

## **A POETICS OF THE LOGOS IN T. S. ELIOT'S POETRY**

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*Abstract: There have been many ways of considering the intricate paths of such a poetics as high modernism displayed and it was maybe the only trend so difficult to classify under the pressure of analytical necessity of the literary criticism of the time, which has become traditional by now. Much research has been done along the decades that followed and it is not our task to revise the whole range of definitions that have been formulated and become common places of the critical thinking. They all have tried to unify the ever-changing shape of modernist artistic manifestations under some old or renewed philosophical lines of thinking. Or at least find some shared characteristics. And they did. It is the altogether traditional notion of the logos that we wish now to focus upon and see if it still has a place within the acknowledged break and fragmentariness of a trend which defines itself as a denial of old consecrated principles of order. I shall make short references to the historical and present meanings ascribed to the word logos and see the way it breaks and shares itself so that one could find it afterwards still in its place, in the modernist literary text, whole and creative.*

*Key-words: Logos, super-logic, complete/partial culture, one/ multiple, rule/exception*

For the ancient Greeks, *logos* was reason, the *logoi* were principles of things existing in the world, which in Plato's philosophy belonged to a realm of ideas beyond the material world. In between them there was a huge gap, or the enigmatic mouth of a cave opened for imitation. So, they were not part of its material substance, but they were accessible to the philosophical mind that could reach above in its capacity for understanding. Thus, the heaven of principles was highly separated from the earth of all things, which represented a mere mimesis of the high order of *universalia*, or accidents of a substance.

*Logos* also has the meaning of the word itself. As it is for the Greeks, word and reason contain each other, for it is by word that reason is expressed. This might be the line of horizon where a heaven of ideas meets the earthly things without separation or fading imitation, in the ancient Greek philosophy of a word. Is it a pre-figuration of or a coincidence with Christian theology? Or it is rather a *de facto* situation, an inherent state of things? The Greek language offered an already refined instrument for naming the as yet unnamed fact of life that broke into history: the *Logos* incarnate.

The theological counterpart of the word *logos* comes now into place. The Christian perspective opens the closed circle of nature with a break. And the break is performed by *the Logos* incarnate. Hence, the whole Christian thinking is a break in the *organicity* of all natural things, philosophy, history, perspectives of practical life. Now the word gains its new meaning: it does not lose the others, yet it contains them all and receives a new eschatological perspective. As it is, it went through a gradual accumulation and at the point of intersection with what is more than a linguistic phenomenon, and foreign to it, it speaks of revelation. From now on, principles and reasons are inherent in every existing reality, material, too, (yet not pantheistic), and these reasons are called *logoi*. They are inherent, yet their origin is transcendental. The existing order of things in the created Universe was given by the absolute, uncreated Triune God.

Now we wish to go further with some basic theological clarifications that dovetail nicely the literary ones. The history of this fundamental notion in philology comes through Greek philosophy and reaches Christian theology. *The Word was made flesh* (Jn. ch.1). The main understanding of this event of the Incarnation of the Logos, one Hypostasis or Person of the Holy Trinity, was formulated under the pressure of and for those who did not understand it, and so, definitions were reached, forcing the language (Greek), to express the unfathomable mystery, the paradox of a super-logic. The super-logical event consisted in the mysterious, super-rational (for the human mind), fact of a meeting of the divine essence and the human essence in the unity of one Person. The two natures made up *aunity without change, confusion, division, or separation* (the definition of Chalcedon, 4<sup>th</sup> century). One would say, a *meta-phora*, etymologically speaking, a figure, literary and iconographic at once, a paradox of the rhetorical kind, and a *symbolon*, with respect to the palpable reality of the historical Incarnation, an Image. The Incarnation of the Word – Logos – is also an Image, for He was seen.

