

# T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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# Exchanges...

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## EDITORIAL COMMENT

Welcome to this Spring 2017 edition of 'Exchanges'. In it, we continue our developing series on Eliot and Intertextuality – hoping that other readers and Society members will add to the series by contributing their own examples of Eliot's constant re-emergence both in literary fiction and as a point of cultural reference. We note with sadness the death of Eliot enthusiasts both famed and more modest; we offer accounts of Eliot-related events both musical and artistic; we consider the current state of the Church of England, which became Eliot's spiritual home; and we offer an insight into how F. R. Leavis regarded Eliot, as well as a glimpse into Eliot's relationship with C. S. Lewis – one surprisingly warmer than might be expected. And – of course – we wish our readers all the joys of the Easter season!



*John Caperon*

*Editor*

## **Eliot and Intertextuality**

A piece in last September's *Exchanges* looked at intertextuality in two recent novels, Helen Dunmore's 'Exposure' and Sebastian Faulks's 'Where My Heart Used to Beat'. It is quite remarkable, I think, and a testament to his enduring imaginative power, that a hundred years on from T. S. Eliot's publication of 'Prufrock and Other Observations' in 1917, contemporary writers are still referencing him and his poems in their development of characters in their novels. And the trend began early.

In his 1921 novel 'Crome Yellow', Aldous Huxley satirised with all the spleen of a brilliant young outsider the privileged and – as he saw it – ridiculous world of the literary-intellectual house-party. Huxley, graduating in 1916 with a First in English Language and Literature from Balliol College Oxford, was unfit for military service and worked as a farm labourer at Garsington Manor, where the society hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell entertained the literati. It was a context in which the young observer Huxley was to meet D. H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell and a host of 'Bloomsbury' figures. They made their way – in thin disguise, together with Garsington – into his first novel, itself a kind of 'Observation' in the spirit of Eliot's first published collection.

Huxley's central character Denis Stone – a kind of ironic self-portrait – is a young poet, whose chronic sense of uncertainty is modelled it seems directly on Eliot's Prufrock. At dinner on his first night at the house party, Denis, subjected to a literary interrogation, admits that he has been writing: 'Oh, verse and prose, just verse and prose ... about the usual things, you know.' Hearing his fellow-guest Scogan's all-too-accurate description of the probable plot of his embryo novel, Denis '... blushed scarlet ...', lying that his novel was 'not in the least like that', and determining to tear up the two extant chapters 'that very evening when he unpacked.'

It is just a confirmation of Denis's identity as a complete Prufrock that we read of him the following day: 'Denis woke up next morning to find the sun shining, the sky serene. He decided to wear white flannel trousers – white flannel trousers and a black jacket, with a silk shirt and his new peach-coloured tie.' Huxley is quite clearly –and wittily - referencing Eliot, and the Denis/Prufrock comparison lasts throughout the novel. What other evident instances of Eliot-based intertextuality have Society members noted, I wonder?

*John Caperon*

## ‘Anglo-Catholic in religion’: Eliot and today’s Church of England

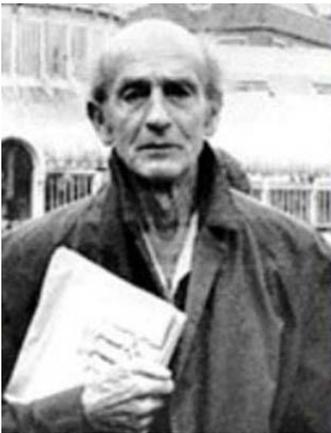
*Eliot eventually found his spiritual home in the Church of England, as a devout Anglo-Catholic. Does today’s Church, we wonder, have the potential to inspire similarly?*

Even the most casual observer will be aware that the Church of England – in Eliot’s day a powerful institution, embracing his own later-life Anglo-Catholicism – is today a shadow of its earlier, mid-twentieth-century self. The latest book to highlight the current state of the Church is: *That Was the Church, That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People*, by Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead (Bloomsbury, 2016). Andrew Brown is a waspish journalist who has been covering religion for many years, and who writes for *The Guardian* and the *Church Times*; Linda Woodhead is a professor of sociology whose work has extensively explored religion and spirituality. Their book is a pretty devastating narrative analysis of how the Church, as they see it, has over the past thirty years lost touch with the broad majority of English people, becoming more of a special interest group for a tiny, religiously-minded minority. Many quotations from Eliot spring to mind as possible epigraphs for their book. They have chosen, however: ‘What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish?’ How, one wonders, might Eliot want to comment?



