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An Unrecognised Face of Literary Modernism

(Joanna Rzepa, *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz*, Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2021, pp. 438)

Abstract: A close, and sometimes polemical, reading of Joanna Rzepa's study *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* reveals the cognitive fruitfulness of a comparatist perspective in considering the nature of the relationship between theological and literary modernisms in a broad European context that, through Rilke, even takes in Russian Orthodoxy. The article shows how in the British context, in which 1922 is a key year for literature, the once clear connection between modernist concerns in theology and literature has been largely forgotten. In Polish literature in turn – since modernism is generally equated with the “Young Poland” movement around the turn of the twentieth century and thus coincides with the most heated period of the modernist controversy in the Catholic Church – the connection is more obvious. In discussing the questions raised by Rzepa's study, the author is led to reflect on how the substance of historical modernist – anti-modernist debates, as well as their rhetoric, continues to be of importance in the present day, in certain respects very disturbingly so.

Keywords: modernisms, literary modernism, theological modernism, European comparatist perspective, Young Poland movement

Streszczenie: *Close reading*, a niekiedy polemiczna lektura studium Joanny Rzepy *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* ujawniają poznawczą owocność perspektywy komparatystycznej w rozważaniach nad naturą relacji między teologicznymi i literackimi modernizmami w szerokim europejskim kontekście, który za sprawą analizowanego w książce Rilkego obejmuje nawet rosyjskie prawosławie. Artykuł pokazuje, jak w kontekście brytyjskim, dla którego rok 1922 jest przełomowym rokiem dla literatury, niegdyś wyraźny związek między modernistycznymi niepokojami w teologii i literaturze został w dużej mierze zapomniany. Z kolei w literaturze polskiej – ponieważ modernizm jest na ogół utożsamiany z formacją Młodej Polski na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, a więc zbiega się w czasie z najgorętszym okresem modernistycznej kontrowersji w Kościele katolickim – związek ten jest bardziej oczywisty. Omawiając kwestie poruszane przez Rzepę, autorka proponuje refleksję nad tym, jak treść historycznych debat modernistycznych/

antymodernistycznych, a także ich retoryka pozostają ważne, a pod pewnymi względami bardzo niepokojąco ważne, w czasach współczesnych.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizmy, modernizm literacki, modernizm teologiczny, europejska perspektywa komparatystyczna, Młoda Polska

Let me begin with a passage from Phase the Third of Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*. The young heroine, with a terrible past already behind her, of rape, disgrace and the death of her infant son, has come to work as a milkmaid in a dairy where her misfortunes are not known. Asked by Angel Clare to tell him "in confidence" what troubles her, she answers as follows:

"The trees have inquisitive eyes, haven't they? – that is, seem as if they had. And the river says, – 'Why do ye trouble me with your looks?' And you seem to see numbers of tomorrows just all in a line, the first of them the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said, 'I'm coming! Beware of me! Beware of me!'... But YOU, sir, can raise up dreams with your music, and drive all such horrid fancies away!"

Angel Clare, whom Tess recognizes as "a decidedly bookish, musical, thinking young man", has taken employment at the dairy as a temporary refuge, now feeling unable, because of his doubts on matters of faith, to fulfil his father's wish for him to become a clergyman. This is his reaction to Tess's words:

He was surprised to find this young woman – who though but a milkmaid had just that touch of rarity about her which might make her the envied of her housemates – shaping such sad imaginings. She was expressing in her own native phrases – assisted a little by her Sixth Standard training – feelings which might almost have been called those of the age – the ache of modernism. The perception arrested him less when he reflected that what are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition – a more accurate expression, by words in LOGY and ISM, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries.¹

What did Hardy mean by that resonant phrase "the ache of modernism", a formulation placed in the mouth of the studious Angel Clare (appropriately, for it has been taken up by scholars) which at the same time is intended to sum up the "horrid fancies" expressed in vivid poetic imagery by the almost unschooled Tess? In an article for "The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine",

¹ The passages from the novel are quoted from: T. Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1978, pp. 180–181.

