

Inaugural address

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**“Human kind cannot bear very much reality”: modernist perceptions of
time and experience**

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Abridged Curriculum Vitae: JOHAN ANDRIES WESSELS

Prof. Andries Wessels was born in 1955, the second of five brothers, and was raised and educated in Bloemfontein in the Free State. He obtained his Bachelor's and Honours degrees (both *cum laude*) from the University of the Free State in 1975 and 1976 respectively. He pursued postgraduate studies at Oxford University in the United Kingdom where he obtained the M. Phil degree in English Studies in 1981. On his return to South Africa he started teaching at the University of Pretoria, but interrupted his academic career when he joined the Department of Foreign Affairs for a few years from 1984, also serving in the South African Embassy in Paris during that time. He returned to the University of Pretoria in October 1988 and has been teaching here ever since.

Having completed his doctorate on the aristocratic novel in the Twentieth Century under the supervision of Professor Leon Hugo of the University of South Africa, he rose through the ranks of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor, finally becoming a full Professor in 2003 and Head of the Department of English in 2006. Prof Wessels's main research interests are modernism and literary expressions of cultural and political identity, often with particular reference to Irish literature. He has published and read numerous papers on these topics at international conferences and also spent periods of research leave at University College, Dublin, and Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, working on the identity theme. He has contributed to books published in the United Kingdom, Germany and Ireland and has furthermore published short stories and poetry translations into both English and Afrikaans, including a translation into Afrikaans of T.S. Eliot's monumental poem *The Waste Land*.

Prof Wessels has been married to Eloise Naudé, a graduate of the University of Pretoria and currently CEO of NB Publishers in Cape Town (better known under its imprints of Tafelberg, Human & Rousseau and Kwela) for 23 years.

“Human kind cannot bear very much reality”: modernist perceptions of time and experience.

The exact meanings attached to the word “modernism” have shifted over the last hundred years or so, but the term is in general applied to a renaissance in literature and the arts ranging more or less from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. It is not uniform or monolithic but multifarious, and is characterized by a reaction against traditional forms and modes in literature and the arts and hence by experimentation and self-conscious manipulation of form. Writers like T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, Kafka and Bertold Brecht, artists like Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Mondrian and Salvador Dali, architects like Le Corbusier and Gaudi and composers like Schönberg and Stravinsky wished to break the moulds and conventions of how art had traditionally been committed over the centuries and find new and revolutionary ways of writing a poem or a novel or a play, of painting a picture, designing a building or composing a symphony. Modernism is also characterized by cross-disciplinary currents and influences, so that the literature of this school was profoundly influenced by, for example, developments in Psychology (like the work of Freud), anthropology (for example the work of Lévi-Strauss, Frazer) and Physics. This was the great era of scientific progress and science became dominant in the intellectual domain. In 1926 I.A. Richards of Cambridge University, the father of the New Criticism which would dominate literary studies for the greater part of the twentieth century, published his *Science and Poetry* in which he overtly relates developments in our understanding and response to literature to the disconcerting rate of change precipitated by scientific development at that time, and asked: “How is our estimate of poetry going to be affected by science? And how will poetry itself be influenced?” (Richards, 1935: 14). More recently the American critic Daniel Albright of Harvard University published a book with the intriguing title, *Quantum poetics*, in which he traces fundamental aspects of the poetry of the great modernist poets T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound to the theories on waves and particles that were becoming current in their time. Albright also refers to the impact of Einstein’s theories on time and relativity on the thinking and preoccupations of writers during this era. Indeed time, or the experience of time and with that the nature of human experience itself is a preoccupation of modernist writers and it is this theme in modernist writing that I hope to consider in this paper.

The crowning work of T.S. Eliot's later years, *Four Quartets*, has often been called a meditation on time (e.g. Beach 2003: 174). Eliot prefaces "Burnt Norton", the first of his *Four Quartets*, with two quotations from Herakleitos, the 6th to 5th Century B.C. Greek philosopher, and most commentators agree that the epigrams are as applicable to the work as a whole as to the first quartet (e.g. Smith, 1974: 255). These epigrams have been translated in a number of ways, amongst which "Although the *logos* is universal, most people live as if they had an understanding of their own" and secondly, "The way up and the way down are one and the same" (cf. Barnes, 1987: 101, 103) are fairly standard renderings. By means of these epigrams, Eliot points us to the Herakleitian concept of the opposition and paradoxical interdependence between *logos* and flux as a paradigm in the poem, a paradigm that he uses for an investigation and articulation of a number of philosophical contemplations in the work.¹