**Footnote:** T. S. Eliot Society Committee member Scott Freer has recently co-edited with Michael Bell a collection of essays entitled *Religion and Myth in T. S. Eliot’s Poetry* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). A review will appear in the forthcoming edition of the *Journal* of the T. S. Eliot Society.

## Leavis and Eliot

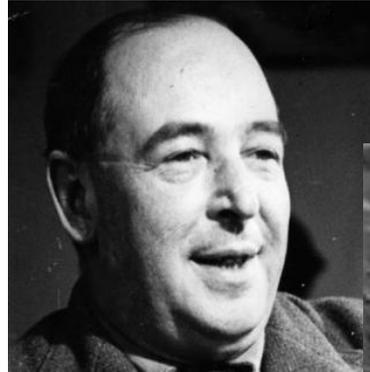


*A recent Newsletter from the University of Cambridge English Faculty contains the following slightly scurrilous account of a Leavis diatribe against Eliot, delivered at Trinity Hall possibly in 1957: we cannot, of course, vouch for the accuracy of the recollection!*

‘Leavis was due to talk about his relationship with T. S. Eliot. It was a wonderful diatribe of total hostility, so much so that when he was ushered out of the door, very late, he was still in full flow, declaiming back at the students gathered on the landing, ‘That man Eliot, he is now such a conformist, if he goes into a room where they are all wearing suits, and these days he doesn’t often go where they are not, and they all have only one button done up, he will fasten his jacket similarly, just to be the same!’ And he disappeared into the darkness mouthing, now to his own satisfaction, repetitively, ‘Just to be the same!’ So much for the morally enlightening power of literary studies.’

## Lewis and Eliot

*A recent issue of Granta magazine included a fascinating account by Miranda France of C. S. Lewis's work with T. S. Eliot on a Commission to Revise the Psalter. The two sat as 'scholars of English' alongside clergy, Hebrew scholars and musicians, and were expected to advise their colleagues from the perspectives of conservative literary scholarship and Modernist creativity.*



Miranda France writes: 'Lewis had publicly attacked Eliot as a writer, as a theologian, even – in a letter to the journalist Paul Elmer More, as a *foreigner*. 'Eliot stole upon us, a foreigner and a neutral, while we were at war – obtained, I have my wonders how, a job in the Bank of England – and became (am I wrong) the advance guard of the invasion carried out by his natural friends and allies, the Steins and Pounds and hoc genus omne, the Parisian riff-raff of denationalized Irishmen and Americans who have perhaps given Western Europe her death wound.'

Lewis's bluff, tweed-clad countryman was a total contrast to Eliot's 'dark-suited, select gentleman from the City of London, with a rolled umbrella.' But as France goes on to show, there was a curious reversal in the expected positions of the two men. Lewis was – according to Minutes of the Commission held at Lambeth Palace – the most open to the idea of change, whereas Eliot was the more conservative, vetoing changes proposed by others. 'I should like to retain the archaisms', Eliot remarks. 'Why alter the old spelling, 'shew'? I like it.' And there is a telling incident recorded by Valerie Eliot: she recalled him coming in late one night from a meeting of the commission 'and when I asked him how it had gone, he said with a tired grin, "Well, I think I've saved the Twenty-Third Psalm".' One fellow committee member commented, apparently, 'Mr Eliot's positive contribution to the Revised Psalter was nil. He had spent his whole time resisting any change!'

But France's article reaches a happy conclusion as far as the personal relationship of Lewis and Eliot is concerned. 'Not long before he died', she writes, 'Lewis told his private secretary, 'You know I never liked Eliot's poetry, or even his prose. But when we met this time I loved him'. And of his work on the commission he wrote, 'we were a wonderfully happy family. I have seldom enjoyed anything more.'" Literary opponents may become personal friends, it seems.

## Four Quartets and Music

*The musical analogy highlighted by Eliot in naming 'Four Quartets' isn't, of course, without significance, and critics have explored the link between music and poetry both generally and in relation to these poems. Less often, though, have we seen a more literal interaction between Four Quartets and Music. Actor Roger Allam and pianist Angela Hewitt have recently developed a programme offering both a complete reading of Four Quartets and a recital of keyboard music by J S Bach and Olivier Messiaen. The Riverhouse Barn in Walton upon Thames was the venue for a performance of this programme in December 2016.*

How much does venue affect performance? The venerable Riverside Barn has a slightly sombre feel and its subdued lighting adds to a sense of expectancy for the first-time visitor. An intimate venue, it offers seating for an audience of around a hundred: perhaps an ideal location for the evening of reading and recital provided by Angela Hewitt and Roger Allam.

