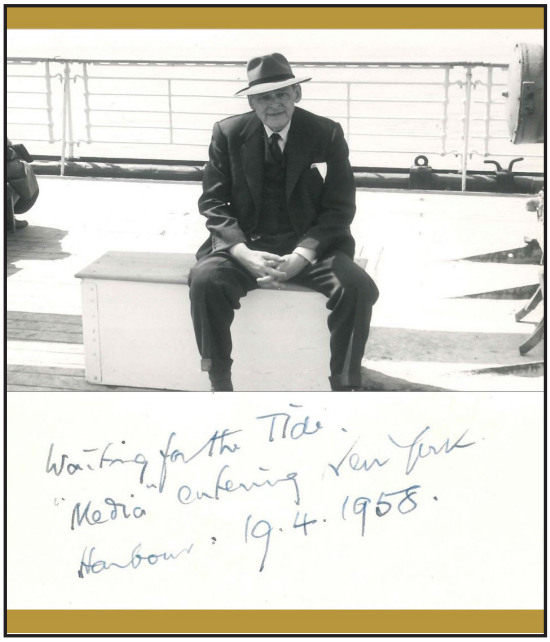
T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

Spring 2026



The Eliot Foundation released this image on the anniversary of Eliot's 1958 visit to the US, annotated by him as waiting to enter New York harbour on the SS Media

Editorial

It was a grim winter. Wetter than ever, bringing flooded fields and roads made almost impassible, it had – apart from the seasonal celebrations - few high spots. One for which it proved worth fighting my way to Cambridge on a tempestuous Sunday evening in January was a special Evensong held at Clare College in memory of its alumnus Nicholas Ferrar, the seventeenth-century founder of the Little Gidding community. Part of Clare's wider celebration of its seven-hundredth anniversary of foundation year, the service was held in the austere chapel, transformed and lightened by astonishingly beautiful singing from the chapel Choir. The service focused its attention on Ferrar himself, but with the strong verbal presence both of Ferrar's close friend George Herbert, and of T S Eliot, for whom Little Gidding had such significance: hymns and anthems by both poets were sung. Braving the rain, the dark and the cold that evening brought huge reward!

But now, as Eliot's 'cruellest month' of April draws to a close, there is a remarkable, unexpected kindness in the English weather, at least in the South-East. Spring has been springing beautifully: daytime temperatures have been warm, though nights remain chilly; bluebells have been decking the woodland floors; and the sheer range of distinctively different shades of green has been remarkable. Instead of going with Eliot's 'Waste Land' vision, it's felt more as if Hopkins was right, in his 'Nothing is so beautiful as Spring'. But either way, Spring is here, and with it, 'Exchanges'.

Every Eliot enthusiast has a story to tell, it seems, beginning with an initial encounter with the poetry. The nature of that encounter differs from person to person, evidently, but there will perhaps always be a line or lines that somehow stick, as Eliot himself suggested in 'Burnt Norton': 'My words echo thus, in your mind'. This edition of *Exchanges* carries two articles describing aspects of that encounter, what we might even think of as aspects of the 'Eliot conversion experience', for two readers. Zebedee Alby describes how lines from 'Little Gidding' reached deeper parts of his person than he had expected; and James Grant tells how encountering *Four Quartets* in a stage performance led to an in-depth commitment to knowing – and owning – Eliot.

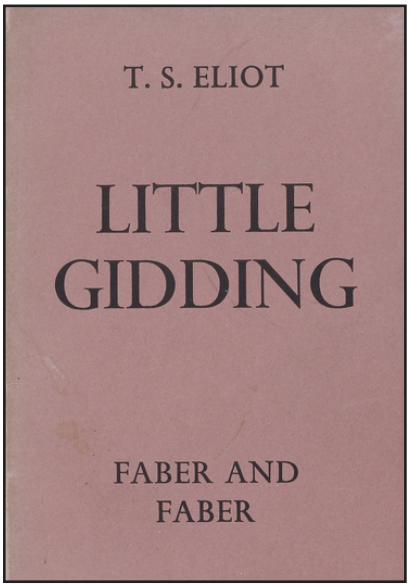
And developing the idea of 'owning' Eliot in the form of his limited, signed editions, Society Chair Paul Keers explores both Eliot's commercial interest as a publisher in 'limited editions', and the special delight which may be derived from possessing a 'limited edition', and most especially, one personally signed by the author.

My own first paperback copy of the Selected Poems was bought on the Charing Cross Road in 1960 or so, and I suppose I hold it in some affection for that reason. But my (second-hand) Collected Poems is purely utilitarian – doing what it says 'on the tin' and simply supplying me with the collection. In contrast, my hardback Four Quartets has a special resonance from my inscription 'Oxford 1985': though why exactly this should be so is hard to say. Clearly, just 'words on the page' aren't everything; around them, around the books which contain them, cluster feelings of one sort or another, and readers may want to ask themselves what emotional charge their books hold for them.

