

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

Autumn 2018

Page 2

Editorial

Pages 2-4

Eliot and the War: thoughts prompted by the centenary of the Armistice

Pages 4-5

Open House Afternoon at the University of London

Pages 5-6

'Return to TS Eliotland'

Pages 6-8

'The Modern Mind': returning to Eliot's criticism

Pages 8-9

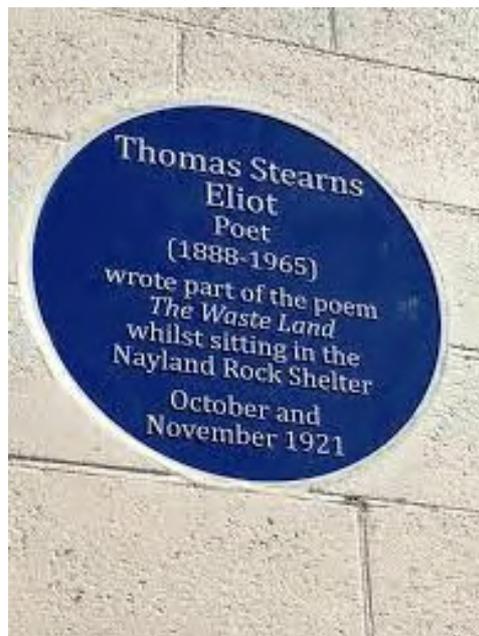
Reflections on the T. S. Eliot Summer School

Pages 9-11

Paradox in Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday'

Page 12

Schoolboy error?



On Margate Sands ...

EDITORIAL

It's quite hard to know just when Autumn occurs. Is it when the first morning mists begin to appear? Or when the first leaves begin to drop? Or the last? A visit to Canada in October this year reminded me that our Latinate 'Autumn' becomes in North America the simpler 'Fall' – defined by the Shorter Oxford Dictionary as 'a dropping down by the force of gravity' and 'the season when leaves fall from the trees'. The dictionary cites this usage in the English context last in 1545, but I can't help feeling that there is something rather fine and descriptive about the simpler word.

In any case, with a long summer behind us, now approaches the time for 'the evening with the photograph album'; and I hope that T. S. Eliot Society members will also find some diversion from the darker days in this Autumn/Fall edition of *Exchanges*. Here we have for you a review of a recent TV documentary, 'Return to T S Eliotland'; an account of an event at London University; some thoughts on 'Eliot and the Great War' prompted by the centenary of the 1918 Armistice; and a longer piece on the place of biography in literary study from a PhD student Society member prompted to return to the critical prose of Eliot. Another student, Johannes Black, reflects on the good fortune of a bursary which enabled him to attend the T. S. Eliot Summer School at the University of London. A literary-critical piece on a passage in 'Ash-Wednesday' ends with a challenge that we hope to meet in the next edition. This one closes with a note on the frequent misspelling of the title of Eliot's most famous poem which *our* readers will sometimes have noticed!

Several of the contributions to this edition happen to be by Committee members of the Society; but be assured that all contributions – from all members! – are welcome. Simply send in your thoughts on a favourite passage of Eliot; or offer a review of an Eliot-related programme or book. Or simply offer a comment on something in this current issue. We look forward to hearing from you!

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@tseliotsociety.uk

For membership or more information about the Society, please go to: www.tseliotsociety.uk

Eliot and the War: thoughts prompted by the centenary of the Armistice

Arriving here in the summer of 1914 on a travelling scholarship, Eliot as an American had no part in the rush to join up once the War began. His letters reveal a distinct unawareness of the European political situation: '... it never entered my head that England would declare war too....', he wrote to his mother on 23rd August. The same letter describes his difficulties in getting out of a Germany already at war, and the relief he felt in reaching the neutral Netherlands, and then London. By early September he is adjusting to the war, though. To his brother Henry on 8th, he writes that he is 'acquiring a war vocabulary' and tells Henry of the newspaper 'extra' which appears with its 'LIST OF ENGLISH DEAD AND WOUNDED'. Once in Oxford, he is focused on study, writing from Merton College to Eleanor Hinkley of the advantages of the English

educational system over the American. But by April 1915 he is writing to Mrs Jack Gardner: 'The war is very real and frightful to me....' It is as if the realities of the War have at last become plain to him. But personal matters rather than public events continued to preoccupy him. In January 1916 he writes to Conrad Aitken: 'The news is that I am to be at Highgate School, near town, next term, that I am starting to rewrite my thesis, that my wife has been very ill, that I have been taken up with the worries of finance and Vivien's health, that my friend Jean Verdenal has been killed'

