

Leonor María Martínez Serrano

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Leonor María Martínez Serrano

University of Córdoba
Córdoba
lemase09@gmail.com

**THE MUSIC OF WHAT IS: T.S. ELIOT AND CZESLAW MILOSZ,
OR A QUIET MEDITATION ON TIME AND BEING**

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1. Poetry, Music and Knowledge

Poetry and music belong together: both art forms are ways of shedding light on the mystery of what is and ways of domesticating time. Where poetry handles words as the building bricks of poems, music handles sounds and melodies as the basic constituents of pieces such as sonatas, quartets or symphonies. Beneath poetry and music is humans' secular concern with making sense of the world or reality, and so they are prolongations of the human imagination, seeking hard to impose order upon seeming chaos. Poetry and music find pattern and harmony where the naked eye might at first perceive only apparent formlessness, random constellations or sheer arbitrariness in the world of things. It is the poet's and the musician's task to bite that order in between their teeth and make it a work of art of lasting value. A learned poet who "studied poetry carefully"¹, Ezra Pound was well aware of the importance of a thorough study of music for the serious poet and so he quoted approvingly Walter Pater's dictum that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" in his prose writings. In the opening lines of *Vorticism*, published in "Fortnightly Review", 96 (1 Sept 1914), p. 461, Pound writes that "Pater proclaimed that 'All arts approach the condition of music'", and in his enlightening *Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch*, the first of two articles on the musician and maker of musical instruments, published in the "Egoist", 4 (July 1917), p. 90, Pound claims that "Poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets. I would almost say that poets should never be too long out of touch with musicians. Poets who will not study music are defective"². To Pound, for whom

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918*, ed. J. Spears Brooker, R. Schuchard, Baltimore 2014.

² Both quotes are lifted again from *ibidem*, p. 645, notes 14 and 15.

the test of a poet's sincerity was his command of the technique of his art, the study of prosody and metric was of paramount importance if one was to make a significant contribution to the endless epistemological adventure of humankind on Earth as represented by poetry.

To High Modernists like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, music had much of value to teach to poets seeking to improve their technical skill in their commerce with words and prosody. Reading the works that had been made by their literary ancestors, they embarked on a sort of poetic archaeology whereby they sought to distill the best that had been felt and thought and expressed in memorable, musical words. A great poem has, as it were, something of the inevitability of a musical score in which every word or note falls exactly into place. A poem of lasting beauty and significance is one that fits the human voice, in much the same way a well-knitted sock fits the foot or a well-designed spade fits the hand that holds it. Poetry and music constitute, therefore, a potent equation recurring in the thought of many poets and literary critics over time.

As potent and inexhaustible is the elemental pair of concepts of poetry and knowledge. That poetry is a form of getting to know the world appears to be a truism, but one needs to be reminded of this elemental truth from time to time. The most elementary questions are the hardest to ask and the hardest to answer as well. In this respect, both poetry and music resemble philosophy and other forms of knowledge. In his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, French philosopher Alain Badiou claims that there are four types of generic procedures or conditions of Philosophy – the matheme, the poem, political invention and love –, which may produce different kinds of truth: scientific, artistic, political and amorous truths. According to Badiou, a truth is a paradoxical thing, as it is “at once something new, hence something rare and exceptional, yet, touching the very being of that of which it is a truth, it is also the most stable, the closest, ontologically speaking, to the initial state of things”³. Poetry cannot be divorced from its compulsion to grasp the world and our place within it. It is a fact that poetry and knowing have walked together hand in hand since humans have proffered poetical, gnomic words, rich in insights into the fundamental questions we have asked time and again over time.

That poetry seeks to shed light on Nature and on human nature sounds like a truism, but we need to be reminded of such a fundamental truth as well. Like science or philosophy, poetry is also a form of paying attention to reality and a form of knowing being. But being is much more comprehensive than the dichotomy Nature vs. human nature appears to suggest. The secular concern of poetry has been grasping human nature and the twin mysteries of time and space, but human nature cannot be dissociated from Nature at large. If we do so, we are blindly embracing the preposterous intimation that humankind can exist on its own and that humans are superior to everything else in life. This biased anthropocentrism might be firmly inscribed in our gene pool and goes unnoticed most of the time in our Western mindset. Life is but an interdependent continuum of subtle modulations and so, by understanding Nature, we will understand ourselves, and by understanding ourselves, we will understand our place within the larger scheme of things. Since the very cradle of humanity, poets have fath-

³ A. Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, New York 1999, p. 36.

omed the human heart, mind and body, and they have looked tirelessly once and again at what it means to be human, and yet they appear to have found no conclusive answer to this most fundamental of all questions. The mystery of being remains insoluble and undecipherable, even if certain patterns and universals can be divined on the surface of the carpet of existence. But poetry never gives up on its call to shed some sort of temporary light on Nature and the human condition. In its forceful and disinterested search for truth, poetry remains intact and pure amid the dissonance of the competing discourses in our post-capitalist world.