Modernism also asserted itself as a break in the immediate literary tradition, yet with old traditional implications. Eliot wanted to initiate a substantial change in conception and writing, on the condition that the substance of this change should be meaningful. The “heap of broken images” in his poetry is not just the result of an explosion of a literary revolution which the confused reader should deal with or dispose of at his or her own will, although we are invited to be explorers. It is not a decomposition of some sort at work either with a relative or surprising outcome. What modernism has to do with the conception of the Logos and why we may choose to look at things in this way is the purpose of this paper.

What kind of poetics is this? Or what kind of poetics does the Logos create? We shall turn for a starting point to a major book written by the great Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica, *Modelul cultural european (The European Cultural Model)* and we shall make a little cultural digression for the purpose of the theory we are going to develop for the literary counterpart.

T. S. Eliot is a fully accomplished personality that accumulated all major literary cultures, traditions and languages, all that humanity had given best up to his moment. Yet he assimilated them in his own way, intellectually and mentally. However, his own way is not foreign to the European model of thought and creativity. Noica speaks of cultures and affirms that the culture of Europe is complete. He uses the word “complete,” not “major,” as we have been used to hearing it in the sense of post-colonial literature studies. And why is the European culture complete, unlike other cultures which he considers to be partial? Not because some are major and some are minor. This is perhaps a simple consequence. He explains it by the relationship between rule and exception and by a mathematical configuration of the One and the Multiple. Both relationships can be observed in each of the existing cultures, yet in different degrees and ways of manifestations which give the specificity of every culture.

In terms of specificity, with respect to the first kind of relationship, between rule and exception, Constantin Noica notices that the rule which does not allow exception is characteristic to the totemic spirit (or culture) and it also operates in the technical-scientific civilization today. It aims at perfect exactness without fissure.

There is another kind of relationship, that of the exception that confirms the rule, characteristic to grammar and to the notion of freedom from the rigor of the rule, which still sanctions its order.

A third one is that of exceptions that enlarge the rule, not only confirm it. It manifests in the history of scientific culture. New scientific theories do not contradict or deny old ones as in the past, but enlarge them. Unlike an old type of knowledge that proved false, old laws disproved by the new ones, there appeared a new type of knowledge “by successive integrations.” Under certain limits, the old knowledge has not been entirely wrong, but exceptions to old rules modified their limits, transfiguring the rule. The exception “educates” the rule to change its image as if it should learn how to become not something else, but what it was already in its fathomless essence. It happens in mathematics in the case of fractions as exceptions to numbers, as fractions of numbers. In religion and philosophy, this relationship between rule and exception is characteristic to the Buddhist religion, Chinese and Hindu, in the *Upanishads* and the cultures it created.<sup>1</sup> In conclusion, the exception can remodel the rule.

A fourth type of relationship is the exception that proclaims the rule by remaining an exception. Plato’s Ideas would be such exceptions that are not absorbed by the absolute rule. For instance, all the beautiful things in the world are not the Beauty itself. That is to say, Beauty exists above everything in the world, in no direct relation to the world, and so is the case with all abstractions and their accidents.

A fifth and last type of relationship is the exception that becomes the rule. There are exceptions that replace rules, be they good or bad.

Cultures and individuals contain all these types of relationships, yet they define themselves by the one they prefer and emphasize. In the European culture exceptions flow, according to Noica’s way of putting it. He thinks that it is the first and only culture that “does not make idols in the religion of a relationship.” It contains a model that replicates on and on in space and time infinitely. It is open to other cultures, unlike the others that are enclosed upon themselves and do not allow penetration or alteration, even though they meet each other. It seems to be so because they are characterized by the above mentioned types of relationship between rule and exception. So it is in the Muslim culture where rules are dominant, exceptions

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<sup>1</sup> Noica makes reference to the European philosophy called existentialism, that states that “existence precedes essence”. This would be odd both with respect to human kind and to God, strictly speaking. As God is eternal, divine essence has always been concomitant with its existence. Noica explains that this phrase means that in the case of man, the law of man is not ready-made, but renewed and redefined with each human being. Everything that we do in our freedom of making “makes” us as men. The Romanian philosopher finds a limit to existentialism: that of attributing this unceasing work of becoming only to man. He says that you can find it everywhere: in sciences, cultures and states of the world.

