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The moment of the yew-tree – May 1996
Editorial

Welcome to this Spring 2021 edition of Exchanges – the date itself a reminder that it is only a year to the centenary of the publication of ‘The Waste Land’. By that time, who knows, we shall perhaps be free of Covid-19; but a year on from Covid’s dreadful arrival we are still in a global pandemic. And with 150,000 so far dead in this country alone, we have to reach back a century for any comparable loss. Eliot’s profound and startling 1922 response to the military, cultural and personal catastrophe of the early twentieth century still resonates.

In our first article, Ewan Lawrie recalls how lines from ‘The Waste Land’ borrowed by progressive 1970s rock music first sparked at boarding school his enduring affection for Eliot’s work. Doubtless other members have recollections of their first introduction to Eliot: might there be a future series in this, I wonder?

Member Tony Yates, prompted by the interpretation of some lines from ‘Preludes IV’ in the annotated edition of Eliot’s poems by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, takes issue with the editors, and interestingly does so in a way which highlights a phrase of Eliot’s – ‘The notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing’ -which others too have seen as a reference to the Christian understanding of God.

Be that as it may, there’s no uncertainty about the 2020 winner of the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry, Bhanu Kapil. In a review of her winning entry, How to Wash a Heart, your editor seeks to identify the qualities in her work which make her a worthy winner of the prestigious award.

And to conclude, if your shelves aren’t already groaning under the weight of Eliot-related books and pamphlets, Society Chair Paul Keers draws attention to not one but two ‘Eliot’s prose’ enterprises. If Eliot wrote it, you can buy it: though the cost may be prohibitive!

Let me end with a reminder that Spring is properly here, and there’s nothing in this editorial about April’s cruelty: instead, Summer beckons, with a promise of some normality; and, let’s remember, ‘In the mountains, there you feel free.’ I wish all readers a safe return to freedom!

John Caperon
Editor

All Members are invited to contribute to ‘Exchanges’, the quarterly newsletter of the T S Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute, or if you have queries or suggestions, contact the Editor direct at Exchanges@tseliotsociety.uk
A Little Trip Back with Father Tiresias

I went to a grammar school in Alnwick, Northumberland, a long time ago. Before Alnwick Castle was a place of pilgrimage for Harry Potter fans, in fact. I boarded, with up to thirty other boys in the Hostel, as it was called. We were viewed with suspicion by the day boys. Sons of North Northumbrian farmers and fishermen with a few offspring of Royal Air Force personnel from the nearby camp passing through. Most of these would move on with their parents. I boarded for five years instead.

I hated English, though I was quite good at it. I looked at Chaucer and Shakespeare and Dickens and Pope and Dryden and Shelley and Keats and Coleridge and... and... It just wasn’t relevant. It was old. Does this sound familiar to you? I read it all the time on blogs and writing forums; so I do understand the attitude - after all, I had it.

We used to have a turntable, amp and two-tiny-speaker stereo system in the laundry-cum-boot-room-cum-kitchen. After prep and at weekends, older lads used to play their vinyl at discreet volumes insisted on by the Housemaster who would stand two floors away at the door of his suite of rooms with a hand cupped to his ear. Sometimes he waited at the top of the stairs for half-an-hour before arriving to order the music stopped.

‘What’s this got to do with Eliot?’ you say. ‘Well...’ I say.

From those tiny speakers one day a Genesis album was being played by one of the older boys, Fish. The album was Selling England by the Pound. I was polishing my shoes while the album played.

Fish turned the album over and side two began. My ears pricked up at something in ‘The Battle of Epping Forest’ and so I was paying close attention by the time ‘The Cinema Show’ began. Romeo gets a verse, Juliet gets a verse, they’re preparing for a date: a trip to the cinema and maybe a fumble after, a bit of word play but nothing special. The bridge arrives and we’re invited to take a little trip back by a ‘Father Tiresias’. Lowbrow stuff in the first two verses, with a nod to Shakespeare thanks to the prospective lovers’ names.

So the album finished and Fish finally noticed I was still polishing the same shoe. Bear in mind these Sixth Form boys barely acknowledged our existence back then.

