T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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Exchanges...

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"Inside, There he Is, – writing a Letter to TOM" –
a self-portrait by Eliot in a letter to his godson Tom Faber in 1932

Editorial

After a Summer whose heat many found stifling, Autumn has brought sudden storms and a sense that the coming winter will be one of further 'extreme weather events'. We are promised – or threatened with – violent winds, heavy rainfall, floods, coastal erosion – not to mention increasing talk of war and the need to stockpile. There's something almost apocalyptic about the way coming months are described.

In what I hope, though, is a reassuring edition of 'Exchanges', we are offered a clear focus on the enduring power and relevance of Eliot's poetry. Dan Dearlove completes his two-part reflection on 'The Waste Land', arguing that the waste land of Arthurian myth can be seen as the very same waste land of modernity: Eliot's poem can prompt us towards 'setting our lands in order'.

Christopher Southgate reports on a Cambridge colloquy on Lancelot Andrewes and Eliot, highlighting the significance of Andrewes as a Renaissance intellectual of broad sympathies, a Bishop of saintly spirituality, and of course a key influence on Eliot. Held at Pembroke College, where Andrewes had been Master, the two-day September conference marked the 400th anniversary of his death, and brought together an international group of scholars. Readers will be familiar with Andrewes as the starting inspiration of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', but there's significantly more to the connection than that, as Christopher's report makes clear.

Turning from the Anglican spiritual tradition to the Catholic, I review *Dark Night*, a new Penguin Classics edition of poems and selected prose by St John of the Cross. The influence of this sixteenth-century Spanish mystic on Eliot is considerable, and a new edition of his key works provides a superb background to some of Eliot's thought in, particularly, *Four Quartets*. In a late interview of 1961, Eliot responded to the startling question, 'Are you yourself not, perhaps, a failed mystic?' in these terms: 'I don't think I am a mystic at all, though I have always been interested in mysticism …. With me, certainly, the poetic is stronger than the mystical impulse.' He went on to suggest that there have been poets whose poetic inspiration depends on mystical insight, but concludes: '… I do not know of any mystic who was also a fine poet, except St John of the Cross.' It's to be hoped that the simple fact of a new, accessible edition will enable more readers of Eliot to explore both the poetry and the mystical impulse of St John, and to grasp more fully the significance of both for Eliot.

Rather differently, this edition concludes – thanks to Kathy Radley, Society Secretary/Treasurer – with some quite extraordinarily ill-conceived criticism of Eliot's talent and work by Lord Alfred Douglas – admittedly not best known as a literary critic ….

John Caperon
Editor

Exchanges *is the quarterly members' 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

‘The Waste Land’ as retelling of the Holy Grail myth?
Part II: Questions not asked



In my last piece, I suggested we interpret Eliot as using the ‘mythic method’ in ‘The Waste Land’ in retelling the Holy Grail story. The point of the mythic method, in Eliot’s own word, is to draw ‘a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ as a way of ‘giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’. Or, put more simply, faced with the muddle of contemporary events, we can draw parallels with archetypal narratives (even more plainly, old stories) to gain a foothold into understanding our world. The suggestion, more concretely, is that we take the waste land of Arthurian myth to be the very same waste land of modernity. We thereby make the myth more familiar, our world a little strange — and yet, paradoxically, the more intelligible for it.

What, then, is the heart of the Grail story, and what does it have to tell us about our moment? You will remember that the King is sick with a wound to the groin, perhaps self-inflicted; as a result, the land (bound to the fate of the King) has become barren. The cure depends on the Grail Knight asking the right question at the right moment, and he stays silent. And haven’t we all? Mythologist and Orthodox Christian Martin Shaw says that the central question of the Grail stories is this: ‘How do you find by an act of will something you once encountered as an act of grace? Is that even possible?’ Shaw goes on to ask his students a provocative question, ‘what question have you failed to ask?’ Somewhere in your life, he suggests, there is probably a great abdication, a moment of decision that came and passed. Like the knight of the Grail legend, the opportunity fell at your feet without searching for it, and you failed to ask the right question at the right moment. Yet fairytales teach us that these opportunities will come around again. The first brother fails to answer the invitation to adventure, but the third youngest brother — the fool in you — will be given another chance.

Returning to ‘The Waste Land’, we see that it is a poem saturated with questions. More strikingly, we find a world haunted by the devastating consequences of the questions never asked, or asked too late. The poem opens under the sign of a terrible question. In the Latin epigraph, the boys ask the Sibyl of Cumae, ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ Her response is a cry of nihilism: ‘I want to die’

From there, the questions build in a torrent. In ‘The Burial of the Dead’, we are asked what can possibly grow from the soil of such a world: ‘What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?’

