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That Amazing Art of Words: the World, Time and Eternity in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot and Elizabeth Jennings

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), the 1948 Nobel Prize winner for literature, is – needless to say – one of the best known and most significant figures on the modern literary scene: not only a major poet of the worldwide renown, dramatist, critic of literature and culture, but also a co-founder of the modernist experiment in poetry. Elizabeth Jennings (1926–2001) has also been recognized as a distinctive and remarkable poetic voice of the 20th century. Perhaps less known to the elite of the literary world, Jennings naturally belonged to the literary and intellectual milieu of Oxford where she received a high acclaim from her contemporary fellow poets forming the so-called “Movement” that included such names as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, John Wain, Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, John Holloway or D.J. Enright. In his *Memoirs* Kingsley Amis, recalls Elizabeth Jennings from the perspective of The Movement and proclaims her “the star of the show, our discovery” (Leader 2009: 293). The recognition of Jennings’ great poetic talent was confirmed by the prestigious Somerset Maugham Award which Jennings won for her book of verse *A Way of Looking* in 1956 which put her on a steady path of a consistent development of her career as a poet.

At first glance Elizabeth Jennings and T.S. Eliot seem to be miles apart; and their poetic careers only slightly overlap.¹ Eliot is generally known as a committed advocate of impersonal theory of poetry and constant exponent of

¹ Jennings’ first volume of poems was published in 1953, Eliot died in 1965, and the *Four Quartets* appeared in 1945, while his two last plays *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* were published in 1954 and 1959, respectively.

depersonalizing of individual experience through the universality of poetic expression. In one of his seminal essays Eliot firmly asserts: "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Hayward 1953: 26).

By contrast, Jennings, who has earned the reputation of one of the most significant twentieth-century English lyrical poets, draws heavily on her personal life, in which emotions actually experienced clearly give an impulse to a poetic expression. The majority of Jennings' poems refer to emotions in the poet which are not masked or shunned, like in the poetry of Eliot, but exposed and deliberately dwelled upon in a profound poetic reflection. The grammatical subject 'I' is a conspicuous feature of Jennings' poetry. Sometimes her 'I' becomes the plural 'we'; sometimes it changes into apparently impersonal 'one' which, nevertheless, all the time retains clear personal overtones, for even when Jennings says 'one' the implied grammatical subject is unmistakably 'I'.

Thus Jennings' feminine poetry of a highly personal voice and distinctly lyrical tone seems to clash with the masculine poetry of T.S. Eliot, the poetry of personal detachment and dramatic leanings which preclude the supremacy of emotions. The differences are obvious and they can be easily discerned in their poems. Where are the similarities then? For the similarities, or in other words the common ground, in Eliot's and Jennings' poetry constitutes the basis for the following discussion which proposes to look upon the world, time and eternity through the prism of their poetic perception.

However, before concentrating on what they have in common it may be worthwhile to start with the period quite remote from either T.S. Eliot's or Elizabeth Jennings' poetic careers. I would like to begin, rather surprisingly, with the beginnings of English literature in the Anglo-Saxon period, and in particular with Old English charms. I am going to refer to one of them, which is the charm against wens.

Wen, wen, little wen,
 Here thou shalt not build, nor have any abode.
 But thou must pass forth to the hill hard by,
 Where thou has a brother in misery.
 He shall lay a leaf at thy head.
 Under the foot of the wolf, under the wing of the eagle, ever mayest thou fade.
 Shrivell as coal on the hearth,
 Shrink as muck in the wall,
 And waste away like water in a bucket.
 Become as small as a grain of linseed,
 And far smaller also than a hand-worm's hip-bone,
 And become even so small that thou become naught. (94-95)

This is the incantation to get rid of a small lump, or tumour, growing on the scalp, and to do this the charmer does not employ any kind of surgery, but makes use of words as an effective scalpel. Charms are usually viewed by Old

English scholars as manifestations of folk-lore and as an interesting mixture of Christian and pagan elements. For this talk, however, the charms like that "Against Wens" are important for a different reason. They are precious evidence demonstrating the primeval intuition in the mankind that words are powerful instruments to make things happen, and to reach out towards realities that are in general out of reach, or at least not easily accessible to ordinary human perception through physical and sensual faculties. Words of Old English charms, arranged in meaningful patterns of rhythm and music, become embryonic poems which are believed to possess unique power to plunge into domains that transcend the graspable world and achieve impossible goals.

