T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

Welcome to this autumn edition of Exchanges. This isn't a season one especially associates with Eliot, but rather more with John Keats, whose 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' has in effect grabbed the poetic copyright of autumn. Eliot, though, has an equally firm hold on spring, with April now perhaps inevitably 'the cruellest month'. It's astonishing, really, how expressions once non-existent now have a kind of privileged status within the language: an encouraging reminder of the significance of poetry and poets.

Not that Eliot was uninterested in the season. Society members will recall how in 'East Coker' he is troubled by an uneasy sense of the co-existence in late autumn of disturbingly different aspects of the natural world: 'What is the late November doing/ With the disturbance of the spring/ And creatures of the summer heat,/And snowdrops writhing under feet/ And hollyhocks that aim too high/ Red into grey and tumble down/ Late roses filled with early snow? One of the many paradoxes of Eliot is that this poet whose life (like that of Keats) was largely city-based had such sensitivity to the world of nature. Would any member of the Society like to explore this further for a contribution to Exchanges?

In this autumn edition, we look back to the summer with a report from a 'Waste Land' study day in June; we have an Obituary of the Eliot enthusiast, painter Richard Williams; while Chris Joyce assesses the life and work of the distinguished Eliot scholar Bernard Bergonzi, who died last year. There is also a discussion of the reception of Eliot's 'The Idea of a Christian Society'; a plea from a Society member; a recently published and unusual recollection of Eliot; and a brief 'And finally…' item.

John Caperon

Editor

A Study Afternoon on *The Waste Land*

Several members of the Society attended this event provided by *Literature Cambridge* at Stapleford Granary in June. The afternoon began with a lecture and discussion run by ***Michael Hrebeniak*** a lecturer in English from Wolfson College, Cambridge entitled *'The Epoch of Space: Eliot's Art of Assemblage'* This lecture suggested ways of understanding Eliot's work in terms of collage, the major compositional principle of modernism. The poem was considered alongside corresponding movements in music and painting as an assemblage of shards and pieces.

Robin Kirkpatrick**,** Emeritus Professor of Italian and English Literature and a Fellow of Robinson College, Cambridge then gave a full reading of *The Waste Land*

The tea interval was followed by a Lecture and discussion by ***Sarah Cain***, Lecturer and Director of Studies in English at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge: *'Early Contexts for Reading The Waste Land: Eliot's Nervousness'* This lecture explored some early twentieth-century contexts about 'mental hygiene' and illness surrounding Eliot's early works, including contemporary medical and psychological discourses about neurasthenia, worry, anxiety, and bodily efficiency.

Kathy Radley

Bernard Bergonzi – an appreciation

Bernard Bergonzi, poet and critic, died in September last year at the age of 87. He was especially associated with the teaching of twentieth century English literature at the University of Warwick. Catholic in both senses of the word, Bergonzi wrote about a range of very different authors including Thomas Arnold, H. G. Wells, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Graham Greene - his last major work was *A Study in Greene* (2006). But two books in particular stand out as central to his legacy. One was *Heroes' Twilight* (1965), a study of the literature of the First World War, in which, in addition to the War Poets, he gave some attention to two authors who had received little previously: David Jones and the nearly forgotten Henry Williamson (forgotten except perhaps for *Tarka the Otter*). Williamson's 'Englishness' would especially have attracted him. The other book was *T. S. Eliot* (1972).

Refreshingly traditional in his views, Bergonzi set a balanced and humane understanding of literature and literary study against the challenge (or threat) of 'theory' which, even in his early years as a critic and teacher, was beginning to encroach on university English departments – it would become a tidal wave. In a characteristic turn of phrase Bergonzi contrasted favourably "the ideology of being English" with the ideology of Marxism and the often impenetrable (and self-regarding) jargon of 'structuralism' and its derivatives. He saw these developments as "symptoms of disorder."