written only a few years after the publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, George J.H. Northcroft described Hardy's phrase as encapsulating a feeling of deep pessimism which was "more than a literary fashion". Northcroft saw it as "a striking phase of the temper of to-day".² David J. de Laura's renowned 1967 discussion makes it abundantly clear that 'modernism' as a theme in Hardy's later novels has above all a philosophical-theological aspect.³ Yet I confess that for long that phrase of Hardy's has existed in my mind alongside the truism of literary studies in English which has identified 1922 as the birth of modernism, without leading me to reflect seriously on how the meaning of 'modernism' in these contexts is connected. Even without reading de Laura's article, it is surely clear from the original, fictional context of the phrase that Hardy did not have in mind anything which could function primarily as a description of literature; rather, through the reflections of a fictional character, he was thinking of the climate of the times, with its philosophical and theological pessimism. As far as Hardy is representative, the connection between modernism, at least as a theme, in literature and modernism in the philosophical-theological sphere which Joanna Rzepa explores in *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* seems obvious; and yet it has largely fallen out of view until now.⁴

The clear implication of Rzepa's book is that 'modernism' was a theological term (long) before it was a term used in literary criticism, and in turn, its use in the latter cannot be understood in isolation from its origins in theological debate. This does indeed emerge as a surprising idea, given that, as she argues, theological modernism at least in the Anglo-Saxon context has largely been forgotten, and certainly not much examined in connection with literary modernism. Much critical discourse – again, at least in the Anglo-Saxon context – gives the impression that modernist art and literature sprang almost *sui generis* into the new world of post-World War I, with theological debate conspicuous only by its absence from the picture. A 2010 Oxford University Press publication by Christopher Butler entitled *Modernism: A Very Short Introduction* purports to explain briefly "how and why modernism began", but makes no

² G.J.H. Northcroft, *The Ache of Modernism*, "The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine" 1897, Vol. 120 (Sept.), pp. 671–673.

³ D.J. de Laura, *The Ache of Modernism' in Hardy's Later Novels*, "ELH" 1967, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Sept.), pp. 380–399.

⁴ De Laura's article refers to Hardy's rejection of "all comforting theistic palliatives" including those derived from what was for him "the more recent and dangerous compromise of theological 'modernism'", linked by De Laura with Matthew Arnold and others (391). An extensive footnote to this remark contains an account of "the history of the word 'modernism' in England in its theological sense", which De Laura deems "not clear". He takes Hardy's "'modern' novels", by which he means primarily *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, to be a warning to the writer's contemporaries that "they had not yet imagined the human consequences of honestly living out the modern premises" (399).

mention at all of theology. Similarly, the BBC Radio 4 series celebrating in its centenary year a moment taken to be “the birth of now” and “the crucial year for modernism” ranges over topics from Egyptomania to the Shabolovka Tower and the Gherkin to indicate how modernism came into being and lives on today, but does not refer to anything of remotely theological significance.⁵ The Palgrave series edited by Roger Griffin, *Modernism and...*, links modernism with phenomena as diverse as eugenics, Japanese culture and phenomenology, but not with theology. Theology is not named, either, in the Editors’ Preface to the interdisciplinary series in which Rzepa’s book appears as an area of research that the series specifically supports (Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature, edited by Ben Hutchinson and Shane Weller).

All the more credit then to the author for drawing attention to an evidently neglected partner in the conversation with and about literature. Undoubtedly, from this point of view Rzepa’s study breaks new ground, and it is certainly true that the book “challenges the common perception of [literary] modernism as a period of vigorous secularisation” (12). However, it is not by any means the first to do this. Even though it takes the discussion in a direction that has not previously been considered at such length and in such detail – that is “the complex interface between literary and theological modernisms” (12) – it is not quite fair to say that the question of the relationship of the literary modernist movement to religion in general is one that has “until now been largely evaded” in critical discourse (11). If it is true that until recently this issue was not often confronted, nevertheless the sources to which Rzepa herself refers indicate that it is now receiving very considerable critical attention. Pericles’ Lewis’s study *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010) is rightly described by Rzepa as “pioneering” (11), but she follows it with mentions of several other scholars who have taken up this theme and provided her with inspiration. Erik Tønning’s *Modernism and Christianity* (2014), in the *Modernism and...* series referred to above, might deserve more than half a paragraph, which is all that it receives. Tønning, indeed, has devoted a large share of his research over many years to the question of this relationship – as witness the title of a collection of essays published by Brill, of which he is a co-editor: *David Jones: A Christian Modernist?* (2017).

