

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

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A press photo captures TS and Valerie Eliot at Heathrow returning from honeymoon after their wedding in January 1957

Editorial

This Winter edition of 'Exchanges' is being assembled at Candlemas, as the Christmas and Epiphany crib with its star-following Magi is going back into store in a thousand English churches, and the liturgical year turns towards Lent. This ancient patterning of the year was, of course, close to Eliot's heart: Eliot, the churchwarden of forty years' service. And even for the un-churched or de-churched of the twenty-first century, these old patterns still have currency: where would we all be without Christmas to brighten the dark days of 'the very dead of winter'?

And I trust that this 'Exchanges' will brighten these dark days too. Society member Paul Rich offers a lively personal account of a recent Eliot event at Southwark Cathedral – a venue of considerable Eliot resonance. We also have an article from Paul Keers, Society chair, exploring the somewhat vituperative exchange of critical perspectives between 2018's Society lecturer, and co-editor of the two-volume, annotated edition of Eliot's Poems Sir Christopher Ricks, and the American feminist academic Megan Quigley. Has the arrival of the so-called #Me Too era fundamentally changed Eliot's poems? Our Sussex correspondent Jay Phillips writes about the T S Eliot lecture, given in Oxford back in November by Hannah Sullivan, also last year's winner of the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry. And there are some briefer thoughts on some of the several Eliot-related aspects of the recent cultural scene: a new 'Cats' film, this year's T S Eliot Poetry Prize, and – of course! – the opening of the Emily Hale archive at Princeton University, revealing for the first time Eliot's letters to her.

John Caperon

Exchanges is the quarterly 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

‘In place and time ‘... Impressions



A dusky, chilly late November evening in London streets. Commuters hurrying home, Borough Market nearly cleared away, the Cutty Sark nestling in the mid-week gloom as though from a time warp. Then into the warmer glow of candlelit medieval stone of Southwark Cathedral, the hubbub of people filing in to fill all the seats in the nave, wrapped up still in winter clothes, and students and others strewn all around the crannies and length of the cathedral, along with the scatter cushions and bean bags distributed for their greater comfort.

Then the evening's entertainment unfolds. Britten's music played, in the round, by the City of London Sinfonia, including his setting of TSE's 'The Death of St Narcissus' with an operatic tenor in full flow, interspersed with powerful, empathetic readings –wandering around the Cathedral - of 'Ash Wednesday' by Alex Jennings and, later, 'Little Gidding' by Juliet Stevenson.

So, the tenor and beautiful harp a metre behind my right ear... the cadence of the poems echoing about the ancient space ... the atmosphere and acoustics making it an evening in tune with TSE's questioning of time and our place in those two poems. Appropriate, given his conversion to Anglicanism preceding 'Ash Wednesday'; and salient, with the penitential and temporal thoughts in 'Little Gidding'. Among the old medieval relics and caskets of bishops, knights, and City elders, and with the verses echoing about the chapels of dedication, this music of words and sounds felt somehow right, and in accord - even to a confirmed agnostic like myself! And my wife, certainly not a fan of poetry or TSE, and here for the cathedral building primarily, commented she had been moved in hearing the professional actors give life and voice to the rhythm of the words. Worth the £40 price of two tickets alone!

This was the Faber-sponsored evening called 'In Place and Time' at Southwark Cathedral, on 20 November, celebrating TSE and his part in initiating Faber's music publishing business in the mid -1960s, with Britten its first composer. We had stumbled across it earlier in the year and booked it opportunistically, and then forgotten about it till shortly before. Travel issues into London nearly made us not bother. But we were both very glad we did. A unique mix and, even to an ageing cynic like myself, a peculiarly near spiritual atmosphere!

So those were my impressions ... I wonder if others from the Society went, and, if so, did they feel similar echoes?

Paul Rich

T S Eliot in the #MeToo era

The normally placid world of Eliot scholarship is being rocked by a public disagreement between two of its prominent academics. On one side, Dr Megan Quigley, an American academic, who believes that the two annotated volumes of *The Poems*, ‘in perpetuating certain traditionalist structures of power, stifle the conversations students are eager to have’.

