

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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Summer 2026

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Happy holidays...!

(Eliot with Geoffrey Faber, 1934)

Editorial

It was a couple of years back at Little Gidding's T S Eliot Festival that Professor Mark Ford commented on Eliot's phrase 'the unimaginable / Zero summer', remarking that it was very hard to see exactly what he meant by it. Perhaps this present summer of 2026 has some claim to offering an interpretation of the term. Successive English heatwaves, a European 'heat dome', extensive and devastating wildfires in France, Spain and even this country: all point to the climate crisis as something no longer to temporise about, or mostly ignore. This is the summer when we need to realise there is Zero time left to change our habits and save the planet's future. Universal destruction is no longer 'unimaginable'.

But – more cheerfully! – this year's T S Eliot festival went ahead on a glorious summer Sunday with more participants than ever, drawn from the T S Eliot international Summer School now domiciled at Merton College, Oxford, and from around the country. Society Committee Member Christina Percy's report below gives a clear flavour of the event; all I'd want to add is that the afternoon session in which Mark Ford and Professor Seamus Perry offered fascinating insights into the composition of the last part of 'Little Gidding' was a model of 'podcast-style' teaching, collaborative, interactive and illuminating. The shortcomings of the single-guru lecture method somehow became plain during this session; might the time have come for the podcast format to replace the lecture?

Someone it was especially good to see again at Little Gidding was Graham Fletcher, nephew of Valerie (née) Fletcher, T S Eliot's second wife. Graham is one of very few remaining family contacts of Eliot himself, and has kindly contributed to this edition of 'Exchanges' a brief memoir of his late aunt on the centenary of her birth. In this context, it's worth adding that T S Eliot's personal life was clearly revitalised by his marriage to Valerie. The last 'Collected' poem, 'A Dedication to my Wife' hints at this, but the final, highly-charged, erotic 'Uncollected' poems in Ricks' and McCue's annotated edition give plain evidence of a personal life transformed.

The question 'Who exactly T S Eliot really was?' is one fascinatingly explored by Paul Keers, Society Chair, in his new book, *T S Eliot: A Lifetime of Old Age*. Paul faced the challenge at the Festival of condensing for the audience in a very few minutes the substance of his book's argument. He succeeded. His book does, too, getting behind the facades of the poet, his early inhabiting of ageing or aged personas, and presenting a man whose actual old age 'repudiated his lifelong vision of senescence'. The Society is privileged to have at its helm this newly-emerged but percipient scholar who has brought a new dimension to Eliot studies.

Moving on from the Festival and its events, other contributions to this 'Exchanges' come from Raymond Solly, who draws interesting comparisons between the thinking of T S Eliot and that of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and from Society Committee member Dan Dearlove, who returns to *The Waste Land*, exploring in the first part of a two-part essay the significance of the mythical undergirding of the poem; the second part will appear in our Autumn edition.

Meanwhile, your editor has been enjoying a new dimension to his life since he subscribed (at a ludicrously inviting figure) to the London Review of Books (LRB). The LRB is one of those publications which has the capacity to send the reader scurrying off to find out more. This first happened to me when I read an LRB article about E W Hornung, the now obscure late C19th /early C20th writer. Famed once for his novels about Raffles, the 'gentleman thief', Hornung was brother-in-law to our local Sussex hero Arthur

Conan Doyle, and in his *Fathers of Men* (1912) drew on his own recollections of education at Uppingham to create a 'public-school novel' comparable to *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. For someone who spent his professional life in schools, as I did, this was a fascinating discovery; so thanks to LRB!

Equally fascinating has been the LRB's T S Eliot exposure in recent weeks. First came a lengthy, entertaining and incisive review by Stefan Collini of the most recently-published volume of Eliot's Letters; and shortly afterwards an article about the Welsh poet and novelist Lynette Roberts. Eliot was her publisher, editor, and important early champion at Faber & Faber, publishing her collections *Poems* (1944) and *Gods with Stainless Ears* (1951). Here was an insight into T S Eliot the business-person, the publisher: a reminder of how wide was the range of his talents: poet, critic, essayist, dramatist, businessman, husband, lover. Eliot's remarkable breadth of capability remains prodigious.