In August, writing once more to Aitken, he tells of his 'scramble' to teach and write and earn enough, and how Vivien 'has been very ill all winter'. No surprise, perhaps, that: 'Of poetry I have not written a line; I have been far too worried and nervous.' It is at this point that Eliot writes of the disappearance from London of literary friends and acquaintances. 'Nearly everyone has faded away from London, or is there very rarely ... Lewis is a gunner in the R.G.A., Wadsworth is something in the navy and is out in the Mediterranean, F. M. Hueffer is settled to an army career in the Welsh Guards and is in France, T. E. Hulme has been in France for ages.' Despite this awareness of the way the War was sucking in literary people, Eliot's preoccupation with his personal life and concerns remained predominant. There is, perhaps, a particular irony in his plans to lecture in Yorkshire on 'Social, Philosophical and Religious Problems in Contemporary France', at a point where the long and bloody Somme campaign was already two months old. The War might almost not have been going on.



The waste land of the Somme — 1916

How things were to change! The entry of the U.S.A. into the War in 1917 brought Eliot into the category of those eligible to serve. By August 1918 he writes to Wyndham Lewis: 'Am trying to get into U.S. Navy as I find there are one or two possibilities there'; and the same month he writes to his brother that 'there seemed a very good chance of a job, with commission, in the U.S.A. Navy Office here in London'. This not materialising, Eliot – 'now passed 'fit' for limited service (hernia)' – busied himself 'collecting testimonials from the most important people I know', hoping for a commission in France; but '...if this fails, I see nothing else at present but to

try for exemption. Not being fit for active service, I am much more useful in my present occupation than in any limited service job for which I could be conscripted as a private....'

In September Eliot is still trying for a military post: 'I am in touch with Major Turner of the Intelligence Service He thinks he can get me into that work.' Nothing came of this, but still in November Eliot was writing to his father of his frustration that the American forces didn't seem to be eager to employ him. A week before the War ended (and incidentally the day Wilfred Owen was killed) Eliot writes that he was finally 'sent for' by Navy Intelligence. Again this proved to come to nothing; and Eliot concluded: 'I feel now that perhaps I am much more useful in the bank than in the army, and that I would have done better not to have bothered about it.'



The headstones of two of the poets who died in the First War: Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen

The litany of English poets and composers who were killed in the War – Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, George Butterworth, to name but a few – is a harsh reminder of what could have happened to Eliot too. The reality of premature death was evident to him: his dedication of *Prufrock and other Observations* in 1917 to his friend Jean Verdenal,, 'mort aux Dardanelles', makes that clear. And Eliot survived, of course, to write 'The Waste Land': surely the most powerful poetic response to the devastation of Europe and European culture the War brought about.

Jay Phillips

Open House Afternoon at the University of London

In September the Society received an invitation from the University Development Office for the secretary to attend an event at the Senate House in London University. The invitation was issued in response to the Society helping the University to connect to both Jeremy Irons and Ron Schurchar for their very successful TS Eliot event last year. In addition, they wanted to express thanks

for the Society's contribution to the student bursary for the Summer School, which we donated in place of direct payment for Ron Schuchard's Society lecture last year.

We arrived at the Senate House reception at five o'clock, to be guided through the newly opened atrium, where alumni and sponsors of the university gathered for a champagne reception and afternoon tea during which we enjoyed an informative address by Dr Mary Stiasny, Pro vice-chancellor (International) of the University.



Following tea, we were given an extensive tour of the building by an engaging and enlightening guide, who refused to let the downpour of rain dampen his enthusiastic presentation.

It was gratifying to note how keen the University is to continue to promote and preserve links with the TS Eliot Society. So much so that I was more than pleased to accept (on behalf of the Society of course!) an extra bottle of champagne to take home with me.

