and the absent or soon to be absent: "childhood just about to leave"; "not sure we believe"; questions whose answers do not satisfy; the Spirit, the dove, peace that are sought for and not found; and finally, in the face of our "most need", only "Christ at his silentest" – a phrase that might be regarded as a paraphrase of the experience described in Hopkins' sonnet.

"Whitsun Sacrament" is not the only poem in Jennings' oeuvre in which childhood comes together with an experience of utter desolation. In an even more clearly autobiographical poem, also, significantly, describing the experience of a sacrament, in this case that of penance, or as it now more often known, reconciliation, Jennings looks back on "A Childhood Horror", a "hurt" that lasted "five harsh years" and cast its long shadow "over decades" beyond that (2012: 651-652). Published only in 1992, in *Times and Seasons*, when the poet was well into her sixties, it tells of a confession made when she "was still a child although fifteen" – this detail about her age, and of "listen[ing] to the words within that still / Confessional" suggesting the stark authenticity of a bitter memory. Merely for the "fault" of "large uncertainty / Of my faith's tenets", at a time when she had not even come "Close to grave sin", and even though he gave her absolution, the priest forbade her to receive communion the next day. With the judgment of hindsight, the poet can say, "The priest was twisted, sick", but at the time the consequence was to terrify her, turning her faith to nothing but "fears" and "grief": for the loss of the innocence that in childhood is, as she says in the *Pensée* quoted above, "an unselfconscious given", that "part / That should be left untouched in childhood till / There have been many blows upon the heart".

One rather obvious reading of this poem would find in it principally a protest against the ruination of a happy childhood by the institutional aspects of the Roman Catholic Church. The speaker is well aware that the conduct of the priest was reprehensible in the extreme, placing a "dark shade […] between / Me and the altar"; hindering a child (whose vulnerability is emphasized by the adjective "frail") from coming to Christ, rather than "suffering the little children to come unto [Him]"; exploiting the sense that children have that "they cannot change such things". The poem even begins by sounding something like another kind of "confession", made in adult life

to a therapist, perhaps, by someone who in childhood suffered some kind of abuse at the hands of a priest. It has an element of self-reproach that is common in such circumstances: "I have pretended long, in loyalty. / […] / I *let it* wound my good fragility" [emphasis added]. There is no doubt of the enormity of the priest's failure of trust. On the other hand, however, the phrases I have quoted might also be seen as the beginning of a healing sacramental confession in which a long buried hurt is brought to light and deprived of its continuing power to wound.[1]

Despite the categorical reference to the "part / That should be left untouched in childhood", the following phrase, "till / There have been many blows upon the heart", has a hint of ambiguity which blurs the apparently clear border between childhood and after childhood. Without the word "many", the phrase would place "blows upon the heart" unequivocally in the time after childhood is past; with it, the phrase admits the possibility that *some* blows at least might be inflicted before its end. The consequence of this ambiguity is, if only slightly, to diminish the significance of the priest's conduct, allowing the speaker in a sense to regain control of her experience. By reflecting deeply and honestly on its pain, by acknowledging its long-term consequences (even now, when "Love sings / […] in my spirit", "black moods" may still come), the speaker is finally led to the frankness of a prayer in which she can admit, "God, you meant terror once", and go on from this to interpret the "childhood horror" anew. "Maybe", by showing her by personal experience what "unjust suffering" means, it has led her "close to your mysteries". Earlier, "Gone was liberty"; finally, the liberating grace of the confession empowers her to make a *decision* which sets her free from the incomprehension and passiv-

[1] Another way in which the poem might be viewed is as a kind of post Vatican II corrective to a childhood experience of the sacrament which might have laid undue emphasis on penance at the expense of reconciliation. Jennings was brought up as a "cradle Catholic" in the preconciliar Church.

ity that made her *let* the "childhood hurt" cut so deep into her frailty:

> Deciding this
> I sometimes now am filled with boundless love
> And gratitude from which I've power to build
> Music, the poem and all they are witness of.