For Herakleitos, life and existence are characterized by flux or constant change. "One cannot step into the same river twice" is the often quoted metaphor he used to suggest the inexorable march of change that is the very nature of existence. However, according to Herakleitos, there is nevertheless a universal, identifiable *logos*, a form, or harmony, or pattern, imminent in this changing existence. In his *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, Zeller (1963: 45-6) explains the Herakleitian notion of flux as follows:

...it was the unceasing change of things, the instability of all individual things that made so strong an impression on Herakleitos, that he saw in this the general law of the universe and could only regard the world as something in incessant change and ever subject to new modifications. Everything flows and nothing is permanent: one cannot step twice into the same river (Fr 91)...everything passes into something else and is thus seen to be something that assumes different shapes and passes through the most varied states.

Herakleitos nevertheless perceives the world - in its condition of flux - as being held together in a state of balance, in "opposite tension which holds the world together" (Burnet, 1978[1914]: 49). According to Herakleitos the world is generated by fire and consumed by fire, alternating in fixed patterns throughout the whole of time (Barnes, 1987: 107), so that there is an ultimate order or pattern or harmony (the *logos*) which transcends the continuous change within existence.

¹ This part of the paper relies heavily on my own previously published paper, "Heraclitean *logos* and flux in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'cosmic consciousness' and 'the still point of the turning world'", published in the journal *Koers* 66(4): 1-14 (2001).

The relationship between the *logos* or pattern or order, and flux or change, is one of the most significant symbolic arrangements or paradigms in Eliot's dense and profound poem. The first configuration of the *logos*/flux paradigm in the poem involves the relationship between time and eternity. Eliot identifies the human experience of sequential time, which he effectively illustrates by the metaphor of an underground train (in "Burnt Norton") or a flowing river (in "The Dry Salvages"), with flux, constant change, as one second ticks over into the next, while he equates the *logos*, which literally means "word", but is usually taken to suggest "reason" or "science", or as we have seen in this case, transcendent "order" or "pattern", with eternity or timelessness.

He introduces the theme of time in the familiar opening lines of "Burnt Norton":

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future
 And time future 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 present.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 189)

In this passage, Eliot depicts the interrelatedness of our conventional concepts of present, past and future, to the point of dissolving the traditional divisions between them, but instead of arriving at a state of grace in spiritual timelessness, he is confronted by a problem, that redemption – which in its Christian sense is a **process** of confession, forgiveness and consequent salvation – is not possible outside of sequential time which is a requirement for progressive actions: "If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable"; if all sin is eternally present, all sin remains unredeemable. He thus suggests that even spiritually, mortal mankind needs the "enchainment" of sequential time in order to enjoy the possibility of redemption from the constriction of time, which is mortal life. The level of complexity of this issue is raised by bringing the "might have been" past, the road not taken - which, according to the orthodox notion of time as succession, can only be an abstraction (as the sequential moment of possible fulfilment passes for ever more) - also into the equation. If divisions of time are dissolved, the "might have been" also remains an eternal possibility.

His conclusion that "What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present" may not suggest, as many readers have concluded (cf. Klein, 1994: 28), that the present is the only inevitable reality or outcome of all real or possible pasts since it is actual, but instead that the actual past and the potential past stand in the same perpetual relationship to a deeper, ever-present reality, in other words, to eternity "which is always present". This is Eliot's equivalent to the *logos*.

The parallel between flux and *logos* on the one hand and sequential time/eternity on the other, is extremely effective as Herakleitos suggests that the *logos* can only be detected through the flux (being is intelligible only in terms of becoming), and Eliot makes the point that for humanity eternity can only be perceived from the vantage point of sequential time: "Only through time time is conquered." Ronald Tamplin (1987: 155) elucidates, "Time is necessary as the place of access [to eternity] but is otherwise only a distraction".

The central image introduced in "Burnt Norton" for this interrelationship between flux and *logos*, time and eternity, is the wheel or spinning world (implying sequential time or flux or constant change) which moves around a central point or infinitesimal axis (the *logos* or timelessness), which though part of the spinning mechanism, is nevertheless still, motionless, at the very heart of the movement, reconciling change into stillness, sequential time into eternity:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered.

(Eliot 1974[1963]: 191)

The still point of the turning world, the centre, is thus outside of movement but is also the core of the movement.