In ‘A Game of Chess’, we shrink down to the atmosphere of claustrophobic human relationships. The speaker neurotically peppers her partner with increasingly existential questions, only to receive silence, or cold, dead responses. ‘Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / Nothing?’

The middle-class anxiety is mirrored in a conversation between the working-class London wives at the pub. Their chatter climaxes in the question that strikes at the heart of the sterility of the modern world: ‘What you get married for if you don’t want children?’ Notably, this question is posed too late, after the marriage has soured. We glimpse here the further tragedy that no question was asked when the woman took the abortion

pills. ‘The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been / the same.’

Yet again, we confront a deafening silence in ‘The Fire Sermon’, in the sexual encounter — or perhaps assault — between the young man and the typist. No question of consent or mutual desire is ever posed: ‘His vanity requires no response / And makes a welcome of indifference.’

The questions reach a crescendo in ‘What the Thunder Said’. They are no longer quasi-domestic, but unambiguously cosmic. ‘Who is the third who walks always beside you? […] What is the city over the mountains [?]’

Deep in the mountains we reach the Perilous Chapel of Grail legend, the place of ultimate test, where the knight must be reborn through a kind of death. The dry sky cracks open with rain, for the first time in the poem, and the thunder speaks a single syllable, DA. It issues three commands: Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathise), Damyata (control). But in the poem, they land as questions, put to us. ‘What have we given? The awful daring of a moment’s surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract.’ Have we sympathised, or only confirmed our own prisons? When the boat responded, did our hearts?

Then we are left on the shore with the Fisher King himself. The land is still waste, the arid plain is behind him, and he faces the water. Notably, the final question of the poem is asked not by a Grail knight but by the King himself. ‘Shall I at least set my lands in order?’ The ‘at least’ is striking. What is it in contrast with? Perhaps in contrast to the successive questions that were not asked, and the desolate world that resulted. Yet notice, whilst the other questions have been asked too late, or never at all, this one is asked in time. If the story holds true, the kingdom is restored through asking the right question. Perhaps the King asks in place of the Knight in recognition that no Knight is coming to save us, and we must take responsibility for ourselves.

Of course, the Grail world is not directly our own, and Eliot’s time is not ours either. But it is hard not to feel that the diagnosis posed in the waste land of modernity is one that we still face — perhaps is only now reaching its crisis. Indeed, there are many questions that are currently being failed to be asked in our pursuit of AI, the destruction of the natural world, the crisis of education around the world, and in sum the loss of our spiritual roots. But the Grail story offers the hope that there can be a redemptive power merely in asking questions. The psychoanalyst C.G. Jung said that ‘[t]o ask the right question is already half the solution of a problem.’ And perhaps even our despair can serve a purpose too. I recently heard Mark Ford explain how Eliot uses paradox in *Four Quartets* to occupy and finally overwhelm the conscious mind, until it fails, and gives up, but in the failure opens up a place for grace to enter in. I wonder whether, in the same way, through this torrent of questions, ‘The Waste Land’ overwhelms and disheartens us in order that, finally, in our giving up, we achieve a kind of clarity and coherence through the noise. A clarity of intention. An overwhelming task emerges. To set our lands in order.

Dan Dearlove

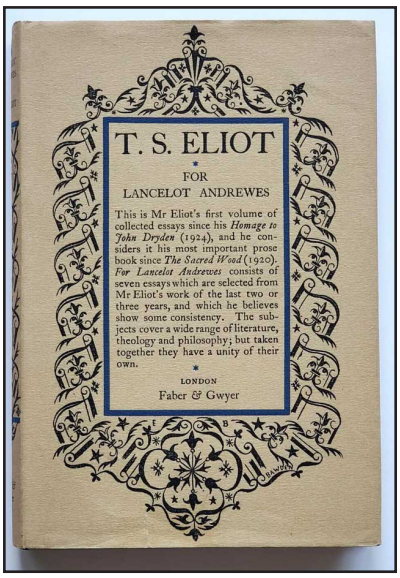
Lancelot Andrewes and the T S Eliot Connection



Jointly hosted by the Cambridge English Faculty and Pembroke College, where Andrewes was Master, this meeting brought together some 40 members, including both senior academics and an encouraging number of postgraduates. I pay tribute to the organisers for both bringing off a smoothly run meeting, and engendering a constructive and supportive atmosphere in discussion - not always the case, alas, at these august establishments!