This brings me to a major name that I would like to have seen in the background to Rzepa’s study. I appreciate the author’s wish to focus her discussion on poets who represent modernism in a broad European scope, and that this limits the amount of detail that can be presented in each of the three main contexts considered; but nevertheless, the lack of any even passing reference to Jones is for me a regrettable omission. His engagement with theological questions in their relation to art was at least as profound as that of Eliot, Rilke or Miłosz; he, no less than they, was acutely aware of the consequences for art of

⁵ 1922: *The Birth of Now*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0013r19/episodes/player>.

“the loss of a universal religious frame of reference” (9). That, indeed, is the unchanging lament of all his work, repeated in countless essays and evident in the dense allusiveness of both his visual and his verbal art. Besides this, to write a chapter entitled “Spiritualising the War [First World War]: Religion, Conflict and Politics” without even a single mention of *In Parenthesis* is to leave out of the account a work which seems to me supremely appropriate to the discussion at this point in the book, not to mention being also one of the most significant achievements of British literary modernism.⁶

I have no desire, however, in view of the enormous service to scholarship that Rzepa has rendered, to give undue space to carping at what seem to me as an individual reader to be omissions from her study. *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz* is an extraordinarily rich contribution to the discussion that has emerged on the relation between literary modernism and Christianity, or religion in general. It is a vast compendium of information heretofore largely scattered, from which Rzepa assembles a coherent scholarly whole. The author’s narrative flair ensures that the book is highly readable, even at times entertaining: though Rzepa quotes it with a straight face, Ronald Knox’s mockery of the modernists in his limerick ‘The Modernist’s Prayer’ can hardly fail to raise a smile:

O God, forasmuch as without Thee,
We are not enabled to doubt Thee,
Help us all by Thy grace
To convince the whole race
It knows nothing whatever about Thee. (qtd 34)

The study is extremely well documented, thorough and immensely detailed in its presentation of all its major aspects: the history of theological modernism and its relationship to literary criticism (Part I) and the three poets who provide the focus for the discussion of poetry, aesthetics and theology in the first half of the twentieth century (Part II). At the same time, careful conclusions to each chapter prevent the reader from losing track of the overall thesis. The book is carefully argued, distinguishing scrupulously between what can be known and what may only be supposed – for instance, it is only “likely”, not certain, that Eliot met Hastings Rashdall, one of the speakers at the Philosophical Club at Harvard of which Eliot was President; it is not known whether he did any particular reading in preparation for hearing Rashdall’s talk, but if he did, he would have found the writer’s approach “pertinent to his own problem of the

⁶ *In Parenthesis* was regarded by Eliot himself, in a note of introduction to the 1963 edition, as a work of genius having an “affinity” with the work of Joyce and Pound as well as his own (*In Parenthesis*, Faber and Faber, London 1963, pp. vii–viii). The work was first published in 1937 at Eliot’s instigation.

interpretation of religious experience” (281). The only thing I find puzzling in the book’s construction is the inclusion of Lou Andreas-Salomé in the title of the chapter devoted to Rilke (197). Of course her importance to the development of Rilke’s thought and poetry is not in doubt, but the book’s subtitle identifies only three foci, not four. Eliot and Miłosz stand alone in the chapters devoted to their writings, so that the appearance of Andreas-Salomé in a chapter title disturbs somewhat the book’s overall organization.

