

# T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



## Exchanges...

### Summer 2022

Page 2

*Editorial*

Page 3

*Teaching The Waste Land: Different Interpretations*

Page 4

*Review article: Matthew Geary, 'T. S. Eliot and The Mother'*

Page 5

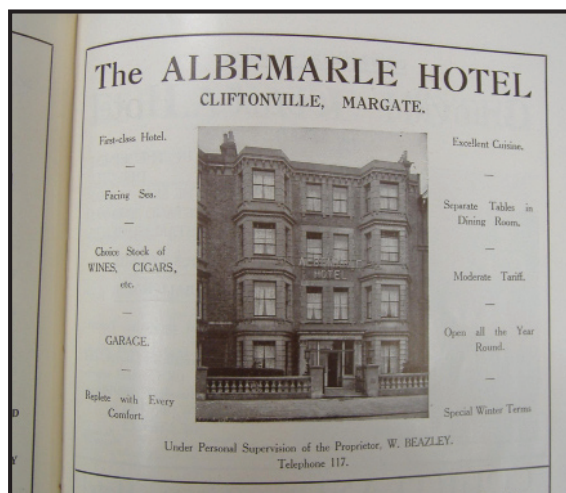
*'Little Gidding' and consolation: a reflection*

Page 6

*The T S Eliot Festival 2022: Little Gidding in the 'unimaginable Zero summer'*

Page 7

*'The Waste Land' at Little Gidding*



*Was your holiday accommodation 'Replete with Every Comfort',  
like the Margate hotel where the Eliots stayed in 1921?*

## Editorial

The centenary year of 'The Waste Land' continues to be marked, as we might expect, by a range of events and acknowledgments, including this year's T S Eliot Festival at Little Gidding. The Society's website has kept a close watch on all these, and by the year's end they will have amounted to an unignorable, public recognition of Eliot's central place in the canon of English Literature, let alone in the Modernist movement. How strange, ironic even, that one of so conservative a temperament in all matters social and religious should claim such an eminent position in disruptive Modernism!

One contribution to the centenary which may have been missed by Society members is a brief article entitled 'Lament among the ruins' in the 30th April edition of the liberal Catholic publication 'The Tablet' by Michael Alexander, former professor of English Literature at St Andrews. Many have taken 'The Waste Land' as a declaration of personal, cultural and existential despair; but, says, Alexander: 'The poem looks towards religion'.

In his account of part V 'What the Thunder said', particularly, Alexander clearly brings out what he calls 'the poem's Christianity'; and goes on to comment:

'This is a poem of deep spiritual doubt, dismay and frustration, yet its part V is a perilous spiritual quest, though to a chapel which is neglected and empty. But the rain has fallen.'

This seems to characterise the poem's ambivalence, its uncertainty, with great clarity: and that spiritual uncertainty points forward to the drift throughout the remainder of the twentieth century towards the progressive public abandonment of religious faith, as well, paradoxically, as to Eliot's own conversion to Anglicanism.

'The Waste Land' is a main theme in this edition of 'Exchanges', not least in an article by Society Secretary and Treasurer Kathy Radley, who reflects on her many years of teaching the poem, and on the ways in which students have responded to it. And a remarkable performance of the poem by Simon Callow at the T S Eliot Festival is reported, both by Di Beddow, and in a wider account of the Festival by Jay Phillips.

We also have a review article by Scott Freer, former Committee member and Journal editor, on Matthew Geary's recent book *Eliot and the Mother*, not perhaps a title we might have anticipated. Does it indicate an increasingly overcrowded, competitive world of academia, in which the pressure is on to carve out an unexplored, specialist niche? There is certainly now a new focus on the women in Eliot's life, perhaps prompted by the opening of the poet's letters to Emily Hale. A forthcoming study by Lyndall Gordon, 'The Hyacinth Girl: T S Eliot's Hidden Muse', explores the Eliot-Hale relationship; and in her 'Mary and Mr Eliot', Erica Wagner examines Eliot's long friendship with Mary Trevelyan. It will be fascinating to see to what extent, if any, these new studies prompt a changed critical understanding of the poems themselves.