There were two full days of papers, and also – a high spot this – a small but exquisite exhibition of Andrewes materials held by Pembroke. This included a beautiful fair copy of his book of private prayers, his Will, and his personal Bible in the Coverdale version, compete with ink-stains and candle burns. There was also a reminder that sixteenth-century Pembroke provided not only Andrewes as chair of the Westminster group of translators of what became the King James Bible, but also three other translators. The programme also featured Evensong at Pembroke Chapel (an early building of Christopher Wren's), which included prayers taken from Andrewes' private papers.

The historical element was added to by a fine talk from Alison Knight (Royal Holloway) on the certificates given to recusants returning to Anglican observance - several signed by Andrewes survive – and by a tour de force from Peter McCullough (Oxford) on Andrewes' tomb, which moved several times within what is now Southwark Cathedral. McCullough also tracked how Andrewes came to be an icon for the Oxford Movement, and pointed to the importance of an anonymous Times article of 1926 in providing a wider view of the Bishop as a Renaissance intellectual of broad sympathies.



First Edition, published by Faber & Gwyer, dustjacket designed by Edward Bawden

What of the Eliot connection? The other trigger for the conference was Eliot's essay on Andrewes, first published in 1926, which stresses Andrewes the Christian writer, the great crafter of intricately argued sermons. Eliot writes of Andrewes' ability to squeeze and squeeze a biblical text to extract the uttermost juice of its meaning, and this he did making free use of Latin and Greek as well as English to explore nuances of sense. His sermons therefore make dense reading indeed.

It is fair to say that the emphasis of the conference was on Andrewes far more than Eliot; and there were papers tentatively proposing intricate answers to questions it would not even have occurred to me to ask. And there was much fascinating discussion of Donne - which I could only applaud, not evaluate - prompted by Eliot's comparison of the preaching of Donne and Andrewes.

Eliot aficionados would have enjoyed, however, the survey by Christopher Archibald (Exeter) of Eliot's evolving relation to early modern drama, especially Webster, and the poet's move towards a Christian framework that provided the 'under-pattern' he found missing in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, with its

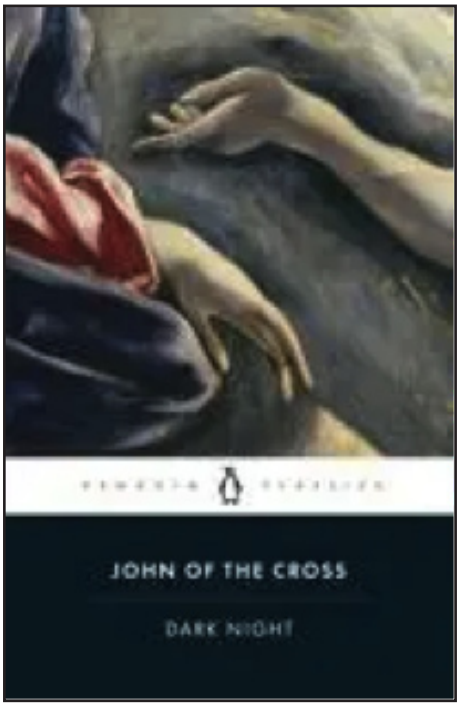
over-fondness for 'flashes' of inspiration, and effects engendering the 'shudder'. There was also a lively paper from Michael West (Dallas) on the evolution of Eliot's attitude to Donne, who is first seen as a poet whose difficulty licensed the difficulty of the modernists, but later comes to be the sort of Christian convert Eliot does not want to become, preferring the more traditionally saintly and austere spirituality of Andrewes.

One last fascinating historical nugget. For the anniversary of the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 a public holiday of thanksgiving was called, with a special service. Andrewes preached several of these before James I. In the more famous Nativity sermons (one of which furnishes the opening to Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'), Andrewes stresses the significance of Christmas Day – this day, now is important, the people are called to recommit themselves as a matter of urgency to the Lord who comes to them anew in bread and wine. In the Gunpowder sermons the message is subtly different, stressing rather what might have happened, and the depth of the evil from which the realm has been delivered, and must continually be delivered. What a tightrope the Bishop must have walked, in all this preaching before the King!

So – all in all – a demanding but hugely enjoyable couple of days, and in the quadricentenary of Andrewes, and the centenary of Eliot's essay, an interesting foretaste of whatever may happen next year for the centenary of Eliot's baptism and confirmation into the Church of England, and his naturalisation as a British citizen.