And this point brings us back to T.S. Eliot and Elizabeth Jennings. One could find many common denominators which connect their respective poetic outputs. I would like to focus upon one of them, which seems to me most conspicuous and especially relevant: it is both poets' belief in the exceptional value of poetry and a special status which they accord to poetic words. It is worthwhile to quote here a small fragment from T.S. Eliot's acceptance speech made at the Nobel banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm on December 10, 1948: "I stand before you, not on my own merits, but as a symbol, [...], of the significance of poetry." This sentence sums up the way of looking upon poetry and its language that has been running through much of Eliot's critical writings. Eliot looks up to Dante and Shakespeare as the greatest masters of words who "[gave] body to the soul of the language" (Hayward 1953: 95). In his talk on Dante, given in the Italian Institute in London in July 1950, Eliot makes it clear that the poet should become "the servant of his language, rather than the master of it" (Hayward 1953: 94). Admiring the genius of Dante and Shakespeare, Eliot underscores an important function of poetry, which is to "pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it" (Hayward 1953: 95).

The same sense of the unsurpassed worth of words and the poet's responsibility for them can be found in Jennings' poetry as well as in her prose. Jennings' book *Let's Have Some Poetry!* (1960) is brimming with her enthusiasm for poetry and her fascination with the capacity of poetic words. She takes delight in words in her poetic sequence entitled "Parts of Speech", (*Times and Seasons*, 1992) and containing four poems: "Verb", "Adjective", "Noun", "Adverb" which are poetic interpretations of well-known linguistic facts as well as reflections on the unique potential of words. For example, the verb quintessentially embodies the "first cry of awareness" (624), so the poet remarks: "'I go', 'I forget', 'I exist' / By language only and always" (625).²

However, Eliot's and Jennings' reverence for words has a singular aspect because it does not merely entail regarding words as pleasurable or intriguing signs suspended in an arbitrary space of shifting significations, or else as power-

² All page numbers for Jennings' poems refer to Emma Mason's edition of *Elizabeth Jennings. The Collected Poems* (2012).

ful tools with an immense potential to generate meanings. Both poets' high esteem for words arises from their metaphysical intuition which makes them see the words of the poet as growing out of and intrinsically bound with the transcendent Word of divine Logos representing the core of reality and the organising principle of all Being. Thus words in Eliot's and Jennings' poetic handling become much more than solely linguistic entities. They assume a special ontological position as pointers to the metaphysical realm and evocative reminders of spiritual reality. Jennings gives it a compelling poetic expression in the poem "Questions to Other Artists" (*Consequently I Rejoice*, 1977), which is a meditation on the nature of art that bridges two distinct but complementary planes of reality: the physical and the metaphysical. The poem addresses the problem of artistic creativity affected by alternating periods of dryness and fertility. Viewing poetic words from the sacramental perspective of the Eucharist, Jennings speaks of a sense of gratitude which the poet feels "when words are offered / Like a Host upon the tongue" (397).

Sir Michael Edwards, in his essay "Poetry Human and Divine", speaks of the metaphysical character of the poetic art by which words acquire a religious status as *mysteria verborum*, and stresses the link between Logos as the *worded* principle which brings the cosmos into existence on the one hand, and the making of poems on the other hand. The Genesis creation story with its emphasis on language as a creative medium authenticates this bond because

God speaks the world into being. He does not make, build, paint, sing, or dance it: he says it. He later gives to Moses tablets of stone 'written with the finger of God'; the names of the faithful are 'written in the book of life.' Those of us who are writers, and in particular poets or dramatists, can feel pleased that speaking and writing are involved in the creation of the universe and the salvation of humanity (Edwards 2017).³

Both Eliot and Jennings share this pleasing consciousness of literary artists. They both have an acute sense of the language of poetry, with all its limitations and its rhetorical potential; and at the same time they see poetic words as intimately engaged in the mystical intercourse with the Word of metaphysical Logos. Accordingly, their poetry derives its power and appeal from the intimations of transcendence which shape the poets' renditions of the world, time and eternity.

