



# Exchanges...

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT**

*This Summer edition of 'Exchanges' offers reviews of two Eliot-related events in recent months, as well as of early July's T. S. Eliot Festival at Little Gidding. Paul Keers, Chair of the T. S. Eliot Society, also writes on the recently published biography of David Jones, the Welsh soldier/painter/poet whose extraordinary work 'In Parenthesis' Eliot so much admired.*



*Continuing the theme of the interactions between verbal and visual art, we carry an article by the French artist and admirer of Eliot, Alain Senez. His article – illustrated by his own art work created in response to one of Eliot's most evocative phrases - 'sudden in a shaft of sunlight' – extends the debate about how one art-form may prompt work in another. Readers will recall the piece in the Spring edition of 'Exchanges' on Richard Williams' personal re-envisioning of the 'Four Quartets', which opened up this fascinating topic. Can readers offer more instances, I wonder, of Eliot's poetry prompting imaginative-creative work in other art-forms?*

*On the critical history front, Dr Chris Joyce's appreciation of the late Bernard Bergonzi's Eliot criticism is regrettably held over to the next, Autumn, edition for reasons of space; and on the interesting topic of intertextuality, we offer a brief footnote derived from the correspondence columns of 'The Guardian'.*

*As ever, we are grateful to all our contributors for their individual insights. 'Exchanges' remains very much a members' conversation board, where ideas are shared – and of course – exchanged. Why not offer a contribution to the next, Autumn edition from your own reading of and reflections upon Eliot? Favourite lines, anyone?*

*John Caperon Editor*

## Event Reviews

**‘T. S. Eliot and Decadence’:** *an evening of poetry and music at Kings Place, London, in February 2017, curated by the Rimbaud and Verlaine Foundation and supported by the T. S. Eliot Foundation*



Most of us who are interested in Eliot have noted things paradoxical about him. One is the contrast between his highly conservative appearance and deportment - Virginia Woolf quipped about his ‘four-piece suit’ - and the images we entertain of a daringly innovative young poet (how unlike the ‘Decadents’ themselves he was in that regard!); but in thinking about his originality, we may well remind ourselves of the strong emphasis he would place on the idea of tradition. At the time of his year in Paris (1910-11), however, he had yet to conceive the ambition to settle in England and to be accepted as a figure of the literary establishment, *plus royaliste que le roi*. He was already an avid and knowledgeable reader of literature when he went to Harvard in 1906. A couple of years later he would come upon Arthur Symons’ influential book ‘The Symbolist Movement in Literature’ (though there was more to that movement than symbolism). As a result he would develop an intense interest in French poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially the work of Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Corbière and Laforgue, poets technically and creatively far ahead of their contemporaries in Victorian England. Later Eliot would write of the importance for him also of Baudelaire.

Paris released him from the constraints of his family background. He would later speak of the need to burn his boats and settle in England (which he did in 1914; America would not return to his affections until much later in life). His Parisian experiences also prepared him for his encounter and friendship with Ezra Pound who, apart from being a gifted poet himself, had a genius for detecting and promoting creative talent in others. There could hardly have been a better time for Eliot, then aged 22, to be in Paris, as Professor Margaret Reynolds (Queen Mary, University of London) pointed out. This was the Paris of Montmartre and the emerging Montparnasse, of the young Picasso and Matisse, of revolutionary music, sculpture and dance. 1910 saw the production of Stravinsky’s ‘Firebird’ and Debussy’s ‘Préludes’, and the second season of the Ballets Russes. Eliot attended lectures by Bergson; and he made one of the most important friendships of his life, with Jean Verdenal, ‘mort aux Dardanelles’, whom he would much later recall, in ‘a sentimental sunset’, coming across the Luxembourg Gardens waving a branch of lilac. It seems likely that Verdenal, an enthusiast for Wagner, introduced Eliot to the composer’s late work, although he could not have heard ‘Parsifal’ – so crucial to the idea of ‘The Waste Land’ - until 1914, when it was first performed outside Bayreuth (at Covent Garden).

