



Exchanges

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

The first task of your new editor is to pay proper tribute to the retiring Chair of the T. S. Eliot Society Committee, Hugh Black-Hawkins. As well as animating and leading the Committee and the Society, Hugh has regularly edited 'Exchanges' and produced for Society members a fascinating variety of Eliot-linked references and quotations. We are enormously grateful to him.

But times change, and as the new editor of 'Exchanges', I want to suggest a change of direction in this thrice-yearly newsletter of the Society. Eliot events are well catered for in the Members' section of the website, which under the management of Paul Keers, new Chair of the Committee of the Society, keeps abreast of all things Eliot-related in the national calendar. So this newsletter will be concerned less with 'news' than with real 'exchanges', I hope, between members. A number of possible approaches to contributing to 'Exchanges' is suggested on our website page, and two are exemplified below in this edition: a member's recollection, and a member's reflection. Both Tony Yates and Scott Freer offer interesting thoughts on the man and the poet – one whose lines are perhaps more quoted today than any other English poet's except Shakespeare. And in the intertextuality section below – one which could become a standard feature of 'Exchanges' – two specific instances of Eliot shaping the characterisation of leading contemporary novelists are explored. Other contributions are from the Society President and Secretary, as well as from your editor; I hope they provide interest and stimulus for further thoughts on the greatest English poet of the twentieth century.

John Caperon



T. S. Eliot

T. S. Eliot Festival 2016: a personal perspective

Kathy Radley, T. S. Eliot Society secretary/treasurer, offers a personal perspective on the 2016 Festival.

Uncertain skies greeted festivalgoers as the doors opened for the 11th Annual T. S. Eliot Festival at Little Gidding in July. It had not been possible to stage a two-day event as originally planned but the day was still full of promise and indeed the sun appeared in time to greet Jim McCue, one of the co-editors of the acclaimed critical edition of Eliot's poems, who began the day with his absorbing lecture *Such things as seem of least and most importance*. This provided the festival with a very strong start and the rest of the day did not disappoint, despite the sporadic rain.

Jewel Spears Brooker then gave an entertaining update on the international award-winning project, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, which took us into the lunch break.

The afternoon began with Matthew Geary's talk *An Investigation into Eliot and Motherhood* and continued with an enjoyable interview of BBC Commissioning editor Jeremy Howe by Paul Keers, when they discussed readings of Eliot's poetry on Radio 4.

The day closed in intermittent sunshine with a special reading of *Little Gidding* by Adam Begley. As guaranteed, the festival had been a full and fascinating event.



Member's contribution: a reminiscence of Eliot

Society Member Tony Yates offers a reminiscence of a near-encounter with T. S. Eliot in the 1960s:

Before it was Waterstone's flagship store in Piccadilly, it was an art-deco emporium called Simpkins, the inspiration for the soap "Are You Being Served?". Back in the 60s I happened to be in there one day when Eliot entered in a wheelchair being pushed by a woman – presumably Valerie. I tried not to stare. I wanted to tell him how much his poetry had meant to me. Fortunately I refrained. I knew he would be kind, but acutely embarrassed.

A year or two later, soon after his death, I attended a commemoration of Eliot's life and work at a theatre in Shaftesbury avenue, with Olivier and other distinguished actors reading from his poetry. I wish I hadn't lost the programme.

Around the same time, the early sixties, when I saw Eliot in the emporium, I spent a week at Little Gidding. I seem to remember it was run by a young Christian community at that time...

Do other Society members have memories of actual or near meetings with Eliot? We'd be glad to hear of them with a view to recording them in future editions of 'Exchanges'.

Member's contribution: Coffee spoons



T. S. Eliot Society Committee member and academic Scott Freer offers a contemporary reflection on the line: 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons'.

We often reach for a comparative by which we can measure our lives – a concrete entity to sense the qualitative value. Life is like a journey through a forest of wolves is a good one: the unknown, threatening territory that is filled with rabid predators. Life can feel expansive, filled with warning signs – fear death by drowning, I see the hanged man, Hurry up please, ladies and gentlemen, it's time. But Prufrock, who may well have returned from the grave to tell his tale of woe, shrinks before the edifice of life: coffee spoons. The metonymy is visceral and common – a concrete universal. In this small object which I used to stir my coffee, I perceived the scene and foretold the rest. For Blake, life is measured by a grain of sand – in the micro-specks of nature there exists a rich expanse of human value. For Eliot, in the granules of coffee there is a narrowing of human value or worth. We are measured, literally, by the comparatives we reach for in this literary measuring. A handful of dust instantly suggests death – ashes to ashes. Prufrock shrinks before life, because he feels the expanse of eternal death. But more than this, the plural of spoons suggests a repetitive action that mimics the stirring of coffee – the reflective mode that is pinned to the wheel of fate. Depressive alcoholics are daily drowning – their minds anchored to the bottom of their glass(es). To feel your life is no more than the