Eliot uses "the dance" as a symbol for the "unmoving motion of the timeless" (Bergsten, 1973: 90) and this image of dancing implies pattern, harmony and therefore correlates neatly with the classical concept of the *logos*, with which Eliot equates it. William Klein (1994: 27) relates the dance image to the movement of dancers around a maypole, commenting that "the sensual ritual of motion is the only tangible way in which the existence of the still point can be expressed". In other words, only through the movement

of the wheel, can the still point at the centre be understood, only through the experience of sequential time can the notion of timelessness be grasped.

As Eliot elaborates the basic *logos/flux* paradigm in its different configurations, he consistently suggests that the intersection or link between the two is significant. This intersection is represented in the time/eternity configuration by what Eliot calls "the moment in and out of time" (Eliot 1974[1963]: 213). From what appears to be personal experience (cf. Murray, 1991: 9²; Spencer, 1999: 259), Eliot sketches in the poem a number of timeless moments, where eternity and temporality intersect within the temporal existence of the individual, where in an ordinary day in an ordinary life, for a moment, eternity is paradoxically experienced. The first such moment is described metaphorically in the opening movement of "Burnt Norton". The extract deals with a visit of a man and a woman to the rose-garden of the manor house of Burnt Norton in Gloucestershire (Gordon, 1998: 266), where a dry pool is miraculously or symbolically filled with water in a moment of transcendent exaltation:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

(Eliot 1974[1963]: 190)

In the second movement of "Burnt Norton", Eliot ponders this experience of the intersection of time and eternity in the rose garden:

I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
Erhebung without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 191-192)

² Eliot remarked that in the composition of *Four Quartets* he was "seeking the verbal equivalents *for small experiences he had had* [my italics] and for knowledge derived from reading".

Eliot consistently depicts these transcendent moments in terms of the reconciliation of opposites, which is in accordance with Herakleitos's notion that the underlying connection between opposites is a significant manifestation of the *logos*. It also correlates to St John of the Cross's mystic meditations, which likewise inspired Eliot and describe the achievement of union with God in terms of an accumulation of paradoxes (Lobb, 1993: 30, Brooker, 1993: 96). In this reconciliation of all opposites, anomalies, distortions, Eliot even includes good and evil, when he cites the statement by the mediaeval mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, in *Little Gidding*, the fourth *Quartet*, that

Sin is behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of things shall be well

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 219)

What Eliot suggests is that this experience of time and eternity reconciled, this moment of complete and transcendent understanding, is characterized by an awareness that all things - including that which in our normal state would appear to us to be evil - inevitably work to the eventual good, which is the essential quality of the universe and its Creator. Eliot confirms this in the last lines of the *Quartets* when he states:

All shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 223)

The Swedish critic, Staffan Bergsten (1973: 239) comments on these concluding lines from "Little Gidding":

The transfiguration of human life and history in the timeless pattern [*logos*] must also involve a resolution of the antithesis of good and evil.... This quotation from the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich is the answer she received to the question how the existence of sin was to be reconciled with a good and righteous God.... [In] quoting Dame Julian [Eliot] indicates that in the divine order of things there is a place even for that which appears evil.

What is interesting to South Africans is that Field Marshall Jan Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa from 1919 to 1924 and from 1939 to 1948, confessed to a similar experience of the intersection of time and eternity in his private correspondence (Wagener, 1995: 211-212; Beukes: 1994: 66-68). Without any reference to Eliot's poem, Smuts very clearly

expressed the same notion, derived, it seems, from the same experience and integrated it into his holistic philosophy of life:

Evil becomes an ingredient in the final good which we attain on the higher synthesis or integration of life. Holism seems to imply this deeper spiritual view of the universe. Evil is not extrinsic to it, but, in some way difficult to comprehend, natural to it and a constituent element in it. The great lesson of experience is to absorb, transmute and sublimate evil and make it an element to enrich, rather than a dominant factor to dominate life.
(Beukes, 1994: 68)

The moment "in and out of time", on which I wish to dwell a little as it is part of the central thread that I try to trace in this paper, is a moment that occurs in the ordinary life of some ordinary people - in a lecture Eliot referred to it as "a crystallization of the mind" accessible to many people who are not mystics (Kwan-Terry, 1992: 161) - in which such people experience eternity, the absolute, the sublime. William Klein (1994: 27) describes it as personal time and eternal time becoming one, while Denis Donoghue (1993: 7) characterizes it as a moment in which "existence and essence seem to be one and the same" and calls it "an epitome, a sample of the ultimate experience, beatitude, the Heaven of God's presence". In the next few lines in the poem, Eliot continues his contemplation of the moment of illumination, of true "consciousness" and explains the need for temporal existence as a platform of access to eternity in our mortal state:

Yet the enchainment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.
Time past and time future
Allow but 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 conquered.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 192)

Full consciousness is thus associated with the *logos*, with the experience of eternity, but in our weakened human condition, according to Eliot, we cannot bear or stand too much "consciousness", we can only digest true consciousness in little bites of upliftment, now and then, caught up in the dreary life of existing from second to second, minute to minute, hour

after hour, month after month and year after year, which enchains our existence, but also protects us from an intensity of experience which we cannot bear.

From the time versus eternity representation of the flux and *logos* paradigm, it is only a short step to the next configuration of this paradigm in the *Quartets* in which the *logos* is identified with eternal God, flux with mortal man and the intersection between them with Christ, God as man. This second configuration of the paradigm is of course endorsed or perhaps inspired by the opening lines of the Gospel according to St John: "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", and a few verses later, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us", in which Christ is conceived of as the *logos* within the flux of life and existence. In "Burnt Norton" II, this configuration is suggested by the charged image of the axle-tree ("Garlic and sapphires in the mud/ Clot the bedded axle-tree") which clearly refers to the cross (the "tree" is a traditional symbol of the cross) as well as to the "still point of the turning world" (the "axle") (cf. Klein 28), and is confirmed in "The Dry Salvages" V, where, in discussing "the moment in and out of time", the poet elaborates:

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 213)

In the incarnation of Christ, God as man, all the inadequacies of man's fallen existence are overcome, all hostilities and incongruities are resolved and reconciled. Incarnation is for Eliot the ultimate "moment in and out of time." This conceptualization is already anticipated in Eliot's 1934 work, "Choruses from 'The Rock'", in which Christ's incarnation as the ultimate transection of the temporal and the eternal is described in very similar terms:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of
time,
A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history:
transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like
a moment of time,
A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for
without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave
the meaning.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 177)

The notion that the moment of transcendent meaning (identified here with the incarnation of Christ), “gave ... meaning” to time and history, raises another interesting issue in terms of Modernist literature. The awareness of a moment of transcending consciousness is common to a number of the modernist writers. James Joyce calls his version “epiphany”, Virginia Woolf contemplates the “moment of being”, E.M. Forster ponders the “eternal moment” and Elizabeth Bowen calls it “life surprised at a significant angle.” (This concept of a moment of illumination when everything falls into place and a new level of understanding has been effected has found its place into contemporary popular culture through the mediation of none other than Oprah Winfrey, who with the worldwide authority vested in her, apparently refers to it as the “aha moment” which term may indeed be traced to those gods of popular culture in the 1970s, Abba: “Knowing me, knowing you, aha!” The same term is used more seriously by the contemporary novelist, A.S. Byatt in her 1985 work, *Still Life*, where she places the term specifically in 1955 – coincidentally the year of my birth. She refers to “... what has felicitously been called the 'aha experience' when a structure felt to be defective or inchoate suddenly appears formed and harmonious” (1996 [1985]: 260), which comes quite close to the concept articulated by the great modernists.

The historical period during which literary modernism flourished was a time of great social upheaval. The First World War had broken down structures (of class and gender, for example) which had been regarded as immutable until the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Women gained the vote and started to work; the working classes gained political power and influence, socialism and communism became significant forces, religion lost its unquestioned role in society. Many Europeans felt themselves at sea in a new and unfamiliar world. What is interesting is that while the modernists were revolutionaries as regards literary form, bringing about sweeping changes in the way art was being enacted, seemingly valuing above all what was new and different, many of them were surprisingly conservative in their view of life and society. The American Ezra Pound notoriously revealed strong Fascist sympathies, while T.S. Eliot, more moderately but famously declared himself a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion,” showing very conservative colours himself (Eliot 1970:7). In his famous critical essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot reconciles his poetic classicism with his radical technical innovation when he explains that all significant new and original works stand in an inevitable relationship with all the great works that have

gone before, that all of Western literature and all of culture and art co-exist simultaneously (and not chronologically) in a great eternal pattern which he calls “the mind of Europe” (Eliot, 1980:16). Although the particular internal relationships of its eternal coexistence are readjusted with the addition of each “really new” work of art incorporated into the eternal pattern, the pattern itself is perfect and complete at any given moment:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted... (Eliot, 1980:15).