Kathy Radley

'Return to TS Eliotland', broadcast on BBC4, October 2018

What, or where, is TS Eliotland? And when, given that this was a return, had we (or indeed the presenter, the writer A. N. Wilson), been there before? The explanation came in the programme's introduction, as Wilson invited us to "come with me to the real and imagined places in his poetic world, where he speaks to me and I hope can speak to you, too." The programme followed an essentially biographical thread, tracing Eliot's life, and highlighting four key poems; *Prufrock*, *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. It was clearly an introduction and overview aimed at a wide audience; and yet at the same time, Wilson was at pains to stress that Eliot "dared to be difficult...dared to defend a higher culture, which many mediocre people today would dismiss as elitist." Woe betide any "mediocre" viewers.

As enthusiasts, we're unlikely to find new textual interpretations or insights in a programme like this. But what we gained was some beautifully directed cinematography of those "real and imagined places". We saw inside the Eliot family summer home in Massachusetts; visited Harvard, Merton College, and Margate Sands; went inside Eliot's Faber office and his Kensington church; and saw at least the front doors of his various London apartments. Wilson also visited Burnt Norton (with some unique aerial cinematography of the garden), the Massachusetts coast, and East Coker, all beautifully filmed. But in the programme's one major omission, he did not

go to Little Gidding. Was this a budgetary decision? It meant that only Blitz archive visuals illustrated the poem, and that “writing Little Gidding” was described primarily as “a patriotic act”.

In the programme’s only jarring passage, Wilson briefly addressed “the persistent allegation that [Eliot] was an anti-Semite.” It jarred because the passage felt awkwardly shoe-horned into the biographical thread, as if imposed by the makers who felt, in the current climate, that it had to be mentioned. Wilson himself did not explore the issue with the evident love and knowledge that he brought to the rest of Eliot’s life and work.



Wilson was an idiosyncratic presenter. In location shots, his oversized beret, undersized sunglasses, and tripping gait beneath a sweeping coat, tended to distract from his surroundings. His prim manner would not have drawn in many of those “mediocre” viewers. The programme’s rich and revealing visuals will have entertained enthusiasts like us; but standing finally in St Michael’s Church, East Coker, and railing against the “easy slogans” of today’s public figures, it seemed unlikely that A. N. Wilson would draw new readers to an Eliot he admired for being daunting and difficult.

Paul Keers

‘The Modern Mind’: returning to Eliot’s criticism

I was struggling with the archive, the living archive. My supervisors for my PhD thesis on the Cambridge of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes suggested that I was becoming a little too close to the biography of the writers: would visiting Sylvia Plath’s room at Whitstead (a house of Newnham College) and there reading her poem ‘Resolve’ really be revelatory? One of them sighed and began searching for a quotation that would help guide me back to my academic thesis from biographical imagining. He suggested I read again ‘The Modern Mind’ from Eliot’s *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*.

Re-reading the essay, I found a gem which would help me enormously: ‘By the time [the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate] has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experienced as to be hardly recognisable. The ‘experience’ in question

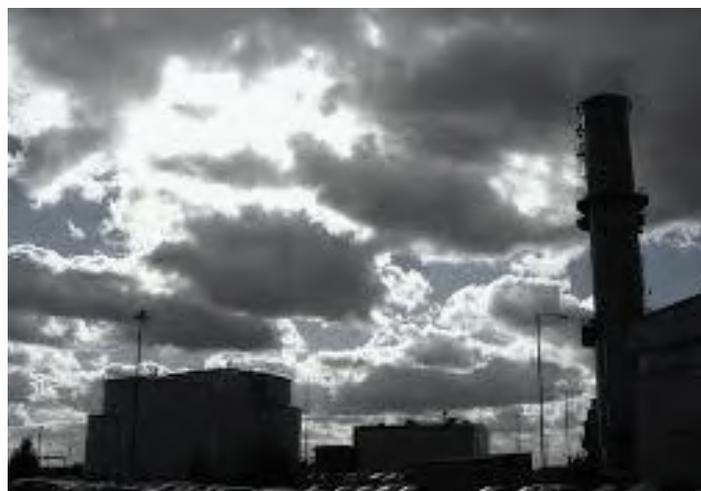
may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he (sic) is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.'