are not allowed or merely confirm the rule and remain outside it. The Buddhist culture, Chinese and Hindu, are based on rules enlarged by exception, yet both are contained in the limits of the natural cycle. They do not break out. That is why they are not complete and extend over only a part of the world; they do not belong to the “oekoumene” (in Gr., all the inhabited land), while the model of the European culture is spread all over the earth and is open to all. The Christian European and American culture changes its face throughout history but keeps its model, values and civilization just because it is open and capable of containing not only the existing reality in its full variation and difference, but the irrational itself. The irrational is rationally integrated. All other cultures and religions are limited to nature and leave the irrational outside or aside, while the European integrates it in full reality and existence. That is why the European culture and the European Christianity is not a kind of “euro-centricity;” it is not the “major” culture or the major religion, but the full and complete culture and religion, as it breaks into the transcendent and allows to be penetrated by the super-rational, which descends in order to be incarnate. Why does the transcendent come to be incarnate? It does so in order to restore the immanent world and raise it to its full meaning and perfection.

Therefore, the European model has a transfigured nature. It places itself beyond nature, which is fallen together with man, according to the Judeo-Christian religion, while for science, it is an object of study in the laboratory. The European culture is that of the un-natural, super-real in all fields: its unnatural point of departure, emerged out of a unique moment in history – that of “the Child born in a manger,” with its theology, philosophy, literature, science and technique. This is the reason why, Noica believes, it is the archetype of any of the other cultures, proving their partiality.

As an open culture, it does not contain the danger of death or disappearance and cannot have tendencies of stagnation. By its mode of existence the European model exists “in the restlessness of creativity” (Noica, *Modelul cultural European*). Its authenticity lies in that it contains the sources of its own renewal, it can never get old, “it is in the condition of the source, not of a still pond” (Noica, *Modelul cultural European*).

To sum up, according to Noica, a complete culture has certain definite features. We shall use his own words in describing it, for they can be as many emblematic definitions, like mathematical axioms that need the same wording: “Unlike cultural configurations, any complete culture initiates firstly, a super-nature, changing the relationship between man and nature in

favour of the first; secondly, a rational type of knowledge beyond the natural one, which is only descriptive, a knowledge capable of integrating the irrational; thirdly, a superior scientific and technical life organization capable of enlarging its own existence and knowledge throughout history; and fourthly, an open horizon like a limitation that does not limit, up to an emergence of creativity out of the historical time.” (Noica, *Modelul cultural European*)

The second type of relationships that gives the scheme of real or possible cultures is that between the One and the Multiple. Noica sees five possible relations: One and its repetition, One and its variation, One in the Multiple, One and the Multiple and the Multiple One. One and its repetition characterizes the primitive (totemic) cultures, as in the first case of relationship between rule and exception; One and its variation, corresponding to the exception that confirms the rule, characterizes the Muslim mentality, for instance; One in the Multiple is pantheistic and corresponds to the rule enlarged by exception in natural limitation, and to a culture of Buddhist type; One and the Multiple is polytheistic, where the One is lost in the preeminence of the multiple, like in the ancient Greek culture. The last relation, the Multiple One, is characteristic of the European culture which was born at the crucial moment of the Incarnation of the Logos, the Christian God, one Hypostasis of the eternal Holy Trinity. The Christian God is One in three Hypostases or Persons. This is the structure of the European model, “a synthetic unity”, as Noica names it, in extension. Eliot would call it “a unifying principle” for his poetry. “The multiple one” gives, by its nature, “multiple unities”. The isotopic structure of anything existing in the world is reminiscent of the Triune God of theology. Almost any substance is isotopic. This synthetic structure represents a unity that multiplies and diversifies infinitely. The European culture operates with structures of the type of multiple unities in extension and this is how Noica explains its style of open rational investigation and creativity. Our culture is that of the embodiment of the law in this instance; therefore, with all the manifestations engendered by the Incarnation, it always proclaims something three-fold or Trinitarian. Three are actually one. The difference between the European culture and other cultures, as the ancient Greek or the Buddhist ones, has to do with the meaning attributed to the infinite, he says. For ancient cultures the finite (as that of the perceived nature), is rational, and the infinite is irrational. For the European it is the other way round. The infinite is rational because it has a basic law, or, as Pavel Florensky says, “Rationality is possible if the actual infinite is given.” Therefore, everything good in our world has an infinite meaning, while everything bad is finite and doomed to perish or to fall

