Seventy years ago this term, Eliot visited the University of Chicago, and delivered four lectures there as poet in residence.
‘All over by Christmas’ was the cheery early judgement about the first World War. Four years and millions of deaths later, things looked rather different. What about the Covid-19 pandemic? We were hopeful back in the summer that we might have seen off the coronavirus. We ‘ate out to help out’, in the ingenious Treasury formula; only to find that by September cases were increasing, our efforts having aided not just restauranteurs and pub landlords, but also apparently the virus itself. By late October the second wave was in full flow, with hospitalisations threatening to overwhelm the Health Service, and deaths rising to awful levels. So lockdown it was again: early optimism replaced by a wearied acceptance that we were in this for the long haul.

We might well recall T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’. A recent article¹ in ‘Crucible’, the journal of Christian social ethics, reminds us that Eliot’s poem saw light in the immediate post-war era, the era also of social devastation following the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 - 20. Applying the themes and images of the poem to the present Covid-19 context prompts the authors to reflect on how the hope for restoration expressed in the poem sits in tension with the experience of suffering; how the search for meaning is frustrated by the sheer dreadfulfulness of living. The poem’s final line, ‘Shantih shantih shantih’, ‘the peace that passeth understanding’, in Eliot’s translation, might express hopeful longing, despairing resignation, or acceptance of the blank incomprehensibility of the human condition; what isn’t offered is anything by way of a simple resolution.

But then poetry doesn’t offer resolutions to our uncertainties or agonies: rather a resource for living in and through them. Eliot’s poems, in phrase, line and longer passages, do, as the writer says, ‘… echo/ Thus, in your mind.’ They offer a well of meaning we can explore and reflect upon, to our learning.

In this edition of ‘Exchanges’, we move from the poems to the author himself in the context of his first marriage, in Society Chairman Paul Keers’ review of Ann Pasternak Slater’s new ‘The Fall of a Sparrow – Vivien Eliot’s Life and Writings’: the most substantial work yet published on Eliot’s first wife. We reflect further on Pauline Davison’s theme in our Summer edition ‘poetry in lockdown’, considering how poetry has been presented to us during lockdown and beyond through the work of the Arvon Foundation. And we look at teaching Eliot today through the different perspectives of a teacher – Society Secretary Kathy Radley - and Lucy-Jean Lawrenson, a Sixth Form student member. A few fragments to shore against our current ruins

John Caperon
Editor

The Wife’s Tale

*The Fall of a Sparrow: Vivien Eliot’s Life and Writings*, by Ann Pasternak Slater (Faber & Faber, £35.00)

Despite being the most substantial work yet published on Vivien Eliot, ironically a line of her husband’s might best describe this book: it is politic, cautious and meticulous.

Ann Pasternak Slater acknowledges in her introduction that ‘this marriage has always prompted polarised and partisan responses’. The TS Eliot Estate having ‘offered’ her this undertaking, it was politic to produce a studiously objective biography – and ‘as far as possible, to avoid all conjecture.’

As part of this large (770pp) volume, Vivien’s writings are published, most for the first time, with scholarly annotation. Her ledgers and diaries have been digitised and made available online. And comparing Vivien’s diaries at one point with the detailed progress of actual events, Pasternak Slater effectively describes her entire project; *The Fall of A Sparrow* ‘presents the reader with the documented facts in shocking counterpoint to [Vivien’s] many evasions, self-aggrandising delusions, and a lifetime’s accelerating impulse towards self-harm.’

She similarly challenges many of the interpretations of Carole Seymour-Jones, whose 2001 biography *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne (sic) Eliot* she describes as ‘often highly speculative, wilfully inaccurate, and loyally tendentious’.

So the book is at pains to debunk, with those ‘documented facts’, some of the more colourful anecdotes of the marriage, like the story of Vivien pouring melted chocolate through the Faber letterbox (‘farcical’); or the tales of ‘Captain Eliot’ escaping into a bizarre second life in Burleigh Mansions (‘meagre and unsubstantiated innuendoes’). She weighs the evidence for Vivien wearing Fascist uniform (no, not really), and sleeping with Bertrand Russell (yes, at least once).