Eliot voices this awareness of the profound relationship between human words relating to the world and the Word, which is their ontological base, in the first Chorus of *The Rock* when he articulates the rupture between the

³ The essay was presented as a plenary lecture at the international conference, "The Power of the Word. Poetry: Word Made Flesh; Flesh Made Word" in Gdańsk (September 2013). It has been published in *Poetic Revelations. Word Made Flesh Made Word* by Routledge. See also similar publications by Michael Edwards: *Towards a Christian Poetics* (1984) and *Poetry and Possibility. A Study in the Power and Mystery of Words* (1988).

human and the divine, referring to “Knowledge of speech, but not of silence; / Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word” (Eliot, 151) – the use in this line of small and capital letters for the ‘word’, underscoring its two dimensions, linguistic and metaphysical, is highly meaningful.

Jennings shares with Eliot the strong sense of the human words of the poet stemming from the intimations of the metaphysical reality which underlies visible and tangible objects of the world. Unsurprisingly, she devotes the longest chapter in her book *Every Changing Shape. Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (1961) to Eliot. Talking there about “the revelatory power of poetry” (ECS, 30), she firmly asserts: “The power of poetry is that by simply naming it can illuminate” (ECS, 22). In a great number of poems Jennings gives a poetic expression to her conviction of a strong bond between the words of the poem and the divine Word as the foundation of all creation which comprises poetry as well as the world whereto poetry bears testimony. I would like to mention two of them, both written towards the end of Jennings’ life. The earlier poem is significantly entitled “A Metaphysical Point About Poetry” (*Praises*, 1998); and there Jennings writes:

... I wish to say that God
Is present in all poetry that’s made
With form and purpose. ... (775)

The other, entitled “Whitsun”, appeared in the volume *Timely Issues*, published in 2001, the year of Jennings’ death. The poem was written at Easter time, before Whitsun, which Jennings calls “[a] Holy time indeed” (820). It also contains a subtle allusion to the period of dryness which has come to an end: “My verse / Has come back”. But this short lyric is in fact a hymn of joy and laudation of poetry which becomes for Jennings a vehicle to touch and communicate transcendence:

... Happiness
Is how I write and know God is near.
Tongues of fire bear poetry to its height,
While holy rhythms take my words to where
There never is a night. (820)

If in Eliot’s and Jennings’ view the words of poetry comprise a denotative surface combined with metaphysical depth, then the image of the world they present may be expected to have a similar twofold structure where the physical continually interacts with the metaphysical, and the material with the spiritual. That is why the world in Eliot’s and Jennings’ poetry is geared to transcendence, just as time in their perception is interlocked with eternity.

One gets the first glimpse of an extended picture of Eliot’s vision of the world in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, the poem which significantly marks the launch of Eliot’s poetic career in 1917. The world in “The Love Song...” is a disconsolate, depressing and stratified city, where the suburbs of

“half deserted streets”, “one-night cheap hotels” and “sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells” are put side by side with a posh house, where “the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”, and where the protagonist, encountering “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare”, feels unable to act when enveloped by “perfume from a dress” (Eliot, 3-7). The two opposite strata of the city are equally unwelcoming, and Prufrock feels ill at ease and entrapped in each of them. In the first cursory reading the poem seems to be about a self-conscious elderly man, with a ridiculous name Prufrock (a semantic merger of ‘prudence’ and ‘frock’), who is hopelessly striving to establish a relation with a woman belonging to his own upper class. There are, however, many hints in the wording of the poem which adumbrate a profounder sense of Prufrock’s inward struggle which transcends the immediately graspable frames of male-female relations. The protagonist confronts an “overwhelming question” that runs like a leitmotif through the poem. Although the question is not defined the reader finds suggestive hints at its meaning, e.g. the asking of the question is like “disturb[ing] the universe”, or “spit[ting] out all the butt-ends of my days and ways”, which point to a broader implication of the plight of Prufrock, who – though he mildly opposes his reduced life “measured out [...] with coffee spoons” – all the time remains in a state of existential inertia (see Eliot, 3-7).