Rzepa’s choice to include Miłosz as one of the principal foci of her study is to my mind a highly fortunate one. The incorporation of references to Polish writers and thinkers of importance to the poet reveals incidentally how deeply involved these were in the intellectual, artistic and religious debates of their time taking place in Europe and beyond. Rzepa sees parallels in these trends, finding for example that the writings of Henri Brémond on the one hand and Jacques Maritain on the other feature prominently in both Eliot’s debate with John Middleton Murry and Miłosz’s with Witold Gombrowicz (168). She argues convincingly that these literary-religious controversies are a continuation of the modernist – anti-modernist controversy which raged throughout Europe and came to a head with the publication in 1907 of Pope Pius X’s condemnatory encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Rzepa’s narrative will make fascinating reading for those who are not specialists in Miłosz’s work or in Polish literary-philosophical culture. At the same time, although the material analysed in connection with the Polish poet will be very familiar to Polish scholars and has certainly been pondered by them from various points of view,⁷ Rzepa’s book provides an angle on Miłosz that has not been directly considered.

In her introduction, Rzepa refers to her subjects, Rilke, Eliot and Miłosz, as “three poets who are considered to belong to the canon of literary modernism” (19). This, however, does beg some questions. Is the time frame of literary modernism the same over the literatures whose representatives she discusses? Is literary modernism really an international concept? And if so, what is its canon? While in the Anglo-Saxon context Eliot has always been considered to be a central figure, and the association of Rilke’s name in the German context with modernism is unlikely to raise any eyebrows, the assigning of Miłosz to the same “canon” seems more dubious. Recently, Ryszard Nycz has dubbed him a “modern [or perhaps: new-time] antimodernist [nowoczesny antymodernista]”.⁸ Furthermore, in histories of Polish literature, modernism usually appears as a synonym for the “Young Poland” movement which flourished at the turn of the

⁷ I am thinking particularly here of Magdalena Heydel’s study of the presence of T.S. Eliot in Polish literature, *Obecność T.S. Eliota w literaturze polskiej* [The Presence of T.S. Eliot in Polish Literature] (2002), Joanna Zach’s *Miłosz a poetyka wyznania* [Miłosz and the Poetics of Confession] (2002) and Łukasz Tischner’s *Miłosz and the Problem of Evil* (2015).

⁸ R. Nycz, *Czesław Miłosz: poeta XX wieku w przestrzeni publicznej*, “Teksty Drugie” 2011, No. 5, p. 13.

twentieth century and in its first decade, so before Miłosz was born and considerably earlier than the heyday of Anglo-Saxon literary modernism.⁹ But – and this may be of key significance – the “Young Poland” era coincides quite precisely with the hottest period of debate surrounding Catholic modernism. For the non-specialist, some clarification of the context of Miłosz’s reflections on Marian Zdziechowski and Stanisław Brzozowski and of his relation to the literature of Young Poland – the period to which he did not belong himself, but in which, perhaps, literary modernism flourished in a symbiotic relationship with theological modernism – would be helpful here.

Rzepa herself remarks, rightly, on the way that new research “has increasingly questioned the understanding of modernism as an aesthetic project characterised by an internal integrity and coherence, and instead opted for the plurality of the term ‘modernisms’, which is better suited to embrace the heterogeneity of diverse responses to modernity.” (10). This aspect of the discussion could benefit from some more specific development, showing the plurality represented by the three poets, as well as the links among them – and also relating this to their own “native” literary context. How, for example, does the reported similarity between Eliot’s conception of art’s religious purpose and “Bremond’s emphasis on poetry’s capability to unite the poet and the reader to the ‘real’” (310) relate to Miłosz’s well-known definition of poetry as “a passionate pursuit of the real”, to which Rzepa gives prominence in the title of her chapter on the Polish poet? How can Miłosz’s identification of a “salvational goal” for poetry – to “restore” the “face” of the world – (“A Semi-Private Letter About Poetry,” 1946, qtd 358) be compared with Eliot’s scathing dismissal of the Arnoldian-Richardsonian idea that “poetry is capable of saving us”: “it is like saying that the wall paper will save us when the walls have crumbled”?¹⁰ Of course, given that the book already runs to over 400 pages, such correspondences as I have pointed to could be mentioned only at the expense of some of the material that has been included. Possibly, though, some of the very fine detail might have been better sacrificed for the sake of this larger picture, and in order to show still more clearly what connects, and what differentiates, the