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

My favourite lines of Eliot



During the Covid epidemic I was invited to an online interview by *The Poetry Exchange* to talk about my favourite poem. I chose 'Little Gidding'. But as I was reading the lines below, I found myself overcome with emotion for reasons I could not discern. I struggled through them, returned to my more usual poise and read out the rest:

If I think of a king at nightfall,
Of three men, and more, on the scaffold
And a few who died forgotten
In other places, here and abroad,
And of one who died blind and quiet
Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?

In the discussion afterwards, I confessed I could not understand why these lines had so moved me. The interviewer, Fiona Bennett, suggested that I had been thinking about the mortality of my father who, as I had previously explained, had been unwell for years then. I saw at once that she was right, and said so. Indeed, my father died mute and alone in a hospital bed a couple of years later; a couple of years later Fiona Bennett herself died suddenly.

In his *London Review of Books* article 'Yeats, Auden, Eliot: 1939, 1940, 1941', Colm Tóibín wrote: "By the beginning of June, he had a rough draft of 'Little Gidding'. On 14 July, he wrote to Emily Hale: 'I have finished the poem but am very doubtful about it.' He was concerned that it lacked 'some acute personal reminiscence' which even though not 'explicated' would 'give power' to the poem 'well below the surface'." This is something that a good poem does: it brings to the surface not only the poet's but also the reader's emotion, sometimes hidden from themselves; and if done well, acts towards acknowledgement and acceptance of the perturbation, opening a way to healing and growth.

This is akin to the process of 'cleaning' in 'heartfulness meditation' where the clots of old obsessive feelings and the knots of trauma that are allowed to metastasise within the self are expunged through an act of will to confer a freer way of being. So, good poems conduce towards human health and sanity.

It does not matter whether you know the 'king at nightfall' is King Charles 1, or that John Milton is the 'one who died blind and quiet'; although knowing adds further poignancy. And doesn't this section address the fact of death rather better than Section III of 'East Coker', which begins histrionically 'O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark…'? But for me, Philip Larkin rather than T S Eliot remains the supreme poet of death.

Zebedee Alby

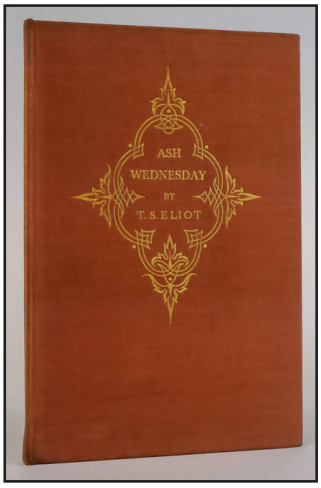
Owning Eliot

I didn't study Eliot at school. In fact I was largely unfamiliar until my 30s when I was lucky enough to see Ralph Fiennes perform *Four Quartets* at London's Harold Pinter theatre in 2021. I had never read, nor did I own a single T S Eliot book but that night, those lines cut through everything. They seemed to contain so much profound truth. Eliot seemed to understand and be able to communicate something of the ineffable, things I'd experienced only in meditation or contemplation, and not really talked about. Five years later, I have studied *Four Quartets* extensively as well as other Eliot poems and prose, and attended the excellent week-long T S Eliot Summer School in Oxford. And my 10-month-old son is named Eliot.

Shortly after that Ralph Fiennes' performance, my wife bought me a new hardback copy of *Four Quartets* and this (now beloved) copy has accompanied me to the four places that inspired each 'quartet'. Those trips were pilgrimages of a sort, driven by a need to experience and understand the poem. My copy also preserves between its pages something I brought home from each place so that when I open the book, Burnt Norton, East Coker, the Dry Salvages and Little Gidding are physically there at the beginning of each poem. But even without those mementos, I feel like my experience of growth and understanding is somehow part of that physical copy of *Four Quartets*. It shows – at least to me – around the edges of the dust jacket and the slightly rounded corners of the hard cover where it's been packed and unpacked, read and reread many times. I love it.

I think it is from this that I developed an appreciation for the life of a book, and an interest in old, rare and first editions. I've learnt where to buy the non-adhesive, acid-free clear polyester used to protect the dust jackets and how to cut, score and fold it to ensure my books are protected from dust and handling.

Some of the books I've acquired are not rare or first editions but merely old. For me, a new book, by its sheer replaceability, has something to prove. To me, age in itself goes some way to indicate value in a book. An old book, especially one in good condition, must have been stored and cared for, possibly by many people over the years. An old book is the product of love and I feel this when I take one down from the shelf.