His Catholicism – of which he was far from uncritical (especially regarding its effects on early years education) – no doubt influenced his deep interest in Hopkins, T. S. Eliot and Greene, and perhaps Arnold too in his contrasting faith. He may have been attracted to the writings of Wells in his earlier years – as he would be to his younger contemporary David Lodge – because of similarities in their biographies. Like Wells, Bergonzi had been self-taught as a young man and, coming from a lower middle class background, had overcome considerable difficulties to win a place as writer and scholar. He had been born in Lewisham in 1929, the son of a dance band musician, later a white-collar factory worker. He left school at age 15 during wartime and worked as a clerk; but he read widely, Eliot's *Collected Poems* taking pride of place in his growing collection of books and periodicals. His own early poetry was strongly influenced by Eliot's.

With encouragement from G. S. Fraser, Bergonzi enrolled at Newbattle Abbey college at Dalkeith near Edinburgh in 1953. Two years later he won a scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford. There his tutor was the literary historian and scholar Freddy Bateson and he came to know Al Alvarez and Christopher Ricks. He would soon embark on a prolific career as a reviewer, most notably for the *New York Review of Books*

. For all his interest in innovative twentieth century literature he believed – like Eliot – in the importance of authority and discipline. Like another critic and teacher he greatly admired, F. R. Leavis, he insisted on the importance of valuation in criticism, but he would take issue with Leavis over his late critique of *Four Quartets* (in *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought*, 1975), in which Leavis took a diagnostic approach to Eliot. Bergonzi's essay, 'Leavis and Eliot: the long road to rejection', appeared in the *Critical Quarterly* in March 1984; it is an excellent example of Bergonzi's straightforward and lucid style.

He had himself edited a collection of essays on the subject of Eliot's last long poetic sequence, *T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets* (1969) in the Casebooks Series. His biographical and critical study of three years later *T. S Eliot* (reprinted in 1978 in the Masters of World Literature series) concentrated on Eliot's importance as a poet and critic rather than on matters that were, for many biographers, beginning to supersede that, such as Eliot's political and personal predilections and his marital difficulties. Bergonzi's study opened up and made Eliot accessible for generations of university students and for readers more widely.

Bergonzi became an assistant lecturer at the University of Manchester in 1959, then full lecturer before being appointed senior lecturer at Warwick in 1966. He became Professor of English there in 1971 and pro-vice-chancellor from 1979 until 1982. He never wavered in his belief in the humane value of literary study; and if there are today some hopeful glimmerings of a revival in the study of literature as one of the 'liberal arts', it is to Bergonzi among others that we are indebted.

Chris Joyce

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A plea from Susanna Ferrar

As many Society members will remember, John Wade and I helped put out the signage and organise the parking for several recent T. S. Eliot Festivals at Little Gidding, and John took quite a few rather good photographs. This year, following his death in April, I got up on my hind legs and recited his poem,"The Slagheaps of My Youth". His rendition of this, and representations of other artworks for which the family and I are seeking homes, are available on this website: http://superart.info/

In particular I would very much welcome (polite) suggestions for what I might do with "En Suite" who is currently languishing in a garage and looking rather sorry for herself.
I look forward to helping at the Festival again next year,
Susanna Ferrar (susannaferrar@gmail.com)

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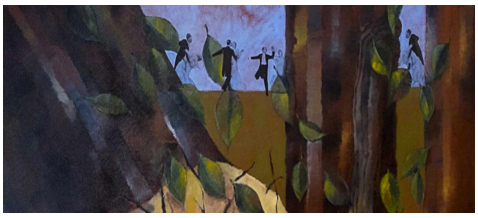
Richard Williams – an obituary



A recent edition of Exchanges carried a review of an exhibition of the work of Eliot-inspired artist Richard Williams, who has since died. The following Obituary draws on material contributed by his son Robert Williams, as well as on the Editor's personal reflections on a recently-made and now much-missed friend.