Aware of how central (human) nature is to their epistemological enterprise, poets still feel there is something impenetrable at the core of poems as inexhaustible artifacts and as constructs of the human imagination that are hard to decode for good. Both T.S. Eliot and Czeslaw Milosz are paradigmatic examples of poets immersed in deep thinking and writing about Nature and human nature, being and the role of poetry in the world. This paper looks at the unfailing vocation and the voracious passion to grasp the world that bring together both literary giants of the Western canon or *Weltliteratur*. Eliot wrote *Four Quartets*, his undisputable masterpiece, at a time of historical upheaval during the Second World War. Milosz wrote his impressive sequence of poems entitled *The World: A Naïve Poem* during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw in 1944. War was the unexpected witness to the birth of two poetical works of lasting value. Seemingly unconnected to each other, it seems both sequences of poems are a moving and deep meditation on being, but also a pristine look at the world with its welcome mysteries and perfections. Milosz translated the crucial text of High Modernism, Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), into Polish in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, and later he got to read and translate *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Quartets*. Both Eliot and Milosz are poets that share the same intellectual lucidity when it comes to unveiling the intricate subtleties of the human soul, with all its contradictions, lights and shadows. Both are erudite, cosmopolitan poets that are convinced that true poetry must be rooted in the literary accomplishments of our ancestors and that tradition is a never-ending work in progress. Both seek in their poems a form of impersonality that might transcend solipsism and subjectivity, but their poems are firmly grounded in their own life experiences. Their poetry is ontologically rooted in the real world to begin with, not in the private self, even if they were well aware that the ultimate masterpiece is private life, which is part of a grander scheme. This might be one of the reasons why they remain classics – which is to say that they are poets whose voice is still able to talk to us across time and space. Their poetry is both vision and witness at the same time, as the title itself of Milosz's collection of essays *The Witness of Poetry* (1983) appears to suggest. Poetry is not just the witness of a particular historical epoch or *Zeitgeist*, but also the living testimony of a unique, precious and unrepeatable life in time.

2. Czeslaw Milosz: Poetry as the Passionate Pursuit of the Real

Born in Szetejnie, modern Lithuania, then under Russian domination, Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) is one of the indispensable literary giants on the horizon of Polish Literature and one of the undisputable masters in the history of world poetry. Because he was born in a rich multicultural and multilingual environment, Milosz was a poly-

glot fluent in Polish, Russian, English and French. He could not speak a word of Lithuanian, though. Throughout his life he preserved a strong spiritual bond with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and with the multi-ethnic rural milieu where he was raised a Catholic⁴. After graduating in Law at Stefan Batory University in 1934, he spent a year in Paris on a fellowship, a city where he came under the spiritual tutelage of a distant cousin by the name of Oscar Milosz, a French poet of Lithuanian descent. In 1936 he returned to his homeland to work as a literary programmer at Radio Wilno, but he was dismissed on the grounds of his leftist views. After a trip to Italy, he took a job with Polish Radio in Warsaw. During the II World War he lived mostly in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, working for underground presses, translating, writing and editing several books, attending clandestine lectures and publishing an anthology of anti-Nazi poetry.

After the war, Milosz served as cultural attaché for the newly formed People's Republic of Poland, first in New York and then in Washington, D.C., after which he was transferred to Paris in 1950. His being a diplomat for the Polish Communist government was bitterly criticized by certain émigré circles. Later, he was banned and censored in Poland as he decided to defect and obtain political asylum in France in 1951. He spent the next decade in Paris as a freelance writer and translator living in quite adverse circumstances. It was in France that he published his book-length essay *The Captive Mind* (1953), a classic of anti-Stalinism which remains a lucid analysis of what a repressive Communist regime can do to intellectuals' minds, and the autobiographical novel *The Seizure of Power* (1955), which renders as fiction much of the material in *The Captive Mind*. Life in the French capital was not easy for the exiled poet, so when he was offered a teaching position in the New World, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean and moved to America, his new home. In 1960 Milosz settled in the United States; he became an American citizen one decade later. From 1961 till his retirement, he was a Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught courses on Polish Literature and Dostoevsky. In 1980 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and then, after the Iron Curtain fell, he could return to Poland. His works had been banned by the Communist government, but the Nobel Prize made him visible again in his homeland. He divided the last years of his life between his home in Berkeley, with views onto the impressive San Francisco Bay, and his apartment in Krakow, where he died in 2004 aged 93.

Czeslaw Milosz is a prolific author. He wrote virtually all of his poetry collections, autobiographical works and essays in his native Polish, but then he translated his own works into English with other authors' help. His literary output comprises a long list of

⁴ As he eloquently put it in his Nobel Lecture delivered on 8 December 1980, "It is good to be born in a small country where Nature was on a human scale, where various languages and religions cohabited for centuries. I have in mind Lithuania, a country of myths and of poetry. My family already in the sixteenth century spoke Polish, just as many families in Finland spoke Swedish and in Ireland, English; so I am a Polish, not a Lithuanian, poet. But the landscapes and perhaps the spirits of Lithuania have never abandoned me. It is good in childhood to hear words of Latin liturgy, to translate Ovid in high school, to receive a good training in Roman Catholic dogmatics and apologetics". The source is Milosz's Nobel Lecture, collected in *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1968-1980*, Editor-in-Charge T. Frängsmyr, Editor S. Allén, Singapore 1993. Available online at www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-lecture.html [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