Dr Matthew Creasy (University of Glasgow), drawing on Verlaine’s ‘Languueur’ (‘Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence’), spoke of its resonance for contemporary poets who likened the recent turbulent events in Europe to the fall of the Roman Empire. They also experimented with unusual literary forms. There would be parallels in Eliot’s poetic practice. So in ‘The Waste Land’ we find in the ‘Murmur of maternal lamentation’ passage that the shortening lines, absence of punctuation and disjointed syntax enact the breakdown evoked; but paradoxically Eliot was not a Decadent poet. Though his poetry was strongly influenced by Verlaine and the others, Eliot is far less relaxed than they about the sense of historical crisis. He is fearful of the consequences of revolutionary change. (This becomes even more apparent as we trace the evolution of his later poetry.)

This for me was the most interesting part of the evening, having the strongest academic component; but not everyone will have wished it to have been more academicised, and as intellectual entertainment it could hardly have been better and more balanced. Simon Callow's readings were sensitive and insightful, dramatic where necessary but (thankfully for this reviewer) less thespian than one might have feared. Pianist and music scholar Roy Howat, author of 'The Art of French Piano Music', spoke absorbingly of Debussy's genius, demonstrating superb pianism himself as he accompanied the fine soprano renditions of literary settings by Anna Sideris, a student on the Advanced Opera Programme at the Guildhall School. (Such settings include notably those by Debussy of Mallarmé and by Fauré of Verlaine; it seems virtually certain that Eliot took the opportunity to hear recitals of such works, perhaps in the company of Verdenal, during his Parisian year.)

Eliot himself was more than competent as a practitioner of French verse, as we find in some of the 'Poems, 1920' such as 'Lune de Miel' and 'Dans le Restaurant' (with its foreshadowings of 'The Waste Land'). 'Practitioner' – the word is Eliot's and suggests well the discipline he brought to his craft. The art of the French poets had a major influence on his own practice, as a little later would the English dramatists of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the 'Metaphysicals' who followed closely upon them. Other influences of the period derived from such emerging disciplines as psychology and anthropology enabled him to experiment with the 'mythical method', most notably in 'The Waste Land'. It was Eliot who, to use words of his own, altered expression; and it is astonishing that a hundred years on he still feels like our contemporary. We may hold Yeats in mind as challenging for the title, but Eliot remains unsurpassed among English poets since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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**Eliot in the Wartime Classroom:** *the University of London 1858 Charter Lecture 2017, with poetry readings by Jeremy Irons. Senate House, University of London, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2017*

The proud, period setting of London University Senate House's Beveridge Hall was entirely right for this lavish event (though loudly protesting groups of low-paid employees outside cast a slight shadow, admittedly). Celebrating the foundation of the University by Queen Victoria in 1858, the Charter Lecture is a traditionally high-profile occasion, and this year coincided with the centenary of T. S. Eliot's first year with the University as an Extension Lecturer. What better, then, than to invite the doyen of Eliot scholars, Professor Ron Schuchard, to give the lecture?



Professor Schuchard may inadvertently convey the impression of knowing all there is to be known about Eliot; but it was evident that in his research for this lecture he had come across really new biographical material, offering a highly-illuminating insight into the habits and methods of the poet as an extension lecturer. Against the common image of Eliot as possessing a somewhat refined, even rarefied mind and personality, Schuchard set out the background of Eliot's adult students – predominantly working-class people with cultural aspirations but little in the way of cultural capital. Eliot's efforts in preparing his lectures, undertaking the difficulty of travel to various locations under wartime restrictions, and finding a point of contact with his diverse audience were little short of heroic, it emerged.

