



# Exchanges

The T.S. Eliot Society (UK)

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## EDITORIAL COMMENT

Members of the T. S. Eliot Society have responded very positively to the new-style *Exchanges*. My thanks go to those who contributed to an interesting and varied September 2016 edition, to those who have shared their appreciation of the new editorial approach, to those also who have contributed to this December 2016 edition, and to Cheri Wilke, society member in the United States, who expertly formats and illustrates the text for publication on the website.

But – and there is always a ‘but’ somewhere! – I may have misled members by referring in my last editorial to *Exchanges* as a ‘thrice-yearly’ publication. Having been shaped and conditioned by schools as both a pupil and a teacher for more years than I care to remember, I think and live naturally in ‘terms’; whereas *Exchanges* is properly a quarterly publication. Discussion at the recent Annual General Meeting of the Society made clear that *four* not three issues it is indeed to be, and I can only apologise to members for misleading them.

This current – second quarter - edition also includes contributions from Society member Nicholas M Hodgers, Committee member Pauline Davison, and Committee chair Paul Keers, as well as a reflection from our Patron Rowan Williams; it also brings all members up to date with the Annual General Meeting, and with the annual T. S. Eliot lecture. At a time of year regularly marked by readings from Eliot – notably from ‘Journey of the Magi’, which has won a deserved place as the classic reflection on the Epiphany – I am pleased to be able to wish all fellow-members of the T. S. Eliot Society the joys of the season.

*John Caperon*



## *The T. S. Eliot Society Annual Lecture: Dr Sarah Kennedy*



This year's lecture was given by Dr Sarah Kennedy, Fellow in English at Downing College, Cambridge. Her title, *Eliot's Ghost Women*, might well have bemused the more casual reader of Eliot, 'this most slippery of poets', as she referred to him. But her exposition identified clearly what she called 'a complicated series of attitudes to the feminine' on Eliot's part, revealed in the significance of the revenant figure, of haunting and hauntedness, in the poems. Whereas Eliot's male revenants are voluble presences, his 'ghost women' are silent, 'charged presences'.

Dr Kennedy went on to explore the question: Why are Eliot's ghost women limited to silence? Her suggestion was that the sheer power of these ghostly figures derives precisely from their silence; and she illustrated her thesis through close reference to and analysis of four texts: 'La Figlia Che Piange', 'Ash Wednesday', 'Marina' and 'The Cocktail Party'. The weeping girl of 'La Figlia ...' has a 'spectral femininity', suggested Dr Kennedy; and the 'Lady of silences' in 'Ash Wednesday' – a poem which 'strains forward towards renunciation' - combines elements of two female figures, the Blessed Virgin Mary and Persephone. In 'Marina', the eponymous female suggests hope, linking her with her sister poetic daughters Miranda and Perdita; and Celia's doppelgänger in 'The Cocktail Party' embodies fully 'the mystery and opacity of Eliot's ghost women'....

*The whole of Dr Kennedy's fascinating and illuminating lecture can be heard via the Members' section of the website, and her exposition will enrich readers' appreciation of Eliot, the most tangential and profound of poets.*



## ***Member's contribution: Eliot resonates with a younger reader***

*Society member Nicholas Hodgers describes discovering Eliot as a college student and finding a pearl of great price...*

I am probably one of the younger members of this society - I am a college student who has just finished a Master's Degree in English Language and Literature. When deciding on a thesis title for my dissertation, one name stood out to me more than any other: T.S. Eliot, a poet who has done more for my burgeoning career than any other writer. My first real exposure to Eliot was during a college course on



Modernism; I had heard the name before and was vaguely familiar with his writing, but I had never delved into it in any great detail. I was intrigued by the titles of his poetry and decided to investigate his writing further.

His poetry resonated with me in a way no other writer's has. I felt had made a great discovery here. It was as though I had unearthed a hidden treasure, a poet who put into words what I and countless others had been thinking, but did not have the words to say. I studied Eliot's poetry in greater detail then, from "Prufrock" to "Four Quartets", each time discovering new things and gaining a better understanding of Eliot's Modernist philosophy and the world he had created. I knew I wanted to be an Eliot scholar then, and I decided I would write my dissertation on his poetry.