poetry books: *Poem of the Frozen Time* (1933), *Three Winters* (1936), *Poems* (1940), *Salvage* (1945), *Daylight* (1953), *Treatise on Poetry* (1957), *Continents* (1958), *King Popiel and Other Poems* (1962), *Gucio Enchanted* (1962), *Bobo's Metamorphosis* (1965), *Poems* (1969), *City Without a Name* (1969), *Selected Poems* (1973), *Where the Sun Rises and Where it Sets* (1974), *Bells in Winter* (1978), *Selected Poems* (1981), *Hymn to the Pearl* (1982), *The Separate Notebooks* (1984), *Unattainable Earth* (1984), *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (1988), *Chronicles* (1989), *Farther Surroundings* (1991), *Provinces: Poems, 1987-1991* (1991), *Facing the River: New Poems* (1995), *It* (2000), *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001* (2001), *Orpheus and Eurydice* (2003), *Second Space: New Poems* (2004), and *Last Poems* (2006). He also wrote the novels *The Seizure of Power* (1955) and *The Issa Valley* (1955) during his stay in the French capital. Among his prose writings are: *The Captive Mind* (1953), *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (1959), *The History of Polish Literature* (1969, rev. ed. 1983), *Visions from San Francisco Bay* (1969, translated in 1982), *Private Obligations* (1974), *Emperor of the Earth. Modes of Eccentric Vision* (1977), *The Land of Ulro* (1977, translated in 1984), *The Garden of Knowledge* (1980), *The Witness of Poetry* (1983), *The Rising of the Sun* (1985), *Starting from My Streets* (1985), *About Our Europe* (1986), *A Year of the Hunter* (1989, translated in 1994), *In Search of a Homeland* (1992), *The Metaphysical Pause* (1995), *Modern Legends, War Essays* (1996), *Life on Islands* (1997), *Roadside Dog* (1997, translated in 1998), *Milosz's Alphabet* (1997), *A Further Alphabet* (1998), *An Excursion Through the Twenties and Thirties* (1999), *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (2001), *A Literary Larder* (2004), and *On Time Travel* (2004). But he was also an active translator: he translated the *Psalms* from the Old Testament, *The Book of Job*, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, works by William Shakespeare, John Milton, Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire and Jacques Maritain, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday* and *Burnt Norton*, and Simone Weil into Polish. He also translated other Polish writers such as Zbigniew Herbert into English and co-translated his own poems with American poets Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky⁵.

Having lived under two totalitarian systems in the twentieth century, National Socialism and Communism, and having been a witness to the Nazi devastation of Poland and the subsequent Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, Milosz "deals in his poetry with the central issues of our time: the impact of history upon moral being, the search for ways to survive spiritual ruin in a ruined world"⁶, as Terrence Des Pres puts it in the *Nation*. But even if he wrote about the past in a tragic, ironic style, he affirmed the inescapable value of human life. After all, Milosz is a humanist, and a humanist is someone who firmly believes in the value of everything human. His poems are a haven for humanity amid a cruel, hostile world, for they affirm the continuity of universal moral human values in spite of all kinds of obstacles and contingencies. Not only that: his poems are engaged with "a confrontation with experience – and not with per-

⁵ Basic bio-bibliographic information about Czeslaw Milosz has been drawn from the poet's profiles available at The Poetry Foundation website at www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/czeslaw-milosz and at www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/czeslaw-milosz [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

⁶ Quoted under the heading *Czeslaw Milosz. Poet Details*, at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/czeslaw-milosz> [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

sonal experience alone, but with history in all its paradoxical horror and wonder”⁷, as Jonathan Galassi claims in “The New York Times Book Review”. As Helen Vendler observes, “For Milosz the person is irrevocably a person in history and the interchange between external event and the individual life is the matrix of poetry”⁸. According to Milosz himself, poetry is conceptualized as being a witness in the corner of Europe where he happened to live “owing to the extraordinary and lethal events”⁹ that occurred there. Milosz is concerned with historical time, one that transcends humankind but influences individual human lives. As Alfred Kazin writes in “The New York Times Book Review”:

Western poetry [...] is “‘alienated’ poetry, full of introspective anxiety. But because of the dictatorial nature of communist governments, poets in the East cannot afford to be preoccupied with themselves. They are drawn to write of the larger problems of their society. ‘A peculiar vision of the individual and the historical took place,’ Milosz wrote in *The Witness of Poetry*, ‘which means that events burdening a whole community are perceived by a poet as touching him in a most personal manner. Then poetry is no longer alienated’¹⁰.

An immensely learned poet of memory¹¹ but also a poet of witness, Milosz speaks in his poems with an ancestral voice that is rich in echoes of his people’s history. His poetry is a poetry that shows a deep reverence towards being: the poet’s true vocation is “to contemplate Being”¹² he says in his 1980 Nobel Lecture. As Seamus Heaney observes in *In Gratitude for All the Gifts*, a homage to the Polish poet published in “The Guardian” in 2004, Milosz “developed a fierce conviction about the holy force of his art, how poetry was called upon to combat death and nothingness. [...] With Milosz gone, the world has lost a credible witness to this immemorial belief in the saving power of poetry”¹³. His poetry has been called *polyphonic* because, as the poet points out, he has “always been full of voices speaking; in a way I consider myself an instrument, a medium. [...] Everything was dictated to me, and I was just a tool. Of what I don’t know. I would like to believe that I am a tool of God, but that’s presumptuous. So I prefer to call whatever it is my ‘daimonion’”¹⁴. He makes powerful state-