‘Lawrie, what did you think of that, then?’
‘I thought it a bit odd, really good though. Not sure why.’

There was an old-looking English teacher called Joe Grieve, who looked a bit like Frank Finlay; though he was probably only forty-something. I used to keep my head down when he subbed for Mrs Wright, one of the few women on the staff. This would occasion great disappointment among all the boys, even the ones that did like English.

‘Joe Grieve says,’ Fish went on, and this was more than any prefect ever said to me in a year, ‘you don’t care for English.’ I shrugged and said, ‘No, not really’.

He handed me the book he’d been reading instead of the lyrics on the gatefold album cover. It was a
creased and battered copy of Eliot’s *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. It was open about a third of the way through. Pencil marks underlined words, sentences, whole blocks of text. Two lines were to the side of certain passages. I read about ‘Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,’ as he relates the story of a typist home from work and ‘the expected guest’, ‘a small house agent’s clerk’.

Fish gave me the book, though it was obviously important to him. I still have a copy, though the pages fell out of Fish’s long ago.

**Ewan Lawrie**


‘Tormented suffering’? A disputed annotation on lines from ‘Preludes’

His soul stretched tight across the skies  
That fade behind a city block ...  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.  

*Preludes IV*

In the annotated text of these lines, Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue quote the metaphysicality of William Empson: ‘It springs from a peculiarly twisted and tormented, but very painfully suffering soul.’ I think they have entirely misconceived the real meaning: ‘tormented’ and ‘suffering’ yes; but ‘peculiarly twisted’ no. Nor is this just some abstract ‘soul’. Eliot is here describing a deeply-felt intimation of God, long before he became a Christian.

If the annotators held a theology of an impassable God, incapable of suffering, this alone would explain their purely secular interpretation. But I think that for Eliot God was anything but impassable, and that much of Eliot’s own suffering was, as it were, on behalf of God. God suffered not just because of us - ‘trampled by insistent feet’ - but for us, for our refusal to become our true selves, and instead to become merely personae, the personae Eliot so brilliantly inhabits and exposes in so much of his poetry.

**Tony Yates**
2020 T S Eliot Prize for Poetry: ‘How to Wash a Heart’ by Bhanu Kapil

The most prestigious of our poetry awards, the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry is also an annual indicator of the state of the art of verse in English. The 2019 winner was Roger Robinson, whose anger-fuelled poetry drew both on the Grenfell Tower disaster and its racial and social implications and on the past and present of British racism. The previous year’s winner, Hannah Sullivan, offered a cooler, more cosmopolitan and transatlantic perspective, and was concerned more with the age-old personal poetic themes of love and death. One line from her work identified the perennial challenge for poetic art: ‘There is not much saying something new in a new form.’

So the task for the T S Eliot Prize judges might be seen as identifying the poet who that year is most genuinely ‘saying something new in a new form’. Chair of the 2020 judges, Lavinia Greenlaw, suggested that all the shortlisted poets were voices ‘as urgent and new as they are artful.’ And there’s no doubt in this reader’s mind that Prize winner Bhanu Kapil’s ‘How to Wash a Heart’ is urgent, new, and artful too.

Bhanu Kapil is a British poet, already with six full-length collections of hybrid poetry/prose to her name, who has lived and taught for the last twenty-one years in the United States. Most recently she has held a post in Cambridge, and the introduction to her reading of ‘How to Wash a Heart’ on YouTube describes her as a leading practitioner of experimental creative writing, working ‘between’ poetry, prose and performance, and impelled by the insights of Feminism, Anti-Racism, the critique of Colonialism and Environmental justice. Kapil is clearly not confined by the simple category ‘poet’.

But this reader finds the old habits of practical criticism urging him not to respond to a writer in terms of the labels attached to her, or the ideological or ethical stances she adopts. What still counts for me is the quality of the lived experience, the imaginative insight, the verbal creativity offered by the writer – in other words, the sheer quality of the poetry. Simply to chime with the preoccupations of the time is not ‘saying something new in a new form’. In reading Kapil our challenge is to put aside all the categorisation, all the ideological background, and to read and respond to ‘the words on the page’.

