

Jonathan Dunne and Tsvetanka Elenkova
**A Dialogue Between Two Orthodox
Christian Poets**

Jonathan Dunne (JD): What for you is the purpose of poetry?

Tsvetanka Elenkova (TE): In his marvellous book *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* Archimandrite George of Grigoriou Monastery on Mt Athos talks exactly about this: that the only meaning of human life is to regain our God's image, which was poisoned after the fall; in other words, our three human elements – body, soul and spirit – have to become God's again. I cannot stop thinking that our speech, our language were poisoned as well. And the Word became words. Many words, words serving the words themselves, words reproducing and being inspired by literary models and other writers' words. The Serbian elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica says that "the mind of theosis

moves in God like a fish in water". The mind of the poet has to move in God like a fish in water.

The Galician poet Chus Pato says that poetry is the passion of language; the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert says that truth is not a question of poetry but of science; the Serbian writer Danilo Kiš says that we poets have to forget about prophets, since we ourselves are prophets because we doubt; and finally the Bulgarian poet Nikolay Kanchev says in a poem that where the village ends is the monastery, where the words end is the Word. I could say I agree only with the last one. Poetry is a passion but in the sense of Christ's passion on the cross, our pains on the road towards Christ, since "from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12, NKJV).

Of course the truth and seeking it is a priority of poetry: the answer to Pilate's question but slightly changed – instead of "what is truth?" we should ask "who is truth?" We are not prophets and we should not have doubts in our hearts, but humbleness. St Paisios of Mt Athos says: "In your prayer you shall not seek anything but repentance. Repentance will bring you humbleness, humbleness will bring you God's blessing and you will abide in it. And whatever you want for your salvation or for the good of others, God will grant it to you."

Therefore the purpose of poetry is to serve, to become liturgy itself. When every little poem, whatever its subject, is Eucharistic. When we become godparents: the first thing God wanted from Adam in Eden was to name the animals, the plants, the world around. Poetry

also has to return to its source and to be able to name things. The poet has to be co-creator.

Which is the best genre to write spiritual literature, to write about Christ?

JD: If we imagine that we are like letters, each human body a letter, with which God would like to write on the paper of his creation, then I think the first genre with which to write spiritual literature has to be the heart, which contains our intentions. The second would be the face, which is our own individual piece of paper, but less perfect than the heart, since our intentions are not always faithfully transferred here. After that, the best genre to write spiritual literature would be the word of the Church Fathers, starting with the Evangelists, the author-translators of Scripture, continuing with the Church Fathers (people such as St John Chrysostom, St Isaac the Syrian) and then with the Church Elders of our own days (such as St Paisios of Mt Athos, whom you have mentioned). I think the closest genre to what they write is the essay, although they may also tell stories to illuminate what they are saying.

I read two things at night. First, I read an excerpt from the Church Fathers. This teaches me about my faith, and I value this most highly. If I was floating at sea and could only hold a certain number of books, these are the books I would hold, novels and poetry would quickly go overboard. Then I read a novel. This tells me a story, but does not teach me about my faith. It deepens my knowledge of language, involves me in the life and events of another, and helps me go to sleep.

I see the following progression in the work of poets: first they describe what is around them, what is external, and their reaction to it; then they enter a period of struggle with God (the meaning of life, if you like); then God, by his grace, leads them to an emotional bond. This is interesting, but always personal. Poetry does not teach me about my faith, it teaches me about someone else's faith.

I lament that, in the West, where relatively few people have an experience of Orthodoxy, the connection between the Church Fathers and us has been broken. The study of Church Fathers is often limited to a university setting, which makes it remote and elitist (only for a few). Saints should be a part of our daily life, and Church Elders, like St Paisios of Mt Athos, St Porphyrios, Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, Elder Joseph the Hesychast, Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra (with his wonderful text on marriage – *Marriage: The Great Sacrament* – available online), should be our daily guides.

How do you explain the transition in poetry from the carnal to the spiritual, from what is seen to what is unseen?

TE: In his *Spiritual Counsels*, Vol. 5: *Passions and Virtues* St Paisios of Mt Athos says: "God's eros is something higher than God's love, it is madness. Love-eros-insanity are levels like envy-hatred-assassination. The great God's love linked with sacrifice sweetly fires the heart and like steam sprays God's eros, which is impossible to hold and joins us to God."