I cannot 'find' Sylvia Plath's experience of the poem "Resolve" in her room in Whitstead; no more than I 'find' Eliot's experience of breakdown in a shelter in Margate. Instead, sitting in the shelter and looking out to sea across flat sands and a blustery sky I can hear Eliot's poem; I can reflect back to when I first heard it and how my English teacher Jane O'Neill at the Cambridgeshire High School for Girls read it to her A level students and had them entranced as her honed voice moved from poem to Southam to Pound's editing to Jessie Weston and then back to the themes of the poem and how they reveal meaning -

'On Margate Sands,
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.'

It is good to sit in that actual shelter at Margate and read the lines and think of Eliot's torment and genius, but it is also good and possibly more helpful to move from Eliot's original experience and to use his poem instead to plumb the depths of our own inability to make connections in our lives. This is not Eliot's original experience; this is poetry and its power. Eliot's poetry leads us to reflect upon connections between people and it resonates with other reading we have done. In the repetition of 'Nothing' I hear Lear reminding his daughter that, 'Nothing will come of nothing' and I move on to wondering if that is true, but also how we fill our lives with 'somethings' that often in our darkest hours equate to nothing.

From there I move on to when I was living and teaching in Essex in Stanford-le-Hope, which the locals would call Stanford-no-Hope. I remember walking along the Thames estuary and the darkness pulling in around Tilbury Fort and the awful, awful views across the water to Gravesend, and then back across the land to the power stations at Corringham and Coryton.



Coryton power station, Thames estuary, at evening

I would imagine all those workers in their houses preparing for the week ahead in the small brick boxes from which came on a Monday morning the children I would teach. These people, 'humble people', living their lives, working hard and expecting 'Nothing'. I am still in touch with Iris from Chadwell St Mary who lived next door to our teachers' council house. Jeff was a night watchman and Iris kept house. Over the years her letters inside Christmas cards became more scrawled, but never shorter. Then Jeff died and Iris' family popped in to care for her and she managed to get out now and again when the grandchildren picked her up in their cars and could get her wheelchair in the boot....

Already I am a long way from Margate Sands and Eliot's experience, and no closer to Sylvia Plath's room in Whitstead! However, I am very close to Eliot's prose passage in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. I have no more words in my thesis yet, but I have a better understanding of what poetry communicates. Eliot I am sure was never aware that he would communicate my thought process when he wrote about Margate Sands, but as he says, 'what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.' I am grateful he completed his poem; I am grateful that I can return to my thesis with the enlightenment he has given me in his prose.

Di Beddow

Reflections on the T. S. Eliot Summer School, 2018

In the course of my second year as an English undergraduate, I was incredibly privileged to receive financial help from the T. S. Eliot Society (UK) and from other sources, which enabled my participation in the International T. S. Eliot Summer School. I am grateful to Dr Chris Joyce from the Eliot Society committee for facilitating the arrangements and for his personal encouragement.

I had first encountered Eliot several years before during a period of distraction from my studies. Eliot's words unsettled my required reading syllabus, radiating significance where other texts merely glimmered. The opportunity to engage and participate with the research of leading Eliot scholars was therefore invaluable to my studies.

Situated in the towering heights of Senate House, University of London, a stone's throw from Eliot's Bloomsbury haunts, the programme unfolded over the course of nine days (7th -15th July), with two excursions, to the landmarks of Little Gidding and Burnt Norton. Irish novelist Colm Tóibín lifted the event with an illuminative opening address: 'Four-letter words', at least to my mind, will forever remain shells from which a 'piece of chocolate' can be carefully removed. Time was then allowed for everyone to be introduced. Over the duration of the programme I encountered a diverse number of passionately motivated individuals from all across the world, with many of whom I am still in contact.

Each lecture on the programme had its value. However, personally, only a select few resonated in ways that I hadn't anticipated; in particular, the insights of Frances Dickey, William Marx, Seamus Perry, and the profound words of Professor Ronald Schuchard, the last of whom led the *Four Quarters* seminars. Together, the lectures traced Eliot's streets, his delights and longings, and the small, private thoughts of this totemic literary figure. The seminars I attended focusing on *Four Quartets*, led by Ron Schuchard, were, perhaps, the most memorable part of my experience. Against the unprecedented July heat, every line of each quartet was pored over, con-

sidered, weighed and discussed amongst our group. *Four Quartets*, notwithstanding the length of each class, demanded our complete attention. It was a highly enlightening facet to the week, strengthening my appreciation even further.