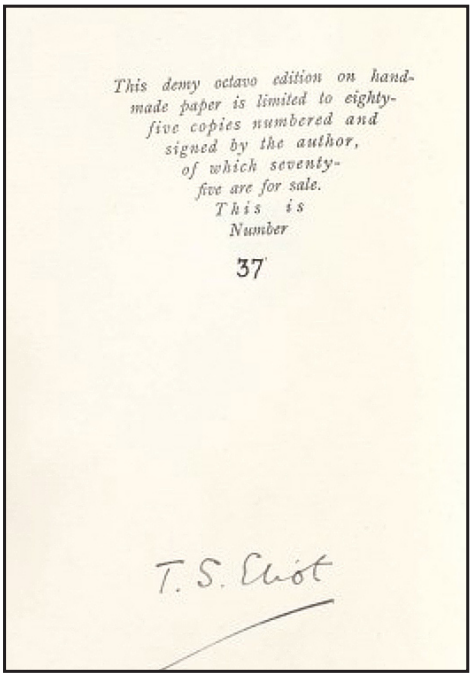
With a poet like T S Eliot who published relatively few poems in his lifetime, you know every detail was agonised over until he was happy with the final result. I suspect Eliot thought just as carefully about the design and production of the publications. Therefore, an old book like, for example, my first edition of 'Ash Wednesday' (pictured right) with its gilt-embossed copper coloured cover, specific typesetting and blank pages, is that way because that's exactly what Eliot intended. These careful choices contribute to the reader's experience. I own several collections that include 'Ash Wednesday' but reading a book devoted to the poem is a different experience entirely. It communicates that 'Ash Wednesday' stands alone, deserving of separate publication, its own hard covers and title pages. It fully focuses my attention on each part, page and word.

I don't consider myself a 'collector' of rare books as such because establishing or completing a collection is not for me a goal in itself. But nonetheless I do have the beginnings of something like a collection. My latest, *The Film of Murder In the Cathedral,* will join my old, rare and first editions on their own shelf in my front room where I can easily see and access them. This one, like many others, is older than me. I am the

steward of these books. They are my responsibility for the time being and hopefully one day they will be somebody else's (possibly my son's). Because books live lives of their own, intertwined with ours; and if cared for, they will outlive us and benefit generations.

James Grant
James is a communications professional working in social housing. He has a passion for words and for silence - and particularly how the former can express the latter. He lives in London with his wife and baby son.

T S Eliot Limited


This demy octavo edition on hand-made paper is limited to eighty-five copies numbered and signed by the author, of which seventy-five are for sale. This is Number
37
T. S. Eliot

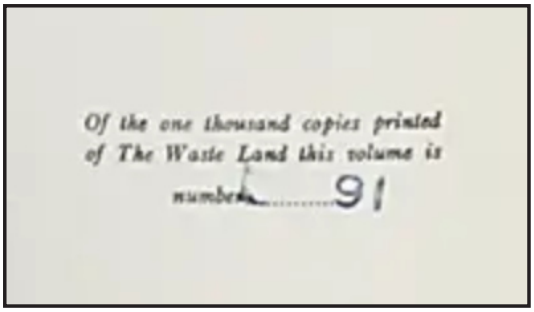
The 'limitation page' of Poems 1909-1925, signed limited edition

In March this year, a dealer in the US offered for sale a rare copy of T S Eliot's *Poems 1909-1925*. Only 85 copies of this special edition had been printed, each one signed by Eliot, and the dealer stated that 'It was the first of Eliot's works to be issued in a limited edition'. Jim McCue, joint Editor of *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, is a renowned Eliot bibliophile, and pointed out that in fact Eliot's earlier collection, *Ara Vos Prec*, was published in a limited edition, as was *The Waste Land*. Which raised the question: what is an Eliot limited edition?

It could be argued that *any* edition of a book is limited, to the number of copies which a publisher prints. In publishing, however, a limited edition has a specific meaning. To quote John Carter's *ABC for Book Collectors*, the term refers to 'Any edition which is limited to a stated number of copies'. Usually, to confirm this stated 'limitation', each copy is individually numbered; often, each copy is signed by its author. These editions rarely appear on the shelves of High Street bookshops; sold through publishers' mailing lists and specialist dealers, they have an inherent exclusivity. Many Eliot enthusiasts will be unaware of them.