Born to a single mother who gave him up for adoption, Richard Wynne Williams (1954 – 2017) was brought up by two dedicated foster-carers in the unpromising surroundings of Jaywick, Essex. He had, according to the educational opinion of the time, no suitability for grammar school education, and was told he'd never amount to much. Somehow, though, among the multiple influences of youth, he came across the poems of T. S. Eliot and found a fascination in them which lasted.

Eventually becoming a teacher and educational leader in the Further Education sector, and taking his doctorate, Richard emerged as something of a polymath. He added the benefits of formal art training to his repertoire of skills, and began to explore ways in which the insights and images of Eliot's poetry might be re-imagined in visual terms, with a focus on the Ariel poems and 'Four Quartets'. Scenes and characters from the poems were rendered on large canvases, influenced also by aspects of Richard's personal history: the result was a powerful and distinctive artistic oeuvre whose impact was not unlike that of Eliot's own poetry – words and images echoing in the mind.

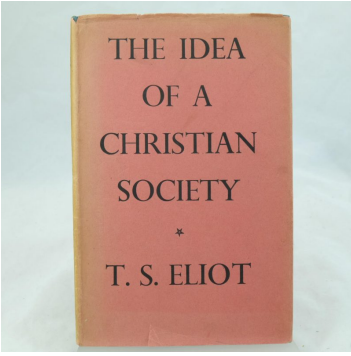
A diagnosis of terminal cancer may have intensified Richard's spiritual searching and his dedication to Eliot. He walked the City of London in Eliot's footsteps. He attended a reading of Four Quartets'. He joined a pilgrimage to Little Gidding, reflecting shrewdly on the irony of Christian spirituality being professed by people with such very large egos. As he approached death he embodied something of what Eliot may have suggested in his lines from 'Ash Wednesday': 'Teach us to care, and not to care. Teach us to sit still.' He had found a place of quietness, and it is not too much to say that Eliot's vision shaped his end. Richard's son Rob read from 'Little Gidding' at his funeral: '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.' *Requiescat in Pace*.

John Caperon

"Four Quartets: I started reading T S Eliot's Four Quartets in 1971. I don't thikg I really understood very much of them at al,l but I was intriqued by what I experienced as their inherent 'mystery'. Eliot's poetry has stayed with me all of my life and I have returned often to the Four Quartets finding that they have revealed more to me as I have aged and that I have come to cherish the companionship that I find in the journey that they describe. Critical to Eliot's Four Quartets are his sense of the philosophy of time and his personal quest for religious understanding. The Four Quartets are in fact philosophy in poetry. These four paintings are not "illustrations" of the quartets but rather visualised responses to them triggered by overarching themes or by particular passages. In some cases the compositions of these paintings have emerged from my thinking over many years and so they create a link between a long term process of thought and emotion with philosophy and image making." Richard Williams

To view Richard's beautiful interpretation of the Four Quartets, please visit his website at http://williamsartwrx.org/gallery.html

Reflections upon *The Idea of a Christian Society*



Sussex Society member Jay Phillips reflects on his recent acquisition of a first edition of Eliot's 'The Idea of a Christian Society'…

I was fortunate enough recently to be given by a generous friend a first edition of Eliot's 'The Idea of a Christian Society' of 1939. The book itself might be thought to be interesting enough, but nestling between the leaves was a yellow-edged, folded sheet of newsprint, which upon being opened, revealed itself as a review of the book by Charles Smyth carried in 'The Spectator' of November 17th, 1939. Some interesting connections became apparent, which I shall explain.

Eliot's book was based on a series of three lectures delivered at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in March of 1939. Lectures in this series – the Boutwood lectures – are given annually in the field of philosophy of religion or political theory, and are an opportunity for distinguished scholars and public figures to explore subjects of personal concern to them under these heads. Eliot used his lectures to reflect on the (then) current scene in international politics: war was looming, and the domestic political situation was far from robust.