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@tseliotssociety.uk

Valerie Eliot: Born 1926



It's interesting to note that Sir David Attenborough was born in 1926. That he's celebrating the centenary of his birth doesn't seem to affect the perception of his contemporary relevance. But when it's remembered that Queen Elizabeth the Second was also born in 1926, as was Marilyn Monroe, it begins to create a sense that these people represent different eras. Marilyn Monroe died in 1962, aged 36.

Valerie Eliot was born on August 17th 1926. Her husband to be, T S Eliot, was 37 and had already written *The Waste Land* before she was born. The following year he would become a British citizen. They would not marry until 1957 when he was 68 and she was 30.

As Paul Keers's book, *T S Eliot A Lifetime of Old Age*, illustrates, Eliot had clearly lived as though he was elderly. After marriage to Valerie, the life which had once been characterised as 'a bad Russian novel' became happy, despite increasing bouts of respiratory illness.

When, just after New Year 1965, T S Eliot died, Valerie was 38. She lived on until November 2012. She dedicated almost half a century to her late husband. Valerie always felt she was his contemporary. They made each other happy.

Graham Fletcher

The Annual T.S. Eliot Festival 2026



Jayme Stayer SJ reads 'Little Gidding' from the steps of the church itself

The nineteenth T S Eliot Festival at Little Gidding was, as always, fabulous. The weather was kind and it was an opportunity to catch up with old friends, make new ones and learn something new.

Jayme Stayer SJ was the first speaker of the day, speaking authoritatively on Eliot's incredibly complex spiritual journey. This was an interesting biographical exegesis, but I was left feeling that I wished Professor Stayer had made more links to Eliot's poetry throughout his talk.

Paul Keers spoke eloquently and very amusingly about his academic publication T S Eliot: A Lifetime of Old Age. Seamus Perry and Mark Ford in conversation, replicating the format of their very popular podcast 'Close Readings', discussed John Hayward and the making of 'Little Gidding'. This was both entertaining and enlightening and I hope we hear their relaxed and rigorous conversation again at a future festival.

One of the delights this year was an extended session of 'My Favourite Eliot'. There was no shortage of festival goers rising to the challenge and reading their favourite pieces and, more importantly, explaining why they meant so much to them.

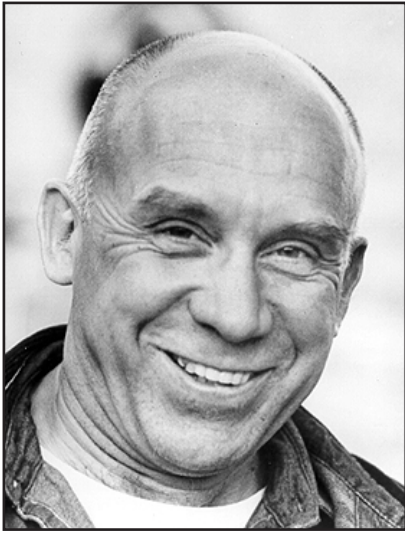
As ever, this was a truly remarkable day in a beautiful setting with great people and delicious food. I am very much looking forward to the twentieth festival.

Christina Percy



Relaxing in the Little Gidding grounds

When Thomas Encounters Thomas: thoughts on Eliot and Merton



Thomas Merton

Reflecting recently on Thomas Stearns Eliot's lines, 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless', my mind was opened to the poem 'Wisdom' by Trappist monk, prolific author and poet, Thomas Merton. The poem was published during 1957 in his significantly titled anthology *Strange Islands*.

Further consideration revealed how both Thomases - both scholarly contemplatives - forged a link between the individual reader of 'Four Quartets' and the topic 'Wisdom'. Eliot's citing of Diels' translation of Heraclitus preceding his magnificent poem focused its immeasurable range of personal interpretations. My extract from *East Coker* inspired further attempts at defining 'Wisdom', both in essence and practice.