Angela Hewitt is an internationally celebrated pianist who has recently embarked on 'The Bach Odyssey' in which she is performing all of Bach's keyboard works in twelve recitals in major halls over the next four years. Her affinity for Bach became immediately apparent as she opened the evening with his Prelude in C major, BWV 846, from 'The Well-Tempered Clavier', Book 1. The precision and emotional power of her playing are superb, and the sound and significance of Bach hung in the air as Roger Allam rose to read the whole of 'Burnt Norton'. Allam has a slightly brooding presence – it's perhaps hard for such a well-known television presence to become entirely removed from his fictional self as a world-weary detective in the series 'Endeavour' – but he brought real variety of tone and feeling to his reading of the first of the Quartets.

The first half of the programme interestingly interweaves a range of Bach pieces and a single Messiaen piece with 'Burnt Norton' (read without a break) and 'East Coker' (divided into three). There is something about the silence after a piano piece – the audience were asked not to applaud until the end of the first half – which somehow prepares for the sound of Eliot's words; and the interspersing of words and music has a cumulatively impressive effect, giving significance to each chord, each word, each note, each pause. If Angela Hewitt at times gave the impression of creating the music as it was played, Roger Allam sometimes read Eliot's words as if they were being uttered for the first time: a sense of freshness and new-minted creativity was the result.

The second half of the programme brought two further Messiaen pieces of startling power and three further Bach pieces, combined with 'The Dry Salvages' (read without a break), and 'Little Gidding' (read in three parts), with additional prominence given to Parts IV and V, each of which was read on its own, bookended by Messiaen and Bach. The profundity of Eliot's words was echoed and reinforced by the music. The artists had chosen to conclude the event with a final J S Bach piece, arranged by Angela Hewitt; and its title 'Alle Menschen müssen sterben' (All people must die) hints tellingly at an underlying theme of the Quartets.

For this member of the audience, the combination of words and music was a powerful success. If all art, as Pater suggested, constantly aspires towards the condition of music; and if 'words after speech reach into the silence', as Eliot said; then this combination of music, poetry and silence was a powerful prompt to wordless, spiritual reflection. Even if occasionally I felt that Roger Allam's verbal interpretation of Eliot's texts was slightly off-beam, in all he gave a highly credible reading of the Quartets; and Angel Hewitt was I felt matchless. If you have a chance of catching this programme the next time it is aired, don't miss it.

*Jay Philips*

*Jay Philips is a member living in Sussex*

## Four Quartets and Painting

*The visual, pictorial quality of Eliot's writing is clear, but seldom if ever have his poems been re-envisioned in terms of visual art. This is the unique enterprise of the painter Richard Williams, whose exhibition of paintings was held at The Rose Theatre, Kingston upon Thames in February 2017. Richard was Principal of a large college of Further and Higher education in London, and holds a doctorate in ethics and leadership; but in 2011 he decided to concentrate full time on painting. A cancer patient since 2015, Richard dedicated the exhibition to the Royal Marsden Cancer Charity.*

Founded by Sir Peter Hall, and modelled on the original Elizabethan Rose Theatre on London's Bankside, Rose Theatre Kingston opened in 2008 and is the largest producing theatre in South West London. Its auditorium provides an intimate, Elizabethan-style space for theatre, and its Café and exhibition areas offered a relaxed and even provisional setting for Richard Williams' exhibition 'The Poetry of Painting'.

Eliot has exercised a long-term fascination for Williams, and his major focus has been on the Four Quartets and the Ariel poems. He writes: 'I started reading 'Four Quartets' many years ago when I was in the sixth form at school. Although I did not understand what I was reading I think I was intrigued by the mystery (perhaps the mysticism) and intensity of the poetry... The poetry of the Quartets has been with me ever since and although I have returned to it on many occasions, it has been slow to reveal its power and meaning.'

Williams says the Quartets are 'as much philosophy as they are poetry'. He sees them as 'abstract contemplations' unified by two themes: the relationship between humanity and the natural world and the relationship of humans to spirituality and Divine presence. He notes, too, that 'the earth lives and breathes in the Four Quartet. Its rhythms contextualize the life process'. Given this view of the Quartets as both intensely spiritual and profoundly earthed, one might wonder how – on earth – they could in any sense be rendered in visual form?