eternal recurrence of coffee spoons proves that Prufrock is haunted by a life wasted in morose and pointless reflection. He is no prophet, because he did not perceive the scene to foretell the rest. He is damned, as we all are according to Eliot, to the motion of eternal recurrence – in living death. It is a nightmare memory we repeat like the stirring of sugar into tea or coffee. Think of how many times you have wasted time and life (for they are the same) in senseless activity. And despair. Imagine that death is Hamlet's fear – not to be and for the ghosts of life to wake you every minute of every living hellish day. I have measured my life in texting or counting the change in my pockets. Imagine that death is a returning to life and an eternal revisiting of your valueless time. All

imaginings are a measuring. A metaphor is a measuring. Hell is perhaps an imagining par excellence – it is the great cosmological measuring – and this is why Eliot admired Dante. Death haunts us, because it is the means by which we measure our lives. We are a grain of sand in a desert. No more. But what is more is our measuring. If the measuring is too haunting to contemplate – we reach for the gun or God. The expansive metaphor is my measuring, for I dare not shrink before life. Good night, good night.

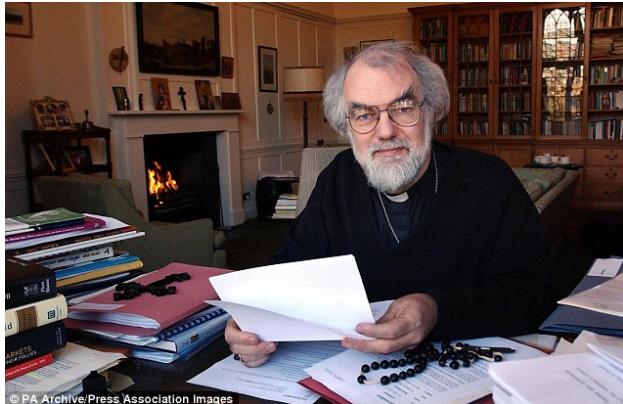
We invite other Society members to offer their own reflection on lines of Eliot: contributions for the next edition of 'Exchanges' should be submitted via the website by the beginning of December 2016.

Member's contribution: Eliot on the Tottenham Court Road

Society member and 'Exchanges' editor John Caperon recalls a first encounter with the poems of T.S. Eliot at a bookshop on the Tottenham Court Road in 1960....

The great thing about being at my particular North London grammar school was that Wednesday afternoons could occasionally be taken off, and the West End with all its attractions lay just half an hour away on the tube. The Northern line went underground at East Finchley, and nothing much happened until Warren Street and Goodge Street: but then came Tottenham Court Road – a mecca of bookshops and music stores. One Wednesday when 'games' had been cancelled I made the journey, and found myself browsing outside one of those bookshops. There was a revolving stand of paperbacks, and as I turned it *The Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* caught my eye. English poetry at school was Wordsworth and Byron, but something alerted me to the Eliot volume. Had I been recommended his poems? I can't recall, but I do remember taking up the *Selected Poems* and beginning to read. 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' struck me as American, but the Italian epigraph was beyond me. I read the opening lines: 'Let us go then, you and I,/ When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherised upon a table....' So different from Wordsworth (could it really be 'poetry'?), but so very compelling. I read on, becoming more baffled by the line; but decided the book must be bought. I still have it.

Eliot, spirituality and prayer: thoughts from Rowan Williams



in the rain with nothing very much happening.

I suspect that, for most of us, a lot of our experience of prayer is precisely that. But the odd occasions when you do see what T. S. Eliot (in section IV of 'Burnt Norton') called "the kingfisher's wing" flashing "light to light" make it all worth-while.

And I think that living in this sort of expectancy – living in awareness, your eyes sufficiently open and your mind both relaxed and attentive enough to see that when it happens – is basic to discipleship.

T. S. Eliot Society President Rowan Williams is known not just as a former Archbishop of Canterbury, and the current Master of Magdalene College Cambridge, but also as a poet and prolific theological writer, the author of some thirty books. His latest book, 'Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life' (SPCK, 2016) was recently excerpted in the 'Church Times', and includes the following reflection on Eliot and prayer.

I've always loved that image of prayer as birdwatching. You sit very still because something is liable to burst into view, and sometimes, of course, it means a long day sitting

'My words echo thus, in your mind.' ('Burnt Norton'): Eliot and intertextuality



Eliot was always clear about the significance of tradition: no poet writes in a vacuum, but in the light of all previous poems and poets. As if to emphasise this he employed the techniques of allusion, reference and quotation more deliberately than any other poet of his era. Now, of course, Eliot is himself part of the tradition; and his words echo in the work of many of those who have succeeded him. Two recent novels, for example, employ Eliot references quite significantly in their characterisation.

In 'Exposure' (Windmill Books, 2016), Helen Dunmore has one of her key characters Simon Callington reflecting thus of his wife Lily: 'He trusts her completely, far more than he trusts himself. Lily is everything. She is the still point of his turning world' (p.82). Later, the near-delirious and dying traitor Giles Holloway lies in his hospital bed and reflects: 'No-one much has come to see him. The best of them are dead anyway. His real friends. Mulching the ditches of Normandy. That line out of *The Waste Land* about the ships at Mylae and some character called Stetson. The ships at Mylae. Quinqueremes and triremes. You'd have been in a damn site of trouble at school if you didn't remember about Mylae, and Giles still does. The defeat of Hannibal Gisco at sea, in 260 BC. Pretty bloody unlikely to have a chap called Stetson at Mylae, but there you are. That bloody T. S. Eliot. What the hell did he know anyway? Where was he in the war he wrote about so well? He was at Oxford. All that stuff about corpses sprouting. Corpses don't sprout, Tom old boy, not in any war. They swell up until their features disappear. They fall apart. They rot in ditches instead of leaping over them' (pp.331-2).