By clearly believing the essence of wisdom is best gained by practicing humility, Eliot with customary perception (and indeed humility), grasped a reality essential to everyday living. He looked beyond the intellectual, observing that to understand humility requires acquiring self-knowledge across as many areas of life's experience as the limited human mind is capable of perceiving.

Thomas Merton's approach appeared to me more appealingly abstract: 'Wisdom is well known / When it is no longer seen or thought of. / Only then is understanding bearable...' Merton had previously said: '... I was burdened with knowledge - / The insupportable knowledge of nothing.'

Merton implies wisdom is best understood when individuals refrain from reflecting on knowledge, and dissecting wisdom, and simply practice wisdom!

Both Eliot and Merton agree in linking knowledge and wisdom, emanating from humility. Initially, both poetical thinkers reasoned that knowledge comprises our foundational storehouse of accepted facts, whilst wisdom enables us to apply intelligently such knowledge to everyday living. Both considered the human condition necessitates a willingness to accept that gaining factual, real-world information is pointless in itself, not least because totally comprehensive knowledge of 'everything' is impossible.

Even though gaining factual knowledge is essential, further investigation is required to develop both the nature and practice of wisdom. It is necessary to involve the domain of impulse and intuition. For, in many circumstances, our understanding resides not so much in what can be said about wise knowledge, as that which cannot be said about it. We are in the apophatic realm.

Both Thomas Stearns Eliot and Thomas Merton incorporated lateral, apophatic Christian thinking, opening the way to attaining the ultimate height of human perfectibility. Both writers - by exercising the deepest and most unselfish humility - attribute the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom to the Divine. Here, approaches to wisdom and humility are subtle, for neither poet proclaims any direct theological association. Yet its existence is undeniable, because through the power of their poems, our own intellectual and spiritual dimensions become immersed in the mysteries of faith. *Strange Islands* indeed!

Raymond Solly

The Waste Land as Retelling of the Holy Grail Myth? Part I



Perceval arrives at the Grail Castle, to be greeted by the Fisher King.

*From a 1330 manuscript of *Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes*

The Waste Land takes its name from the Grail stories of Arthurian legend, we are told in Eliot's infamous notes for the poem. There, he further specifies that much of the 'plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem' were drawn from Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), the main thesis of which is that the Grail stories originate in ancient, pagan fertility rituals.

So: is the waste land in the poem the very same waste land of legend? Can we read Eliot's masterpiece as a modern retelling of the quest for the Holy Grail? And if so, how much of Weston's occult interpretation should we read into the poem?

Professor Seamus Perry warns that while 'you could be forgiven for thinking the Holy Grail was a key element in the poem', this would be a mistake. Eliot himself came to regret having included the notes with the poem, and laments 'having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail'. Indeed, he states in private correspondence to Bonamy Dobrée, 'my own preference would be to abolish the notes to *The Waste Land*'. But Eliot's own relationship with the notes to *The Waste Land* — and by implication the poem's sources — is more complex than this later self-deprecation suggests. In a letter from 1937 to Gregor Ziemer Eliot says that '[t]he notes to *The Waste Land* should be taken at their face value'. So, for the first fifteen years, at least, of the poem's life, Eliot didn't renounce the notes. Rather, he changed his mind about them somewhere between 1936 and 1956.*

A mythological reading of the poem seems pressing today. We are living through a quiet renaissance of interest in mythological stories, and their place in our demythologised urban world; and since we inevitably must live within some narrative framework, we have to ask which stories we are actively inhabiting, and which we want to live by. Reading *The Waste Land* in the light of the Arthurian legend both illuminates the poem and its concerns, and offers insight into questions facing our modern world. Here, I try to show what a mythic reading would seek to achieve, and why it holds promise. In part II of this piece

(to follow in the next Exchanges) I shall investigate in more detail how the mythic core of the Grail legend illuminates the many questions in the poem.

There are many variations of the Grail story — from early mediaeval writers Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach, to later mediaeval Malory, and more recently, Tennyson — but the contours remain the same. A knight stumbles upon the Grail Castle; there he meets a fisherman on the castle lake, the Fisher King. As a result of committing some grave wrong the King has suffered ‘a wound in the groin’; Von Eschenbach’s *Parzifal* says that he was ‘pierced through his genitals with a ‘poisoned spear’. Although this is not explicitly stated, we are left to suppose that the wound has nullified his sexual capacity. What is made explicit is that the kingdom reflects his own condition: it has suffered prolonged drought and infertility, leaving the land desolate, waste.