But Williams has achieved what might seem impossible. His 'Burnt Norton' has the initial appearance of a still-life. It portrays two large porcelain vases, each of which is decorated with photographic images of his own childhood past – a past fragmentary and incomplete, as is our own. The painting meditates, as does Eliot's poem, on the meaning of past and present and future; on the nature of time and memory; and on the elusiveness of meaning itself (The paintings can all be viewed on line at Richard Williams' website: [www.williamsartwrx.org](http://www.williamsartwrx.org) ).

Williams' 'East Coker' is an earthy landscape. He writes: 'Trees falling, trees thickening, leaves moving: everything falling to earth. There is fire in the colour of the leaves. This purges, purifies and regenerates....' Dancers move across the landscape. Instead of Eliot's 'earth feet, loam feet', these are elegant, tail-coated dancers of the black-and-white film era of Williams' childhood. They form a light-footed contrast to the dark and intense tree trunks of the main part of the painting. We all fall back to the earth, says Williams; but we have the chance to know the Divine presence which embraces us.

continued on page 7...

‘The Dry Salvages’ teems with images, says Williams, and conveys for him the ‘sheer drama of life, ceaseless, chaotic, incremental in the detritus left behind: a process which differs in time only in the superficial differences of appearance but not in the substance of living.’ The painting depicts the rocks and rough seas of a dangerous coastline under a lowering, threatening sky, a flock of birds whirling and circling, their wings lit by an intense, dark light. It makes a profound visual impact – capturing a moment frozen in timelessness.

The dominant and presiding image of Williams’ ‘Little Gidding’ is a serene Blessed Virgin, painted from Bellini’s ‘Madonna of the Meadows’ from 1500 and surrounded by flying angels, also from Bellini. But flying beneath them are the Spitfires of English air defence of the time of the poem’s composition. The darkness of the night-time raids and of Eliot’s fire-watching are evoked, and at the foot of the painting is the church at Little Gidding, with crowds of pilgrims making their way to its doors. ‘History is now, and England’, wrote Eliot; and the presiding presence of the Blessed Virgin gives to the painting a sense that ‘All shall be well; and / All manner of thing shall be well.’

The enterprise on which Richard Williams set out – to create a visual response to and evocation of each of the ‘Four Quartets’ – seems on the face of it both risky and presumptuous. But the exhibition – and the sheer visual power of the images he has created – reveals the enterprise to be something intensely worthwhile and creative. Remarkable poems of profound spirituality have prompted remarkable paintings of considerable artistic and spiritual impact.

*John Caperon*



## First encounters with Eliot:

I first encountered Eliot in a literature survey my freshman year of college. Our instructor assigned “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and required we write an annotation on the poem. Though I could not understand the poem, I knew that I liked it. Prufrock became a cornerstone in my collegiate career, as I returned to it at every chance I had. I returned to Prufrock when I wrote an essay comparing time in the poem with time in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” I returned to Prufrock when I compared how Whitman glorified the body in “I Sing The Body Electric” with how Prufrock etherizes it. I returned to Eliot in my Shakespeare class when I needed to write an essay on Hamlet.

Now, I am a graduate student—fully immersed in the politics of theory and the essence(less)ness of literature. The time of my days closing in on either side as I rush to finish papers and research assignments and prepare material for my own students— (If only Eliot promised there will be time to teach the classes I must teach!). In a lot of ways I connect with Prufrock on the beach hearing the mermaids call. I followed a call to higher education believing I could learn something unique; write something that digs deep enough to discover the core of who we are and what we do. But I worry that I am only the fool who will drown under syllabi and interlibrary loan notices, after I discover my “call” was not ordained but contrived.

And yet, after the Derrida and after the Foucault. After the Stanley Fish and Anthony Julius. I find Eliot not merely enjoyable; He becomes necessary. When I return to his work, time and time again, I remember why I came to graduate school. Some power in his words revitalizes my study. And if at the end of this work and all the politics, red tape, and GRE tests—if at the end of it all, Eliot’s human voice wakes me—it would be worth it after all.

*Davis Wetherell*

*Davis Wetherell is a member studying at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a Jesuit foundation*



## Obituaries

It is with sadness that we record the death of a long-standing member of the T. S. Eliot Society, Professor Andrew Kennedy, and send our condolences to his family members and friends. We also – belatedly – record the death last year of Bernard Bergonzi, whose study of Eliot in the ‘Masters of World Literature’ series from the 1970s was written with wit and penetration. A longer evaluation of Bergonzi’s contribution to Eliot studies will appear in the next edition of *Exchanges*.



*The next edition of Exchanges will carry reviews of other Eliot-related events; and we are still eager to receive contributions from T. S. Eliot Society members on favourite lines of Eliot, first experiences of Eliot, and so on. Simply use the website to submit your piece!*

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