

# explorations



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## REVIEW

**Małgorzata Grzegorzewska. 2021. *Eliot's Christianity in a Contemporary Perspective. From Hindsight to Insight*. Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press.**

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Małgorzata Grzegorzewska's *Eliot's Christianity in a Contemporary Perspective. From Hindsight to Insight* takes up some weighty questions about the spiritual dimension of literature and culture in the contemporary Western world. At stake are the meaning and legitimacy of the literature which embodies, or at least tries to embody, the spirit of Christian faith and theology in the civilization which is sometimes characterised as post-Christian. As the Polish critic reminds us, this problem was acknowledged by T. S. Eliot who in his later poetry and essays tried to reconcile the modern (or call it modernist) sensibility with the idea of the Christian society. The thesis itself is not original. It is the quality of penetrating interpretations and incisive arguments which makes the book exceptional – *Eliot's Christianity in a Contemporary Perspective* offers a new perspective on the poet we seem to know so well.

The words printed on the back cover provide a clue: "This book looks into the conversation between literature and religion in the works of T. S. Eliot." To this general and somewhat abstract description we can add a few statements from Grzegorzewska's important introduction entitled "Time Past and Time Present." Having referred to the two World Wars, the "event" of Shoah and the memory of Auschwitz, Grzegorzewska notes that her book "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" (12). A bit later she returns to this idea: "I wish to argue that it is not only 'timeless truths' which make [Eliot's] works matter regardless of the passage of time, but the fact that their resources ... are transformed and replenished through history" (15). Thus, time present is fully understood only when we look at it through the prism of time past. Eliot would certainly agree with it.

It is difficult to do justice here to the wealth of interpretative ideas and proposals contained in the five chapters of the volume. Grzegorzewska's critical argument follows many paths, sometimes parallel, sometimes crossing at the least expected points. The Polish critic moves skillfully, often in the course of just a few paragraphs, from detailed analyses of poems to philosophical, theological and historical contexts, enriching the interpretation with unanticipated echoes, etymological traces and intertextual references. At the same time, Grzegorzewska centers her readings on the Christian vision of the

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poetic word as the Word-made-flesh – the vision that "has nourished our imagination and provided us with the ideas harnessing reverberations of times past with possibilities for time present and time future" (15-16).

*Eliot's Christianity in a Contemporary Perspective* abounds in unexpected interpretative propositions which constantly make us go back to the poems themselves. Quite surprising are Grzegorzewska's readings of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as a dark meditation centered on the motif of John the Baptist (Chapter One) or a poem reactivating the figure of the Russian Holy Fool, the *yurodivy* of the Eastern Orthodox tradition (Chapter Two). Read with an eye on such apparently distant contexts – and Grzegorzewska adds more and more frames of reference as she examines Eliot's celebrated poem – Prufrock slowly takes on depth and complexity. We see him as both a prophet and a fool, a tragic and a comic hero.

A similar effect is noticeable in the next chapters (and in a short and unexpected "Intermission" squeezed between the third and the fourth chapters, a moving reading of "A Song for Simeon"). In Chapter Three Grzegorzewska contrasts Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and Auden's *For the Time Being* with the poems by two Polish poets: Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński's "Ballad of Three Kings" (written in Warsaw in 1944, after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and before the Warsaw Uprising) and Zbigniew Herbert's "A Halt." Particularly evocative is the juxtaposition of Eliot's and Herbert's poetic texts. The Polish critic concludes: "Without the Christian outlook of the 'Journey of the Magi,' the darkness of 'A Halt' grows much darker; without the knowledge of 'A Halt,' the eschatological promise in 'Journey of the Magi' derides the memory of the multitudes who perished in gas chambers, street executions, or were abandoned behind walls crowned with barbed wire" (110).

In the fourth chapter Grzegorzewska draws our attention to the fragment of *East Coker* where Eliot introduces the figure of the wounded surgeon, and then couples it with an analysis of George Herbert's "The Thanksgiving" (there are also short but important references to Marvell and Shelley). Chapter Five includes more critical investigations of *The Four Quartets*. It is perhaps the least convincing part of the book although it contains many powerful insights and interpretative propositions. The argument meanders around the Christian notions and imagery of love and light, and is more dispersed than conclusive, drawing ideas from Jean-Luc Marion (an important point of reference in the whole book) and Geoffrey Hill's "The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy." The chapter and the book end with a reference to Eliot's silence after *The Four Quartets*, which is a rather startling postscript to the idea of the Word-made-flesh. Grzegorzewska writes about Eliot's "life-long preoccupation with the vulnerability of human speech and his concomitant fascination with the apophatic tradition, one which stresses the insufficiency and inadequacy of human language to speak about divine mysteries, or indeed about anything outside the realm of language" (167-168).

All in all, *Eliot's Christianity in a Contemporary Perspective* is a competent and highly original book. One should emphasize the novelty of its interpretations and conclusions. Grzegorzewska is one of those critics who are able to combine rigorous, brilliantly nuanced readings of literary texts with a broader reflection on the meaning and role of literature in the contemporary world, the philosophical and cultural premises of modernity, and the question of religious awareness and spiritual passion. Her readings are careful and comprehensive, and the book is both reader-friendly and challenging in its vision of the poet of the Incarnated Word.

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