First, an overview. ‘How to Wash a Heart’ is a slim volume comprising forty brief poems of twenty or twenty-two lines, divided into five sections each containing eight poems; there are no titles or headings for poems or sections; nor does each poem have a standard number of words or syllables, and neither is there any detectable rhyme. As far as I know, this is a genuinely new form. It’s not a sonnet sequence, nor are the poems extended sonnets; but the sonnet sequence is the traditional genre of which ‘How to Wash a Heart’ reminds me. The sonnet has always been a vehicle for the personal, even intimate, poetry of relationship with the other, whether lover or God. And Kapil’s work, whilst having clear social and political concerns, is rooted in an imagined relationship, that between a foreign refugee and a native host.
The terse economy of Kapil’s writing is powerful and effective. It’s in deliberate contrast to all that’s represented by ‘John Betjeman, poet of the British past’, who has a walk-on appearance in line 3 of the opening poem. No rhyme, no metre, no cosy bourgeois assumptions: the poem’s narrator may be ‘wearing my knitted scarf’ like Betjeman, but that’s where the resemblance ends. The scene is set in this first poem: ‘You made a space for me in your home, for my books and clothes, and I’ll / Never forget that.’ Subsequent poems fill in more detail: the memories the narrator has of her previous home; her exhaustion from being a guest ‘In somebody else’s house/ Forever.’ There’s a growing fear and dislike of what becomes an exploitative host/guest relationship: ‘In that moment, I understood that you were a wolf/ Capable of devouring/ My internal organs….’

The vivid title image – washing the heart – says much about human emotion. ‘How to wash a heart: / Remove it.’ This image mirrors the transplantation of people from one, known, cherished place to somewhere else, less comfortable, more full of risk. But: ‘There’s nowhere to go with this /Except begin: /To plunge my forearms /Into the red ice /That is already melting / In the box.’ The insistent question for the refugee-guest is: ‘Am I safe with you?’ Is there safety, in fact, anywhere? ‘I smell the pollen of the flowers of the mango tree /which once concealed /A kill.’ And there’s a frightening contrast between the personal and the public in the land of refuge. While: ‘My first friend in this country /Is gorgeous, / Lanky and blonde’, ‘… the outer conditions / Are xenophobic.’ So there’s a perpetual undercurrent of fear: ‘It’s extraordinary how afraid I am /All the time.’ No wonder, perhaps, when behind the narrator-refugee is the horror of violence: ‘My ancestral line /Was decimated …/ One hot night.’

During the course of Kapil’s narrative there’s a gradual breakdown of the refugee-host relationship, so much so that the narrator is towards the end so desperate for intimacy that she will accept it whatever the price: ‘Whatever you want to do / To me do it. /To this end, I invited you /Back.’ But the visiting lover – one imagines another ‘young man carbuncular’- provides, along with ‘the wet towel /On the bannister’, an excuse for the host to end the relationship. In the closing poem where the short lines develop a powerful and terrible rhythmic force, ‘the officer /From the Department /Of Repatriation’ is on hand to bring nemesis.

Reading these poems, we are given an understanding of displacement, and of its personal cost; the narrative sequence has painted a vivid portrait of home, of loss, of victimisation and self-abasement. What works for me, here, is not the Feminism, the Anti-Racism - or indeed any other ‘-ism’. It’s the words. Eliot wrote of the ‘intolerable wrestle with words and meanings’; as a wordsmith, a poet, Bhanu Kapil has achieved the skill of bringing alive in very limited compass a powerful narrative of place, identity and human value that is genuinely ‘saying something new in a new form’.

John Caperon
There’s been excitement around the publication at last of *The Complete Prose of TS Eliot* in an eight-volume printed edition. There’s been disappointment that the edition is not being published in the UK. But there’s also been a revelation to many – that another multi-volume edition of Eliot’s prose, after several years’ editorial work, is also in the pipeline.

Back in 2004, Professor Ron Schuchard was given the go-ahead by Valerie Eliot to begin compiling and editing all of her husband’s prose. It was ten years before the first volume of Eliot’s *Complete Prose* was published online; and the project was only completed in 2019. During the pandemic last year, many people will have enjoyed the free access which was provided to this monumental subscription-only digital resource.