That evening, the knight feasts with the King, and a mysterious vessel — the Grail — is paraded past the banquet. Fearing to speak out of turn, the hero fails to ask the King the right question: Whom does the Grail serve? What ails thee, King? (The first question is in Chrétien de Troyes; the second in von Eschenbach. To these, we might add further questions: What is the Grail? Why is the land waste?) If only the knight had asked the right questions at the right moment, the King would have been returned to health, waters to their channels, and the fertility of the land would have been restored. Instead, the next morning the knight leaves the castle, which then vanishes. He is left to pursue a search for the Grail.

Weston’s thesis in *From Ritual to Romance* was that behind the medieval romance lay a more ancient record of pagan initiation rituals into fertility cults. For Weston, the Grail quest is an initiation in which one voluntarily undergoes death in order to find new life. Here, she is drawing on the archetype of the dying and rising God, popularised by Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Now, we certainly find the themes of fertility, contrasted with sterility, throughout *The Waste Land*, and in Eliot’s later work, most clearly in the rustic dancing around the fire in ‘East Coker’. But if we get bogged down in Weston’s thesis, we risk missing the more general resonance between the poem and the Grail legends. Looking back at his citing Weston, Eliot clarifies in a 1957 letter to Bonamy Dobrée: ‘I was certainly not concerned with the validity of her thesis, but with the value of the imagery as a spring-board!’



What Eliot is rejecting here is not tracing allusions to other works, mythological or otherwise. What he rejects, amongst other things, is the thought that great works of literature are, as it were, puzzles to be solved, so that if only one can find the key, one can unlock all the mysteries contained therein. There is a temptation to see the Grail stories this way in relation to *The Waste Land*.

Eliot tells us a better way myth might be used in approaching modern work in his 1923 ‘Dial’ review of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which uses Homer’s *Odyssey* to structure the work. In place of the ‘narrative method’ (which is roughly the method of a novel), Eliot says that Joyce has discovered ‘the mythical method’. This method consists:

‘In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity [...]. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.’

Eliot goes on to say that this method is ‘a step toward making the modern world possible for art’. When the ‘new critic’ Cleanth Brooks wrote his landmark 1939 essay on the poem, treating the Grail myth as its unifying structure, Eliot approved of it. We can see, then, that far from discouraging any comparison of *The Waste Land* with the Grail legends, Eliot would have welcomed it: but *The Waste Land* is not a riddle to be solved, and Weston’s book is certainly not the esoteric key. We can, though, read *The Waste Land* as an application of Eliot’s ‘mythic method’. The Grail legend is as good a scaffolding as any to shore up the fragments of modernity that the poem presents. But what exactly are the fruits of this comparison? What can we learn from approaching the poem in this way? These are the questions I take up in part II.

Dan Dearlove

* In ‘The Poem Eliot Published: Authorial Intent and the Notes to *The Waste Land*’, an essay in the 2026 *Journal of the T.S. Eliot Society*, Raúl Rodríguez Calvoz ‘presents a practical scenario that explains why Eliot included the Notes [...] and then later disowned them.’

Envoi



These collector’s cards, manufactured in China, are currently being sold online. Described as ‘Authentic History Relic Cards’, the suggestion seems to be that a document penned by T.S. Eliot has been cut into tiny pieces, with each piece embedded in one of these cards, offering a fragment of Eliot’s own handwriting. There are around 15 variants of these Eliot cards currently offered on eBay, at prices between £200 and £5.93.

Eliot did write in French, so perhaps we can overlook the fact that the writing appears to be in French. We might also overlook Eliot’s preference for the typewriter. A handwriting expert might offer a better judgment upon the likelihood of Eliot having penned these words. That likelihood is, however, already challenged by the presence of other cards in the series, attributed to Mona Lisa (sic), and to Plato, a figure not known for his use of pen, paper or indeed French.