under the numeric infinitude of “something and something more”..., a sadly redundant limitation. While everything good enters, as in no other culture, “the limitation that does not limit, (is) like in the history of the child born in a manger” (Constantin Noica, *Modelul cultural european*). All these characteristics can be traced in Eliot’s thinking and poetry.

One of them is Eliot’s *Unifying Principle* as the multiple unity of the Logos. More than the poems he wrote before, “The Waste Land” achieves its full characteristics: unconventional, fragmentary syntactically and logically, yet achieving a *multiple unity*, according to the European structure we have discussed above and according to Eliot’s “unifying principle”. It is this “multiple unity” that stands at the core of modernist writing, an exception replacing the rule that gives account to the effect. Here one can find the *Logos* in operation. The Logos is the only multiple unity among all cultures, one in three hypostases, theologically.<sup>2</sup> Linguistically, the word is one in all its meanings, according to its higher, theological Image, rendering significant life to any text it substantiates. The logical structure of Eliot’s poetry is instated by a super-logic act, the way the Logos was incarnate in the natural rationality, with its own supernatural Reason, in order to transfigure it and raise it to a higher significance. The Logos (Word, Reason, Hypostasis of the Triune God) breaks into the natural sequence of birth and death and instates Resurrection, the restoration of man and nature beyond what is commonly accepted as “natural order”. “The tiger springs in the new year” (Gerontion). This means another kind of action “beyond good and evil” in common natural reasoning. By doing so, the Logos also infuses language with a power of significance that saves our words from “cracking”, while breaking the natural reason, yet breaking it free and fully significant.

In modernism there also occurs a fully intentional break at the level of form in order to reach to a break and an in-novation at the level of meaning and significance. The formal break of poetical sentences calls for an urgent search for meaningful coherence which shall not be found in the rational order of words: its break points to a kind of logic inscribed in the words themselves, not in the syntax, an in-scription of revelation, or to nothing. Eliot’s unifying principle beyond syntax aims at the same thing. It is the principle of significance, the power of logic beyond the natural logic, the power of the Logos beyond the natural grammatical logos, with its transcendent dimension. The whole earth is waiting for rain in the WasteLand, for

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<sup>2</sup> Though there are groups of three gods in Buddhist or Hindu religions, they are not a unity, but a plurality.



something from above the dry horizontal land, the only thing that can bring it back to life, waiting for its vertical significance.

This content of a word is not of a deconstructivist kind, but it is a cultural and spiritual inheritance appropriated and transfigured. Language changes by accumulation, and by achieving new territories of significance, and therefore, as this happens, something happens to old poems, too. That is one reason why “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it.”<sup>3</sup> Thus modernist poetry “tells” stories about past and “present”, their ever-accomplishing stories. As Paul de Man says, it “uses an imagery that is both symbol and allegory, that represents objects in nature but is actually taken from purely literary sources”<sup>4</sup>. He means creative spiritual sources, yet he does not see the source of them, the transcendent and the immanent creativity in co-operation. Indeed, the modernist poetry is still put into relationship with events reinterpreted, yet, more importantly, reinterpreted in the perspective of their latest significance.