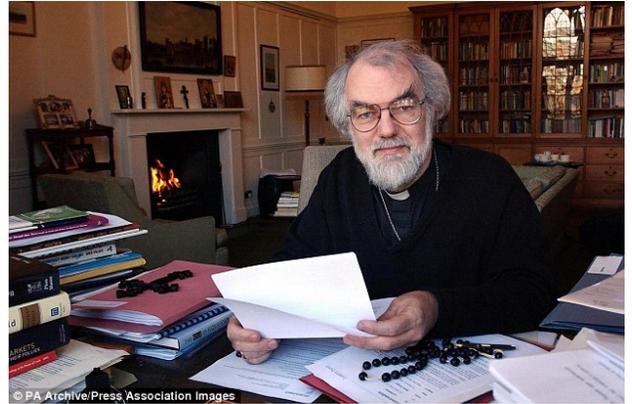
Having emerged with a top-class honours degree and seen a range of possibilities in the world of English studies open up to me because of it, I feel indebted to Eliot, a man who died well before I was even born and whom I will never meet, but whose poetry has had such a significant impact on me and my studies. I am grateful to have had his experience, and I hope Eliot continues to remain a constant interest for me and my career, wherever it may go.

*The editor renews his invitation to other Society members to send their own responses to Eliot. Write about your favourite Eliot lines, describe how you first encountered Eliot, set out the questions you might like to ask him....*

### ***To set against alienation and despair: Rowan Williams and Eliot***

*An edited extract from Rowan Williams's St Martin in the Fields lecture this Autumn on the theme 'Who is my neighbour' was recently carried in the 'Church Times'. In the section quoted here, Williams offers a personal understanding of God, with at least possible echoes of Eliot:*

When I am asked, suddenly, questions about who I am, who is God, and what is the meaning of life, I try to speak briefly, personally, and as a Christian. Who am I? I am someone called by my name by my Creator; I am someone whose distinctive humanity is called into being because God wants it to be, and loves it because he wants it to be. And that calling into being, immediately, eternally, sets me in relation with all those others whose names are being called.

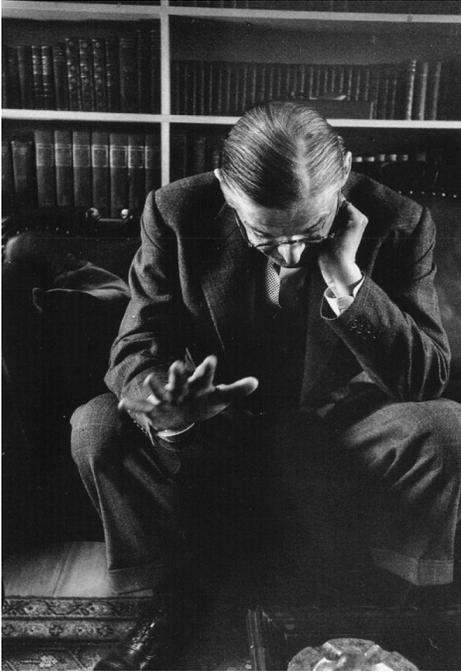


Who is God – the one who calls? God is the unimaginable, loving intelligence, from whose everlasting action comes everything, and whose everlasting, loving intelligent action is both focused utterly on you and me, and on every other being that is made....

*Reviewing Robert Crawford's 'Young Eliot', Rowan Williams wrote of the way the biography 'helps us see ... how [Eliot] became the sort of poet who would write Ash Wednesday (1930) and even the Four Quartets (1943). His reception into the Church of England, a few years after the period covered by this book, was not a straightforward religious conversion....' Williams's point is that the earlier Eliot 'had never completely turned his back on a religious perspective'; and the Editor has often wondered whether there is a fleeting sense of religious longing in the line from 'Preludes': 'The notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing'. What do members think?*



## *“In this Twittering world”*



*Society chair Paul Keers alerts readers to Eliot’s presence in the Twittersphere ...*

Is there anyone left who doesn’t know about Twitter? In case there is, Twitter can be described as a way of circulating online text statements, or Tweets, limited to 140 characters each. Many significant people, as well as less significant celebrities, are now “followed” by millions who read and recirculate their statements.