And the most touching – most telling – moment for this member of the audience was when Professor Schuchard showed a slide of the dedication written inside a copy of 'The Oxford Book of English Verse' grateful students had clubbed together to purchase for their lecturer. It's been said (wrongly and too often) that Eliot appeals only to the cultured, even that his verse is designed to exclude. Not so, of course: and here was clear evidence that as an 'extension' lecturer Eliot made every possible effort to communicate with and genuinely to extend his classes of working people. It was a truly revelatory lecture; a century on, new light being thrown on our greatest poet.

And Jeremy Irons has the great actor's ability to throw new light on a familiar text. Irons had been asked to read the whole of the 'Four Quartets' in one, uninterrupted sitting – another heroic enterprise – and perched on a stool before his predominantly academic audience he brought out a greater sense of the poet's thinking and at times struggling creative mind – searching for words, frustrated at their inadequacy – than this listener had previously heard. If the task of a reader is to convey both the sense and the complex feeling of the poet's words, to show the poet's mind at work, this was a great and compelling performance. Both lecture and reading took the audience into new places with Eliot; and it was a delight to note that this outstanding event also gave prominence to the work of the T. S. Eliot Society (UK).

*John Caperon*

## The T. S. Eliot Festival at Little Gidding, Sunday July 9<sup>th</sup> 2017

In the depths of winter, Little Gidding can be a bleak, charmless place; but in high summer it evokes a sense of the timeless rural landscape of England: rolling fields, burgeoning wildflowers, birdsong. The risks of holding a Festival in this setting – remote from public transport links and requiring a marquee to host a reasonable crowd of festival-goers – are evident; but this year the weather was near-perfect, and a gathering of some 120 Eliot enthusiasts met only yards from the tiny church of St John which Eliot had visited in 1936, and which prompted the title of the last of his ‘Four Quartets’.

Festival-goers this year included T.S. Eliot Society members and participants in the T. S. Eliot International Summer School hosted by the Institute of English Studies, University of London. There were participants from Eliot’s home town, St Louis, Missouri; and the festival-goers’ age profile was encouraging: senior scholars (including Ron Schuchard) mingled with students of Eliot and Modernism and with younger enthusiasts. One of these (from the United States) had even immortalised his new enthusiasm for Eliot by having lines from ‘Prufrock’ tattooed on his back....

The day began with ‘Prufrock’. Novelist Ali Smith read the poem (a novel experience hearing it in her refreshing Scottish accent!) and then discussed it with biographer Adam Begley. ‘Prufrock’, she suggested, was *the* poem of adolescent anxiety; and subsequent questions and discussion brought out festival-goers’ own understandings of the poem. Why had I read it a thousand times and not noticed before, in one of my favourite lines, ‘No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be ....’ the ironic force of the final two words? Perhaps because in that line they have a kind of ‘dying fall’, whereas in the third soliloquy they stand firmly at the start of the opening line?

Robert Crawford, the biographer of ‘Young Eliot’, spoke engagingly (as ever) about the same poem, delving into the significance of Eliot’s sourcing of the title name from a St Louis furniture emporium. Here is a poem about love and sex, recounting the narrator’s inadequacy in both realms, yet named after a supplier of beds.... In warm, engaging and humorous vein, Crawford provided a superb class on the poem.

Ron Schuchard offered an update on the publication of Eliot’s prose works. Startlingly, he told his audience that ninety percent of work written so far on Eliot had been undertaken on a knowledge base of ten percent of the writer’s actual work. The identification, collection and publication of Eliot’s prose was an ongoing challenge; just the ‘Letters’ project would run to twenty volumes and take a further fifteen years. And the soon-expiring embargo on the Emily Hale letters would release a further cache of material for Eliot scholars – though any expecting lurid, erotic revelations were likely to be disappointed.