In his Preface to the book, Eliot explains that his '…point of departure has been the suspicion that the current terms in which we discuss international affairs and political theory may only tend to conceal from us the real issues of contemporary civilisation'. His intention, Eliot says, is not to plead for a religious revival in the uncertain times he lives in; but rather to assert the importance of values, and of religious thought, as leading to 'a criticism of political and economic systems'.

As I re-read Eliot's lectures in their slightly adapted book form, I was reminded of what had earlier seemed to me one of his main characteristics as a prose writer: that while his sentences were clear, and their progression logical, it was nevertheless hard to say at the end of a few paragraphs what precisely was the argument he was making; summarising Eliot's prose was a struggle. It was while this thought was in my mind that I turned to the 'Spectator' review. Charles Smyth – an academic theologian whom I had had the honour of meeting in his later years at Corpus in the 1970s – saw Eliot in similar terms, it turned out. 'His thought', said Smyth, 'is … as easy to follow as it is difficult to grasp: paradoxically, it is elusive, not in spite of its precision, but because of it.'

Smyth's review, running to some 1300 words, manages to offer the summary that this reader found difficult, and is an achievement in itself. In tune with the Corpus ethos of the late 1930s, a blend of Anglo-Catholic and critical impulses represented in the Mastership of Will Spens and in College Dean Edwyn Hoskins, Smyth sees Eliot's work as a 'resumption of the Tractarian counter-offensive against Liberalism'. He goes on to argue that: 'The disintegrated culture, the slovenly subjectivism, the spiritual and the intellectual indiscipline, the irresponsible individualism of our time, which are the fruits of 'Liberalism', are real evils.' Eliot's book contributes seriously to the necessary attempt to 'work out a Christian doctrine of modern society', says Smyth.

All this may seem far from us in the supercharged, digital world of the 21st century. But Eliot's concluding conviction in 'The Idea of a Christian Society' has, I think, a continuing resonance in our days. He writes: 'As political philosophy derives its sanction from ethics, and ethics from the truth of religion, it is only by returning to the eternal source of truth that we can hope for any social organisation which will not, to its ultimate destruction, ignore some essential aspect of reality….' That is well said; and returning to Eliot's nowadays neglected 1939 lectures is worthwhile; my generous friend deserves warm thanks!

Jay Phillips

An (unusual) recollection of Eliot

In his new book, The Diary of a Bookseller*, the author Shaun Bythell recalls a supper conversation with his friend, Alastair Reid:*

Alastair spoke of his first trip to America, which he took via London. A lecturer at the University of St Andrews, from which he had recently graduated, had given him the telephone number of a friend of his in London called Tom. Alastair duly arrived in London and telephoned 'Tom' to see if he could put him up for the night. 'Tom' turned out to be TS Eliot.

Stewart Henderson, another friend who was there for supper, asked him "What did he smell like?" To which Alastair – with no pause for thought – replied, "A musty pulpit, which is exactly what he would have wanted to smell like."

Paul Keers

And finally…

Society members will have been aware of the patriotic furore around the silencing of Big Ben for the next four years as a consequence of necessary repair work both to the Elizabeth Tower and to the mechanism of the clock. How could Great Britain remain Great without the bongs of Big Ben, it was asked? It was the parliamentary sketch writer of the *The Guardian*, John Crace, who conjured the obvious T. S. Eliot reference, and managed to insert it into his account of the last sounds of the Great Bell (apparently its 'official' name) before the great silence. Describing how shortly before midday on 20th August a small crowd of journalists had gathered outside the members' entrance to the houses of parliament to observe the final, world-ending sounds of Big Ben, Crace ended his piece with the words: 'Big Ben had fallen silent. Not with a bong but a whimper.'

Next edition:

In our next edition we carry an article on T. S. Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism, and a reflection on reading (or is it 'performing'?) Eliot's poetry in public…

The Editor invites further contributions from members: a couple of hundred words on your favourite line or lines, anyone? Write to Exchanges@tseliotsociety.uk

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