So, in connection with the above thoughts, I think that the right way to put the question is not how you make the

transition from the carnal to the spiritual in poetry, but how you make the transition from human to divine eros. And the answer is simple: by devotion, by transferring your passions from sins to pains—eros for God like Christ on the cross. If the answer is simple, to apply it takes all your life. Suffering but joy. Trying to follow God's will for you. To escape the three most crucial sins that all start with a snakelike "s" in Bulgarian and with consecutive letters in English: love for *kudos*, love for *lust*, love for *money*.

For poets and people of art the most difficult, I think, is vanity. Because of hard, often financially unrewarding work and also the absolute necessity of confidence in our writing, we often seek recognition. Albeit subconsciously. In this context St Gregory of Sinai says: "Everybody who abides in his calling will be saved." On the other hand, Abba Isaiah says that we should lead a simple life and never carry out self-assessment if we want to keep our hearts healthy.

I am no different from other poets.

Where do you find the link between God the Word and words in our lives: in the structure of language or in its everyday use?

JD: There is something here between repetition and recognition. I remember, when I lived in Spain, a friend and I used to play a game that involved saying something that had never been said before. But it was not a question of coming up with something that had never been said before, it was a question of saying something and then recognizing it as something that may not have been said before. Similarly, when I translate, if there is a turn of

phrase I am unsure about, I will search for the variants on Google and generally choose the one that has most hits, because I assume that this will be most recognizable to the reader, there is something of recognition in translation.

Obviously I think that the link between God the Word and words can most be found in the structure of language; this is something you talk about in your latest poetry collection, *Magnification Forty*, which looks at the varying focuses of our eyes and our ability or inability to focus on things that are right in front of us. The devil prefers us to be blind and leaves us well alone in our blindness, but, the Church Fathers say, when we become aware of God's presence – when we become *aware* (*am are*) – then the devil starts to attack us, a storm cloud of temptations or provocations, which are greater, the greater are God's gifts (St Isaac the Syrian says something interesting about this in his Homily 42: we receive the gift before the temptation, but only become aware of it after the temptation).

So blindness is a question of focus. We are blind to some things, but not to others, and our range changes with our life. It is the same in language, the same in nature. I think the two confirm themselves and confirm each other. Often, if I am translating, I receive a confirmation of something I have written later on in a book I am reading. Or I receive a confirmation in nature, when I go outside. Some people like to comment laconically that there are no coincidences. This is utter nonsense. Coincidence is the language of the Spirit. I would say there are only coincidences, which are things that happen together.

But I have not said anything about repetition. When we are young, we babble on and generally find ourselves either interesting or hilarious. But as I get older, I prefer to be more silent (of course, there is God the Word in the structure of language, because *silent* is *listen*; another case I find very beautiful is the connection between *word* and *love*, the phonetic pairs *l-r* and *v-w*, the alphabetical pair *d-e*, that strange, round, eternal *o* in the middle, drawing the other letters to it through its own gravity, like a *planet*, a *template*; *eternal*, by the way, can spell *I am free*, connections between letters can be made through phonetics, the alphabet and appearance). Now the language I find most useful is liturgy, words that I have not written, they have been written by the Fathers of the Church (St Basil, St John Chrysostom, St Macarius). I simply learn them and make them my own by means of repetition. Here also God the Word is present in everyday use.

How important is it to repeat or recognize what you are writing?

TE: Repetition is everything. No concert or artistic manifestation is possible without repetition. I remember attending a rehearsal with Joshua Bell in Sofia – Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto in D Major* – it was incomparable, it was the second time I cried in a concert hall, after the time my father, the Bulgarian bass Stefan Elenkov, played Boris Godunov in Mussorgsky's opera. Repetition carries a personal element that makes it special. It is sometimes better than the premiere, the performance itself.

But let us talk about repetition in a more poetic way. Think of a field with grass, people going up and down,

many times, many people, a path will appear that is deeper than the grass, deeper than the surface of the earth even. A track or furrow. By repetition you go deeper. Into the depth of the question. I am a good swimmer – swimming is a very spiritual sport, apart from the closeness with the water, you swim up and down a lane, 10 or 100 times, until you lose all sense of being in a lane. The lane widens and becomes a pool, the pool widens and becomes a sea. With repetition you also widen things.

What do monks on Mt Athos do every day apart from translating, writing and working with the earth? They permanently repeat the Jesus Prayer until it becomes a part of them so that even when they sleep they repeat it again and again, and whatever they do it repeats inside them.

