

INTRODUCTION

Time Past and Time Present



When we read Eliot's description in 'Burnt Norton', the first of the *Four Quartets*, of the human subject 'distracted from distraction by distraction / ... in this twittering world', we smile involuntarily, surprised by words which have found a new transpositional meaning for our times.¹ Another passage, taken from *The Waste Land*, 'I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you / I will show you fear in a handful of dust' ('The Burial of the Dead', 27–30), seems to repeat the old theme of *memento mori*, whereby a reader of metaphysical poetry may discern in this admonition an echo of John Donne's poems (perhaps these words from the detached, apparently unemotional 'Lecture upon the Shadow': 'The morning shadows wear away, / But these grow longer all the day' (22–23);² or this intensely passionate confession from one of the *Holy Sonnets*: 'I run to death and death meets me as fast ... / Despair behind and death before doeth cast / Such terror' ('Holy Sonnet (1)', 3–7). Eliot's image clearly refers to the custom of sprinkling dust over a coffin during a funerary rite. Yet the same ominous 'handful of dust' can be seen

¹ T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' (III.12,24), in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, vol. 1: *Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 182. All further quotations from Eliot's poems follow this edition. The figures in brackets refer to line numbers, or, in the case of the *Quartets*, the movement number followed by lines numbers.

² John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Robin Robbins, (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 207.

to have taken on a far more chilling relevance after Shoah. From the perspective of a post-war reading of the text, it cannot but evoke the memory of the ashes and dust in Treblinka; the memory of Auschwitz, and the countless other death camps where the dead were denied dignity both in death and burial.

This book looks at T.S. Eliot's poetry through the prism of the two World Wars, which is signposted by frequent references to Gdańsk, the city where World War II began. It does not aim at re-assessing Eliot's works, but rather seeks to highlight the ways in which a poem can surprise us with an excess of meaning generated by the intervention of time and history. The issue at stake here is also the poet's ethical responsibility for his excursions into history's 'cunning passages, contrived corridors' ('Gerontion', 34), which was probably an allusion to the so-called Polish corridor, linking Poland with the Free City of Danzig on the Baltic coast, now Polish Gdańsk; as argued by the critics, this reference may have articulated the poet's short-sighted and ill-advised championing of German complaints about the Treaty of Versailles.

During one of my visits to the Church of St. John the Baptist in this beautiful Hanzeatic city – Gdańsk was virtually raised from the ashes after it had been turned into a landscape of ruins by the Soviet army in 1945 – my attention was caught by 'an illegible stone' ('Little Gidding', V.14) in the church floor, obviously an old image trodden blank by the footfalls of generations of worshippers and chance visitors. Only two barely distinguishable marks remained: a shape which might have been the trace of a death's-head at the bottom and some lettering at the top: No. 58... In this instance, the phrase from 'Little Gidding', reminding us that 'we die with the dying' (V.15), found a new relevance in connection with the material artefact. In our times, this image might serve as a kind of accidental symbol of the industrialisation of wholesale murder which took place during World War II, and reduced victims to numbers tattooed onto skin. When I found myself contemplating such horrors, I settled in my mind to explore the ways in which the twentieth century may be scrutinised, or more pertinently 'found out', by Eliot's poetic word and outlook. As though his political choices and commitments were myopic, yet his poetry was broadly focused and far-sighted.

In his poem 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy', which alludes to the life and works of a French poet, Geoffrey Hill asked a pertinent question: 'Must men stand by what they write / as by their camp-beds or their weaponry / or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?' (1.14–16).³

³ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 183. All further quotations from 'The Mystery' follow this edition.