And yes, TS Eliot is on Twitter. Well, there is a “bot” (an automated feed) called @TSElibot, which posts quotations from Eliot’s poetry and prose, each one within Twitter’s 140 character limit. To date it has posted some 7,000 – and has nearly 33,000 followers, who receive them each day.

There are amusing albeit occasional Tweets which appear from “Vivienne Haigh-Wood” (@The1stMrsEliot) on occasions such as Eliot’s birthday and wedding anniversary. (First wedding, obviously...). Various Eliot scholars and enthusiasts are active on Twitter, such as Jim McCue (@fordebirds). And our Society itself Tweets (@TSEliotSocUK), primarily links to new events and news stories posted on the website.

To keep up with items for the website, I monitor any Tweets from anyone which contain the words “TS Eliot”. Needless to say there is a constant flow, many from people announcing Eliot-related events. And of course, in various circumstances, different lines from Eliot are often quoted; following the US election result, there was a (perhaps understandable) surge in people quoting from *The Hollow Men*.

But what intrigues me is that the most constantly circulated of Eliot’s words are not his most famous or profound lines, but some which might best be described as “motivational”. They are otherwise relatively obscure; and the most popular of all might not even be from Eliot.

There is, of course, a popular craving for statements which provide positive encouragement, the kind of optimistic, go-for-it phrases which appear on office posters and fridge magnets, phrases such as “Today is the first day of the rest of your life”. Therein lies the popularity on Twitter of one of the most circulated yet relatively obscure lines from Eliot: “Every moment is a fresh beginning”.

It's a line which has echoes of *Four Quartets*, but is actually taken from *The Cocktail Party*. And in a simplistic interpretation, "Every moment is a fresh beginning" provides exactly the same message as "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" – only from a rather more reputable author.

Similarly, one of Eliot's most widely circulated quotations on Twitter is: "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out just how far one can go". As you will immediately realise, it is not one of his most celebrated lines of poetry. In fact, it comes from Eliot's preface to *Transit of Venus* (1931), a book of poems by Harry Crosby, who was something of a playboy of the time. This obscure line is now frequently quoted and recirculated on Twitter, encouraging people to "push themselves".

But perhaps the most popular quotation on Twitter attributed to TS Eliot is: "If you're not in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?" This is repeated constantly, often between students, and far more often than any of his poetry. Each time it appears it is then retweeted (recirculated to other people) dozens of times. But... does it really sound like Eliot?

(Some time back, the Society was contacted by a literary agent, who wanted to use the quotation as an epigraph to a children's book, and needed to confirm its source. An appeal in our Members Area led to no suggestions, so as the most likely person to know, Professor Ron Schuchard was approached. His diplomatic reply was that: "I regret to say that I have never come across this alleged quotation by TS Eliot in the main body of his prose writings.")

Anything which brings Eliot's name to a wider modern audience is to be applauded; it is good to see that TS Eliot is being widely quoted in the digital space, and that his words retain a contemporary significance. But one has to question the odd and obscure lines which have achieved most popularity on Twitter – and wonder whether TS Eliot is being misrepresented "in this Twittering world"?