In *The Waste Land* (1922) the world is depicted in similar terms as either a bleak and oppressive urban territory or a desert which lacks nourishment and in consequence forbids fruition. The examples could be multiplied, e.g.:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. ... (Part I, “The Burial of the Dead”, 53)

It is the world invaded with false idols (“Madame Sosostris [...] with a wicked pack of cards”, Part I, 54); infected with neurosis (“I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones. / What is that noise?”, Part II, 57); haunted with a sense of futility and emptiness (“I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands”, Part III, 64); littered with the rubbish of abused civilisation (“The river sweats / Oil and tar”, Part III, 63); and squandering its spiritual heritage (“voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells”, Part V, 68). Eliot’s “Waste Land” is the modern world in a diseased condition of frustration, exhaustion, thwarted love relations, rejected procreation, moral and emotional paralysis and inertia. It is compellingly represented by the image of the “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit / [Where] one can neither stand, nor lie nor sit” (Part V, 66).

But at the same time it is the world in great need of having its original harmony restored, and yearning to come back to the state of natural goodness and purposefulness which are part of its designing Logos. That is the reason why Eliot’s poetic personae carry on their existential quests. In consequence the horizon of Eliot’s landscape and cityscape in the poem does not remain utterly dismal and lifeless. Buddha and St. Augustine are implicitly evoked to

repair what is out of joint in the modern world, and the dramatic protagonist of the poem seeks salvation in the realm of the divine:

To Carthage then I came
 Burning burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest
 burning (Part III "The Fire Sermon", 64)

Some hope can be detected at the end of the poem when Thunder rumbles its message of universal humanistic values and the rainfall nourishes the desert. The thrice repeated word "Shantih", which is the Hindu equivalent of the Christian "The Peace which passeth understanding (Philippians 4:7)" closes the poem.

Jennings' poems on the whole offer a much more cheerful and brighter picture of the world. Similar to Eliot's, hers is a two-storey world, where the physical adumbrates transcendence and, in consequence, becomes a transitory stage on the way to the metaphysical. However, unlike with Eliot, Jennings' world is the world where the metaphysical dimension is not so much arduously and desperately sought, as already intensely felt. While Eliot follows J. Alferd Prufrock through "muttering retreats" in the evening which is "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table" (3), or ponders upon the "hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth" (Part V, 67) of *The Waste Land*, Jennings remains immersed in the sunlight, rejoicing in the unsurpassable beauty of the natural world, and listening attentively to the "Sermon of the Hills" (*Celebrations and Elegies*, 1982), as in the poem bearing this title. The hills speaking to the poet fill her with aesthetic delight at the phenomenal beauty of nature: "We lean against the sky and all the stars / Are silver flares struck from our many stones" (469); at the same time they intertwine her admiration with a sense of the divine.

We are a distance of sky, a channel of water
 Entering the silence of men.
 So we teach you calm and diffidence but also
 Love ...
 Love that surrenders day by day at a Mass (469)

In her poems Jennings is a keen and sensitive observer who contemplates the world of nature and is fascinated by its beauty. "The world's for delight" (337), the phrase from one of Jennings' poems ("Not for Use", *Growing Points*, 1975), can be taken as a leitmotif for much of her poetry. Many of Jennings' poems bespeak spontaneous enjoyment of the world which first and foremost is cherished for its very being. Deriving simple joy from the wonder of creation can be seen, for example, in a poem recording a trip to the wood, and entitled, accordingly, "The Wood" (*Relationships*, 1972).