The question posed by Hill refers to Péguy's attacks on his former friend, Jean Jaurès, the director of the French Socialist Party, whom Péguy criticised for his pacifist views. The controversy led to political murder, and it has been argued that Péguy's vehement rhetoric may have encouraged the fanatic who assassinated the pacifist.⁴ Jaurès was shot by a French nationalist on 31 July 1914 in the Café du Croissant, and died in 'a wine puddle' (1.2). Péguy was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Marne on 5 September of the same year, leading his battalion across a field of beetroot towards a line of German guns. 'Wine', 'beetroot' and 'blood' form a monochromatic triangle in the poem which links the factual to the figurative, and entangles the sublime with the banal. Hill's ironic tone prevents us from blaming the poet for any unintentional complicity in the death of Jaurès, but he does not dismiss the problem of the performative possibilities of the creative act, either. The argument in 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy' is clearly influenced by Eliot's poetic outlook. Like Eliot, Hill points to the fact that the spoken word is not just an empty sound, and written words are not only marks on the page. Each word has 'a reason' of its own, which interacts with the material world, and history continuously unravels the meaning of poetry.

The protagonist of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' claims he is 'no prophet' (83), so instead of contemplating poetry's predictive power, we may wish to explore how Eliot's poetic scenarios reveal their oneness with contemporary culture. With these reflections in mind, I have distinguished four major theological strands in Eliot's work connected with four different poetic personae, each of which I consider crucial for a reading of Eliot in our post-Christian world. The four I propose are John the Baptist and the (Holy) Fool from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the wandering and wondering Magi from 'Journey of the Magi', and finally the 'wounded surgeon' from 'East Coker'. Each chapter involves a different paradox. The Baptist ironically defined himself as a 'voice of one crying in the desert', but we all know only too well that the cry is never answered or even noticed in the wilderness. The great precursor of the Russian symbolists, Fedor Tyutchev (1803–1873), persuasively linked John's predicament to human existential loneliness, saying: 'So is the soul's despairing protest / Lost on the earth and in the sky' (15–16),⁵ and the same note of despair resounds in the modernists re-workings of the

⁴ Douglas Olivier, 'Poetry's Subject', in: *Real Voices on Reading*, ed. by Philip Davies, (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 89.

⁵ Quoted by Jurij Lotman, 'The end! How sonorous is this word!' in: *Culture and Explosion*, trans. by Wilma Clark (Berlin: De Gruyter/Mouton, 2009), p. 161.

Baptist's story, from Eliot to Beckett. The Fool puts on a mask in order to strip the world of false appearances. The Magi set out on a quest for wisdom, understanding and love, leaving behind their books, homes and families. The wounded surgeon makes provision for the patients' health through his suffering and death. All of them can be compared to supple reeds whose gentle rustling amounts to a powerful symphony.

Michael Edwards in his book *Towards a Christian Poetics* has pointed to the Fool as 'a hero', apparently bearing Prufrock's cryptic reference to the Fool, and I gladly follow in Edwards's footsteps. The task I set myself anticipates addressing the contemporary relevance of Eliot's poetry as Christian poetry.⁶ The impulse to write about Eliot thus came from a desire to explore how his version of 'Christian poetics', related to the poet's specific place in history, enters into a dialogue with our anxiety-ridden age; not only to speak about the losses we have incurred, but also about the hope that we nevertheless endeavour to seek. The story I wish to outline, begins with a voice, the sounds and resonance of human speech, and proceeds towards the Word, the ground and *telos* of human language; it starts with a cruel parody of a love song, but makes headway towards *eros* and *agape*: human and divine love. Eliot's poems articulate the pain of exile and loss; they originate in the wilderness and traverse the desert in search of truth and understanding. The poet also takes his readers to the rock of Golgotha and makes them wonder at the hopelessness of the Cross. By and large, all his works travel over these two possibilities: the conviction that poets' words awake voices from the past which may seem without a real object and yet stir echoes in our memory; and the desire to find a poetic (incarnate) word which, like the Christian Word-made-flesh, would have a bearing upon the world, cut people to the quick and embrace them with relentlessly unsentimental compassion. I will try to argue that the strength of Eliot's Christian imagination lies precisely in his articulating those very doubts and contrarities that make up a faltering but fertile faith, very much in the same way as religion informs the works of Eliot's predecessors, his contemporaries and his followers: Herbert and Marvell, Dostoyevsky, Thomas and Jennings, Auden and Hill, Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński and Zbigniew Herbert. In order to provide a more comprehensive view of the twentieth-century quest for a Christian God, I also include in this discussion two Russian filmmakers, Andrey Tarkovsky and Pavel Lungin.