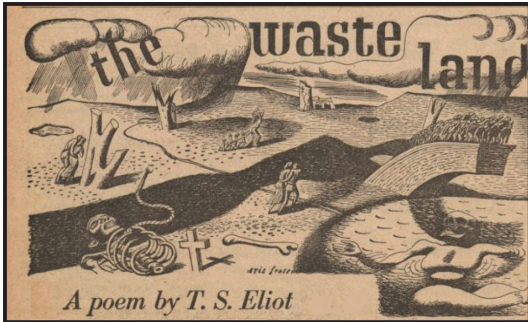
And this edition includes a brief piece on 'Little Gidding': a reminder from Society member Bridie Macmahon that Eliot's poetry touches powerfully not just the critical intelligence but also the personal life. Macmahon's intimate account of finding spiritual solace in the final section of the poem is moving and powerful. Academics may debate the nuances and chase down the allusions; but Macmahon has found – along, we might surmise, with very many others – that Eliot can speak, to quote St John Henry Newman, from heart to heart: 'cor ad cor loquitur'.

**John Caperon**

**Editor**

*Exchanges is the quarterly newsletter of the T.S. Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute or if you have queries or suggestions please contact the Editor direct at [Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk](mailto:Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk)*

## Teaching The Waste Land: Different Interpretations



Students who have cantered through ‘Prufrock’ and enjoyed it can be daunted by the thought of studying ‘The Waste Land’, an undoubtedly complex poem, which leaves itself open to widely differing interpretations. However, it is precisely because of this that the poem is such a fruitful text to be read, analysed, and discussed by Advanced Level students.

Current A Level regulations for the largest Examination Board, AQA, prescribe an element of Non-Exam Assessment (NEA) worth 20% of the student’s final mark. The idea is that you teach a portion of the suggested text; with Eliot I taught half a dozen poems, but students are then supposed to read the rest of the collection themselves. They may submit only two drafts of their independent essay, on which the teacher is not allowed to write. Students are expected to link a named poem to critical theory: hence the unit title, ‘Theory and Independence’. They are also expected to write more widely about Eliot’s poetry and reference other Eliot poems. The final assessment objective is to ‘include different interpretations’.

‘The Waste Land’ is full of themes, allusions, and analogies. Students are happy to respond to these and experience indicates that there can be as many different interpretations as there are students in the class. They are happy exploring vast concepts. To some, ‘The Waste Land’ highlights the psychological and cultural crisis that came with a perceived decline of morals and cultural identity following the First World War. The poem can also be related to ideas of spirituality, love, relationships, death and the afterlife.

Several sections in ‘The Waste Land’ clearly relate to ideas of spirituality. For example, in Part V, ‘What the Thunder Said’, the imagery can be viewed as pre-apocalyptic, as well as containing parallels to the crucifixion of Christ. There are ‘sweaty faces’ who are in ‘agony’; there is ‘shouting and crying’. The entire passage hints at the end of the world. There is a ruined chapel that remains standing yet is empty, highlighting those religious symbols, once regarded with reverence, which still exist but have been made redundant by humankind’s indifference. Towards the end of the section, a flash of lightning brings rain with it. Is the flash indicative of revelation, realisation or a threat? Is the rain a baptism, a cleansing, or indicative of God’s wrath?

Students do not have to wrestle with universal concepts. A more manageable and profitable approach to ‘The Waste Land’ can be to investigate the women in the poem. Eliot presents us with a galaxy of female characters which includes a priestess, a countess, a fortune-teller, a rich, privileged lady, a middle-class girl, a typist and a poor housewife. Each of these women has her own problems and unhappiness. They miss the past and stay indifferent to the present. They exist to be available to men and to satisfy them. Every relationship turns out to be sad or dead.