⁹ See Kazimierz Wyka’s classic study *Modernizm polski* [Polish Modernism], which begins like this [in my translation]: “The purpose of this study is to provide a structural description of Polish modernism. By modernism I mean the earlier, preparatory phase of the work of the Young Poland generation, the phase linked above all with the rise of individualism, the rebirth of metaphysics, and the saturation of literary genres with lyricism and symbolism. Of course the development of modernism cannot be strictly enclosed within any rigid time frame, but still the *terminus a quo* may be taken to be the year 1877 (...) and the *terminus ad quem* 1903 (...). The high points of modernism seem to be the second series of Tetmajer’s *Poems* (1894), Przybyszewski’s *Confiteor* (1899), Berent’s *Próchno* (1901).” (1968 edition, 15).

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Literature, Science, and Dogma*, “Dial” 1927, Vol. 82/3 (Mar.), [pp. 239–243], p. 241. Review of I.A. Richards’ *Science and Poetry*.

approach of the three chosen poets to religious and artistic questions, and to the relationship between them.

Although Miłosz appears last in Rzepa's study, as the youngest of the chosen trio, it might be that it is the author's grounding in Polish literature and thought that at a deep level is the starting point for her reflections. More than likely it is this background that enabled her to see the link so essential to her thesis, between theological and literary modernism. I am unable to speak to the German context, but in Anglo-Saxon modernism this link certainly is, or perhaps has become, obscured. In the discussion following a lecture given online to scholars of the Department of Twentieth Century History of Polish Literature of the Jagiellonian University on 10 January, 2022, Rzepa says that the process went the other way; she noticed Eliot's interest in the debates of theological modernism and only then turned to consider Polish modernism, having never previously heard of any discussion of Catholic modernism in this context. She adds that Michał Rogalski's study of Zdziechowski of 2018¹¹ was the first really to consider this.¹² Nevertheless, when one starts to investigate it, the link between theological and literary modernism is obvious in the Polish context, in which the two overlapped in time. It is impossible not to notice the dialogue with theological modernist thought in the writings of Stanisław Brzozowski and Zdziechowski, who are key names in Rzepa's study of Miłosz and his dialogue with modernism. If my surmise is correct, then Rzepa's book would indirectly bear witness to the cognitive fruitfulness of the comparatist perspective, its power to bring to light matters that may be overlooked in studies within one tradition only: in this case, revealing what I have called in my title an "unrecognised face of literary modernism".

An important focus of Rzepa's discussion of Miłosz is his moving essay of 1943 on Zdziechowski, to which I wish to devote some little attention. Miłosz contends here that for Zdziechowski, what bears witness to God, who is "miracle", is simply "the inner voice, the heart's need"; and he quotes Zdziechowski's description of the soul of man without God as being "like the earth without water".¹³ It is the irrationality of cognition that Miłosz says draws Zdziechowski close to Modernism, and besides suggesting that Zdziechowski would agree with the English Jesuit modernist George Tyrrell about the immanent God in the heart of man, he also perceives the influence of Russian Orthodox philosophers such as Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyaev on the Polish thinker (thereby, incidentally, providing support, though Rzepa does not make explicit use

¹¹ M. Rogalski, *Producenci margaryny. Marian Zdziechowski i polski modernizm katolicki* [Producers of Margarine. Marian Zdziechowski and Polish Catholic Modernism], Znak, Kraków 2018.

¹² *Czesław Miłosz i modernizm katolicki. Spotkanie z dr Joanną Rzepą*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xepk2poRmg0>.