Sometimes you recognize things because you read about them, but other times you perceive their depth at the moment of reading or writing. Recently I was hurt and felt a sense of burning in my heart. Then I said to myself it was my soul – according to Church Fathers, the soul is situated in the heart – that was being burned without being consumed. Another time, I was reading the Akathist to Our Sweetest Lord Jesus Christ and spoke the following words aloud: “Desiring to save the world, O Sunrise of the East, Thou didst come to the dark Occident of our nature, and didst humble Thyself even unto death” (*Holy Trinity Monastery Prayer Book*). I was struck by the beauty of the phrase “O Sunrise of the East” – in Old Church Slavonic it is even more beautiful, “O East of Easts” – by the recognition of the meaning, the deepest prayer I have read. Sometimes when you read your poems in translation your eyes can

be opened to different or richer meanings. I even think reading the translation of your poem – if the translation is competent! – can improve the original. Christ is the greatest translator of all since he brought us God's Word, by becoming the Word he made it understandable, approachable for us all without limits of education, age or stage in life.

Why do you think most people today prefer prose to poetry, and what can a good poem teach us more than a good story?

JD: In the beginning, literature was poetry, Homer's epic, for example. It was sung and listened to. It was learned through repetition. There was no writing it down until later. Then came the Father of History, Herodotus, who wrote his history of the ancient world until the early fifth century. It is interesting how close *history* and *story* are, indeed in many languages they are the same word. Then came the great dramatists of the heyday of Athens, the tragedians and comedians. This evolution was reflected somehow in Britain, with the poetry of *Beowulf*, the history of Bede, the plays of Shakespeare. We do not reach a novel, a story that is not based on what has happened, until Cervantes, who famously died in the same year as Shakespeare.

I assume people prefer prose today, by which I understand first and foremost novels, because it suits our lifestyle better. We can read them on our own, and they do not require a large amount of effort on the part of the reader, generally speaking. This is why the novel parallels the development of the printing press. The others involved coming together: to listen to the bard reciting

his poetry from memory; to live the history or listen to the messenger arriving breathless from Marathon, as the news went racing down the streets; to witness the performance of a group of actors. For a novel, we do not need any of these things.

But I maintain that a novel does not really teach us much. It entertains us, as a story told around the fire might entertain us, if well told. It might teach us something about historical events or geography if set at a certain time or in a certain place. For example, I have been reading about the horrors of Smyrna in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*, when the Greeks departed from Asia Minor or western Turkey. This makes me curious about what really happened in these events of 100 years ago, during the infamous exchange of populations.

A good poem, I think, can be vertical instead of horizontal. Instead of relating events along a timeline, it delves deep into the moment, heightens a human emotion. We live on a timeline (past-present-future). Points on the line are reflected in the use of the auxiliary verbs *have*, *do* and *will*. All very indicative of our way of seeing things. The only one that represents an extended period on the line is *be*, we use this for the continuous. But still none of them tells us much about the whiteboard. This is why I do not think you will find much literature, as it is commonly understood, on the bookshelves of an ascetic. You will find St Isaac and St Paisios. It is they – together with human experience, our response to events in our daily lives and the Holy Spirit (through coincidence, conscience) – that will teach us.

How similar/different is the understanding of poetry in the West and the East, and what relationship do you

think there is between the writing of poetry and spiritual practice?

TE: One of the most beautiful metaphors in the New Testament is the one about the rich man who will never get to heaven; it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. On how useful it is on a spiritual level to be poor, St John Chrysostom says that the rich exist for the sake of the poor and the poor exist for the salvation of the rich. If we consider countries, we shall see this is again relevant. Poetry blossoms where there are difficulties in life. Simply because it receives a metaphysical frame, an eschatological dimension. My personal observation is that poetry from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was especially strong in post-socialist countries. Poets like Bogomil Gjuzel and Nikola Majirov from Macedonia, Nikolay Kanchev and Binyo Ivanov from Bulgaria, Duško Novaković and Dragan Danilov from Serbia, Ryszard Krynicki from Poland, Tomaž Šalamun from Slovenia and many others are clear proof of this. We prepared a very strong anthology with 17 contemporary poets from Bulgaria for Shearsman Books titled *At the End of the World: Contemporary Poetry from Bulgaria* – “at the end of the world” not only from a geographical or economic point of view, but because of Nikolay Kanchev’s poem, which I have already quoted: there at the end is the Word, the monastery. If somebody has an interest in beauty, paradox and metaphysics in poetry, he or she may well find them in these pages.