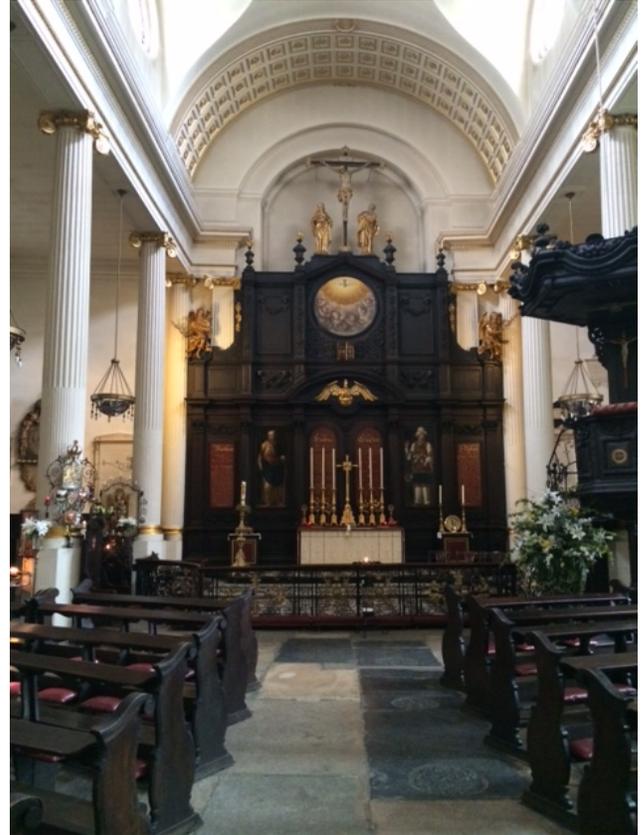


## ***Walking T. S. Eliot's 'Waste Land': a London peregrination***

Pauline Davison reflects on a morning spent with 'Footprints of London' (See: [www.footprintsoflondon.com](http://www.footprintsoflondon.com))

On a grey, windy day in October I joined a small group gathered at the Monument to meet Tina Baxter of *Footprints of London* for a literary walk, *The Waste Land in the City*. For two and a half hours we were led through a maze of streets between Monument and St Paul's, with Tina pointing out places associated with the poem. She knew the area like the back of her hand, though I would have welcomed a map. I tried and failed to reconstruct our route with my A to Z when I got home. However, I enjoyed the walk enormously. It reminded me of the excitement I felt when I first read *The Waste Land* as a teenager. It made me realize how well Eliot, a foreigner, had come to know the square mile of the city, its topography, history and people, and how much the city has changed.

We were never far from the river which appears frequently in the poem in various guises. Spenser's "Sweet Thames, run softly", evokes pastoral images of Richmond or Kew, contrasted with the splendour of Queen Elizabeth's royal barge and the workaday river which "sweats oil and tar". We admired old Billingsgate, now a well-restored 'events venue', but in Eliot's day a huge, noisy, smelly, fish market, whose workers after a busy morning might "lounge at noon" in a bar in Lower Thames Street.



**"Ionian white and gold" in St Magnus Martyr**

The scent of incense welcomed us into St Magnus the Martyr, the fishermen's church, home to the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers. Standing at the north end of London Bridge it has always been the gateway to the city and inside there is a wonderfully detailed model of the old Bridge with its shops and houses. The church was rebuilt by Wren after the Great Fire and Eliot considered its interior, where the walls "hold inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold", one of his finest, though the columns are actually Corinthian, not Ionian. He would have been comfortable there with its proud Anglo-Catholicism. After he joined the Church of England in 1927 he worshipped at a similar 'high' church, St Stephen's, Gloucester Road.

He knew and loved the city churches and in a letter of 1920, protesting at a proposal to demolish nineteen of them, he declared that they gave "to the business quarter of London a beauty which its hideous banks and commercial houses have not quite defaced ... the least precious redeems some vulgar street ....", and that is still true. We visited Hawksmoor's only city church, St Mary Woolnoth, and saw the clock which "kept the hours with a dead sound on the final stroke of nine." We admired the spacious interior of St Mary-at-Hill, whose priest-in-charge is Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, and we walked through the garden in the ruins of St Dunstan-in-the-East, where only the Tower remains.

There are vignettes and snatches of conversations in the poem that bring to life the people of the city. Eliot must have sat in a pub and listened to the Cockney voices telling the story of Lil and Albert's marriage: "When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said – / I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself...". In contrast there are the measured tones of Madame Sosostris: "If you see dear Mrs Equitone, / Tell her I bring the horoscope myself: / One must be so careful these days"; and the voice of neurotic anxiety: "My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak." And there are the tiny character sketches of people who live or work in the city: the seedy merchant Mr Eugenides; the "loitering heirs of city directors"; the house agent's clerk and his bored lover; Mrs Porter and her daughter, who "wash their feet in soda water" – all brought to life in a few lines.