The personhood of the Logos is apparently foreign to modernist poetry, as personhood, generally speaking, yet it is pointed to in an ineffable, delicate way, in the way of finding out its endless mystery:

*“Who walked between [...]?” (Ash-Wednesday, Part IV)*

or:

*Who is the third who always walks beside you?*

*When I count, there are only you and I together*

*But when I look up the white road*

*There is always another one walking beside you” (The WasteLand, What the Thunder Said)*

There is always a third one in this *togetherness*. As in the loving relationship of the Holy Trinity, so it is among men. We do not rely on a double-fold, but on a three-fold and a multi-fold relationship that unites all of us. Least of all do we conceive as good the life of isolated people, “each one in its own prison”. Their prisons or houses are decadent, as in “Gerontion”. This above

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth, Hugh, *The Pound Era*, p. 112, Univ. of California Press, 1973

<sup>4</sup> De Man, Paul, *Lyrics and Modernity in Blindness and Insight*, p. 171



quoted fragment reminds of the road to Emmaus after the Resurrection of the Lord. He is not directly named because, as in the Scriptural text, his disciples did not recognize Him while walking *together*. As in Eliot's verse, so in the Gospel's text, the two of them (or two of us) are walking together:

*"And it came to pass that, while they communed together, and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden, that they should not know him"*  
(Luke, 24. 15, 16).

You and I is not enough. *Let us go, you and I*, in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, represent an intimacy inside the near-death experience of an evening containing earth and sky, compared to "a patient etherized upon a table" (line 3) and followed by deserted images. This you-and-I togetherness in its closed circle does not save from death.

So, Christ, the Logos incarnate, is not openly mentioned in *The Waste Land*, but the need of redemption is clearly put forth. His absence is an assertion of His presence. His very absence has its own images and consequences. They are foreshadows of more direct expressions of the second period of Eliot's creation. Without any intension from Eliot's behalf, due to the trajectory of his own life, the first part of his lyrical writing is like a series of prophetic projections of the ultimate meanings that he was going to utter openly and directly in the second period of his writing, the Person of Christ the Saviour and the Logos "in the world and for the world" particularly. From this point of view, all the poems including "The Waste Land" are like prophetic Old Testamentary books announcing the Redeemer and promised Logos, while the second part of his poetry resemble the New Testamentary writings with the outright proclamation of the visible descent and redeeming action of the Lord, the divine Logos incarnate, Meaning of all meanings, and the Word of all this poetry's words contained and containing it. The "Choruses" from *The Rock* contain such proclamations, including the whole discussion about togetherness and isolation in a few lines:

*"Thus your fathers were made  
Fellow citizens of the saints, of the household of God, being built upon the foundation  
Of apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself the chief cornerstone.*

*But you, have you built well, that you now sit helpless in a ruined house?"*  
(“Choruses” from *The Rock II*)

Thomas Becket sacrifices his life in the name of the Lord in the historical play *Murder in the Cathedral*, while “The Four Quartets”, much more symbolic in style, like another book of Revelation, reasserts the Name to be discovered by those who “do not cease from exploration,” just to find that He was there from the beginning, “the life of significant soil”.

Modernist poetry has texts without a self, without an “I”. The poet withdraws from them leaving the text speak, so to say, by itself. The full “voice” or the many voices of such a poem are voices of the words themselves. The author makes words speak, while he withdraws. It is what happens in the Eastern iconographic canon. The painter disappears from the composition so that the icon should not be his own message, but bear a message of its own. Hence, the main concern of the interpreter of modernist poetry should be the interrelationship between the perceptual and the intellectual elements. The word itself comes with a message of its own. Who speaks? The word’s whole truth and history.

As all linguists states, *logos*, the word, presupposes a locutor (a speaker) and an *interlocutor*. Someone speaks the word and another receives it. It involves a locutionary act, which is an act of relationship, and instates a *locus*, a location, too. Words are displaced and replaced without losing their places or integrity. In modernism, immediate relationship is blown up, and distance is introduced, so that the work and the role of the words themselves are brought to a climax, giving open place to other kinds of relationships, more mysterious, more far-reaching. With modernism, relationship itself is given another understanding, it is reformulated, yet not given up as it seems. The locus of the relationship in a poem is as conceptual and as manifested as the relationship itself. Generally speaking, modernism is not apparently interested in space; it gives priority to time and history, but to a frozen one, trapped in the text for the sake of its meaning. We would dare say the modernist space should not be obliterate in my analysis by lack of priority, but seen from a different angle. It will not be a geographical space, yet space still exists. There is no word that does not suggest a certain kind of *locus mundi*.