The impressions I had conceived of T. S. Eliot by the end of the programme were very different from when I had first begun, nine days earlier. I can't say that when reading Eliot I still feel the same terror as I used to, nor do I turn to him in periods of distraction, but I now appreciate his body of work as something altogether different than I had previously understood. Eliot's extraordinary grace with language ensued from a brilliant yet tormented mind that more than anything else needed words to communicate itself.

Attending the T. S. Eliot summer school was an incredible experience, one I would highly recommend to anyone who has invested of themselves not only in Eliot but in literature as a whole.

Johannes Black
Clare College
Cambridge

Paradox in Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday': a contrary view

Anyone who has been to the small town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Eliot's father built the family's holiday home, Eastern Point, in the mid-1890s, will have been struck by the quiet beauty of the old colonial town. We have photographs of Eliot there as a boy and as a young man, and it's clear from his later poems that he retained affectionate memories of it all his life. Although he declared himself a classicist and discouraged biographical approaches to his work, there are passages which bear the mark of autobiographical reflection and which have a lyrical beauty that is not always to be associated with Eliot. One such is this from the sixth section of 'Ash-Wednesday':

(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things
From the wide window towards the granite shore
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover

And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

The opening words are of course from the Confessional – and the title of the sequence as a whole adverts us to the theme of penitence. We may also be aware of the presence in the poem, as in *Four Quartets*, of St John of the Cross; but the beauty and poignancy of the poetry, the intensity of its power of association – the wide window, the “white sails”, the “lost” lilac, the “unbroken” wings (in contrast equally with the “broken Coriolanus” of ‘The Waste Land’ and

with “the broken king” of ‘Little Gidding’), the intensity of longing (these are much more than conventional reminiscences) – all this appears to make the poem a refutation of his avowed, and avowedly Christian, intention to repel the temptations they figure. He plainly associates the “lost lilac” with “the usual reign” of ‘Ash-Wednesday’ part I – not hoping, as he says there, “to turn again”; but so strongly positive are the counter-suggestions of “unbroken wings” and the other poetic values, most notably those associated with the lilac, that he succeeds instead – or so it seems to me - in repudiating his declared belief.



The house of the wide widows, now 18 Broadmoor Road, Gloucester, Massachusetts

The ‘lilac’ which is ‘lost’ is one the most potent examples of Eliot’s associative process. It calls up almost invariably those things in his gravitational field which stand for human love, longing and affection. Despite his (self-defensive?) aversion from Whitman (“When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d”), no subsequent American poet could use the word without full consciousness of its import: love of country, of loss and grief. It seems likely that at some stage too (perhaps through Pound) he encountered Amy Lowell’s ‘Lilacs’ (1920):

May is lilac here in New England ...
May is much sun through small leaves,
May is soft earth,
And apple blossoms,
And windows open to a South Wind.
May is full light wind of lilac ...

And there was the memory (a “sentimental sunset”, Eliot called it) of Jean Verdenal coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris in the late afternoon waving a branch of lilac.

In ‘Ash-Wednesday’ III we read that:

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair

here associated with “enchanted maytime”. It was the cruelty of April to have bred “lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire”.

But “the blind eye creates/ The empty forms between the ivory gates...”. The reference is to the close of book vi of *The Aeneid* (Eliot knew his Virgil well), where through the gates of polished ivory the gods of the dead send false dreams to the living. The longed for ‘lost sea voices’ and the ‘lost lilac’ are illusory temptations of the flesh: “I do not wish to wish these things”. Hugh Kenner (*The invisible poet: T. S. Eliot*) says: “Here every noun, verb and adjective pulls two ways. The lilac is lost in belonging to a world that has been renounced” (lost perhaps also in a simpler sense of belonging to an irrecoverable past) and that its returning transfigured is so thin a possibility as to be effectively illusory. It is true that the closing line of the section offers a momentary resistance: “smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth” - but by now the ashes of repentance are firmly upon the poet’s forehead.



Looking out to sea from ‘Eastern Point’: “the white sails still fly seaward”; and Eliot himself at sea.