Christopher Southgate

St John of the Cross – a new edition



The works of St John of the Cross were a significant influence upon Eliot's spiritual life, as well as appearing in direct quotation as the epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*, and in Section III of 'East Coker'. A masterpiece of the Catholic mystical tradition, 'Dark Night' - the poems and selected prose of John of the Cross - now comes in a new translation by poet and translator Martha Strackland, with an introduction by Colin Thompson, a specialist in Golden Age Spanish literature and a former minister of the United Reformed Church. Strackland brings energy and finesse to her translation, as one might expect; and Thompson, notwithstanding his Protestant heritage, displays a profound affinity with John's Catholic mysticism. And a brief note on nomenclature: in our secular age, for the publisher Penguin the author of this classic mystical text is no longer 'Saint' John but simply 'John'. Hmm.

Analogy and metaphor are at the very root of theology. The twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote, 'If we speak of Him, we are no longer speaking of Him.' But one term – 'love' – appears to be applicable in both human and divine contexts. The Hebrew Bible's Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, presents as an erotic classic, with its lovingly detailed and vividly evocative, sensuous descriptions of the female lover's form, with its urgent invitation to be 'drunk with love.' But in Rabbinic commentary – however unlikely this may seem - it becomes a classic of spiritual love, of love between the soul and God. John's 'Dark Night' poem – powerfully rendered by Strackland - echoes the intensity of the Song of Solomon, and his other poems pick up

much of its imagery, deliberately placing his work in the tradition of the Song and seeking to be a contemporary equivalent of the ancient erotic/spiritual classic. His 'I entered in I knew not where' introduces the idea – well-known in Medieval English spirituality - of 'unknowing', of the transcending of knowledge, of 'not-understanding', of 'taking leave of the self; and any reader of 'Four Quartets' will make connections.

The notion of the ascent towards God runs through much of the poetry, as does the conviction that '… once the will has felt/God's own holy touch/nothing will be enough/but that divinity itself.' ('Not for all of beauty'). This sense of a deep longing of the soul which can only be satisfied by God lies at the heart of Christian mysticism. John's distinctive contribution is to see this ascent in terms of a via purgativa for spiritual beginners, a via illuminativa where divine light appears as darkness, and a via unitiva, where the soul is filled with divine love, making possible a union between Creator and creature. But on this upward journey there is of course the 'dark night of the soul'. Colin Thompson's excellent introduction elucidates: '… the passive night of the spirit is the time of the greatest suffering, spiritual aridity and despair, because God appears to be entirely absent, and all the soul can do is to wait in the darkness…'

Reading this new edition of St John of the Cross, one is constantly taken back to Eliot – in 'Ash Wednesday', 'Sweeney Agonistes' and *Four Quartets*. There's little doubt that reading Eliot in the light of St John is an illuminating experience, or that this new edition will bring the sixteenth-century Carmelite saint's work accessibly and memorably to many new readers.

John Caperon

Lord Alfred Douglas on T S Eliot

The TS Eliot Society is grateful to The Hugh Walpole Society for alerting us to this extract, published in their Review. The letter from which the quotation comes was written by Lord Alfred Douglas to Hugh Walpole, 22 January 1938 and is from the Hugh Walpole Collection at the Bodleian Library.

> "I cannot understand why one should be expected to admire T. S. Eliot (ask the admirable Quillercouch what he thinks of him!) If the sort of stuff he turns out was poetry then any tom fool could write it by the yard. There seems to be a sort of wave of insanity on this subject passing over England. I never accepted Walt Whitman as a real poet but at least he had the rough ore of poetry in him and if he had ever tried to master the art and technique of poetry he might have been a poet because his ideas were original and he had a fine vocabulary and passion to help him. Eliot has none of these things he not only has no knowledge at all of the technique (he does not make any pretence of of [sic] employing it) of poetry but his mind is commonplace and platitudinous. He is utterly incapable of writing poetry. If he were shut up in a room and told he would be let out only after he had written six lines of real poetry he would remain in that room till death claimed him!"

This letter has recently been published for the first time, along with several others, in John Cameron Hartley, 'Letters from Lord Alfred', Hugh Walpole Review, Autumn 2026, 7:2, pp. 26-38. The letters are reproduced courtesy of the Executors of the Literary Estate of LAD, John Rubinstein and John D. Stratford.

Kathy Radley