So, Eliot makes it clear that the work of even a new and radically innovative poet is inevitably connected to the great classical patterns of literature.

Nevertheless, the political conservatism of the modernists is an interesting phenomenon. In a way it is a response to their world and time. In his essay on “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca”, Eliot states: “The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time ...; it [is] his business to express the greatest emotional intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think” (Eliot, 1980:137). The instability in the modernists’ poetry or art reflects the threatening changeability of the world these writers and artists found themselves in, and the conservatism of their thought probably reflects a longing for stability, for certainty in confusion, for something to hold on to, to derive meaning and purpose from in a changing and uncertain world. Eliot’s most celebrated poem, “The Waste Land” famously dramatizes the desperate search for meaning in a fractured world.

The moments of transcendent meaning, prized and expressed by a whole range of modernist writers express at a formalistic level the subversive interaction between change and certainty, between what Herakleitos called, the flux and the *logos*. In the shifting, transient experience of life, the instability that the modernists expressed so brilliantly not only in the content, but also in the form of their writing, there is a hankering for stable meaning, for something certain and meaningful to hang on to. These moments of transcendent power lend a pattern of stability, a promise of immanent meaning in an otherwise volatile existence.

For Eliot the moment of transcendence is essentially spiritual in nature, and spiritual in a very specific Christian sense. He declared,

I take it for granted that Christian revelation is the only full revelation; and that the fullness of Christian revelation resides in the essential fact of the Incarnation, in relation to which all Christian revelation is to be understood (quoted in Bergsten, 1973: 47).

This forms an interesting and direct contrast to his contemporary, the great Irish modernist writer, James Joyce, who indeed mustered Christian concepts in order to express his views on art and experience, but resolutely and persistently stripped the concepts he used of their religious dimension. Joyce had been raised in a Roman Catholic and Irish nationalist tradition and his mind was saturated by these historical forces. He purposefully turned his back on both of these, leaving Ireland and forswearing the Catholic faith, but his mind continued to function in terms of the patterns established by his education. So, Joyce calls his version of the transcendent moment, “the moment in and out of time”, an “epiphany”, a term derived from the Christian Church calendar. The Feast of the Epiphany on 6 January commemorates the homage of the three wise men to the infant Jesus and is derived from the Greek word for “showing” or “revelation”, as Mary showed or revealed the baby Christ to the eminent visitors from the East. Joyce secularizes the term completely, however, simply to suggest a moment of increased sensitivity, awareness, a moment of seeing beyond the obvious, which Joyce associates in particular with art and the artist, with the apprehension of beauty by the recipient (viewer, reader) and with the arrest of beauty, of the aesthetic, by the artist in the creation of art. For Joyce what is revealed in the epiphany is nothing divine but the essential quality of the particular object. Joyce embeds this notion of the epiphany in the aesthetic philosophy of the great Roman-Catholic philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the character Stephen Dedalus describes the result of the appreciation of beauty as the “luminous, silent stasis of esthetic pleasure.” He derives this idea from Aquinas’s theory of art and from the final step in Aquinas’s account of the stages in the process of the apprehension of beauty. According to Aquinas the appreciation of beauty encompasses three crucial stages. In the first stage, *integritas* or “wholeness”, the viewer isolates the beautiful object from its environment, noticing it as a separate entity. In the second stage, *consonantia* or “harmony”, the viewer identifies the internal patterns of the beautiful object – whether it be a painting, a sculpture, a poem, novel or musical composition – its design, light and shadow, themes, motifs and images. Thirdly and finally there is the breathtaking

moment when the viewer, reader or listener undergoes the actual experience of beauty, the moment of *claritas* or “radiance”. Aquinas links the final stage to Christ, “the light and splendour of the intellect” (cf. Beebe, 1973:152-168), seeing the radiance of God in all expressions of beauty, but Joyce, the lapsed Catholic, strips it of its Christian dimension when his largely autobiographical character, Stephen Dedalus, identifies *claritas* purely secularly with *quidditas*, the “whatness” of the artistic object, deliberately removing the divine dimension in Aquinas’s original thinking. In *Stephen Hero*, an earlier version of the *Portrait*, Stephen explains the idea of the epiphany:

First we recognize that the object is one integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany (Joyce 1977[1944]: 213).