⁶ Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p. 1.

I will attempt to address the predicament of the reader confronted with by a ‘heap of broken images’ (‘The Burial of the Dead’, 22), which has always been to me the most momentous idea of Eliot’s early poem, *The Waste Land*. We ought not overlook the fact that the title does not point straightforwardly to a ‘wasteland’, a barren or overgrown strip of land, a wilderness or a desert, but precisely a ‘waste land’ (as in wasted inheritance), which makes the reader think of exiled, separated humankind. The predicament of a prodigal offspring and the ‘poor banished children of Eve’, in the words of *Salve Regina*, a traditional prayer to the Virgin, remained one of most prominent concerns in the poems written after Eliot’s conversion in 1927. Edwards writes: ‘All of Eliot’s poetry is preoccupied with the “overwhelming question”: as much before he became a Christian as after. ... All of his poetry is likewise concerned with conversion, with the spitting out of all the butt-ends of one’s days and ways’.⁷ Bearing his opinion in mind, I suggest that we should view Eliot’s entire work as if in a rear-view mirror, juxtaposing texts from different periods in the poet’s life, in order to see how he ultimately arrived at ‘our first world’ (‘Burnt Norton’, I.23), and found that this was no longer an Eden of primordial innocence, but a place where painful memories, which though they cannot be erased – and indeed should not be obliterated – may nevertheless be healed and redeemed. Despite his contention that ‘all time is unredeemable’ (‘Burnt Norton’, I.5), which means that we cannot retrieve time past, Eliot proves that time may function as a *pharmakon*, both a poison and cure for poetry, when he says that ‘only through time time is conquered’ (‘Burnt Norton’ II.43). Following this suggestion, I wish to argue that it is not only ‘timeless truths’ which make his works matter regardless of the passage of time, but the fact that their resources – also with regard to theology and religion – are transformed and replenished through history.

Some readers may identify ‘our first world’ as heavenly Paradise, others will interpret Eliot’s metaphor as a nostalgic remembrance of the poet’s childhood or his first love. In this book, however, I suggest we use the phrase ‘our first world’ to designate the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Bible and Christian liturgy. For many of us the Bible is no longer a sacred text, and Christianity is losing ground in Europe and North America. But the Christian idea of the Word-made-(suffering)-flesh, which informs Eliot’s poetry, remains of crucial importance for understanding language and literature today. Our comprehension of Eliot’s work – indeed, of all literature written in English – will be incomplete if we ignore this tradition which for centuries has nourished

⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

our imagination, and provided us with the ideas harnessing reverberations of times past with possibilities for time present and time future.⁸

In his brilliant meditation on Christian poetry in the present day, entitled ‘Christian Poetry “and now”’,⁹ Edwards ponders the nuances of Eliot’s tone which constitute the iridescent meaning of the concluding passage of the first part of the fifth movement in ‘East Coker’, which reads:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (V.15–18)

We very often speak about the sound of the poem, but I can hardly think of a critic who might equal Edwards in bringing this sound to the silent page of a book. Here he draws our attention to the melody of intonation patterns and the plethora of modalities through which one and the same word can function differently in a sentence: the four sequential ‘ands’ articulate the anxiety which rises with each succeeding ‘turn of the screw’; there are different ways of construing the word ‘seem’, which may be used ‘weakly (as if to say that the conditions do rather seem unfavourable, when you think about it), but strongly, to mean what it says: the conditions seem unpropitious, but may not be’; and, last but not least, “‘perhaps”, rather than being tired and “per’apsey”, is the awakening to another possibility: one may not be required either to win, or to lose’.¹⁰ In this way, the poet-critic helps us discern the cautiously optimistic message in the quoted passage of ‘East Coker’ which paves the way for Christian poetry in our post-Christian times.