¹³ The essay is collected in both *Prywatne obowiązki* and *Legendsy nowoczesności*. I quote here, in my own translation, from the former (Pojezierze, Olsztyn 1990, pp. 202–203).

of it, for one of her propositions, that in the developments of religious thought in the period covered by her study there were coincidences between West and East). As Rzepa notes (28), Miłosz saw the modernists and their sympathisers, like Zdziechowski, as the last true religious thinkers. The figure of Marian Zdziechowski, alone with God and a world which did not proceed from His hands, looks “deeply anachronistic” against the mindset of the inter-war years, in which Miłosz found religious thought largely confounded with politics instead of proceeding from the inner life of the spirit. For Miłosz, Zdziechowski stands less as a document of his times than as “a document of certain eternal matters that today are eclipsed (...)”¹⁴

Whether the same “eternal matters” are also eclipsed in the “today” of nearly a century later is not so important here as the sense that the questions that troubled Zdziechowski are eternal questions, while the world lasts... and this is one reason why Rzepa’s book, which from an important point of view is a meticulously argued historical narrative, constantly breaks into the present of the reader. I, at least, in this context cannot fail to be reminded by Miłosz’s account of Zdziechowski of the bleak yearning of the heart for God expressed in another context in the second half of the twentieth century by the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas. In countless poems on the paradox of the absent, present God, Thomas speaks of “the emptiness without him of my whole / being”.¹⁵ Miłosz’s essay concludes with a reference to Newman, alongside Pascal (209), which seems implicitly to link Zdziechowski with these two, as someone who lived his faith “on his own, not someone else’s, account” – giving, as Newman would say, “real assent”.¹⁶

This leads me to comment on a further achievement of Rzepa’s, which is to show the importance of John Henry Newman in an extremely interesting, competent, clear account of the rise of theological modernism and its character (Part I chapter 2). The historical account is fascinating, and so is the sense of the scope of international – and even inter-denominational and inter-faith debate – loose, formal, personal in the case of the modernists (e.g. the exchange between Zdziechowski and Friedrich von Hügel, 38), more formally structured in the case of the anti-modernists. Rzepa points to the interesting paradox that Newman, who according to Tyrrell would have detested the stance of the modernists, given his antipathy to liberalism, nevertheless proved an inspiration to modernists within and outside England, to the point where the Pope felt it

¹⁴ *Prywatne obowiązki*, p. 208. My translation.

¹⁵ R.S. Thomas, *The Absence* (1978) [in:] *Collected Poems 1945–1990*, Dent, London 1993.

¹⁶ As Zdziechowski wrote in his 1921 discussion of the writings of Stanisław Brzozowski, *Gloryfikacja pracy* [The Glorification of Labour], “We accept faith not as the outcome of deductive logic, but with our whole soul; we assent to it with our souls; in this *przyswiadczenie* (thus Brzozowski translated the word assent, which played such a great role in Newman’s philosophy) ‘feeling, imagination, reason, will, all the powers of our being are centred’” (my translation). See <https://www.polskietradycje.pl/artykuly/widok/117>.

necessary to dissociate him from the movement by implying that if anything in his thought coincided with that of the modernists, it dated from before his entry into the Catholic Church (52)! The debate over Newman continued into the 1920s, as suggested by the exchange published in Eliot's "Criterion" (52); and he emerges as a constant presence in Rzepa's book. It might indeed be that he is a more important figure than even the author gives him credit for, especially in relation to Eliot; Newman has always seemed to me to be an unacknowledged inspiration to the poet's views on the nature of religious poetry.¹⁷

Rzepa draws very helpful parallels between strains of thought developing in different parts of Europe in the first part of the twentieth century, for example revealing the similarity between Andreas-Salomé's view of the nature of religion and that of William James (200), as well as the Catholic modernists von Hügel, Brémond, and Tyrrell (201). She also attempts to relate the approach of Russian Orthodox thinkers such as Pavel Florensky to that of Western theological modernists, arguing that all stressed that the meaning of dogma "can be fully realised only through personal experience of faith" (224–225). This is the justification, I take it, for the possibly surprising inclusion of Rilke in the study; though I own that some clarification would help here. Rzepa argues that Rilke and Andreas-Salomé rejected Catholicism and turned to Eastern Orthodoxy, iconography and "the practice of icon veneration" for a "spiritual and creative rejuvenation" which they did not find in Catholicism (247). This account seems primarily to emphasise the differences between Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition as understood by Rilke and Andreas-Salomé, rather than the similarities. Is the reader then to infer (for it is not said) that while the two Germans were exploring (and idealising) Russian Orthodoxy, the very same questions as troubled the latter's thinkers were, ironically, being debated by theologians in the Western tradition right under their noses?