Cobwebs and underground, early Spring flowers,
 Dexterous nests beginning to be built
 And somewhere, far off, smells of damp and smoke.
 Our purpose simply was our walking there,
 No quest, no hunt, simply the wood itself. (304)

In another poem, "A Sky in Childhood" (*Extending the Territory*, 1985), the night sky – presented from the vantage point of a small girl – becomes an object of a miraculous transformation, as a result of which it appears as an "untarnished marvel" (505) of the world:

And the moon had squandered her light or the stars had doubled
 Each other, so there was no Great Bear any more,
 No Milky Way,
 But only diamonds on receding velvet,
 Lights twinkling, showing me uncounted facets
 And a sense in me of awe and wonder ... (505).

Not only the small girl, but also the mature woman-poet is spellbound by the world, the state perfectly reflected in a poem with the much telling title, "Spell of the Elements" (*Moments of Grace*, 1979). The poet here uses words as a form of incantation, in a way similar to the earlier mentioned Old English charm "Against Wens"; her goal, however, is far from practical, for her chief aim is to participate in the cosmic swirl of the elements that unite in the mystery of life which – with a clear allusion to the Incarnation and Nativity – opens up for the mankind a new path towards eternity.

Fire and water, air and earth
 Contend, unite. A magic birth
 Is taking place somewhere not far
 Celebrated by a star.

Take the music of the wind,
 Take the fingers of a mind
 Making, breaking, letting go.
 Take the blanket of the snow
 And a necklace of the stars,
 [...]
 We are subject to a spell. (439)

No matter what form her nature poems assume they always become a canticle of praise for the wonder of the world, and gratitude for the favour the Creator bestowed upon humanity by bringing man and the world into existence. Jennings' poetic imagery, different from Eliot's, is dominated by light which not only defines and intensifies the colouring of her poetry, but also becomes a symbol of transcendence. Reflecting on the human presence in the "world we prune and wound" (514), Jennings admits in the poem "Worth" (*Extending the Territory*, 1985): "Only our wonder lights the world for us" (514);

and her admission is both an expression of aesthetic delight and a recognition of the ontological status of the world which emerges out of darkness as a marvel of a gift which passes between the divine and the human.

The world arouses in the poet a sense of grateful wonder which allows not only the admiration of the visible phenomena, but more importantly, it assists in the process of discovering and contemplating the noumenal. In the poem "Beginning" (*Tributes*, 1989), Jennings again looks back at herself when she was a little girl enthralled by the coming into being of a new day: "I was four or five / And I watched the sun open the garden and spread out the grass" (623). Later, from the vantage point of the adult viewer, she can find a poetic voice for the awareness of an unnamed transcendent presence shining through the stupendous show of the beginning of a new day which on the micro scale echoes the creation of the world.

And somewhere around are presences, always have been
Whose hands remove clouds, whose fingers prise open the sun.
Watch, learn the craft of beginning and seeing the world
Disclose itself. ... (623)

The world in Jennings' poetic vision "discloses" itself before a receptive and attentive viewer. It may be noted that the poem contains an appeal to a quasi-mystical abandonment of purely sensuous instruments of cognition and appreciation: "Forget that you are / Eyes, nose, ears but attend" (623). Thus the plea for attending to things without a customary reliance on either the senses or the intellect, but with the foremost assistance of the attitude of exultation at the beauty of the world, defines the epistemological course proposed in Jennings' poetry. Although that course is different from Eliot's poetic quests which pose "overwhelming questions" and evoke the voice and the words of sages and prophets, yet the final target of both poets' epistemological paths is the same, i.e. uncovering the spiritual which resides in the material world.