That concluding "of" is a daring feat of poetic aplomb. It is like the poet's joyous cry of freedom and assurance: out of the confession of a rending experience of desolation no less "grave" than in Hopkins for being that of a child, the poet has "built" a piece of consummate music, with only two rhyming sounds for each six-line stanza – and deliberately chosen the most insignificant of words, a preposition, to sign off! For when "of" is rhymed with "love", the poem's very form expresses the lifting up of seemingly unimportant and unnoticeable experience – childhood experience, as so often in Jennings – into "boundless" significance.

"A Childhood Horror" refers to the experience of two sacraments: to one by the pain of the way it is administered, to the other by the pain of its being denied. Unlike confirmation, which is the subject of "Whitsun Sacrament", a person may receive these sacraments countless times in the course of a lifetime. Here is what Jennings says, elsewhere in the *Pensées*, distilling the wisdom that incorporates childhood experience but has carried it into adult life and learned to make use of it: "We may *perhaps* be able to remain in a state of grace without frequent communion and confession. What is quite certain is that we cannot stay in a state of *peace* without these sacraments. For they have the power to fuse our wills and our emotions and our intellects. If we do not often receive the graces which these sacraments impart we tend to rely too much on the intellect, to pile up lists of resolutions while our hearts and feelings are elsewhere. The will too tends to grow cold without

the fire of the Blessed Eucharist, the purging flames of penance" (104).

In writing of the pain of "unjust suffering" experienced by a child and its potential to bring a person "close to [God's] mysteries", Jennings is working a line of thought that is familiar in her poetry. "Hurt" (2012: 289-90) recounts the story of an apparently trivial incident at a party, in which the hostess refuses to accept a gift, "small enough / But pretty and picked out with care" for her by her guest, because it comes from Russia. As often in Jennings' work, the incorporation of direct speech ("I do not want it") into the poem, and the deftly sketched details give the incident described the air of authenticity; but at the same time, this deeply hurtful though unspectacular event in the life of the person recounting it becomes an image of all the intentional and unintentional injuries that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another in everyday life.

"They do not mean to hurt, I think", is how Jennings begins the poem; and those words might also sum up her attitude to the priest in "A Childhood Horror". There is never any rancour in her accounts of pain suffered at the hands of others; but this does not diminish her sense of the seriousness of the wrong done. In "Hurt", it is for "lack of charity", the cardinal sin in Jennings' book, for "this kind of thing [that] is worse than Lust // And other Deadly Sins" (that enjambment over the stanza break somehow downplays the whole concept of the Deadly Sins in relation to the real sin) that "Christ sweated blood". Importantly, the particular pain that the poem draws attention to within the "greater pain" of the Saviour's suffering on the Cross, is the one that *"a hurt child shows"* [emphasis added]. Thus, in this attempt to imagine the Crucifixion, the theological truth of the identification of Christ with human beings is revealed in a comparison of His pain with that of a child.

In the various traditions of Catholic meditation, the unknown, everyday suffering of the ordinary and little regarded is taken up into the suffering of Christ, borne for and with human beings on the Cross. Jennings was deeply familiar with these traditions, and in her poetry their influence can often be felt in her sensitivity to the frailty and helplessness of children. This is why, in "A Childhood Horror", the child's "unjust suffering" becomes a means of drawing near to God's "mysteries": the mystery of the Cross. "Hurt" is written in *terza rima*, a form that raises the dignity of the seemingly undramatic subject. In its final line, standing like the final lines of Dante's cantos outside the tercet framework, yet linked with the whole sequence of thought by the sentence construction and rhyme, we may find a structural confirmation of the deep seriousness with which the poem regards all suffering, beginning, perhaps even ending, with the hurts of childhood, which remain where "the heart / Stores up all things that have been done // "And though forgiven, don't depart".