It is a construct, of course, but a very important one, no other than the world itself. The most outstanding poem of high modernism gives precedence to it. Its name is a “land”: *The Waste Land*. It offers the perception and the vision of nowhere and everywhere, though, at times,

Eliot emphatically calls it England and constantly draws and effaces its outlines. One may be misled, if one looks for accuracy. It is England, indeed, and more specifically, London at times, yet this is of little importance from an appropriate distance, just to see the inferences of the text. The text itself emerges as a *locus mundi*. A *locus* where the *locutio*, the locutionary act does not happen and still does happen in various ways.

The dialogue is suggested, as the interlocutors themselves are too, suggested, like shadows of the past and present of this world. There is no word without its expected speaker. The speaker is enigmatic and hard to grasp, as the mystery of the person itself. The word reaches into silence, as Eliot puts it. The silent person becomes an implicit presence. “Who is walking between...?” between me and you, between the lines of the poem, between the poem and its interpreter, between word and word: a significance and an unknown “who”, barely recognizable. Derrida asserts the priority of language over that of presence. Actually, they contain each other. He speaks of the implicit power of a language which disrupts the metaphysics of presence and “tears it away from its foundation” (Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, p. 119). It is the expression of the autonomization of language and the text. On the contrary, Eliot asks the question of a “who”, although he sets words free in order to let them utter their own meanings. He sets them free, but the words themselves search for the three-fold relationship, with a context, with their speaker, and their origin, in order to say what they mean, especially that they have a source and a significant end, plunging into their own significant mystery. The text of *The Waste Land* invokes the voice of an apparently absent authority which later Eliot was to discover in Christian theology, but in “The Waste Land”, there are only fragmentary inscriptions in which this distant order may resonate. It is the very secondariness of these words, their removal from any pretension to immediacy and ‘presence’, that gives them value and power. “Poetry is not the assertion that something is true, but the making that truth more fully real to us,” an assertion of Eliot’s that makes Kenner consider the former was concerned with effects rather than ideas. (p. 256). We tend to believe that Eliot was very much concerned with that truth carried by the words that make it more fully relevant. Therefore, a poetics of the *logos* seems to us very important in the analysis of poetry of this kind.

At the level of poetical philosophy, some considered him deeply influenced by Hinduist and Buddhist thought. It would be most improbable in the “Four Quartets”, especially after the poet’s conversion to a more traditional form of Christianity in England. In Christianity, “the way

up” and “the way down” are different in meaning than in Hinduism, though the language seems the same. Indeed, time does not heal any wound, but “the wounded surgeon” does. As we have seen at the beginning, the Hindu wisdom remains trapped in the cyclical condition of nature, in *kronos*, therefore, Eliot leads us to a deeper understanding of the passage of time, taking us to the *kairos* beyond death. “Travel forward” does not mean, as for the Hindu, resignation before a cyclical and immutable condition, with their hope in reincarnation or metempsychosis, which does not offer a way out of death. For the Christian, as for Eliot, it is not just serene resignation, but the certitude of the Resurrection through Christ, Who conquered death. Eliot reads and quotes Krishna in his poetry, yet with a Christian mind. The philosophical language may look the same, but the meaning is actually extremely different. We are always glad to find such a language in ancient texts of other religions, supposing that they might contain the same wisdom as in Christianity, or at least an anticipation or prophecy of the universal salvation. However, things are not quite so. The language may be similar at times, but the religious beliefs give its contrasting meaning. It seems that Eliot interpreted Krishna’s words by his European pattern of mind; he baptized the language of the Bhabavad Gita, while urging the travelers, his readers, to “fare forward” beyond death, to final Resurrection, rather than adopt the philosophy of another religion. The Christian European and American cultural model of this comprehensive super-logic breaking into infinitely profound creativity did not fail in the work of the most representative poet of the two continents.

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