It may well be that other readers approach Eliot’s lines with fewer reservations than I have, or may even endorse them unreservedly. I should like hear that case put.

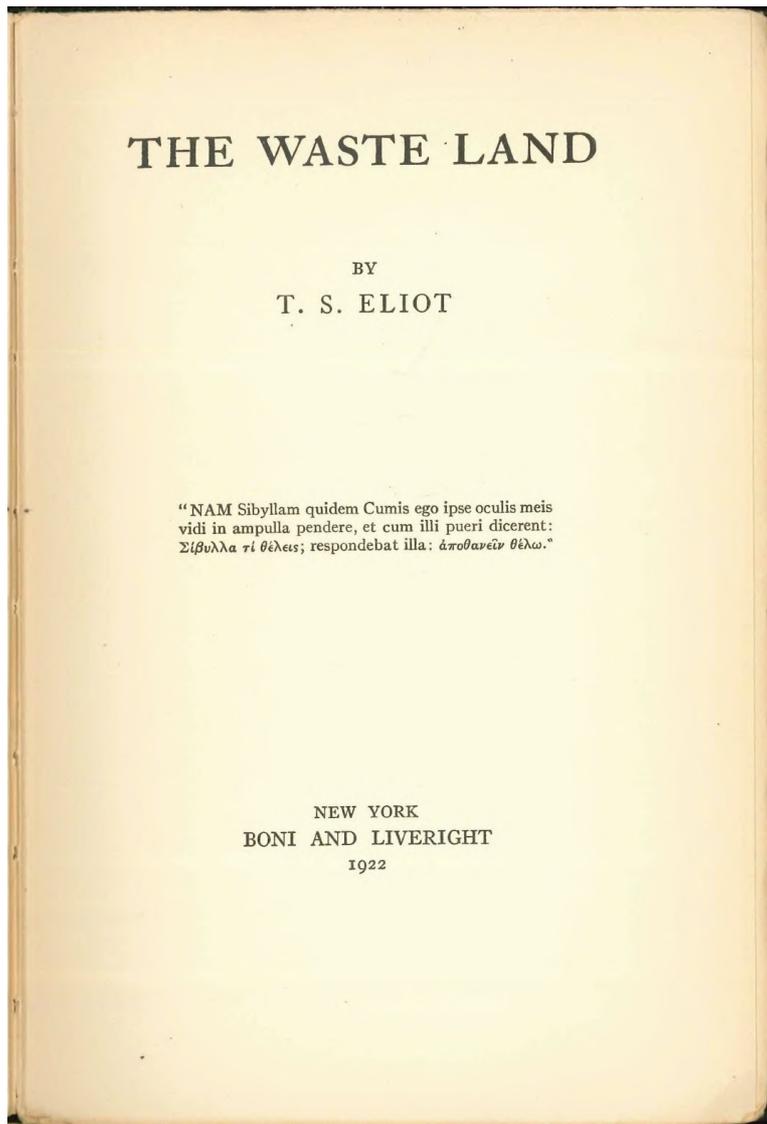
Chris Joyce



Schoolboy error?

Generations of English teachers must by now have been infuriated by an elementary mistake of school students: referring to 'The Wasteland' instead of 'The Waste Land'. But the mistake had been made early on. Bill Goldstein in his *The World Broke in Two* (2017) notes that 'Eliot's poem was announced to booksellers and the press as *The Wasteland*.' Publishers Boni & Liveright wrote in their 'Good Books catalogue for 1922: '*The Wasteland* is the longest poem T. S. Eliot has written and the first poetry that he has written in the last three years... *The Wasteland* will be one of the most beautifully printed and bound books that has ever borne our imprint.' (Goldstein pp.219-20)

So not just a schoolboy's error, then.



But they got it right on the cover! The first edition of 'The Waste Land' in book form. The poem had first appeared in Eliot's journal *The Criterion* in October 1922 and in *The Dial* in America the following month. This edition by Boni and Liveright appeared in December of that year. In early print-runs the publisher was shown as Horace Liveright, who had negotiated the deal with Eliot and lawyer John Quinn. Depending on condition and whether numbered, copies currently sell for between £10,000 and £50,000.