For the viewer, the perception of an object as beautiful concludes with the sense of the object’s radiance in the moment of epiphany; for the artist the creation of art begins with the epiphany which the artist then embodies in the work of art, lending that transcendent or eternal quality that surpasses the limitations of time and place, to the work of art itself:

This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley’s, called the enchantment of the heart (Joyce 1990, c1964 [1916]: 217).

Joyce refuses, however, to link this transcendent quality of the moment of epiphany, and of the work of art as a bearer of that transcendence, with the divine in the way that Eliot does in *Four Quartets*.³

Perhaps the most striking example of such a moment of epiphany in Joyce’s work further illustrates the process of secularization that Joyce insists on. In *a Portrait of the Artist as a*

³ This part of the paper relies to some extent on my own previously published paper, “Smithies, chambers and the mind of Europe: the poetics of James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, published in *Aan ’n toegewyde leser: liber amicorum Elize Botha*, edited by Heilna du Plooy (Tafelberg, Human & Rousseau, Kwela, 2005).

Young Man, Stephen Dedalus, who as I have said, is largely based on the young James Joyce himself, is faced with the choice of becoming a Catholic priest or pursuing his dream to become an artist. Pondering his dilemma, he sees a young girl on a beach standing with her feet in the water, and in the perception of her beauty, he experiences an epiphany that clarifies his position for him.

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither; and a faint flame trembled on her cheek.

--Heavenly God! cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on! (Joyce 1990 c1964 (1916): 176)

Stephen decides not to become a priest of the Church, but a priest of secular life instead, with art as his sacrament. The passage is littered with terminology from the religious life (e.g. “worship”, “God”, “advent”, “soul”, “holy silence”, “angel”, “ecstasy”, “glory”) but these terms are deliberately stripped of a religious meaning, to suggest the secular life that Stephen chooses. Stephen experiences “profane joy” rather than religious joy, the girl is not an angel of God, but an angel of “mortal youth and beauty”, she is not an envoy from God but an “envoy from the fair courts of life”, she does not throw open the gates of heaven to the young man, but the “gates of all the ways of error and glory” – life with all its greatness and its weakness, in which Stephen is to immerse himself in order to create from it transcendent, immortal art. Stephen’s transcendent moment of epiphany is nevertheless similar to the “moment in and out of time” described in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* in that it is a moment of ecstatic upliftment, a moment when the subject experiences transcendent understanding and clarity of vision, when the

imperfect and inadequate is made complete and whole. It is a moment of unsurpassed significance in the life of the subject which lends meaning to his life as a whole, even though that life is to be lead largely within what Eliot calls “the enchainment of past and future”.

The British novelist E.M. Forster’s “eternal moment” is also such a moment, a moment that lends meaning to an otherwise imperfect and unsatisfactory life. In his book, *E.M. Forster’s Modernism* (2002), my colleague and dear friend, Prof. David Medalie relates Forster’s “eternal moment” to the interplay between realism and romanticism in Forster’s writing (69 *et seq.*). Medalie states that

the romantic elements [in Forster’s writing] have precisely the function of irradiating the mundane.... This transformation is frequently achieved by means of the ‘eternal moments’ which feature so prominently in [Forster’s] works of this period (2002: 70-71).

Forster’s concept of “the eternal moment” is beautifully illustrated in his short story with that title (1954:188-222). In the story a well-known author, Miss Raby, returns to an alpine village, where as a young girl she had experienced such a memorable moment when, Feo, a young and handsome alpine guide, had declared his love for her in the mountains and had begged her to run away with him. Sensibly, she had not done that, but had instead put the moment into a novel, transforming it into art in the best Joycean sense, and the novel became very popular, making the village famous and causing a rush of tourism, which in turn destroyed the pristine and innocent beauty of the village and its environment. Returning to the village after many years, Miss Raby is horrified by the decline for which she feels responsible, but is nevertheless driven to try and recapture something of that entrancing, transcendent moment in the mountains by searching out Feo, who disappointingly turns out to have become a rather sleazy, obsequious hotel manager. Her behaviour furthermore succeeds in alienating her travelling companion, the gentlemanly, correct, but unimaginative Colonel Leyland, so that in many respects the visit turns out to be a disaster. But for Miss Raby, this does not appear so in the end, because she is able to gain a perspective on the “eternal moment” that occurred in the mountains, when the young, impassioned, handsome guide declared his love for her, and she is able to assess the value of this moment in terms of her entire existence. She realizes

that the incident upon the mountain had been one of the great moments of her life – perhaps the greatest, certainly the most enduring: that she

had drawn unacknowledged power and inspiration from it, just as trees draw vigour from a subterranean spring. Never again could she think of it as a half-humorous episode in her development. There was more reality in it than in all the years of success and varied achievement which had followed, and which it had rendered possible.... A presumptuous boy had taken her to the gates of heaven; and, though she would not enter with him, the eternal remembrance of the vision had made life seem endurable and good (216-7).