Jennings' wonder at the miracle of creation lies at the intersection of the aesthetic with the spiritual. That specific juncture recurs in a considerable bulk of Jennings' poetry. It is well illustrated in "Lost Time" (*Timely Issues*, 2001). As it is one of her last poems published, "Lost Time" also strikes a note of recapitulation of her poetic life. The poem registers Jennings' feelings in hospital when she recovers after having been drugged for surgery. The poet muses on the "lost time" evoked by the poem's title, while recalling simultaneously a keen awareness of a newly-found luminosity in her surroundings, which gives an inkling of metaphysical reality by making all things appear "aglow with grace" (808):

And yet what wonders hit me when I crossed
The threshold back to consciousness to find
All things aglow with grace. (808)

The same sense of enthrallment and holy wonder can be found in a short poem entitled "Almost" (*Familiar Spirits*, 1994), where the poet reflects on the display of beauty in the world of nature from the speculative vantage point hypothesizing that "It almost was not" (700), and she solemnly declares:

... Now
I celebrate the clothing of all these,
Their singing and their colour and this now
We stand in peacefully as night intrudes
In kind dark dusk. O celebrate with me. (700)

It is worth noting that here, like elsewhere in many other poems, Jennings invites the reader to "celebrate" together with her – thus underscoring the dialogic aspect of poetry, where the poet and the addressee of the poem are engaged in a communication which leads to a singular communion through words. For Jennings such communication in the domain of poetic words was of crucial importance.

We find the same invitation to a dialogic communion through words in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. It is epitomised in the opening line of the poem which initiates Eliot's poetry of existential and metaphysical quests: "Let us go then, you and I" (Eliot, 3). The polite invitation from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" assumes a harsher and more admonitory tone in *The Waste Land*: "You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!" (Eliot, 55).

In "Almost" Jennings celebrates not only "the clothing", "singing" and "colour" of the world, but also "this now", i.e. every fraction of time which is experienced as the continuous and fleeting present. Next to the natural world time occupies an important place in Jennings' poetic imagination. Unlike her world which can be touched, tasted and described with the help of words, time – though intensely felt – is much more abstract and elusive; any direct experience of time is only through the momentary present. In the poem "Child of Seven Questions" (*In the Meantime*, 1996) showing the child's reaction to the horrors of the war in Chechnya, the poet observes that: "Time touches us in a panic-stricken Now" (727). Most often, however, Jennings' poetic reflections on time appear in more positive contexts. In "Song of Time" (*Extending the Territory*, 1985) the poet declares:

In time we grow, through time we learn
The visitations of the sun
And ardour of the moon. (540)

And seeking a figurative representation for time, the poet voices an invitation to "dance with time and turn / It to a friend" (540).

Jennings' pulls time out of its bond with clocks, calendars and other forms of man-made measurements. In "Telling the Time" (*In the Meantime*, 1996) she states: "Telling the time has little to do with hours / Or seconds, minutes, day" (738), and further on she reasserts her conviction that time, even though it may

be intimately felt in the present, still remains beyond human grasp resisting any form of mastery: "You cannot hold time back" (739). "The Force of Time" (*Tributes*, 1989) is another poem which underscores the discrepancy between the illusion that man can control time and its true nature overriding all earthly measurements, mental concepts and categories.

The watch, the sundial and
 Putting back the clock
 Make us feel we can
 Tame time but we forget
 It is time's hand which mocks (610).

Jennings' poetry articulates the poet's acute awareness that although time provides the inevitable framing for the world and human life therein, it is only temporary. Hence it is bound to come to an end, and make room for even more indescribable timelessness. Jennings envisages the timeless eternity in terms of the nakedness of time that has discarded its clothing, and she claims:

...its three garments of
 Present, future, past
 Will one day be cast off
 And we live in a power
 Whose medium is trust
 And undemanding love. (611)

In Jennings' vision time can be understood and fully accepted only in its relation to eternity. "Time is our worry and our pain" (757) the poet confesses in the poem bearing a significant title "In and Out of Time" (*Praises*, 1998). It bespeaks Jennings' religious sensibility deeply ingrained in her perception of reality, and making her see that "lasting things" take place while "Clocks chime, bells ring. The present slips away" (757). Jennings' interest in the writings of Christian mystics gets reflected in her poetic musings on time and eternity. Intrigued and fascinated by time, she views each 'now' as having a potential to be made everlasting when it enters into the mysteries of God. In "The Hours" (*Timely Issues*, 2001) the poet observes the monastic practice of singing Hours and she discerns in it a sacramental ritual of going through segmented time towards its ultimate fulfilment in eternity which does not know any borders or divisions.