There are differing stories around its publishing history. Its US publishers, Johns Hopkins University Press (JHUP), have taken down a video on their website in which one version was expounded. Early articles were clear that both online and print publication, by JHUP and Faber, were initially planned. But at some point during the process Faber pulled out of UK print publication, and it seemed for some time that the material would remain online-only.

So there was excitement when print publication, of an eight-volume, $700 set, was formally announced last autumn. Unfortunately, while the Faber logo is clearly visible on its spine, JHUP told the Society that ‘While the book is scheduled for a 23 March 2021 release here in the US, there are not currently plans for UK distribution, either through Hopkins Press or from a different publisher.’

Nevertheless, images have been circulating of sets in UK hands. We know of at least one member who, despite the distribution embargo, bravely pre-ordered a set through Amazon UK back in October 2020, for what now looks like a bargain pre-publication price of £460. To his great delight they arrived here in the first week of April. (Amazon UK has been ‘temporarily out of stock’ since publication.)

It is theoretically possible to order a copy from the US, but to do that Amazon.com, for example, at the time of writing, charge an above-list price of $742, plus $61 for shipping. (It does weigh 24 lbs!) A few UK booksellers seem to be advertising imported sets through Abebooks.co.uk, but prices vary daily with the exchange rate between £500 and £600.

However, what will come as a surprise to many is to hear that Faber have planned to publish in the UK their own multi-volume project, *The Collected Prose of TS Eliot*. The first volume, a 600-page hardcover (with the ISBN 9780571295487) can now be found at several booksellers online.
Edited by Professor Archie Burnett, this work has been in the pipeline for years, in quiet parallel with Professor Schuchard’s better-publicised labours. On his Boston University web page, Professor Burnett has stated for some time that “I am currently preparing a collected edition (so far, text only) of the prose of TS Eliot in 5 or 6 volumes.”

There would appear to be two essential differences between the Complete Prose and the Collected Prose. First, the Complete is a critical edition, extensively annotated by a team of Eliot scholars, with ‘notes that will enhance and clarify his highly referential prose’. A similar comparison might be drawn between The Poems, annotated by Ricks and McCue, and the Collected Poems, the comprehensive volume of Eliot’s published poetry. The Collected Prose, like the Collected Poems, ‘will not be textually annotated,’ wrote Professor William H Pritchard in the Hudson Review back in 2015, ‘but the indefatigable Archie Burnett will exercise his usual editorial scrupulousness.’

The second difference is the material which they collate. The Complete Prose contains unpublished material, unsigned reviews, Prize Day speeches, even open letters to The Times to which Eliot put his name along with other signatories. The Collected Prose will have a stricter definition of what constitutes Eliot’s prose writings.

(This led at one point to what was described, in The Chronicle of Higher Education in 2014, as ‘genteel sniping’ between the editors. Their article explains: ‘It’s a fine idea to be a completist,’ says Mr Burnett of Mr Schuchard’s work, but he’s not sure there will be widespread interest in lots of ‘odd little scraps’. Mr Schuchard, for his part, doesn’t understand why Mr Burnett would take on an editorial task that is ‘not scholarly.’)

The Collected Prose may indeed be spurned by scholars who require every ‘scrap’ which Eliot wrote. But it may appeal more to enthusiasts who simply want all of Eliot’s published prose, in fewer volumes and perhaps, therefore, at a lower price. Given the cost of imported sets of the Complete, many in the UK will want to wait to see and compare the two.

But, ‘wait without hope’? When Valerie Eliot died in 2012, The Guardian reported on the projects she had inaugurated. And they said then that ‘the Collected Prose, edited by Archie Burnett (but without annotations), is to be published in six print volumes, in… (wait for it…) ‘2014.’

And Faber have told us that the publication date for the first volume which has appeared online is ‘an error...and we don’t have confirmed publication dates for the volumes at present.’

Paul Keers

Envoi

One can’t help feeling that the manufacturers of this child’s stool might have found an even more appropriate quote from Eliot, had they read on just one line further...