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ C. Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England 1983, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Czeslaw Milosz. Poet Details...*

¹¹ In a world characterized “by its refusal to remember”, as Milosz puts it in his Nobel Lecture, it is of the essence to remember that humankind has evolved over time and that there is an inescapable continuity to elementary moral values like good and evil, truth and falsehood. Cultural memory is instrumental to preserve human dignity and to ensure the survival of the human species after all. In his interview with Nathan Gardels, Milosz claims the following: “In Polish poetry, memory goes back to Rome and Greece. There is a feeling of the continuity of European civilization. We find that a certain moral, even natural, law is inscribed in centuries of human civilization.” See N. Gardels, *An Interview with Czeslaw Milosz*, “The New York Times Review of Books” 1986, vol. 3, no 3, www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/02/27/an-interview-with-czeslaw-milosz/ [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

¹² C. Milosz, *Nobel Lecture...*

¹³ S. Heaney, *In Gratitude for All the Gifts*, “The Guardian” 11 Sept. 2004, available at www.theguardian.com/books/2004/sep/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview25 [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

¹⁴ Robert Faggen’s interview with the poet published in „The Paris Review”: R. Faggen, *Interview with Czeslaw Milosz, The Art of Poetry* no. 70, “The Paris Review” 1994, Issue 133, available at

ments on loss, destruction and despair because of what his eyes witnessed in the span of a lifetime. “The act of writing a poem is an act of faith, yet if the screams of the tortured are audible in the poet’s room, is not his activity an offense to human suffering?”¹⁵, asks Milosz in *The History of Polish Literature*. Milosz is concerned to explore the proper place of the poet in the world after the horror of World War II, which accounts for his collections of essays on the role of poetry in a world that appears to have lost its moral foundation somewhere along the way. As Milosz claims in “Poets and the Human Family”, one of this Charles Eliot Norton Lectures collected in *The Witness of Poetry*, true poetry is “the passionate pursuit of the Real”¹⁶. He dismisses poets who concern themselves with art for art’s sake only and think of themselves as alienated beings. Poets may have “grown afraid of reality, afraid to see it clearly and speak about it in words we can all comprehend”, wrote Adam Gussow in the *Saturday Review*. What we need precisely “in today’s unsettled world are poets who like Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, will speak for rather than against the enduring values of their communities”¹⁷. Helen Vendler expressed it eloquently once again with these words:

“The work of Milosz reminds of the great power that poetry gains from bearing within itself an unforced, natural, and long-ranging memory of past customs; a sense of the strata of ancient and modern history; wide visual experience; and a knowledge of many languages and literatures... The living and tormented revoicing of the past makes Milosz a historical poet of bleak illumination”¹⁸.

3. Earth as Living Flesh: Czeslaw Milosz’s *The World: A Naïve Poem*

Milosz has got a tremendous passion to grasp the world¹⁹. His poetry is a poetry that confronts reality above all things: “Being raised above being through Being”. As he points out in an interview with Robert Faggen for “The Paris Review”, “in its most important instances, poetry is an exploration of man’s place in the cosmos”²⁰. Apart from his bleak statements on loss and destruction, he also makes forceful statements on what it means for humans to be alive in a world that might well be paradise only if we cared to make it a habitable place. In the nineteenth century Walt Whitman wrote the great poem of the body and the self: the unsurpassed and unsurpassable *Leaves of Grass*, one of the undisputable peaks of the human imagination on American soil.

www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1721/the-art-of-poetry-no-70-czeslaw-milosz [accessed on: 3.09.2016].

¹⁵ C. Milosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, Berkeley 1983, p. 458.

¹⁶ C. Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry...*, p. 25.

¹⁷ See *Czeslaw Milosz. Poet Details...*

¹⁸ See *ibidem*.

¹⁹ Indicative of this passion to grasp the world are Milosz’s words on the admiration he felt for Linnaeus and his fascination about nature: “Well, my great hero was Linnaeus; I loved the idea that he had invented a system for naming creatures, that he had captured nature that way. My wonder at nature was in large part a fascination with names and naming.” See R. Faggen’s interview with the poet.

²⁰ R. Faggen, *op. cit.*

Whitman's omnivorous intelligence wanted to embrace and capture everything through his poems. Hence the infinite streams of words and the democratic impulse beneath his poetry. His was also a passionate pursuit of the real, which Milosz sees as the genuine mission of true poetry. But "The great poem of the earth remains to be written"²¹, claimed Wallace Stevens in *Imagination as Value*, one of the seminal essays included in his volume *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. Later in the twentieth century, Czeslaw Milosz probably accomplished something close to this "poem of the earth" as he wrote *The World: A Naïve Poem* in Warsaw in 1944, during the Nazi occupation of the Polish capital city. In Seamus Heaney's opinion, this lyrical sequence is a *sui generis* 20th-century equivalent for Virgil's *Eclogues*. As the Nazi troops occupied Warsaw, Milosz lifted his eyes up towards the sky and depicted a sort of Arcadia on Earth largely inspired by his childhood homeland, where guardian angels floated in the air watching over the poet's family home, a place of warmth and protection, harmony and goodness against the hostility of the world. As Milosz explains in his interview with Robert Faggen, in writing *The World* "I wrote a long work consisting of short poems [...], a sequence – though I was not aware of it at the time – like Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. I considered the world so horrible that these childish poems were answers – the world as it should be, not as it was. Written in view of what was happening, *The World* was a profoundly ironic poem"²². And yet, Milosz acknowledges that we should approach objects with detached reverence and that "things of this world should be contemplated rather than dissected. [...] Detached contemplation, which is a good definition of art"²³.