Students certainly all have an opinion on such relationships and the position of women in society. The heart of A Level teaching is class discussion and the student’s individual response. However many years you teach ‘The Waste Land’, there will always be a student who provides an interpretation which you have not encountered before!

## Review article: Matthew Geary, 'T. S. Eliot and The Mother'

As the author claims, this is 'the first full-length study on T. S. Eliot and the mother'. But whilst Geary begins with a detailed account of Charlotte Champe Stearns who was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on 22 October 1843, the study is dedicated to psycho-analytical readings of the 'maternal' in Eliot's poetry and drama. In this respect, Geary presents a useful section in which he clarifies the use of key terms and definitions, such as 'motherhood', 'mothering' and the 'maternal'.

For rather than assuming an essentialist view of 'mother', the brilliance of Geary's work lies in an understanding of Eliot representing the maternal as 'enigmatic, spectral, a threshold, a limit and a vanishing point of view'. Geary positions Eliot's literature according to real experiences with Charlotte, and what he calls the 'maternal poetics' is often shaped by an ambivalence in the sense of attachment, separation, and individuation.

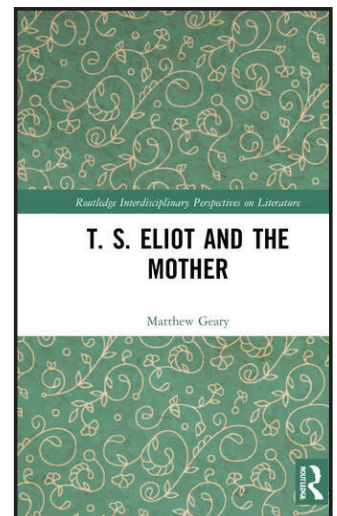
Geary charts Eliot's ambivalence towards the maternal via five phases, which begins with Eliot's early poetry. Chapter 1 outlines Charlotte's life and Unitarian faith and support for 'its liberal, humanistic theology', and the compelling evidence is that Eliot's 'disenchantment with his inherited faith' is psychologically tied to Charlotte's 'message of religious optimism'. Nonetheless, Charlotte, unlike many leading Unitarians, was sufficiently liberal to be open to the Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary.

The evidence given is a large print of Bartolomé Murillo's *The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin* (1678) that hung in Charlotte's bedroom. Hence the complex maternal dynamic that underwrites Eliot's literary output. The opening chapter is indicative of Geary's overall method: the interweaving of a biographical positioning and a close reading that draws upon 'traditional Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical paradigms' that include contemporary feminist perspectives, particularly Rozsika Parker's work on maternal ambivalence in 'Torn in Two' (1995).

Geary demonstrates that the beginning phases of Eliot's maternal poetics (from his juvenilia to 'The Waste Land') are characterised by separation and loneliness. Moving to Paris (1910-11) resulted in a sense of liberation and separation anxiety which stimulated 'a creative flourish'. This biographical context, coupled with the setting for 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) which recalls the 'genteel Boston society and the women's organisations [...] that would have known through his mother', becomes the basis for Geary's reading of Prufrock's desire for 'male independence and autonomy' that is also bound to a 'wish to reach the mother'.

Perhaps the most fascinating sections are where Geary presents revealing letters by Charlotte and compares the poetry of Eliot and Charlotte. Charlotte was, in the words of Geary, 'a remarkable woman of great intellectual capacity and deep religious conviction' but whose creative output was frustrated by 'having to adhere to a nineteenth-century patriarchal culture'. Chapter 4 and the conclusion compare 'The Dry Salvages' with Charlotte's 'Saved!', showing that Eliot's mother remained a 'spectral presence' following her death in 1929. 'Saved!' shares certain resemblances with Eliot's third quartet, with both set in the Atlantic Ocean off the New England coast and using the 'troubled sea as a metaphor for human endeavour, religious journeying, faith, sin and the possibility of salvation'.