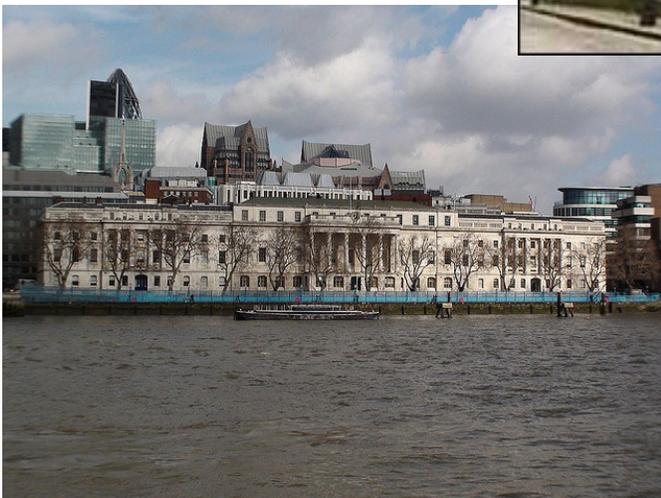


**St Mary Woolnoth**

The city Eliot knew, even the one I grew up with, has changed immeasurably, but below the skyscrapers and tower blocks many of the old landmarks remain - St Paul's, the Monument, the Custom House, the churches. The crowds of workers still flow over London Bridge; and as we walked through the narrow back streets or watched the murky river, it was still possible to imagine the city that provided the backdrop for that great poem of alienation and despair.



**St Dunstan-in-the-East**



**Billingsgate Market**

## ***T. S. Eliot Society Annual General Meeting November 2016***

*The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held in the finely-appointed Lucia Windsor Room at Newnham College, Cambridge, by kind permission of the Principal, Professor Dame Carol Black. Members will recall that Valerie Eliot generously endowed a lectureship in English at Newnham, and was herself an Honorary Fellow at the College; the Eliot connection is strong. What follows sets out the key points from the AGM, and thanks are due to Society Secretary Kathy Radley for allowing me to plunder her record of the meeting.*



Some sixteen members were present for the AGM, where new Chair Paul Keers began by paying tribute to retiring chair ***Hugh Black-Hawkins***. Hugh had over eight years in the chair brought energy and direction to the Society, and considerably extended its reach, said Paul; and in recognition, gifts from the Committee were duly presented to Hugh. In his response, Hugh commended the commitment of the new Chair and of the Secretary, Kathy Radley, in sharing with him the recent efforts and achievements of the Society.

In the ***election of officers***, Paul Keers was confirmed as Chair and Kathy Radley as Secretary and Treasurer; other Committee members were similarly confirmed, with the website continuing under the management of Paul Keers, the Journal under the care of Scott Freer, and Exchanges edited by John Caperon.

Thanks were also expressed to Chris Joyce for arranging this year's ***T. S. Eliot annual lecture***; the history of the lecture showed a certain symmetry: this year's lecturer, Dr Sarah Kennedy, had assisted at the inaugural Society lecture which had been given some years ago by the late Professor Frank Kermode.

***The Society's communications*** had been further developed, it was reported. In addition to the website and Journal, there is now a (static) Facebook page directing enquirers to the website. The introduction of *Paypal* as the Society's payment portal, and of *Eventbrite* as our ticketing agent, had brought real progress. Since its inception in 2012, the website has had 117,000 page views by 46,000 visitors, and there are currently between 50 and 70 visitors a day.

***The Bodleian Library*** had identified the Society's website as one providing significant research potential for students of Eliot, and had included the website in its own on-line resources. This represented a real accolade for the Society, and for the website manager Paul Keers.

***Membership*** now stood at 137, the highest to date, and the Society's ***Finances*** were in good condition, with membership subscriptions bringing in some £1,900, and other income deriving from sales of the Journal, of Society mugs, and of ***the late Graham Pechey's Tongues of Fire: word and being in T. S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets'***. There was affectionate recognition of Graham's outstanding work for the Society both through the Journal and in his own writing, and there were tributes, led by his successor as Journal editor Scott Freer, to his life as a teacher and scholar both in South Africa and in this country.

***T. S. Eliot Festival:*** following the success of the one-day 2016 Festival, the 2017 Festival, scheduled for Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July, would have a similar format and again take place at Little Gidding. There was some uncertainty, though, about future plans for the Little Gidding site; the proposed appointment of a new Dean for Little Gidding had not materialised and further developments were awaited.

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