It may seem odd to mention food in a festival review – are we not above such un-intellectual considerations? – but one has to say that Little Gidding food, supplied from the retreat house, is absolutely excellent. Both lunch and tea were superb. As indeed was the afternoon: Marjorie Perloff, scholar-in-residence and Florence Scott Professor of English (Emerita) at the University of Southern California, gave a brilliant, chock-full lecture on ‘Four Quartets’, forcing readers back to the poetics of the text, and revealingly highlighting differences between MS and printed versions. Ali Smith had earlier categorized the poems as ‘prayers’; Perloff reminded us that they were also poetic texts.

It may be that any possible tension between ‘prayer’ and ‘poetic text’ was resolved for most festival-goers in the day’s final session. Jeremy Irons, seated on a stool in the porch of St John’s Church, before the tomb of Nicholas Ferrar, read ‘Little Gidding’- a reading enhanced by birdsong – and the poem became for listeners both a poetic and a profoundly spiritual experience. An Anglican priest present expressed appreciation for the way the text came alive in Irons’ reading; he simply responded, ‘One tries not to get in the way.’ This was a powerful and memorable ending to the festival. *Jay Philips*

Robert Crawford



Ron Schuchard



Marjorie Perloff



Jeremy Irons reading  
*Little Gidding* in front of  
St. John's Chapel

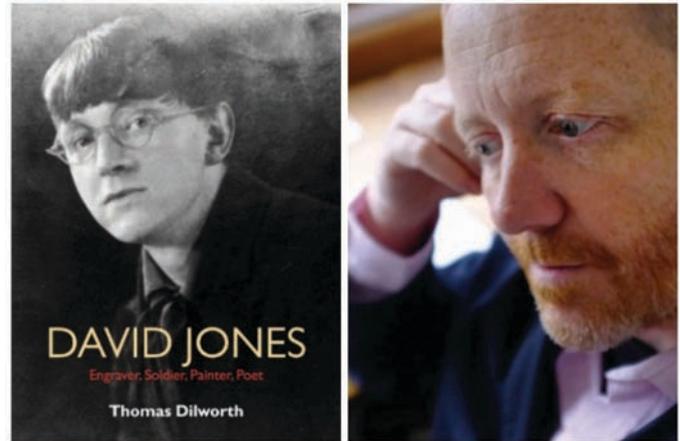


*By kind permission of Jeremy Irons and of Faber & Faber Limited, both Jeremy Irons' introduction, and his reading of Little Gidding at Little Gidding, can be heard for a limited period in the Members Area of our website. These recordings are available for our members only.*

## Perspectives

### David Jones on TS Eliot ...

It's always interesting to obtain a glimpse of Eliot the man, through the eyes of those who knew him. 'David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet' by Thomas Dilworth (Jonathan Cape, April 2017) is the first full biography to be published of a man T. S. Eliot described as "Of major importance.... One of the most distinguished writers of my generation." A substantial work of 400+ pages, it will obviously be of primary interest to enthusiasts of David Jones – but it does, in some brief passages, contain some interesting observations by Jones about his friend and publisher.



Eliot was extremely supportive of Jones, publishing his work at Faber, promoting and writing introductions to his books. Jones produced illustrations for some of the Ariel poems, and even designed a bookplate for the Eliots; the original hung in their front hall. (There is a photo in the Miscellany section of the Society website.)

"He's a jolly nice bloke," Jones wrote in one letter, "& I like him more the more I see of him." He found Eliot to be "a withdrawn character...an astonishing fusion of something youthful and something immeasurably old & wise.", and considered Eliot "*really* a great chap" and "a darling man, the soul of kindness and helpfulness."

Once, during the war, Eliot declined a meeting because he was on fire-watching duty on the Faber roof, and "I have a system whereby I can get through several manuscripts while watching, and I make it a policy never to break with routine except for something extraordinary."

After a lunch at the Garrick, Jones suggested that they share a taxi back to Faber, so that they could continue talking. Eliot said no; he always took the Tube and "didn't believe in spending money needlessly." And in a discussion on the poetry of Chesterton, Eliot remarked: "Chesterton reminds me of a cabman beating himself to keep warm."