Despite the similarities, as Geary argues, Eliot's poem does not share Charlotte's Unitarian optimism



in ‘man’s earthly salvation’. Yet, in emphasizing Eliot’s ‘fervent belief in Marianism’, Charlotte is implicated in Eliot’s adoration of Mary, and so ‘The Dry Salvages’ is a poetic tribute to his mother, who, like Mary, had ‘sacrificed herself [...] to mediate his passage to God the Father’.

Overall, Geary’s book makes a significant scholarly contribution to an understanding of Eliot’s relationship with Charlotte as well as the interdisciplinary study of motherhood, mothering and the maternal in Eliot’s oeuvre as well as literary Modernism. As Geary convincingly shows, maternal aesthetics and practice is in a sense ‘queer’ – “non-essential, fluid, mobile and open” – and will help future scholars to revise so-called ‘male modernism’.

**Scott Freer**

*T.S. Eliot and the Mother, Routledge, 2021, 338 Pages 19 B/W Illustrations, ISBN 9780367759193*

*There is still a publishers’ discount available on both hardback and e-book versions of this publication – see the Members Area for details.*

### **‘Little Gidding’ and consolation: a reflection**

‘And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.’

These closing lines of Little Gidding acquired a particular meaning for me after the death of my mother in 2014, and brought me solace when nothing else did. I have read no literary criticism of the poem, and I have not attempted to consider how or whether the poem as a whole gives credence to my interpretation of these lines. My words reflect only my own experience of the words at a time of great need.

I had been finding it impossible to come to terms with my mother’s suffering, in spite of the fact that I am a Catholic and know that suffering does, ultimately, have meaning. I spoke with my then parish priest, and something in that conversation led me to go back to this poem. And in the closing lines, I suddenly found what I was looking for: echoes of Julian of Norwich and her calm, persistent reassurance; an acknowledgement of pain/fire/suffering; and the rose, my mother (and the Virgin Mary, and Christ). No coherent theology, but images and echoes that resonated in my mind and heart and allowed me to know that it is through a uniting of the fire and the rose in death that Heaven is reached. So my mother’s suffering was not gratuitous; the rose was not consumed by the fire but united with and by it; and ultimately, all shall indeed be well.

Nothing takes away grief, or compensates for loss; but these lines of Eliot’s gave me the key to the door through which a degree of acceptance could be found. Other writing and other poetry have their places, but Little Gidding is where I found peace, and I trust will do so again when the fire returns.

**Bridie Macmahon**

## The T S Eliot Festival 2022: Little Gidding in the ‘unimaginable Zero summer’



Coming up England in the early morning was a reminder of how good the road system is – at least, until it gets overcrowded. More of that later. Within two and a half hours I’d come from the top of the Sussex Weald to the depths of rural Huntingdonshire, and to Little Gidding. Already at 10.00 am the sun was strong in a cloudless sky, and the Festival marquee outside the tiny church looked cooler than it was. But one of the strengths of Ferrar House, the conference and retreat centre at Little Gidding, is its high-quality catering and refreshments. I was refreshed.

Little Gidding is isolated. There’s a hint of uncertainty about whether Festival speakers and audience will actually find their way there. Thankfully, the day’s central performer, the actor Simon Callow was on time and in brilliant form as he opened the Festival with a reading – no, a performance! – of ‘The Waste Land’. It was like being one of the cast of Eliot’s characters, as if we were living inside the poem. Utterly stunning.

It was a huge change of style, from immersive drama to cool analysis, in Mark Ford’s lecture on ‘Little Gidding: beginnings and endings.’ It seemed to me, though, that Ford – both poet and professor – might have been happier in a lecture-theatre or seminar room than in a large marquee just yards from the church where ‘History is now and England’. He drew attention to the uncertainty, imprecision even, of Eliot’s diction (‘Can anyone explain to me what he actually means by ‘... the unimaginable / Zero summer’?’). His comments on the editorial work of John Hayward and others for ‘Little Gidding’ were fascinating. But Ford seemed to sideline what Eliot himself had said about ‘the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings’. Isn’t that the point about Eliot? That he trades in imprecision, suggestion, meanings stretching beyond the words? But Mark Ford certainly made Eliot’s uncertainty, his ‘reaching into the silence’, clear.