At first, Edwards makes us think of Gogo and Didi lingering in the unreal world without a beginning and an end, but instead of leaving us in this abstract limbo, he repeats the promise to be found in the Book of Revelation:

[The present], in a post-modern world which proclaims, peculiarly often, the death of God and which waits, unexpectantly, not for the Second Coming but for the post-post-modern, is no more unpropitious than 1940 or 1640 for the poetry one might wish to write after Eliot. ... Christian poetry, now and at any time, is likely to rework the real

⁸ For an analysis of selected twentieth-century poets who made use of Christian symbolism cf. Jean Ward, *Christian Poetry in Post-Christian Day: Geoffrey Hill, R.S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings*, (Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁹ Michael Edwards, ‘Unpropitious: Christian Poetry and “now”’, in: *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*, ed. by Adrian Grafe, (London and New York: Continuum/ Bloomsbury, 2008), pp. 172–180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

in search of whatever is beyond what meets the eye, and always does well to return to the unamended real in acknowledgement of the creatureliness of even the most clairvoyant visionary. The need to re-view and to re-word the real derives from the Fall, from the perception that the self and the whole of its world have suffered a catastrophe. The ability to do so comes from the other end of history, from the new Creation, from the promise that the world is not to be laid aside in the name of an Elsewhere, but is to become “new heavens and a new earth”.¹¹

There is a strong religious note in the English word ‘propitious’, linked to the Latin rendering of both the Hebrew *kaporet* and Greek *hilasterion*, which in the Old Testament and the Septuagint designated the golden cover on the Ark of Covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with blood on the Day of Expiation. In his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul uses the word *hilasterion* in relation to Christ, representing Him as a ‘propitiatory Victim’; in a Latin Eucharistic hymn attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, the same notion is rendered by the phrase: *salutaris hostia*. Edwards alludes to the Pauline theology by saying: ‘the most unpropitious state of affairs prevailed when the propitiation was actually being made’.¹² One more reason to stress the significance of the rich theological resonances of the word chosen by the poet is the possible connection between the Old Testament *kaporet* or *hilasterion*, denoting the ‘Seat of Grace’, St. Paul’s interpretation of this notion in the context of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice, and the ‘promised end’, tantamount to the creation of ‘new heavens and new earth’ after the old world perishes consumed by a roaring fire, as anticipated in ‘Little Gidding’.

Readers of Shakespeare may also be reminded that in *The Tragedy of King Lear*, when the old king enters the stage carrying the dead body of Cordelia, Kent expresses his utmost despair in the form of the question: ‘Is this the promised end?’, and his bleak understanding of apocalypse is reinforced by Edgar’s assumption that Cordelia’s untimely death and Lear’s boundless grief give us a foretaste of Doomsday: ‘Or image of that horror?’ (5.3). In the twentieth century, the war and Holocaust gave rise to a form of writing which Jacques Derrida described as a godless ‘apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without a vision, without truth, without revelation’ in contradistinction to the revelatory event of the Resurrection and Pentecost.¹³ Accordingly, Jan Kott, the author of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (1963), proclaimed the absurdist ending of Shakespeare’s great play to be perfectly in tune with the predicament

¹¹ Ibid., p. 178.

¹² Ibid., p. 173.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy’, trans. by John Leavey Jr., *Oxford Literary Review*, 1984, vol. 6, no. 2 (1984), p. 34.

of our times. But what if we associate the image of the father holding the body of his daughter with the medieval representations of the ‘Mercy Seat’, showing God the Father supporting the crucifix?¹⁴ One may then conclude that the contemporary relevance of *King Lear* need not consist in the rejection of the Christian outlook of the play, but rather in anticipating the scandalous paradox which in Eliot’s last poem, ‘Little Gidding’, amounts to juxtaposing the destruction caused by air raids with the Pentecostal fire and the prefiguration of the ‘promised end’ and the ultimate triumph of love. Both Shakespeare and Eliot point to the same overlapping of ‘the most unpropitious state of affairs’ – Original Sin, the execution of the Innocent, the death of Cordelia, the horror of war – with the concomitant effect of ‘propitiation’, which has always determined Christian faith and hope.