Vivien’s life is traced here in meticulous factual detail and academic tone, over nearly 500 pages. A patient reader could find much of the book’s content in the volumes of *The Letters of TS Eliot*, which contain most of Vivien’s quoted letters in addition to those between Eliot and his correspondents. But here the threads are drawn together into a single narrative.

There is indeed no conjecture. No speculation as to why Eliot so hastily married Vivien in the first place. No exploration of her name’s persistent alternative spellings. And no real investigation of Vivien’s possible role.
in Eliot’s work. Her comments written on the manuscript of *The Waste Land* are straightforwardly documented, in a single paragraph. There is no mention of that poem’s line, ‘The ivory men make company between us’, said to be excised by her. And no consideration of what Seymour-Jones called ‘her influence on his genius’; perhaps fortuitously, since the book was completed before the opening of the Emily Hale letters, and our new awareness of her female presence in his poetry. Although I for one hear the speech patterns of A Game of Chess when Virginia Woolf writes after a meeting with Vivien: ‘Suppose you were to say to her, ‘Would you have some more cake?’ , she’d say (in a wild voice) ‘What’s that, what’s that, what do you mean, what did you say that for?’

By patiently presenting all existing facts, the book is sometimes therefore a relentlessly detailed tracing of social events, country cottages, seaside hotels, endless household ‘movals and removals’, and of frankly humdrum domestic life, ‘On 28th October she and Eliot visited Pearl [Fassett]’s parents, spending 3/- on flowers for Mrs Fassett and 5/- for taxis there and back.’ Such detail, while impressive, can become somewhat tedious. And against this backdrop, one’s attention is inevitably drawn to the more dramatic aspects of Vivien’s life, particularly ‘the incrementally corrosive effect of [her] persistent maladies’.

Pasternak Slater provides detail of Vivien’s ailments, from tangible evidence of both drug addiction and anorexia, to Vivien’s own claims of sometimes fantastic disorders (such as ‘internal displacements’, supposedly caused by standing). Early in the book, she diagnoses Vivien as suffering what we would now call Munchausen’s Syndrome, ‘whose sufferers feign disease in order to draw attention, sympathy, lenience or reassurance to themselves.’ Eliot’s brother Henry would later describe her state as simply ‘self-induced, voluntarily and deliberately’. The disruption her ailments caused to the Eliots’ life is recorded in endless apologetic letters, together with less diplomatic background exchanges between family and friends. And Eliot’s own behaviour, including his role in her eventual confinement, is presented with calm objectivity – although the author does allow herself a comment that ‘few could have displayed conjugal stamina comparable to his’.

The book now leaves little doubt about the sad facts of Vivien Eliot’s life. And by presenting over 200 pages of her published and unpublished writings, I’m afraid the evidence also leaves little doubt that no major talent has been overlooked. ‘She has boundless ambition,’ Bertrand Russell observed, ‘Far beyond her powers’.

So the figures in this marriage are not ‘the Eliots’, nor are they ‘Tom and Viv’. Rather, as they are invariably and revealingly addressed throughout this book, they are ‘Eliot and Vivien’. Which surely reflects why our interest persists – not out of voyeurism, watching a marriage which was, as Eliot wrote in his posthumously sealed statement, 17 years of ‘nightmare agony’; nor because to a young wife ‘the marriage brought no happiness’; but because to Eliot himself it ‘brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land.*’

Paul Keers
Poetry in Lockdown: a perspective on the Arvon Foundation

Our Summer edition included an article by Pauline Davison describing how poetry had supported and encouraged both her and a group of friends linked by computer. Here, the Editor looks at a national source of poetry in the pandemic.

Totleigh Barton (below), a Devon farmhouse, was the Arvon Foundation’s first residential centre. Other current Arvon centres are at Lumb Bank, Yorkshire (a former home of Ted Hughes, also below); and at The Hurst, Shropshire, the former home of playwright John Osborne. Founded in 1968 by two poets, John Moat and John Fairfax, with the original aim of providing time and space away from school for young people to write poetry, Arvon has since broadened its work to become ‘a freehouse of the imagination’, welcoming adult writers in the belief that ‘creative writing can change lives for the better’, unlocking ‘our potential, our empathy, our hope’.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown period and since, Arvon has offered on-line courses and readings via the Zoom platform with a range of poets and other writers. I’ve tuned in (as we used to say) to a number of the readings, and have found them both intimate and inspirational. My reflections on Roger Robinson’s reading appeared in our Summer edition, and I won’t repeat them, except to recall his wonderful comment: ‘Four Quartets’, that’s my jam’. But I do want to offer a thought or two on three other readings (by Colm Toibin, Simon Armitage and Michael Symmons Roberts).