Lunch: and time to avoid the searing sun (and the offered alcohol!). But a chance to meet some of the members of this year’s T S Eliot Summer School: Americans, Indians, Italians: wonderful that the English poet (forgive this, transatlantic cousins!) most conscious of his European, classical roots, and of the Indian sub-continent, should draw such a diverse group of students to the heart of rural England!

Then the afternoon, and a brilliant discussion between two biographers whose new books on Eliot are about to appear. ‘Veteran’ may seem an uncomplimentary word to apply to Lyndall Gordon, but she has been in the biographical field for ages, and her ‘The Imperfect Life of T S Eliot’ (1998) is a classic. She exudes a wisdom born of immense scholarship, and her conversation with Erica Wagner, whose study of Eliot’s long-term friendship with Mary Trevelyan is about to be published, was revelatory, as she described the experience of reading the Emily Hale letters and preparing her new book ‘The Hyacinth Girl’.



The Festival closed with a reading of ‘Little Gidding’ by Simon Callow, from the steps of the ‘secluded chapel’. Gone was the multi-character-actor of the morning, replaced by a man of deep reflectiveness,

sharing the profundity of the poem with the audience scattered on the grass before him. A hugely memorable reading, performance left aside. Now, one simply has to look forward to next year!

I end with a slight whinge. Not about Little Gidding or the Festival, but about the road system. Why is there only one way South across the Thames at Dartford? The bridge was closed and the resulting congestion kept me for an unbelievable six hours! But every cloud, and so on: Radio 3 offered its own dramatic re-working of 'The Waste Land' as I stewed in endless traffic. Know what? Simon Callow was heaps better.

**Jay Phillips**

### **'The Waste Land' at Little Gidding**

Again, the Eliot gods smiled upon the festival and the weather was glorious. The coffee was ready, the garden in full bloom and Kathy was at her desk to pull in any unsuspecting visitors, so that she could encourage them to become members. Simon Callow (who managed to book such a name for the festival?) stepped up to open the day with a reading of the centenary poem, *The Waste Land*. A breeze ran through the warm marquee. By the time we reached Marie, urged to hold on tight, we were utterly gripped. Callow performed the poem. He made it a play, but in a good way. Smart and English in his appearance, he moved seamlessly from Eastern Europe to London, from ancient mythology to jazz.



Madame Sosistris, immediately visible from Callow's use of voice and facial gesture, unsurprisingly, could not see the burden upon the back of the 'one-eyed merchant. If the hanged man indeed is equated with Frazer's Hanged God, Callow's clairvoyante was not endowed with the power, or authority to find any salvation for the fertility of the land and stressed the importance of bringing her own horoscope to the next meeting with Mrs Equitone.

The short transition from this comedy to the darkest of interpretations of the final line of 'The Burial of the Dead' was profound. Callow spat at the audience: 'You! hypocrite lecteur! — mon semblable, — mon/frère!' I asked Callow later what was behind the strength of the accusation and he told me that Baudelaire's poem 'Au Lecteur', from where Eliot lifted the final line, was one of his that he much admired and he wanted to convey the power conveyed by the earlier poet.

Most profound though in my opinion was the way in which Callow's Tiresias seemed to narrate the tragedy of each sexual cameo. Tiresias stood in judgment upon King Tereus of Thrace who 'So rudely forced' himself upon poor Philomela, but the prophet's own fragility was emphasised, particularly when Callow's seer described the grubby sterility of the congress of the 'young man carbuncular' and the typist.

It was a superb performance and one which I will not forget. As the applause greeted 'Shantih', it was clear that I was not alone in my intense appreciation. People rose to their feet to impress upon the actor, how profoundly he had moved us. I paraphrase George Szirtes in his response to the performance — 'a great poem, read by a great actor.'

**Di Beddow**