The resemblances between Forster's "eternal moment" and Eliot's "moment in and out of time" and Joyce's "epiphany" are profound. Like the vision of the girl on the beach guides and directs Stephen Dedalus's entire life thereafter, informing it and giving meaning and purpose to it, so Miss Raby realizes, the moment on the mountainside had informed her life, making it appear "endurable and good". Like Joyce with his epiphany, Forster associates the 'eternal moment' with aesthetic beauty. Significantly the moment on the mountainside had inspired Miss Raby's most successful novel, just as for Joyce the conception of art starts with an epiphany for the artist, which he then embodies in art. Significantly Miss Raby realizes that "[t]here was more reality in it than in all the years of success and varied achievement which had followed ...", evoking Eliot's equation of the eternal aspect of the "moment in and out of time" with "reality" by comparison to which the everyday life becomes transient and insignificant. These moments have the function of "irradiating the mundane" (Medalie 2002: 70), just as Eliot's "moment in and out of time" illuminates the otherwise insignificant lives of human beings:

A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for
without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave
the meaning.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 177)

Like Eliot's "moment in and out of time" Forster's "eternal moment" is a moment that is, in David Medalie's words, "paradoxically, located within time and yet able to transcend the flux of time; consequently, it is left behind and yet never left behind" (2002:71). In the quoted extract from the short story, Miss Raby confirms this when she talks about "the eternal **remembrance** of the vision" as confirming the endurable quality and goodness of life. In a very similar way, Eliot evokes the role of **memory** in "Little Gidding", the last of the *Quartets*, as the means of safe-guarding the moments where time and eternity intersect:

This is the use of memory:
For liberation...
From the future as well as the past.
Eliot 1974 [1963]: 219

For another great modernist, Virginia Woolf, the “moment of being”, her equivalent of Eliot’s “moment in and out of time” or Forster’s “eternal moment” likewise occurs when the human being is fully conscious of experience. Mundane life, what Eliot calls the “waste sad time before and after” is “not lived consciously” according to Woolf, but embedded in “a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (Woolf 1985:70). This recalls Eliot’s view in *Burnt Norton* that

Time past and time future
Allow but little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time.

In other words, we normally live within the enchainment of sequential time, within a dulled cotton wool existence of flux, but are granted from time to time moments of supreme awareness, when we also, according to Woolf, see and understand the greater patterns of human existence, in other words grasp Eliot’s *logos*. In her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, the character Mrs Ramsay, experiences such a “moment of being” as she presides over a great dinner party which she hosts:

Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now (but this cannot last, she thought, dissociating herself from the moment while they were all talking about boots) just now she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather, for it arose, she thought ... like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. Nothing need to be said, nothing could be said. There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt ... of eternity; ...there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out ... in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby.... Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that remains for ever. This would remain. (Woolf 1977 [1927]: 97).

Again the passage profoundly echoes the formulation by her modernist contemporaries. Like Eliot, she associates the moment of being with “eternity”, something “immune from change” and her “coherence” and “stability” echo his “completion” and “resolution”. Like Joyce’s epiphany radiates its essential quality, Woolf’s moment of being “shines out ... like a ruby”. Just as Forster’s Miss Raby realizes that the “eternal moment” is the “greatest” and “most enduring” moment of her life, so Woolf’s Mrs Ramsay is assured that “[t]his would remain.” In all these remarkably similar expressions by the great modernist writers of the twentieth century, not only a hankering for the complete, the stable, the meaningful, is expressed, but also a supreme and experiential confidence that there is more to life than “the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral”, than the increasing awareness of transience in the unstable, impenetrable, disintegrating world of their daily experience.