Is it perhaps in this way, by "stor[ing] up all things that have been done", not in order to grieve continually over them but to bring them to the Cross, that the adult whom the child becomes may learn (or re-learn) to be "the *kind* of child God wants us to be"? But this cannot be done without recalling or rediscovering the abandoned provinces of the world of childhood, which in Jennings' poetry is so much more capacious and mysterious than adults seem to realise. In "Children and Death", the poem's "they" are evidently adults, of whom the "we" declare: "Nor do they know our games have room enough / For death and sickness" (2012: 106). "They", the poem suggests, do not understand that the secret world of childhood is at home with those experiences that adults would shield it from, preferring the "dear familiar darkness" to the "light" placed by the child's bed to keep that darkness at bay. In the poem "A Bird in the House", recorded on *The Poetry Archive* in Jennings' own reading, this ability of the child to accommodate

death, in a way that the poet calls "callous but wise", is dramatized in a tale of a dead pet canary ritually placed "in a cardboard egg": "That day we buried our bird / With a sense of fitness, not knowing death would be hard / Later, dark, without form or purpose" (2012: 500).

In an early poetic sequence entitled "The Clown", Jennings reflects on the experience of watching a circus performance, and makes the clown a figure that "strangely […] remind[s] / Of Christ on the cross", a figure with something of profound significance to say "concerning pain". At the same time, the poem implies that it needs the "utmost concentration" of a *child's* watching, "the way / A child will watch until the view enchants / And he is lost in it", to hear what the clown has to say (2012: 103). The poem seems obliquely to recall the warning of Jesus: "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3); but it does so by focusing on a quality of the child that homilists explicating this text may not usually have in mind: the ability to be enchanted out of the surrounding world and lose oneself in an eternal moment. It is this ability that offers access to things generally hidden from the eye of the adult; we may be reminded of another Gospel text that points to the wisdom available to the child: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt. 11: 25). "Time halts" for the child as he "stares at the stars", though he "does not know / Their names"; he is taken out of himself, "possessed / By dispossession" in a way that only the experience of falling in love can restore to him in adult life ("A Child in the Night", 2012: 380).

In the original *Pensées*, Pascal laments the human inability to live in the present, which might be regarded as the particular curse of adulthood:

> We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming, as if in order to hasten its course; or we re-

> call the past, to stop its too rapid flight [...]. Let each one examine his thoughts, and he will find them all occupied with the past and the future. We scarcely ever think of the present; and if we think of it, it is only to take light from it to arrange the future. The present is never our end. [...] So we never live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so. (*Pensées* 172)

In "The Bright Field", R. S. Thomas presents essentially the same thought in poetic terms, with one of his dizzying enjambments across a stanza break: "Life is not hurrying // on to a receding future, nor hankering after / an imagined past". Rather, it is "the turning / aside like Moses to the miracle / of the lit bush" (1993: 302). It is the present – unlike the past or the future – which can become an image of eternity, of a world released from the constraints of time, a world in which it is possible to wonder. As suggested in my comments above on "The Clown", in the life of the child there is not the sense that so weighs on the mind of the adult, of what Eliot in "Burnt Norton" calls the world's "metalled ways / Of time past and time future" (1969: 174). So in the same Quartet, the poet sums up the yearning to be unshackled from those "metalled ways", to be able to "turn aside" and walk out of history's relentless linear progress, in the image of "the hidden laughter / Of children in the foliage" (Eliot 1969: 176). We find a very similar image in a poem from Jennings' penultimate collection, *Praises* (1998), whose title, "Concerning History", seems to point not in the direction of eternity at all, but towards the time-bound sublunary world that adults know. Remarkably, "history" is imagined here, with a fanfare of integrating sound effects (alliteration, assonance, consonance and internal rhyme), as "the child / In a green wood in a gold flower in a white hour" (2012: 786). So, alongside many accounts of ordinary childhood experiences, we find in Jennings an idea of childhood as a gateway to what is outside the ordinary temporal world, giving on to a "view" that may "enchant" us and

release us from ourselves into a world of wonder in which, to invoke Eliot again, "all is always now" (1969: 175).