At face value the twenty poems making up *The World* appear to be nothing but the expression of Milosz's gratitude for the simple fact that the world exists as an exuberant paradise on Earth. Underlying all the poems in this sequence is his constant amazement that such a world as ours should exist for us to enjoy and to make sense of. After all, this has always been the secular concern of poetry: the impulse to shed light on Nature and human nature. Needless to say, poetry is a form of paying attention to reality, but also a most powerful path leading to knowledge and, if we are lucky enough, to wisdom and serenity. Amid the competing discourses that seek to attract people's attention in our ferociously post-capitalist world, poetry possibly remains the purest form of knowing. In its compulsion to set order upon chaos and to illuminate areas of reality that remain in the dark, poetry resembles philosophy and science. This is why it makes sense to affirm that thinking and singing remain vocations, not professions, and that poetry has a passion to grasp the world that makes it a worthwhile and sublime human endeavour. Poets, scientists and philosophers spend a lifetime appeasing their hunger for order and their thirst for sense-making. This is the *cupiditas naturalis* that Aristotle identified in ancient Greece as being a sort of universal compulsion in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*: the desire to know, otherwise known as everyone wants to understand²⁴.

²¹ W. Stevens, *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, New York 1951, p. 142.

²² R. Faggen, op. cit.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ These are the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* I.I, 980a 21-7: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their use-

The three-stanza poem entitled *Hope* is clearly reminiscent of the spirit that infuses life into William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. What remains astonishing and captivating about this poem is the fact that it conceals a wealth of deep thinking beneath deceptively simple, transparent language. The opening lines are a straightforward celebration of Earth as the ultimate living flesh: "*Hope* means that someone believes the earth / Is not a dream, that it is living flesh; / That sight, touch, hearing tell the truth; / And that all the things we have known here / Are like a garden, looked at from the gate"²⁵. According to the poetic voice speaking in this poem, hope means that one believes reality is real, and not eel-slippery dream or illusion. There is a stubborn, tangible consistency to the world we live in which is simply inescapable. It is not a thing of the mind only, but *esse*, existence, endowed with a life of its own. However, there is in these lines much more than a simple eulogy of the Earth as a terrestrial paradise. *Hope* is also a forceful statement on epistemology or on the way humans go about making sense of the world: it is the senses that provide us with the raw data which reason builds knowledge upon. Contrary to skeptic people's expectations, our eyes, hands and ears do not deceive us, but tell us what the elementary contours, textures and melodies of the world are like. Earth is depicted as being a garden, a secular prolongation of the Garden of Eden perhaps, which ultimately remains out of reach because everything is simply inexhaustible and impenetrable to the human mind. *Esse est percipi*, claimed Berkeley after all. The world exists as long as there is a perceiver there to make sense of it. Upon closer scrutiny, this turns out to be an extremely narcissistic and anthropocentric view of the existence of reality *per se*. The world does not need us humans. It is the other way around: Earth is the only home we have for the time being; it is *terra matrix* that sustains different forms of life on this tiny speck adrift in the middle of the universe. Milosz captures Berkeley's thinking with the brevity of a perfect single stanza:

Some people think our eyes deceive us; they say
That there is nothing but a pretty seeming:
And just these are the ones who don't have hope.
They think that when a person turns away
The whole world vanishes behind his back
As if a clever thief had snatched it up²⁶.

The poem entitled *Love* resembles *Hope* in many respects. If *Hope* is a celebration of the Earth as the living flesh, *Love* is a homage to universal solidarity and biocentrism: it is not man or woman that stands at the centre of the universe, but life instead. The language is kept simple once again, as if a pedagogical impulse informed the poem from within. Love is an extremely complex concept and so a sort of

fulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton 1984, p. 1552. The original translation is by W.D. Ross and was published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1924.

²⁵ C. Milosz, *The Separate Notebooks*, New York 1986, p. 145.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

intellectual alertness is discernible in between the lines. In 1956 Erich Fromm wrote the classic *The Art of Loving*, a ground-breaking book in which he sought to illuminate different kinds of love: motherly and brotherly love, spiritual and physical love, the disinterested love inherent in true friendship, passionate and sexual love, the love of God or religious love. Love remains a gigantic mystery and the central experience to human life. There is only life and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, and towering high in between them is the experience of supreme love – a potent cultural construct and an irresistible impulse at once. But Milosz’s definition of love verges on humility and acknowledges that the human species is a tiny speck in the vast mesh of things that make up life. Man is not the measure of all things in the end or the ultimate centre of life. Life is but a continuum that embraces both human and nonhuman beings, and *homo sapiens sapiens* does not rule or sit at the top, commanding the rest of creation before his eyes. Milosz does not believe in the omnipotence of man, so love means precisely that humans are “only one of many things” and that they look amorously at everything surrounding them as unexpected boons, with gratitude in their hearts. Saint Francis of Assisi called the sun and the moon, the birds and the trees, brothers and sisters in a gesture that acknowledged a profound sense of kinship uniting everything in the universe, from the dumb stone through the majestic tree to the passing cloud. In Milosz’s words:

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at unfamiliar things
Because you are only one of many things.
And someone who can look that way at himself
Will heal his heart of many troubles,
Perhaps without knowing that he has done it.
Then Bird and Tree say to him, “Friend”²⁷.