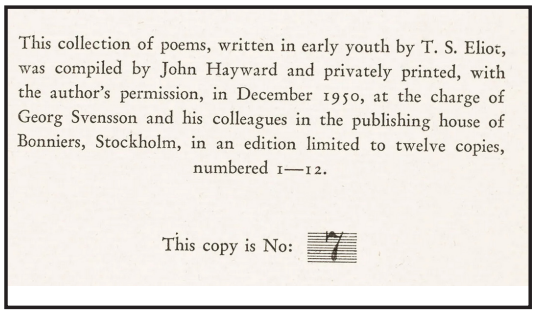
Some of Eliot's earliest publications, when he was little-known, were limited by what may be seen as publishing imperatives. Carter explains that a publisher might limit an edition when 'The publisher estimates that the potential sale of the book is x hundred (or thousand) copies, and decides, when printing so many and no more, to make a virtue of necessity by adding a formal limitation notice.' The limitation in *Ara Vos Prec*, for example, states that 'This edition of 264 copies is the first book printed by John Rodker,' which may have induced caution regarding its quantity.

And when *The Waste Land* was first published by Boni & Liveright, it was limited to 1000 copies. Another motivation identified by Carter is when 'The publisher considers that the book will sell better if a


Of the one thousand copies printed of The Waste Land this volume is number 91

scarcity value is created from the start'. Advertisements for *The Waste Land* stressed that it was 'certain to become a collector's [sic] rarity in a short time'. In addition to bookshop sales, a copy could also be obtained by taking out a year's subscription to *The Dial*, the magazine which had first published the poem in the US, but only 'until the supply is exhausted'. The first edition sold out within two months.

Once Eliot had gained a reputation, much of his poetry and some of his prose would be published for the first time in both a normal trade edition, and a more exclusive (and expensive) limited edition. Eliot's official bibliographer, Donald Gallup, records 76 books and pamphlets by T S Eliot published during his lifetime; of those, a quarter were published in additional limited editions, frequently signed by Eliot. For instance, 2000 ordinary copies were published of the Ariel poem 'Marina', a modest four-page pamphlet containing the single poem, in a blue paper cover, priced at one shilling, about £4 today; but 400 copies of the same single poem were published in a numbered limited edition, larger in size with hard covers stamped in gold and a glassine dust-jacket, on English hand-made paper, each one signed by Eliot. These were several times more expensive, at seven shillings and sixpence – £30 today.


This collection of poems, written in early youth by T. S. Eliot, was compiled by John Hayward and privately printed, with the author's permission, in December 1950, at the charge of Georg Svensson and his colleagues in the publishing house of Bonniers, Stockholm, in an edition limited to twelve copies, numbered 1—12.

This copy is No: 7

There are a number of characteristics to a limited edition. First, obviously, is the number of copies to which it is limited. In Eliot's case, these could range from the 1000 copies of the First Edition of *The Waste Land*, and the 350 signed limited edition copies of *Journey of the Magi*, down to just 125 copies of *Dante* and the 85 signed limited edition copies of *Poems 1909-1925*. A couple of special printings are even smaller; there were just 12 copies of the first edition of *Poems Written in Early Youth*, 'privately printed, with the author's permission', each one numbered. Copy No 7 (above) sold at auction last year for €4,500..

Then there is the enhanced production quality of a limited edition. They are often produced on hand-made paper, and some are printed by hand. That limited edition of *Poems 1909-1925* is bound in buckram; a signed limited edition of *Selected Essays* was bound in vellum. The Mardersteig limited edition of *Four Quartets* (discussed in detail in *Exchanges* Winter 2022) has marbled cover boards with a white parchment back stamped in gold, and issued in its own slipcase. It is stated as… 'printed in Dante type by Giovanni Mardersteig on the hand-press of the Officina Bodoni in Verona. The edition consists of 500 numbered copies on paper made by Fratelli Magnani, Pescia. All are signed by the author.' It sold for ten guineas when issued in 1960, the equivalent of £300 today; copies now sell at auction for over £5,000.

(Hand printing can in itself justify an edition's limitation; as Carter judiciously comments, 'If the book is printed by hand, the pressman's enthusiasm for first-class work is apt to decrease after a certain point.')

Why would one purchase an Eliot limited edition? They are often beautiful examples of book production, a pleasure to handle and read. Some are bought by completists, determined to collect every existing publication of an author like Eliot. Others will go to people waiting to sell at a profit in later years. But for enthusiasts, they also offer an opportunity to gain that most personal of expressions, Eliot's signature, his own hand inside one of his own works. The evidence that Eliot himself has been in contact with this particular page provides a personal and rather thrilling connection between author and work.

Paul Keers

Envoi

Given the observations in this issue about rare Eliot books, this might be the place to present an addition to his bibliography – his little-known 'Guide to social media domination'.

Thumbs, ostensibly authored by T.S. Eliot, is available from Amazon (£18.99 hardback, £14.99 paperback or £7.99 Kindle), with no explanation of its attribution,

Or perhaps after all these years it is social media which throws J. Alfred Prufrock's 'nerves in patterns on a screen'?