It is somewhat difficult, I have to say, at the present time, to read Rilke's exalted praises of the "Russian soul" and confessions of "love for this vast, holy land" (208), supposedly possessing "a spiritual depth that has been lost in the west" (208) – as if echoing the current rhetoric of Vladimir Putin. But that of course is not Rzepa's fault. She remarks that Rilke's and Andreas-Salomé's "idealisation of Russia contradicted some of their direct experiences." (213). She quotes Sofya Shil, the Russian who accompanied them on their travels: "But they did not want to see the other truth just as true – the fact that the people were perishing without rights, in poverty, in ignorance, and that the vices of slaves were growing in them: laziness, filth, deception, drunkenness. When we spoke of this with deep sorrow, we felt it was unpleasant to our friends; they wanted (very legitimately) gladness and miraculous peacefulness." (213–214).

¹⁷ See also L. Oser, *A Century of Neglect: John Henry Newman and T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'*, "Studies in the Literary Imagination" 2016, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 47–62.

Though this was surely no part of Rzepa's intention in writing her study, still it must be said that to read Rilke's account of Russia and things Russian at this moment in history is to be made forcibly aware that idealisations have a pernicious potential, failing as they do to take account of human fallibility. The view ascribed to the "young worker" of Rilke's 1922 text is surely shocking to read today (and might it not also have been so at the time of writing, only a few years after the Russian revolution?):

one should try hard to see in any type of power that claims its right over us all the power there is, power as a whole, power at large, the power of God. One should say to oneself that there is only one power and perceive the small, the spurious, the defective power as if it were rightfully the one to make claims on us. (...) If one were always to see in any kind of power, even in the painful and malicious one, the one great power itself, I mean that which ultimately and justly retains its claim to it, would one then not survive unharmed, so to speak, even the power that is unjust and arbitrary? (qtd 214)

The emphasis in Rzepa's study of her chosen trio, especially in relation to Eliot, is on their prose writings. However, the book includes some inspired interpretations of the Ariel poems in the context of the poet's reading and thinking of the time, but not limited by that context. Rzepa describes the way that Eliot explored in these poems "the key questions recurring in the theological debates of the period" and prominent in his debate with Murry. She treats "Journey of the Magi", for instance, as "a poetic response to Murry's claim that '[t]he birth in the manger at Bethlehem, the Star in the East, the visit of the Wise Men, are devoid of historical reality. These wonderful things did not happen.'" As she argues, the poem "challenges Murry's statement and presents the Magi's journey as a re-enactment of the modern believer's search for the meaning of the Incarnation – a long hermeneutic journey to understand 'this Birth.'" (297). She goes on to comment on "the ironic overtone of their conclusion that 'no information' was left for them", which "suggests that the modern Magi have possibly begun attaching too much importance to what can be referred to as 'information'—a straightforward and scientifically verifiable fact – and subsequently have lost the ability to read symbolic signs that are more elusive and require interpretation." (300). The attention drawn to Eliot's use of the word "information" in Rzepa's study, again, reaches out into the present moment, in which that word has acquired still stronger and more baleful overtones than in Eliot's time.

Rzepa's account convincingly traces the dynamic development of Eliot's thinking. The conclusion to the last Turnbull lecture (1933), she says, "signals an openness to diverse ways of conceptualising the relationship between poetry and religion." (312). I cannot help but be reminded, in reading her account of these processes of change, of some lines from *Four Quartets*: "Last

year's words belong to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice" ("Little Gidding" Part II). Rzepa writes: "He [Eliot] asserted that finding 'the middle way' between various extremes is a strenuous effort, as it 'requires discipline and self-control, it requires both imagination and hold on reality'. (310). The reference is to the poet's essay on John Bramhall; but the wording is somehow reminiscent of the strivings of "The Dry Salvages": "the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action" (Part V). Rzepa herself writes in her conclusion to the chapter that Eliot's "engagement with mysticism finds its full expression in the meditative passages of Four Quartets (1936–1942), with the final lines of 'Little Gidding' referencing Julian of Norwich – the celebrated mystic of modernist theologians." (318). Perhaps Rzepa has discovered yet another way in which these late poems of Eliot "set a crown upon [a] lifetime's effort" ("Little Gidding" Part II), partially explaining why they end his strictly poetic output.

Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz is an academic monograph of high quality. Nevertheless, it is fitting that the final section of this work of scholarship should bear the title "Epilogue", which one might associate with the end of a narrative, rather than the more usual "Conclusion". For the Epilogue does something more than round off the book's argument. Indeed, despite its clear restatement of the main thesis, that theological modernism, "though hitherto largely neglected by scholars of literary modernism, had a profound impact on the cultural landscape of early-twentieth-century Europe and the United States" (407), it scarcely rounds anything off at all. Instead, it follows the trail of a fascinating story which winds on into the post-World War II world and beyond, opening out even into the present moment.

Time and again, as a reader of this book, I am made aware of the undiminished actuality of the apparently recondite debates which occupied the minds of theological and literary thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century. Zdziechowski's *Pestis perniciosissima: Rzecz o współczesnych kierunkach myśli katolickiej* [On contemporary trends in Catholic thought], published more than a century ago (1905) in Polish and German, sounds in places as fresh as if written yesterday. Rzepa writes: "He [Zdziechowski] is critical of the attempts to ground theology in empirical sciences, as 'the constant mixing of theology with mathematics leads to an unforgivable absolutism of judgement, desiccates the heart, and deprives it of the ability to understand the moral domain.'" (343). Against this, there is Eliot's "diagnosis of the malaise of contemporary philosophy", which Rzepa identifies as lying in "its endorsement of 'the most dangerous of dogmas – the dogma that we must do without dogmas'." (284). On the other side of a debate which probably rages as hotly today as it did in the exchange between Eliot and Murry, Rzepa reminds us of the latter's highly contemporary-sounding view that "the man who believes in God does not need a Church' any more" (293).

In the book's Epilogue, some mid-twentieth-century inheritors of theological modernist thought such as Henri de Lubac, Henri Bouillard, Marie-Dominique

Chenu, Yves Congar and Jean Daniélou are mentioned as influential in the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council, which continue to be the subject of reflection today. It should not then have come as any surprise, after reading *Modernism and Theology: Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Czesław Miłosz*, to find Fr Robert Skrzypczak concluding some reflections on the Sunday Mass readings for 19 June, 2022 with this quotation from the *Paradoxes of Lubac*: “All the formulas, all the precautions of orthodoxy, all the scruples of literal conformity, all barriers, in a word, are powerless to safeguard the purity of the faith. If the spirit should be lacking, dogma becomes no more than a myth and the Church no more than a party.”¹⁸

In *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (Yale University Press, 2011), Gabriel Josipovici declares that while there are “many excellent books on individual Modernists”, there are “hardly any good books (...) on Modernism”. If books on this subject are not “hopelessly biased and partisan”, then they are vitiated by their authors’ tendency to “reduce everything to a lowest common denominator”.¹⁹ Neither of these criticisms can be made of *Modernism and Theology*, which combines outstandingly interesting discussion of individual writers (even if they might not all have appreciated the label “Modernist” and even if in the case of Miłosz it might be particularly open to debate) with an account, not of Modernism as a monolithic whole, but of many multifaceted Modernisms – without disregarding their sometimes dubious and even disgraceful philosophical and political associations. So far from reducing these Modernisms to a lowest common denominator, Rzepa’s study, to continue the mathematical metaphor, multiplies the contexts in which their inter-relationships can be seen. In spite of being a work of immensely careful and detailed scholarship concentrated on a defined period in the past, or perhaps even because it is this, it keeps the Modernist chapter wide open to the present.

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¹⁸ *Paradoxes of Faith*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1987, p. 20. Quoted by R. Skrzypczak in *Dokument tożsamości*, “Gość Niedzielny”, 19.06.2022, <https://www.gosc.pl/kalendarz/41e75c>. Komentarze-do-Ewangelii/, accessed 19.06.2022.

¹⁹ G. Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2011, p. xi.

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