Monks sing the same words, ...
 [...]
 Prayer that pierces the sun and rounds the moon,
 Moves through the trees and over the roofs of houses.
 The Hours are eternal in their repetitions,
 [...]
 Hour after Hour, they will proceed forever,
 Telling our Birth and sanctifying death,
 Tolling and ringing, ... (812)

The bringing together of birth and death, the beginning and the end of existence, or in other words, time-based alpha and omega of all narratives of life, is also a distinctive feature of the renditions of time in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, where time, like in Jennings' poems, is inextricably linked with eternity. We find many unmistakable signs of this metaphysical merger already in *The Waste Land*. The movement of the sundial mercilessly marking the passage of time is evoked by the prophetic voice resounding in Part I, "The Burial of the Dead".

(Come under the shadow of this red rock),
And 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. (53-54)

Although "a handful of dust" is a reminder of death, other symbols in the poem adumbrate Christian resurrection and as such they are clear pointers to eternity.

Time is the "worry and [...] pain" (to quote Jennings from "In and Out of Time") of many Eliot's protagonists and dramatic personae. The hesitating Prufrock who neurotically repeats "There will be time, there will be time", Archbishop Thomas Becket torn between the allures of time and commitment to eternity, or the wistful women of Canterbury, trapped in the temporal, are particularly notable examples⁴. However, the poem which is especially remarkable for Eliot's contemplation of the mysterious interplay of time with eternity is *Four Quartets* (1935-1942), where the poet observes:

... But to apprehend
The point of the intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint - (Eliot, 199)

Already the first Quartet, "Burnt Norton", voices an acute awareness of time comprising the past, present and future (which, by the way, Jennings sees as "the garments" to be cast away in eternity):

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past. (Eliot, 177)

On the one hand time underlies human words, life and art; but on the other hand it irresistibly points to the timeless:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, ... (Eliot, 181)

⁴ See T.S. Eliot's verse drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*.

While the “silence” here may connote death, the “stillness” implies a perfect state of eternal harmony. They both hint at “another intensity” which Eliot compellingly evokes in the second Quartet, “East Coker”:

In my beginning is my end. ...
 [...]
 Here or there does not matter
 We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion
 [...]
 ... In my end is my beginning. (Eliot, 184, 191)

The merging of the end with the beginning is a recurrent motif in Eliot’s poetry. It is a poetic allusion to the realm of transcendence which gets defined in poetic terms in the third Quartet, “The Dry Salvages”, in the following words:

Here the impossible union
 Of spheres of existence is actual,
 Here the past and future
 Are conquered and reconciled, (Eliot, 199).

It is appropriate to conclude these reflections with a brief reference to two poems which epitomize T.S. Eliot’s and Elizabeth Jennings’ poetic itineraries and their main concerns as poets. Both poems are inspired by the biblical episode of the three Magi going to Bethlehem to pay homage to the new-born Messiah. Eliot’s poem is entitled “Journey of the Magi” and it is considered the first poem of the convert, for it was written soon after Eliot was received into the Anglo-Catholic Church in 1927. The poet’s persona is among the Magi going through the cold and hostile world. Most of the time the world is inhospitable, and people unreceptive and full of derision. Only when the goal is near does the landscape get more sunlight and a waft of spring. However, there is nothing spectacular about the arrival except that reaching the destination imperceptibly marks the “intersection of the timeless with time” (c.f. “The Dry Salvages”, 199), and gives the poet a certainty of transcendence which spans the gap between birth and death.