Giles Holloway has read Eliot at school, and now lines of *The Waste Land* echo in his mind, prompting recollections of his Ancient History classes and of his own war experiences, and leading to a tetchy outburst against the poet - 'Tom, old boy' – for the unreality of his response to war. The Eliot reference enables Dunmore both to hint at the nature of Giles's (private) education, and to reveal something of his fevered, cynical dismissiveness. In Simon's case, his perception of Lily as 'the still point' is a crucial one: her stillness, her inner quiet, is what chiefly identifies this decisive and heroic character, increasingly central to the novel as the plot reaches its climax. Eliot's words flesh out her inner being for the reader.

In his most recent novel, 'Where My Heart Used to Beat' (Vintage, 2016), Sebastian Faulks develops themes he has previously tackled, weaving both love, warfare and mental health into the history of his central character and narrator, psychiatrist Robert Hendricks. Towards the end of the novel, it emerges that Eliot has become influential for Hendricks. In the process of writing his book *The Chosen Few*, a study of the 'one in a hundred of the human population who is mad', Hendricks has found himself drawn to literature, and has shared the sense of cultural loss expressed by Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, the loss of an 'age of innocence', '... a time before 1914 when it was still possible to believe that human beings ... were essentially becoming , with whatever setbacks, more civilised, more humane, and more enlightened creatures' (p.237).

The Waste Land has also entered Hendricks' consciousness. As he sits beside the sea, reflecting on the profound, quasi-metaphysical discussions he is sharing with his senior medical colleague Dr Pereira, lines from the poem come to mind: 'As I propped myself up against a passably comfortable rock, I thought of the lines from *The Waste Land*: 'I sat upon the shore/Fishing, with the arid plain behind me/Shall I at least set my lands in order?' Perhaps, rather than strive for order, it would be better for me to relax and let the absurdities and non sequiturs of life roll over and drown me.' Hendricks' ongoing, existential dialogue with Eliot continues: later in the novel, he is debating whether – having eventually learned of her whereabouts – he should visit his wartime Italian lover Luisa: 'I was worried I would love her as much as thirty-seven years ago; I was worried I would love her less.... Sadness I had lived with, sadness I could almost bear; but I couldn't face the idea that it had all been wasted. If, on the other hand, I discovered that she was still indeed the missing heart of me, then that would remove any chance of salvation in this life. So I couldn't go. I had loved her too much, that was the fact. T.S. Eliot, a poet I had discovered late, was often quoted as having written that humankind could not bear very much reality. It seemed to me the thing humankind couldn't bear too much of was love' (pp.273-4). So Hendricks, the analytical scientist, the psychiatrist, has found that Eliot's words, echoing in his mind, prompt reflection and inner argument. Eliot is a key reference-point for Faulks' characterisation.

These two instances indicate a possible abundance of Eliot references in twenty-first century writing. What other examples can T. S. Eliot Society members offer? It would be interesting to read members' responses in the next edition of 'Exchanges'





Spender on Eliot: poet, eels and peaches

Though not of course a clergyman, Eliot possessed a formality of bearing which might – given a dog-collar – have encouraged others to mistake him for one. In this extract from ‘World Within World’ by Stephen Spender (Hamish Hamilton, 1951) Spender describes an early encounter with Eliot, highlighting the poet’s ‘priestly’ seriousness.

When I was twenty a friend had sent some of my poems to T.S. Eliot, and a few weeks later I met him for the first time at one of those London clubs where I have met him so often since. His appearance was grave, slightly bowed, aquiline, ceremonious, and there was something withdrawn and yet benevolent about his glance. When Eliot orders a drink or inclines over the menu to consider a meal the affect is such as to produce a hush. It is a priestly act as he says in a grave voice: ‘Now will you have a turtle soup (I doubt whether it will be made from real turtle) or green pea soup?’ But he is also a connoisseur who has strong views about wines, and still more, cheese. On the occasion of one of our first meals, I disturbed him a little by announcing that I would choose smoked eel to eat. I was surprised to hear him say: ‘I don’t think I dare eat smoked eel,’ thus unconsciously paraphrasing Mr. Prufrock who asks himself: ‘Do I dare to eat a peach?’... (1929)

Epilogue:

I hope Society members will have enjoyed this first edition of a re-shaped ‘Exchanges’. If this space is really to be a locus for interchange and debate, it needs responses and contributions – so do please offer your feedback, your comments and critique, and let’s begin an ongoing discussion about Eliot. Please send contributions through the dedicated Exchanges page on the website by the end of November.

T.S. Eliot

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