I forget the first time I ever heard a living poet read, but it certainly wasn’t in my school or university days: the discipline of ‘English’ was then felt to be critical rather than creative; and creative writing had a place far below analysis and comparison, appreciation, and even precis. As a teacher in East Africa I heard Ngugi wa Thiong’o (then known as James Ngugi) read and respond to questions from a group of our senior students, and that was a revelation. Somehow, writing...
became personal: the book – what we’d always thought of as ‘the text’, an objective thing - became something subjective, the creation of a real, human person.

Becoming a teacher, and then a head of English in this country, I worked – with the assistance of organisations like (the then) Southern Arts - to bring writers and especially poets into the school. In the ‘Martian’ age of the 1970s, we welcomed Craig Raine, the original ‘Martian’ poet; Vernon Scannell, of the older school of working-class realism; Paul Muldoon; Dannie Abse, D J Enright, Anthony Thwaite, and a range of others. And visits elsewhere brought students and staff into direct contact with Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, the elder statesmen of that now far-off time. Students and teachers didn’t just read the text, they met the writers too.

Is Zoom able to create the same sense of closeness to the creative mind of the writer you get from a live encounter? Well, yes; perhaps even more so than visits and public talks or readings. Arvon’s Zoom readings were a further revelation. There is something about the intimacy of a virtual reading that brings the viewer into close, face to face contact with the poet or writer, on a one-to-one basis. Without those Arvon Zooms, I’d have had little idea of the personal character of the writers, the depth of their personal reflectiveness, their struggle with expression, the ‘intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings’, as Eliot put it. Colm Toibin, doyen of Irish novelists, was a compelling speaker, dredging responses to questions from considerable depth. So too was Simon Armitage, Northerner and poet laureate; responding deftly and wittily to questions from perhaps over-awed Zoomers; and Michael Symmons Roberts came off the page for me in a powerful new way: light in texture, tight, astute. So grateful thanks to Arvon (www.arvon.org) – and to Zoom – for a new, and newly intimate, appreciation of some our very best current writers.

John Caperon
Teaching – and learning – Eliot

How is Eliot taught today? The Editor’s question is prompted by the realisation that since he began teaching, both the critical context and the A level examination framework have altered beyond recognition: there is now a range of established literary-critical perspectives to be ‘inhabited’, and a far more prescriptive examination framework. Gone are the days when an examination candidate might have been expected to write, say, on: ‘What do you most enjoy about the poetry of T S Eliot’.... Here, Kathy Radley sets out what her A level students of Eliot are expected to do.

Teaching TS Eliot at A Level Today

Is it difficult in 2020 to teach a poet who is considered in some quarters privileged, Anglo-Catholic, royalist and anti-Semitic? I’ll examine this question through a series of coursework tasks which I wrote for my sixth form students, and through recollections of classroom debate.

For their Coursework paper, students have to write two essays, one of which must be on poetry. Today’s teaching, in line with the requirements of the examination boards, provides a series of lenses through which to teach the poems. These are: Marxism, Feminism, Post-Colonialism, Narrative Structure, Value (the ‘Canon’) and Ecocriticism. Chapters on each element are provided in a Critical Anthology. The title of the coursework element is: Theory and Independence.

For the poetry, I teach a selection of TS Eliot poems, and the students are expected to read more of the collection independently and then chose one of my suggested questions or negotiate one of their own. (They do not have to do Eliot at all, but to date no student has ever been that independent!) The aim of the teaching is to examine how to read poems through the prism of the selected critical approach: for example, Preludes through Marxism, or Portrait of a Lady through Feminism.

The aim stressed by the examination board is that the student must engage in debate. The background of the writer is key here, and this is where unfavourable elements of Eliot’s context may have entered the classroom discussion.
So, consider the following question:

*According to Marxist Literary criticism, the writer is bound by his context and therefore merely translates social facts into literary ones: to what extent is this true of ‘Preludes’ and other Eliot poems?*

In order to answer, the student would have to comment on Eliot’s advantaged background and consider whether he was in fact ‘bound’ by it. Students generally engaged in a reasoned argument about whether Eliot could successfully portray poorer working people quite comfortably and with a total lack of rancour.