Taking then all these theological undertones of the adjective ‘propitious’, which Eliot used to describe the circumstances of writing poetry in his times, it would therefore be wide of the mark to interpret his diagnosis by claiming that he considered these circumstances ‘unfavourable’, ‘inopportune’ or simply ‘unsuitable’. Instead, we may infer that the poet referred to a culture which seemed void of the manifold blessings encapsulated in the notion of *hilasterion*: mercy (*hileos*), pardon, reconciliation and satisfaction.¹⁵ Yet, as Edwards succinctly noted, the fact that one considers the circumstances ‘unpropitious’ to undertake the task of recovering ‘what has been lost / And found and lost again and again’ does not entail the futility of such efforts. As Eliot must have remembered from St. Paul, the Christian ‘now’ is today and always the accepted favourable time: ‘the day of salvation’ (2Cor. 6:2), although in another place the apostle spoke of ‘redeeming the time, because the days are evil’ (Eph. 5:16). Other translators of the Bible render this verse as ‘take advantage at every opportunity, because the days are evil’ (*American Standard Version*), and as we know, the English word ‘opportunity’ comes from Latin *ob portum veniens*, referring to the wind which blows ships into the harbour, but a person who uses her time well is not an opportunist who always steers with the wind.

This book highlights the importance of Eliot’s religious outlook in the post-Christian day – when Christianity is more and more often viewed as ‘a private faith of the minority rather than the cornerstone of public life’,¹⁶ and

¹⁴ Małgorzata Grzegorzewska, *Teologie Szekspira*, (Kraków: Homini, 2018), p. 159.

¹⁵ Livingstone Blauvelt, *The Apostle Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome. From Oppressive Bondage to Joyful Deliverance*, (Chicago: Xulon Press, 2005), p. 98.

¹⁶ Robert O. Paxton and Julie Hessler, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, (Boston: Wadsworth Press, 2012), p. 578.

so in circumstances which, once again, *seem* ‘unpropitious’ – in order to show that his poetry can be instrumental in rediscovering Christianity’s potential for making things new today, instead of maintaining anachronistic and timeworn patterns. As Charles S. Kraszewski has succinctly argued, Eliot’s modernist frame of mind was instrumental in his understanding of culture and religion:

In his spiritual journey, which led him from Unitarianism through scepticism and a flirt with Eastern mysticism into (as he saw it) Catholicism as expressed in the English Church, this Anglo-American master, whom Pound once described as the “young man who has modernised himself”, took Pound’s slogan “Make it new!” as a religious and cultural, no less than poetic, imperative. From about 1925 on, Eliot began to expound the timeless truths of traditional, Catholic Christianity to a world that sees religion as something become irrelevant; to a “neutral” culture lacking the higher dream, lacking the cohesiveness provided by a real apprehension of the Eternal; to an age, as he put it in his Choruses to *The Rock*, “which advances progressively backwards”.¹⁷

Despite the pessimism implicated in the claim made by the poet, I will try to show that his voice, which we may call ‘a voice of the one crying in the desert’ in an allusion to John the Baptist whose mission will be the subject of the first chapter, may help us imagine the future of our culture as inspired by the ‘higher dream’ of divine love and forgiveness. I will pursue this path fully aware that for us ‘there is only the trying’, in a humble anticipation of the fulfilment beyond the horizon of our expectations.

* * *

I owe the reader an explanation why I have not decided to use any modern translation of the Bible (New International Version, New American Standard Bible, or the New Jerusalem Bible), but have adhered throughout to the King James Bible, despite its ostensibly archaic idiom, which may seem unsuitable for an argument looking to stress the contemporary relevance of the biblical message. The choice was, however, deliberate, determined by the aesthetic merits of the translation, which for centuries have inspired users of the English language. I hope the long-established diction and style of the Authorised Version will speak in favour of my decision.

¹⁷ Charles S. Kraszewski, *Irresolute Heresiarch. Catholicism, Gnosticism and Paganism in the Poetry of Czesław Miłosz*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 2. One may notice here that Eliot’s diagnosis reads like a reverse version of Walter Benjamin’s metaphor, inspired by Paul Klee’s drawing, of the angel of history nostalgically facing the past, but being inevitably carried further and further away by the wind which blows from Paradise and propels him into the future.