Jennings’ poem is entitled “Words for the Magi” (*Consequently I Rejoice*, 1977), and it arises from the belief of the “Cradle Catholic”, as Jennings identified herself in the title of one of her poems. Significantly, “Words for the Magi” and “Cradle Catholic” appeared in the same volume bearing a much telling title: *Consequently I Rejoice*. “Words for the Magi” is a subtly provocative poem for it upsets the expected paradigm of the well known situation described in the Bible. Jennings’ Magi do not bring to Jesus the precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but instead they make their offering of the worded correlatives of material gifts. However, in the course of gift-giving the words reveal their hidden layers of signification. Thus the Magi’s encounter with

God Incarnate becomes a mystical dialogue in which the human words that were given, return as the words enhanced with a new dimension deriving from the Word of divine Logos.

Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and Jennings' "Words for the Magi" may be regarded as parallel texts which present poetic renditions of the journey both poets were making across the words of their poetry.

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Résumé

Cet art magnifique des mots: le monde, le temps et l'éternité dans la poésie de T.S. Eliot et E. Jennings

T.S. Eliot et Elizabeth Jennings sont deux personnages très importants de la scène littéraire britannique du XX^e s. Les deux sont chrétiens profondément croyants: T.S. Eliot – converti dans l'Église Anglo-Catholique, et E. Jennings – catholique romaine depuis le « berceau ». La raison de mettre T.S. Eliot et E. Jennings ensemble est que dans leurs voix poétiques – respectivement masculine et féminine – les deux célèbrent le langage comme un moyen suprême de communiquer la réalité et de transmettre une qualité visionnaire de la poésie qui tend à la transcendance. Dans les mots poétiques, Eliot et Jennings voient le rayonnement de la Parole divine – Logos. Par conséquent, ils accordent à la poésie le statut élevé d'un art singulier des mots, qui est particulièrement disposé à rendre l'inexprimable et ce qui échappe à la connaissance intellectuelle abstraite ; à donner une forme verbale à une expérience du monde et du temps ainsi qu'à la crainte humaine de l'éternité. Pour Eliot et Jennings une telle poésie devient une piste épistémologique en quête de la vérité et du sens, et un forum unique pour un dialogue existentiel. Dans leurs œuvres poétiques, Eliot et Jennings développent leur propre poétique du langage où la couche dénotative se joint à une profondeur métaphysique. Cet assemblage se reflète dans leurs rendements poétiques du monde et du temps qui se croisent avec l'éternité.

Streszczenie

Ta wspaniała sztuka słowa: świat, czas i wieczność w poezji T.S. Eliota i E. Jennings

T.S. Eliot i Elizabeth Jennings należą do znaczących postaci brytyjskiej sceny literackiej XX wieku. Obydwoje są głęboko wierzącymi chrześcijanami: T.S. Eliot – konwertyta w katolickim Kościele Anglikańskim, zaś Elizabeth Jennings – „od kołyski” w kościele Rzymskokatolickim. Powodem zestawienia T.S. Eliota i Elizabeth Jennings jest fakt, że w swoich różnych głosach poetyckich – odpowiednio męskim i żeńskim – celebrują oni język jako najdoskonalszy środek komunikowania rzeczywistości i przekazywania wizjonerskiego charakteru poezji sięgającej ku transcendencji. Zarówno Eliot jak i Jennings widzą w słowach poetyckich przebłysk boskiego Słowa – Logosu. Tym samym przyznają oni poezji wzniosły status wyjątkowej sztuki słowa, która szczególnie nadaje się do wyrażania tego co niewyraźne i co wymyka się poznaniu intelektualnemu; do nadawania formy słownej doświadczeniu świata i czasu, a także ludzkiemu lękowi przed abstrakcyjnie pojmowaną wiecznością. Dla Eliota i Jennings poezja staje się ścieżką epistemologiczną w poszukiwaniu prawdy i znaczenia, oraz jedynym w swoim rodzaju forum dialogu egzystencjalnego. W poezji T.S. Eliot i Elizabeth Jennings rozwijają własną specyficzną poetykę języka, w której warstwa denotacyjna łączy się z metafizyczną głębią. Odzwierciedleniem tego połączenia jest ich sposób wyrażania świata i czasu, w które wpleciona jest wieczność.