And on the other, Professor Sir Christopher Ricks, joint editor of those volumes, ‘blank as to what it was that Jim McCue and I had failed to supply (failed even to see the need for, unreconstructed in our “traditionalist structures of power”)', and who goes on to accuse his critic of ‘shameful carelessness’.

Matters began when Dr Quigley published an essay, *Reading The Waste Land with the #MeToo Generation*, in *Time Present*, the newsletter of the US-based International T S Eliot Society, and with minor emendations in *Modernism/modernity*, the journal of the Modernist Studies Association. ‘The old Eliot is changing rapidly,’ she wrote, ‘as students interrogate *The Waste Land*, this quintessential High Modernist text, with new eyes in the #MeToo Era.’

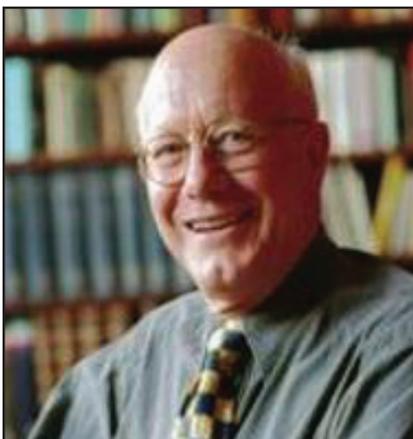
As an example, she says, ‘The first time I heard *The Waste Land* called an “abortion poem” I thought I had misheard my student; now I hear it frequently (and convincingly) called a poem that stages and performs racial and gender violence and investigates trans experience.’

Her essay asks, ‘...how has reading *The Waste Land* changed for the #MeToo generation?’, before asking, in the penultimate paragraph, ‘And, more provocatively, how do the new poetry editions... in perpetuating certain traditionalist structures of power, stifle the conversations students are eager to have?’

In particular, she questions the annotations in *The Poems*. ‘I looked up “pills”, for example,’ she writes, ‘and was shocked to see practically nothing annotating, “It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said”. By what principle of editing does “chitter chatter” or “fishermen” or “Metropole Hotel” or “automatic hand” receive extensive (arguably excessive) annotation but “pill” merit practically none? Editing shows our values - what we think is important for scholars to know and for students to learn, and also our history, what we have valued in the past. What does it mean when “pills” means almost nothing?’



Dr Megan Quigley



Professor Sir Christopher Ricks

After some months, Christopher Ricks has delivered a lengthy and detailed response, in the pages of *Essays in Criticism* – a response described by one Oxford Professor as ‘coruscating’.

“By what principle of editing does...” is set to whet an accusation, not ask a question,’ writes Ricks, ‘and it never intended to stay for an answer. (Though an answer is insinuated: *None that would not be reprehensible.*) The same is true of “What does it mean when ‘pills’ means almost nothing?” This, too, does not stay for an answer, again preferring to insinuate one, along the lines of *just don’t get it*. Particularly if the editors pre-date the #MeToo Generation (with, in this case, a dead-white-male attended upon by moribund-white-males to boot). Editors such as these cannot but have

a cast of mind that has invested – the terms are Dr Quigley’s – ‘in perpetuating certain traditionalist structures of power’.

Ricks questions her reaction to hearing *The Waste Land* described as ‘an abortion poem’. Dr Quigley, he writes, ‘Couldn’t believe her ears? An experience of the poem would have had to be lavishly inattentive if it failed to hear that the poem itself tragically can’t help turning to abortion as incarnating its excruciation’. And in response to the specific accusation concerning ‘pills’, Ricks details further relevant comments made in *The Poems* four pages earlier, in connection to the line, ‘What shall I do?’. However, Ricks observes, ‘registering that there is such a note would have asked that a little trouble be taken’.

In a series of responses, Ricks quotes the actual commentary which *The Poems* does provide to each of the lines which Quigley challenges. He also points out that: ‘There is no note on “chitter chatter”. There is a note to [III] 262: “a clatter and a chatter from within”.’; and that it is ‘fishmen’ which is annotated, not ‘fishermen’.