*How does T S Eliot present his characters in ‘Portrait of a Lady’ and how does a feminist reading of this text open up potential meanings in this and other Eliot poems?*

Students at A Level are sophisticated enough to realise that they have to consider a writer’s views and attitudes within their time context, and they happily engage with what they might consider to be an old-fashioned view of women. In this case, of course, there is also the consideration of both protagonists’ privileged social status.

*The poetry of T S Eliot subverts the rules of narrative so much that the message remains unclear. Using ideas from the critical anthology, to what extent do you agree with this view?*

Debate around this question requires more knowledge of the narrative techniques of Eliot’s predecessors than his own social background. A lecture on Modernism provided at the start of the course, and the contributions of David Lodge on narrative technique, yielded straightforward debate on this question without issue.

*Does T S Eliot deserve his place in the Canon on the basis of this Poetry Collection?*

This question invites a debate on ‘value’ and what the literary world considers worthy, which is contentious enough among the students but also necessarily segues into Post-Colonial considerations of white male privilege. All occupants of the Canon being white, male and privileged, apart from George Eliot and Jane Austen, who are white, female and privileged. This is probably the area where students are more exercised than any other, but it’s with the literary establishment generally, rather than with Eliot himself.

I have found no greater difficulty with teaching Eliot than any other writer from a hundred years ago. Apart from a belief that art is separate from the artist, in general I have found that English Literature A Level students are enlightened and pretty worldly-wise after studying the contexts of Shakespeare and other pre-20th century texts, which form an assessment focus at GCSE. I have to admit, though, that anti-Semitism never entered our classroom debate; and I have also to admit that I have yet to tackle Ecocriticism as a critical approach….

**Kathy Radley**
Looking back on ‘Cats’ the movie

Lockdown has afforded us all the luxury of retrospection, and having just finished my A-Levels, I started looking back at the last year of school. A memorable day, one that I think will stay with me for a while, was when I picked up an old copy of Eliot’s ‘Selected Poems’ for the first time. Immediately I was enraptured, transported through thinly veiled allusions to past civilisations; the effortless symmetry of his verse filled me with awe. This is where my fascination with Eliot began, and I couldn’t wait to talk about it with my friends at school.

It felt strange to me that every time I tried to initiate a conversation about Eliot, I was met with disinterested mumbles of, ‘Oh, that’s the guy who did ‘Cats’’. It’s true that the relationship between seventeen-year-olds and poetry is not a typically symbiotic one; but it felt wrong that Generation Z’s understanding of Eliot should be so nonchalantly reduced to ‘Cats’.

Undoubtedly, I blame Tom Hooper’s 2019 film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical for this, a lengthy and fairly disturbing interpretation of ‘Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats.’ I believe I read once during my studies of Eliot that he particularly didn’t want any film adaptations made of his poems, and a year on and more from when the film was released, I still wonder what he would’ve made of it. There’s no doubt that he was a lover of the theatrical - in 1914 whilst a student at Oxford he wrote a letter to his cousin stating that he had been: ‘… to a few music-halls, and to the cinema with a most amusing French woman who is the only interesting acquaintance at my boarding house.’

Part of the greatness of Eliot’s work is his ability to weave together cultural depictions from the ancient to the modern, producing works entirely avant-garde in their unique fragmentations of ‘time present and time past’. But upon discovering that my peers only saw him as the man behind, albeit distantly, a fur-covered Taylor Swift, I wondered what the future of poetry scholarship holds. I was reminded again of my first encounter with Eliot, via Petronius and ‘The Waste Land’ epigraph. The Sibyl of Cumae, a once sacred prophetess, has neither youth nor beauty left when we meet her, and is instead a commodity from ancient times, attracting visitors who come to gawk instead of pray. She is neither living nor dead, like so many of Eliot’s characters in ‘The Waste Land’, and represents the fall of a civilisation: once so powerful, now turned to dust. If there is one thing I have learnt from Eliot’s poetry, it’s that culture rises again, and even if ‘Cats’ has warped kids’ views of Eliot into a Sibyl of Cumae-type character, I have faith that if anyone can prevail, it’s Eliot himself.

Lucy-Jean Lawrenson