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1965, Jones turned on his radio for the late news summary, to hear a familiar voice concluding a tribute to somebody. He then heard the announcer say "That was Mr Auden speaking of Mr Eliot who died today." (Imagine that formality in today's announcements of celebrity deaths!) Jones was shaken; he was about to reply to the Eliots' Christmas card, and instead spent half the next day composing a letter of condolence to Valerie. "It is," he said, "The end of an era."

*Paul Keers*

## ‘Sudden in a Shaft of Sunlight’

Painters thrive on images, real images as well as internalised images. They process them in the light of their experience and their capacity for expression. My own cultural background is French having been trained in the classical tradition at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. Eliot maintained close relations with French culture through his work with the NRF (Nouvelle Revue Française). Hence, when Francis Kyle proposed this theme to his gallery artists for a group exhibition on T. S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets” I felt it would be legitimate for me to explore Eliot’s approach despite the profoundly Anglo-Saxon tenor of his works.

Eliot’s dark and radical thinking transmits an implacable view of our world. Very few authors have instilled in me so many internal visual references. Also important in my decision to accept this challenge was the desire to translate the ambivalence I find in Eliot’s poems. In his references to fleeting moments of happiness it is clear that wherever light appears, shadows are always dominant. Not wishing to ignore or criticise any major pictorial trends, I have opted for triptych form. Nevertheless, the three panels do not fit neatly into a fixed chronology of past, present and future. If pressed, I would say it is more a matter of the spiritual, the physical and temporal, although these variations are superficial and are part of a global poetic space.



I do not wish to be too explicit in providing details of the elements that go towards the structure of this triptych. Suffice it to say that they are present in the poems. They are my images, certainly, but they stem from words and what I suppose to be Eliot’s thoughts ‘:

‘ ... The moment in the draughty church at smokefall,  
Be remembered.’

‘Here is a place of disaffection.’

There is certainly a reason for the reference to ‘Burnt Norton’ in the partially closed space of the theatre. The spectator is not to be party to the hidden images that are not to be expressed in paint. This external world should never be directly visible, but rather left to the imagination of each individual :

‘Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden.’

While the desire to transmit the disturbing beauty of Eliot's poetry was the main reason behind my decision to commit the spirit of 'Four Quartets' to oil and canvas, the major challenge facing me was T.S. Eliot's relationship with time. Just as time exists only paradoxically, so modernity, or classicism, or any other label, can only be relative. Such notions take on their meaning only when they refer to the periods during which they arise and to the subjective judgements of cultural actors living within these periods.

I do not illustrate the words. I read the words many times, until I reach a point where I am not re-reading but rather absorbing myself in the images generated by the words. I am a painter. All that remains for me is to capture these images and to paint.

*Alain Senez*







### A Footnote on Intertextuality

‘Intertextuality’, *as any fule kno*, came to birth as a critical term in Julia Kristeva’s essay ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’ (1966), and - in this age of literary theory – has become widely-used to describe what writers have been doing for ever: referring to one another’s writing, consciously or unconsciously. Recent pieces on intertextuality in *Exchanges* have offered some Eliot-related examples, and our short series closes with the following thoughts garnered from two London readers writing in the correspondence columns of ‘The Guardian’ in June.

*Apropos* of Bob Dylan’s plagiarism, Sally Vickers quoted Eliot himself on the subject from ‘The Sacred Wood’: ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal’. In a riposte to this, Keith Reader wrote: ‘I used to tell my literature students: ‘You cheat. Others plagiarise. I practice intertextuality.’ Nothing more to be said....

*The next edition of Exchanges will carry reviews of other Eliot-related events; and we are still eager to receive contributions from T. S. Eliot Society members on favourite lines of Eliot, first experiences of Eliot, and so on. Simply use the website to submit your piece!*

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