In a world that is conceptualised as being a continuum of creatures united by a deep sense of mutual sympathy, humans are meant to serve life. By serving life, they are serving themselves. This is a life with a higher purpose and calling: not the egoistical satisfaction of one’s needs and interests, but something nobler that conforms to the grander scheme of things. The master blueprint might be invisible to our eyes, but it is there nonetheless, receding further and further from our view. After all, we are born not just to change the world, but to let the world change us as well. Once the territorial imperative is abandoned, once the compulsion to own and take dominion over the world is forgotten, what is left is the deep conviction that one is to contribute to a sort of universal spiritual harmony, and that one’s vocation is to make the others shine in splendid self-fulfilment and plenitude:

And then he’ll want to use himself and things
In such a way that each one glows, fulfilled.
And if sometimes he finds he doesn’t understand,
It doesn’t matter. His task is just to serve²⁸.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 147.

Faith is such a perfect jewel-like poem that it is worth quoting in full. All three poems, *Hope*, *Love* and *Faith*, are the most powerful statement on the world we find in Milosz's sequence. They betray the poet's concern to explore the world just as it is and to convey its subtle nuances in simple, transparent language devoid of superfluous ornamentation. Here is the two-stanza composition in the impeccable translation into English:

The word *Faith* means when someone sees
 A dewdrop or a floating leaf, and knows
 That they are, because they have to be.
 And even if you dreamed, or closed your eyes
 And wished, the world would still be what it was,
 And the leaf would still be carried down the river.

It means that when someone's foot is hurt
 By a sharp rock, he also knows that rocks
 Are here so that they can hurt our feet.
 Look, see the long shadow cast by the tree;
 And flowers and people throw shadows on the earth:
 What has no shadow has no strength to live²⁹.

Faith dwells on the existential inevitability with which every little thing in the world is imbued. Everything falls naturally into place, so there is no need to disturb or defile the peace and beauty of the world. Dewdrops and tree leaves simply exist. There is no desire in them, no compulsion to be or pretend to be what they are not. They simply *are*. It is no wonder that *be* should remain the greatest metaphysical and ontological verb par excellence. Having faith implies believing in the order and equilibrium the world treasures within itself and exhibits overtly anywhere we may turn to look, even if we do not notice it most of the time. We have got eyes, but we do not see or understand really. No matter how hard one may try to change the world, the world will always be what it is: a vast, impenetrable time-space vortex where everything is in permanent Heraclitean flux. In actual fact, Milosz does not believe in the self-sufficiency of a world known only through empirical experience. The poet says: "I personally believe that the world as we know it is the skin of a deeper reality, and that reality is there. It cannot be reduced to mere words. [...] There is a difference between a man who focuses on language, on his inner life, and the hunter – like me – who grieves because reality cannot be captured"³⁰. Poetry is "the passionate pursuit of the Real" then, but the real, by which Milosz means God, "continues to remain unfathomable"³¹. The leaf is carried down the river, out of a natural necessity. The logic to the world remains unaffected; its will is crystal-clear and indomitable. Even stones have a logic to themselves. When they hurt our feet, that was bound to happen as well and there is no point in blaming them. Stones are stones and there is nothing they can do to avoid their stoneness. At any rate, what every human and nonhuman being appears to have in common with each other is the fact that they cast shadows on the earth. The sun up

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 143-145.

³⁰ R. Faggen, op. cit.

³¹ Ibidem.

there gives life and nutrients to everything else down here. What lacks motion or shadow cannot be said to be living or alive. It is simply dead or non-existent. (In the poem entitled *The Sun*, the sun is precisely described as being “the emblem of the artist of the whole”). In his enlightening interview with Robert Faggen, Milosz explains:

There is some Thomas Aquinas behind those lines [“And flowers and people throw shadows on the earth: / What has no shadow has no strength to live.”]. He asserts belief in the objective existence of things. It’s a sort of naive poem – a belief in the reality of a flower, of a river and a garden. My poems of that era contain a double search: one, a search for the grace of innocence – the “naive” poems – the other, the cycle “Voices of Poor People”, a search for a means of how to deal directly with the Nazi occupation. There is also the influence of the Chinese poetry that I was reading then for color, pure color³².

4. Milosz Reads T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*: Time vs. Eternity

Czeslaw Milosz read and translated T.S. Eliot’s poetry into Polish. In his interview with Robert Faggen, being asked whether he agreed with Eliot’s intimation that poetry is an escape from personality, he admitted that “Literature is born out of a desire to be truthful – not to hide anything and not to present oneself as somebody else”. He conceives of the act of composing poems as a way to satisfy his “need for rhythm and order” and his “struggle against chaos and nothingness to translate as many aspects of reality as possible into a form.” In addition, he elaborates on his encounter with Eliot’s work:

The Waste Land is filled with elements of catastrophe. At that time, in occupied Warsaw, it had a certain power, filled with images of collapsing cities. [...] It is a deeply satiric poem, however, even a sarcastic poem. That is alien to my vision. But in the *Four Quartets* we have the exceptional and rare case of someone who, after much struggle, has succeeded in reconciling his return to faith with his art. I met Eliot in London, and he gave me a warm reception. Later I saw him in America and translated some more of his poems into Polish³³.