You ask me about the closeness between poetry and spiritual practice. There are Christian poets throughout

the history of poetry in Europe and elsewhere, such as the English poets John Donne and William Blake. But there are poets who consider themselves first and foremost pilgrims of God, and poetry gushes from their mouths like water from a hot spring. This is the case with St Gregory the Theologian, who in all his texts defends and glorifies the Holy Trinity in poetic form. The most beautiful poem about Christ I ever read was from his Third Theological Oration. In its essence, Christianity is very poetic; Christ the Word is himself a poet. The best poet ever – if we read his words and follow his actions with care, we shall witness this. Orthodox Christianity, which before the Great Schism of 1054 was the only form of Christianity, has been followed down the centuries by apostles, martyrs, Church Fathers, saints, desert abbas and monks today in places like Mt Athos, all of whom with their lives have shown themselves to be poets. Poets of Christ. I am reminded of an example from the book *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* by Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov). A novice with his spiritual father enters the church. He is holding a lit candle and the father suddenly says: "Throw down the candle!" He doubts for a moment – there is a carpet and it may catch fire – but he does so. From our logical point of view this is not right, but for the monk the highest virtue is submission and cutting off your own will: through their opposition Adam and Eve gave way to the first sin, through their disobedience to God, through insisting on their own will. To become an Orthodox monk you must take a vow of chastity, obedience and voluntary poverty. There are many other examples of poetic paradoxes, actions and prayers in books about

the desert fathers, such as *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (Penguin Books, 2003).

For me the best poets are those who practise Christianity rather than just being believers. This is also true of other religions – think of the Persian poet Rumi or the Siva-focused poet-pilgrims Allama Prabhu, Basava, Akka Mahadevi and Devar Dasimayya (whom I translated into Bulgarian several years ago). One of the most beautiful examples of poetry known to the world.

What is your list of 10 favourite books and why?

JD: I sometimes ask students of translation how they prepare for a translation. Obviously, you have to read the book, search for vocabulary and consult the author or an authority on the author's work before you can translate the text or book. The preparation, I feel, should be a horizontal process, carried out over time, while the translation itself, for me, should be relatively quick, a vertical process, a cut through time. But there is one thing I believe is important to carry out before every translation, and that is prayer. We are, after all, dealing with the Word, and it amazes me that there is not a greater connection in academic circles and at conferences between theology and literature or language. Surely, when we talk about language, we should talk about Christ, who is the Word.

So my first book, aside from the Bible, would be a prayer book. You already talked about prayers as the highest form of poetry, and you mentioned the example of St Gregory the Theologian, who devoted his literary gift to this, so I would say *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, beautifully prepared by the Holy Transfiguration

Monastery in Boston. It is important, in my view, to have a prayer book (an Orthodox prayer book) that gives the correct version of the Creed, a prayer Ieronymos of Aegina used to say for protection as he was walking down the street.

My second book would be another Holy Transfiguration Monastery publication: *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, which Joseph the Hesychast called "the Alpha and Omega of the life of watchfulness and interior prayer, [they] alone suffice to guide one from his first steps to perfection". This is a book for a lifetime.

My third would be any book by or about St Paisios of Mt Athos. I have not read all of his *Spiritual Counsels* (the fifth volume has yet to be published in English, I think), so for now I would say the second volume, *Spiritual Awakening*, although I know his *Epistles* are popular. My fourth would be *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* by the late Archimandrite George of Grigoriou Monastery. It is astonishing to think that we are called to become children of God, and this is the path taken by the saints. A book that I think people would enjoy immensely is another you have mentioned: *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*.

For a volume of poetry, I would include the Harvill edition of Raymond Carver's poetry, *All of Us* (that way, I get to include all his poetry books!), for its simplicity and delight. For a novel, simply because I read Thomas Hardy before Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the first book that moved me to tears. For use of English, while there are some stunning examples such as *Lolita* or *Stoner*, I would go for *Moby Dick*. For a translation, while I greatly admired the work of translator Michelle Granas in Eliza Orzeszkowa's

classic *On the Niemen* (which appears to have been self-published, a reflection on the state of the publishing industry and our own priorities), I would go for the wonderful and all-enveloping *The Tale of Genji* in the Everyman edition translated by Edward Seidensticker (I have not read other translations of this work).

Am I allowed an icon for my next book? After all, they are said to be written. The oldest image of Christ from St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. And, for my last selection, the face of a priest I saw at Vatopedi Monastery, full of light and love. This is also a form of God's writing.

I would be interested to know your favourite 10 titles, and what advice would you give to an up-and-coming young poet?