In "Concerning History", however, the injunction that follows the image of the child in the greenwood, "Don't let grey come banging the door," with its rude and brutal stress on "banging," suggests how fragile, how threatened, is this vision of the eternal. In Jennings' humble and compassionate listening to the world, including the world of childhood, there is never anything smug or naïve. Her sensitivity to the child's vulnerability is perhaps particularly noticeable in her treatment of the theme of Christmas, which incorporates both the apparently trivial trappings of the Feast and the wonder of its profoundly mysterious theological meaning. But whatever the approach, there is always a sense of the child's susceptibility to hurt. One poem calls to mind the disappointment of an ordinary child, dubbed "a sulky little boy" by the adults around him, at the sad failure of the celebration to live up to the excitement of expectation: "I've planned what I'll give everyone and what they'll give to me, / And then on Christmas morning all / The presents seem to be // Useless and tarnished" ("Christmas", 2012: 233). This poem, however, might possibly hint that the disappointment is the fault of the adults; perhaps it is they who have failed to focus on the season's true mystery and in so doing have spoilt it for the child. "Christmas too / No longer seems to mean // The hush, the star, the baby, people being kind again" might express in a child's language a sense of why "things all go wrong" when Christmas finally arrives.

"Christmas" is spoken from a child's point of view. In many other poems, Jennings dwells from an adult perspective on the mystery by which "God took time and entered history" ("A Christmas Sequence", 2012: 637). The poet emphasises "all that littleness, […] all that tiny flesh" of the child whose "manger is the universe's cradle" ("Christmas Suite in Five Movements", 2012: 450-452), who "made a world where even children fit / For he was innocent" ("A Christmas Sequence",

2012: 638). The conflation of the nativity with the crucifixion continually reminds us of the smallness, powerlessness and vulnerability of the Christ-child, who in these respects is no different from any other child: "Cradle Catholic" addresses to Christ the words: "To make life simplified / You were a little child who died", (2012: 131). "Christmas Poem 1974" begins with an astonishing backward sweep: "Once more you climb down from the cross / Back through the thirty years and lie / Within a young girl's large embrace / And warmed by wonder" (2012: 390). On the other hand, "Christmas Suite in Five Movements" concludes by looking forward from the tiny child in the manger to the "daily bread" of the Lord's Prayer and the Eucharistic Host: "God, you have made a victory for the lost. / Give us this daily Bread, this little Host" (2012: 452). In this final phrase, the "little Host" is both the child who welcomes us at the crib, "where the poor of heart receive all gifts / The universe can offer" ("Hymn at the Crib", "A Christmas Sequence", 2012: 659), and the sacrificially given Eucharistic body of Christ.

These are poems in which theological depth combines with an apparent simplicity of expression. Simplicity, indeed, is a recurrent motif in Jennings' work and a recurrent word in her vocabulary; it is a quality that she values highly and commonly connects with childhood. However, she presents it as, incomprehensibly, both familiar and profoundly "strange" – a word with which it is frequently paired. In "Our Lady's Lullaby", Mary exclaims: "O power subdued to flesh of mine, / How tangible is our exchange. / From me the milk, then you in wine. / Simplicity, O you are strange" (2012: 385). Simplicity, the name Mary gives here to her child, is inexplicably, unutterably complex at the same time. In "Interior Music. The poetry of the plainspoken", Clive James makes "complex simplicity", brought about by the poem's "interior music", his criterion of poetic quality. He does not mention Jennings in this context; but he well might do. In her poetry, simple language,

usually uncomplex sentences and a direct, conversational tone, frequently with features of colloquial speech, such as contractions, combine with intricately though unobtrusively crafted poetic forms which exploit an endless variety of rhythmic effects and sound qualities (as for example in the *terza rima* of "Hurt"). Reflections on ordinary everyday experience lead the reader into the heart of the Gospel teachings and the meaning of Christ's Passion. And at the heart of this complex simplicity is the mystery of the Incarnation – of God who became Man as a little *child*, who alone can teach us how to "become the *kind* of child God wants us to be", accepting the restored gift of innocence and its necessary concomitant: "the renunciation of *every* kind of possessiveness".

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