Milosz read Eliot’s poetry for the first time during World War II. Upset with the mistiness and derivativeness of French symbolism and Russian melodic poetry, he turned his attention to English literature. So as to be able to read invaluable, precious texts in the original language, he decided to learn English. Translation was a good practice for him to master the language; it was a good exercise for his mind too. As a result of that sort of intellectual gymnastics, he translated *The Waste Land* into Polish. It was the first complete Polish translation of this seminal High Modernist poem and the one which had a decisive impact on Eliot’s reception in Poland. But he also translated two more poems by Eliot: *The Hollow Men* (1925) and *Burnt Norton* (1936), the first of *Four Quartets*, which is Eliot’s undisputable masterwork. It re-

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

mains unclear whether he read the remaining three *Quartets* – *East Coker* (1940), *The Dry Salvages* (1941) and *Little Gidding* (1942). Perhaps he read Eliot's masterpiece in full some time after it was completed in 1942. What appears to be out of the question is that he gained a thorough knowledge of *Burnt Norton* in the process of rendering it into his mother tongue. What remains even more enlightening is that he turned to Eliot once again much later in his life, as he composed his own *Treatise on Poetry*, a poem written in the late 1950s. Seeking to shed light on his own thought about poetry and the real, in the commentaries in his *Treatise on Poetry* (1957) he resorts to *Four Quartets* as the embodiment of the kind of poetry he seeks to revolt against. At three different points he comments on Eliot's masterpiece, largely on *Burnt Norton*.

- (1) First, he writes: "There are two dimensions. Here is the unattainable / Truth of being, here, at the edge of lasting / and not lasting. Where the parallel lines intersect, / Time lifted above time by time"³⁴. He adds this comment: "'Time lifted above time by time': this line refers to T.S. Eliot's poem *Burnt Norton* in his *Four Quartets*. This reference may be polemical because, as it seems, the narrator doesn't strive, unlike Eliot, for reaching the still point beyond the fluency of time. His intention is rather to humanize Time". Milosz's contention appears to be that Eliot's concept of time is inhuman and that it should be tamed somehow.
- (2) At a later point, he writes: "There is much with which to reproach us. / Given the choice, we rejected peaceful silence / And long meditation on the structure of the world / Which deserves respect. Neither the eternal moment / Attracted us as it should, nor purity of style. / We wanted, instead, to move as words move / Raising the dust of names and of events. / We didn't care enough that they disappear / In a thousand sparks and we with them"³⁵. Milosz's commentary reads thus: "The eternal moment is opposite to time. It's beyond any change – even if it's a matter of seconds. T.S. Eliot writes about 'the still point of the turning world' in his *Four Quartets*. Such thought can be found in some mystical writings in many civilizations". Milosz refers here to the unfathomable concept of eternity.
- (3) Finally, Milosz writes: "For contemplation fades without resistance. / For its own sake, it should be forbidden"³⁶. And Milosz's note reads as follows: "This line is written against the pureness of poetry, but this is also a discussion with T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Disowning a world in favor of the still point – this perfect silence beyond time – we may deprive contemplation of intensity. Sugar is tasty, but we shouldn't eat it in tons". Here Milosz appears to dismiss *Four Quartets* as a contemplative or even escapist poem. Because it explores time and the timeless, Eliot's work appears to be a poem not strictly concerned with the pursuit of the real.

Apart from these scattered commentaries on Eliot in his *Treatise on Poetry*, Milosz wrote an essay entitled *Reflections on T.S. Eliot*, included in his collection of essays *To Begin where I Am: Selected Essays* (2001), in which he claims: "Eliot's tight and raw poetry stems from his philosophical contradictions, but the poetics he chose made him an "obscure" poet. There are some passages in *Four Quartets* one cannot untangle

³⁴ C. Milosz, *A Treatise on Poetry*, New York 2001, p. 143.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

without any help of Eliot's interpreters (doubtable, by the way)³⁷. The main critique Milosz appears to raise against Eliot in his *Treatise on Poetry* concerns his conceptualization of time. *Four Quartets* is mainly a poem about time and eternity punctuating a person's lifetime and the history of humanity at large. Let us therefore turn to the way time is explored in *Four Quartets*, particularly in *Burnt Norton*.

Four Quartets is a poem about time as the greatest mystery of all. Human life happens in space and in time, those elemental Kantian axes that are simply inescapable. It comes then as no surprise that time should be one (if not the most important) of the main threads running through the four poems. In her thorough analysis of Eliot's masterpiece, Helen Gardner speaks of "Eliot's austere and rigorously philosophic poem on time and time's losses and gains"³⁸ and, in actual fact, *Burnt Norton* opens with a dozen lines of speculation concerning time present and time past:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present³⁹.

These opening lines, in their austere exactness, set the meditative deliberation that is found at later points, for *Four Quartets* is a sustained meditation on human life lived in time. The exploration of man in time begun in *Burnt Norton* is brought to a complete, beautiful conclusion in *Little Gidding*⁴⁰. In between the first and last *Quartets*, the nature of time is explored with lucid subtlety. There is personal time, where memory appears to revive time past despite the irrevocability of the past, but there is also historic time and there is solar time, which transcend the time span of human life. In other words, there is in *Four Quartets* the limited time of a single and irreplaceable life, measured against the vast expanses of Time presiding over the succession of different civilizations on Earth. In all instances, Eliot is amazingly articulate in his attempt at defining what time is.