TE: I read primarily Orthodox literature and poetry. I got to an age when I decided that life is too short and with all your work and home engagements you simply do not have time to be informed about everything. So I stopped reading literature that is outside my interests. What can be more important in life than your spiritual growth and professional dedication? We have a publishing house, Small Stations Press (www.smallstations.com), and produce many beautiful books (we work with the best Bulgarian designer, Yana Levieva, which means our books are very aesthetic) for the Bulgarian and English book markets, so I have to keep up with poetry. We publish interesting books by contemporary European poets such as Gökçenur Çelebioğlu, Samira Negrouche and Manuel Rivas and by Bulgarian poets such as Yordan Eftimov, Vladimir Sabourin and Kiril Vasilev. We also publish major poets such as Raymond

Carver and Rosalía de Castro. I particularly admire the central European poets Tomaž Šalamun and Adam Zagajewski.

On the question of titles, from Orthodox literature, they would be *The Philokalia*, *The Evergetinos* (stories of the desert fathers), *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St John Climacus and anything by St Isaac the Syrian, Abba Dorotheus and St Macarius the Great. Then there is the unforgettable experience of reading the book about the life of the hermit Elder Joseph, one of the twentieth century's most influential spiritual figures: *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast* by Elder Ephraim. In terms of poetry, St Gregory the Theologian and the three Cs (or Ks): Cavafy, Carver and Kanchev.

Not to forget the great Dostoevsky! I love everything by him, in particular because of the "Creed" he wrote in a letter to Mme Fonvisin:

I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic, more rational, more manly, and more perfect than the Saviour; I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one. I would even say more: if anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth. (Translated by Ethel Colburn Mayne in *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, Chatto & Windus, 1914)

My advice to a beginner poet would be to create a right taste about what is good poetry, to find a poet-teacher and to develop his or her own style. Without these three you cannot become a good poet.

Through all your years, you have gravitated between four cultures and literatures: English, Greek, Spanish (especially Galician) and Bulgarian (more recently),

North to South, West to East. This is your cross in life. But what is the cross-point between them and what is your sacrifice?

JD: The cross-point, I think, is obvious. The Galician writer Suso de Toro, when I suggested to him that we wanted to show our son different cultures so that he could make an informed decision about his future, because our son is bilingual, suggested he already had enough cultures to choose from. He was linking identity to the earth, to a country. I replied that, wherever we went, we took our country with us, it was not confined to a piece of land. He asked which country that was. I replied Christ. Christ is my country, my nationality, my profession; he has given me all things.

We live in the era of the line. *Line* is close to *mine*. The number "1" is a line, we start counting from there and continue upwards, without realizing that "0" is much closer. If only we would count down, or at least teach our children, when they count, to start with zero. Similarly, the ego ("I") is a line. *Ego* is close to *God*. Just a single letter separates them, a step in the alphabet. We have to turn around; in a word, to repent.

When we do this, of course, we are given our cross (which is the ego with a line drawn through it). This is our sacrifice. We could talk about *fear* (which is close to *safe*), we could talk about *money* (the reverse of which is *venom*). We could talk about how the translator, who is all of us as humans, is driven on to the line whose existence he would wish to deny. Like a spider, he threads

the line to heal the scar. He is no man and stands in no man's land. But the *scar* can become *grass* (phonetic pair *g-k*). This is our purpose.

Money is an illusion; despite our reliance on it, our daily concern with it, it is an illusion – pieces of paper or figures on a screen. Fear is also an illusion, however strong its hold. It prowls around us; if you notice, it never comes from within us, it comes from without if we let it in. Like thoughts if we entertain them.

Giving up the ego is not such a sacrifice if we consider the enormous benefits (and joys!) of calling Christ our friend. We think of the ego, the individual, as so important. Democracy is based on the idea that power belongs to the individual and the individual has the right (within limits!) to do what he likes. We are back to the line, which we draw around spaces to say: "This is mine!" We do this with land, for example, even though it is patently obvious that land does not belong to us, we never made it, we would be incapable of coming up with the ingredients on our own. It is in our keeping, and we have a duty to protect it. It is the same with everything else that we deal and trade in. They are all products of what is around us. We could come up with nothing on our own. So we are translators. In the same way we breathe and translate oxygen or eat and translate food to provide energy and live, so we deal in products that are already there (they do not come from us) and translate them – clay, water and fire into brick (the image that St Spyridon used to illustrate the Holy Trinity).

When we deny the ego, we have a cross (the devil does not like our eyes to be opened, he wants us to

remain blind and ignorant). But this cross is also a plus sign. It is another way of counting down from "1" to "0", as the Greek alphabet does (the Latin alphabet counts up from "I" to "Z"). This is why, like the Orthodox sign of the cross, I have ended up in the East.