Woolf maintains that the “moments of being” form part of a pattern which she associates with art. “I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art... We are the words, we are the music, we are the thing itself” (1985: 72). In the *Four Quartets*, the relationship between the intensely lived moment “in and out of time”, and the dull passage of sequential time that Eliot terms the “waste sad time/ Stretching before and after”, is likewise extrapolated to reflect the relationship between human experience and art. The third configuration of the *logos/flux* paradigm in the *Four Quartets* thus pertains to art.⁴ This configuration forms another clear equivalent to the time/eternity relationship, taking up the idea that a work of art – as notably exemplified in Keats's Grecian urn – can also represent an overcoming of the ravages of sequential time. Steve Ellis (1991: 15) has pointed out that Eliot was influenced by the “prevailing aesthetic of abstraction” in England during the 1930s, and quotes the artist Ben Nicholson as stating in 1934, “painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realisation of infinity” (Ellis, 1991: 16). Art becomes another manifestation of the *logos*, of infinity or eternity, of the still point of the turning world. Eliot explicates this idea in the last movement of “Burnt Norton”:

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is living
 Can only die. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.
 Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
 Not that only, but the co-existence,
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
 And the end and the beginning were always there
 Before the beginning and after the end.
 And all is always now.

(Eliot, 1974[1963]: 194)

Eliot suggests that words and notes, like everything in our world, are subject to time and extinction, and that only by imposing or retrieving a pattern, i.e. *logos*, can this “mortality” be overcome. When notes or words or designs are cast into an artistic mould by the artist, the process of artistic creation wrests the words or music from transience and the work

⁴ This part of the paper again relies on my own previously published paper, “Heraclitean *logos* and flux in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: ‘cosmic consciousness’ and ‘the still point of the turning world’”, published in the journal *Koers* 66(4): 1-14 (2001).

becomes eternal or immortal, so that even when the notes are not physically played, or the words read, the work of art exists, conceptually, aesthetically, and not subject to passing seconds, so that "the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end." Art then becomes another emblematic representation of the eternal, of the *logos*.

The flux/*logos* paradigm is elaborated in *Four Quartets* in three major configurations, transient human experience which can be immortalized in art through the process of artistic creation, sequential time and eternity which intersect in the fleeting but significant moments "in and out of time", and ultimately in human or mortal existence versus divine or immortal existence, intersected in the incarnation of Christ, God as man, the essentially eternal in human and temporal form. For T.S. Eliot the centre can only be located through the periphery, the axis "at the still point of the turning world" can only be defined through the spinning wheel; eternity or timelessness can only be accessed through the temporal experience of human consciousness, in fleeting moments of exaltation in daily life, in the charged, timeless configurations of art as an imitation of divine creation, and finally in Christ, who embodies the love of God and is for Eliot the ultimate transection of the temporal and eternal. Likewise for Joyce, the practice of his art is intimately connected with the moment of epiphany, the moment of ecstatic experience of beauty, which lends understanding and simultaneously bears the core of the creation of art in it and for E.M. Forster the eternal moment lends transcendent and lasting significance to an otherwise imperfect and unsatisfactory life. For Virginia Woolf, the moment of being is a moment of complete consciousness, suggesting that we are usually not conscious, that we live a dulled life, that – as Eliot puts it – "human kind cannot bear very much reality."

When one is due to give one's inaugural lecture, one receives a set of documents from the university, in which it is *inter alia* suggested that the lecture should ideally reflect on the current state of the particular discipline. In my experience papers which have stuck closely to this suggestion have often – though not invariably – been amongst the most boring papers I have ever had to listen to. I have therefore chosen not to follow this suggestion, though I fear that my avoidance may not have protected my patient audience against boredom. But in an indirect way perhaps, my paper attempts exactly that, in that it has endeavoured to demonstrate what it is that we occupy ourselves with in the humanities in general, and in literary studies in particular. In the humanities we concern ourselves with

mankind in all its multifarious – splendid, disconcerting, hopeful, hopeless, inspiring, nefarious – dimensions and tinctures. In disciplines like History, Sociology, Criminology, for example, we study mankind's time-bound and transient interactions with one another and with the world in the flux of our existence. In disciplines like Philosophy and Theology, we are perhaps more preoccupied with mankind's more transcendent, eternal, ontological aspirations associated with the *logos*, the timeless and eternal. In Literary Studies, however, we are privileged to deal with the whole gamut of human experience, the *logos* and the flux, the here and now and the eternal, transformed into timeless art, and finally with how this entire experience of life – our very existence in all its particulars, elements and aspects – is conceptualized, mediated and negotiated through the medium of language, which is the very texture of existence, enveloping and sheathing us in radiance and empowering us with astounding force. This brings me back to the *logos*/ flux paradigm that has guided my contemplations in this paper, as the role of language as the medium of human existence is also revealed or suggested by St John's tantalizingly evocative expression of the concept of the *logos*: "In the beginning was – the Word."

I thank you.

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