Time is and is not the same. Time is approached slightly differently in each of the *Quartets* by Eliot, the man sensitive to the nuances of such fugitive, eel-slippery matter. In *Burnt Norton*, personal time prevails: we see Eliot reviving memories in his mind, but memories are only possible in time, so time the destroyer is also time the preserver, and "only in time time is conquered". Thus, as Hugh Kenner suggests, memory occurs in time and it is our weapon against Time⁴¹. The catalyst for this journey back in time, towards an actual experience lived in 1934, is a remote garden in

³⁷ C. Milosz, *To Begin where I Am: Selected Essays*, New York 2001.

³⁸ H. Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, London 1978, p. 41.

³⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London 1944, p. 13.

⁴⁰ H. Gardner, op. cit., p. 71.

⁴¹ Kenner H., *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, London 1985, p. 255.

Burnt Norton. According to Helen Gardner, Eliot mentioned three sources for *Burnt Norton* in an interview with John Lehmann: “‘Bits left over from *Murder in the Cathedral*’, the beginning of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the garden [which Eliot visited only once in the summer of 1934]”⁴². As Gardner observes, “The garden, in its stillness and beauty and strange remoteness from the world, stirred in Eliot profound memories and brought together disparate experiences and literary echoes”⁴³. In the garden some apprehension of the still point gathering past and future occurs. Time is annihilated or cancelled for the fraction of a second as it were, and Eliot is set free from the tyrannical bonds of the ticking clock. The garden is closely associated with “our first world”, which is the world of childhood and innocence, but also maybe the Garden of Eden⁴⁴. However, in a letter to John Hayward, dated 5 August 1941, Eliot mentioned three other sources of a literary character for *Burnt Norton*: “his own poem ‘New Hampshire’; Kipling’s story ‘They’, which he only recognized as having contributed to his poem when, five years later, he was re-reading Kipling for his anthology *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse*; and a quotation from E.B. Browning”⁴⁵. Eliot’s meditation on time is thus compounded of all these experiential and literary ingredients. The fruit of this personal archaeology is a poem on being and time tremendously rich in philosophical echoes. Consider these lines from Part II of *Burnt Norton*, which somehow reassert the possibility of experiencing timeless moments – moments out of time, in a zone of no-time:

Burnt Norton, Part II

Time past and time future
 Allow but a little consciousness.
 To be conscious is not to be in time
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time time is conquered⁴⁶.

Czeslaw Milosz’s *The World: A Naïve Poem* (1944) is a poem concerned with the stubborn pursuit of the real. *Hope*, *Love* and *Faith* are three memorable poems and masterpieces in miniature in a sequence of 20 poems that seek to construct a haven for humanity in the middle of the unimaginable havoc and inhumanity brought about by World War II. Written at a time when the Lithuanian-born poet was struggling with Eliot’s words in his attempt at rendering *Burnt Norton* (1936) into Polish, these Blakean poems remain a twentieth-century equivalent of Virgil’s *Eclogues* in their impulse to build Arcadia or Paradise on Earth at a time of extreme historical upheaval. Earth is the ultimate living flesh, the inevitable inspiration for the poet’s thinking and singing. T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton* is a poem concerned with time and eternity, with the succes-

⁴² H. Gardner, op. cit., p. 39.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ H. Kenner, op. cit., p. 249

⁴⁵ H. Gardner, op. cit., p. 49.

⁴⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*..., p. 15.

sion of civilizations on Earth, and with the invisible core of life beneath the skin or surface of things. Though dwelling on the intellectually demanding heights of abstract thinking – the ones of the realms of metaphysics and ontology – Eliot’s poem is a powerful statement on being, on the mystery of time, on the impenetrability of human life, which has the un-premeditated elegance of a circle. Both poetical works are a gift to humankind and so we should be grateful that they simply exist.

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Summary

THE MUSIC OF WHAT IS: T.S. ELIOT AND CZESLAW MILOSZ, OR A QUIET MEDITATION ON TIME AND BEING

This paper looks at the unfailing vocation and the voracious passion to grasp the world that bring together Czeslaw Milosz and T.S. Eliot, two of the greatest poets of the 20th century. Eliot wrote *Four Quartets*, his undisputable masterpiece, at a time of historical upheaval during the Second World War. Milosz wrote his sequence of poems entitled “The World: A Naïve Poem” during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw in 1944. Thus, war was the unexpected witness to the birth of two poetical works of lasting value. Both sequence of poems are a moving and deep meditation on being, but also a pristine look at the world with its welcome mysteries and perfections. Milosz translated the crucial text of High Modernism, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, into Polish in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, and later he got to read and translate *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets*. Both Eliot and Milosz are poets that share the same intellectual lucidity when it comes to unveiling the intricate subtleties of the human condition, with all its contradictions, lights and shadows. This paper explores the essential aesthetic affinities shared by both giants of the Western canon.

Key words: *being, Czeslaw Milosz, epistemology, music, poetry, time, T.S. Eliot*