‘So.’ writes Ricks, ‘let me too (sic) have rhetorical recourse to an announcement of being “shocked”, and say that I am shocked that anyone assumes the right to disparage a work of editing without taking any trouble whatsoever – the trouble, for instance, of just checking “chitter chatter”, itself malicious chitter chatter when there is no such note.’

Overall, Ricks defends *The Poems* as offering ‘something of constitutive pertinence. And permanence.’ He continues, ‘Our annotation does then abstain (duly, we believe) from critical appreciation or exegesis of the kinds that are not best suited to the setting, the conventions, and the essentially informative format, of an edition.’

Quigley admits that ‘These new editions of his poetry provide so much essential information. Yet,’ she continues, ‘they simultaneously fossilize Eliot into a petrified version of the New Critical scholar-poet, which stifles much of the vibrancy and disquieting provocation that my students find in his work.’

‘Informative’ or ‘fossilising’? The reverberations will, no doubt, continue.

Paul Keers

Dr. Megan Quigley’s essay can be read in full in Modernism/Modernity on <http://bit.ly/3aWQ0l1>

*Megan Quigley is an Associate Professor of English at Villanova University, where she is also on the Irish Studies and Gender and Women’s Studies faculty. Her book, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2015,*

On Friday 7th February, Dr Quigley will give a talk, ““Hurry Up Please It’s Time” – #MeToo and TS Eliot in 2020’ .for the Women’s Studies Mst at the University of Oxford. She will also lecture at the International TS Eliot Summer School in London in July 2020.

*Professor Sir Christopher Ricks’ essay can be read in full in *Essays in Criticism* on: <http://bit.ly/36wr7sM>*

*Christopher Ricks is a Fellow of the British Academy, Warren Professor of the Humanities at Boston University and Co-Director of their Editorial Institute. He was the Oxford Professor of Poetry from 2004 to 2009. His book, *TS Eliot and Prejudice* (1988) was succeeded by editing Eliot’s early poems, *Inventions of the March Hare*, and co-editing the two-volume critical edition of *The Poems*.*

The Annual T S Eliot Society Lecture 2019 – Hannah Sullivan

The 2018 lecture having been in Cambridge, it seemed fair enough for the 2019 event to be in Oxford. And what better venue than Merton College, where Eliot matriculated at Michaelmas 1914? Even more fitting was the lecture location: the elegant and spacious T S Eliot theatre, graced by an Epstein bust of the poet. Mind you, it was a good step from rural Sussex, and not the best month for a long car journey around the M25 and up the M40 – though conditions always seem to improve the further away from London you get ... and the Oxford Park and Ride facilities are convenient, cheap, and easy to access.



Above, l to r: Dr Hannah Sullivan, Paul Keers, Professor Helen Small

The Annual Lecture was introduced by Helen Small, newly-appointed Merton Professor of English and fellow of Merton, who illustrated Eliot's time at the college with some fine visuals, and who afterwards gave us a conducted tour of Eliot's set of rooms – pretty generous by today's standards, and large enough to act now as a junior common room. It was good to be reminded that Eliot's introduction to English life was at Oxford; but it wasn't for him the Mecca others have found: 'Oxford's very pretty', he wrote to Conrad Aitken, 'but I don't like to be dead'.

Hannah Sullivan had chosen for her lecture the title: 'T S Eliot and the Art of Abandonment', itself containing some of the ambiguities she was to explore. She noted Eliot's desire to 'hold fast to something fixed and permanent' – perhaps something he found in his Anglo-Catholic identity from 1926 onwards – and its ambiguous relationship with abandonment. After all, she argued, Eliot abandoned both people, poems and places And, in another meaning of the word, she noted, there are 'moments of abandonment' evoked in the poems. I suspected that Dr Sullivan's comments about abandoned people might have even more resonance once the Emily Hale archive was opened; but she nailed her point by quoting a 'personal' notice which almost

appeared in 'The Times': 'Will T S Eliot please return to his home 68 Clarence Gate Gardens which he abandoned September 17th 1932.' An abandoned lover and an abandoned wife? So much for 'something fixed and permanent', perhaps?

And then what about Eliot's abandonment at an artistic rather than personal level? Hannah Sullivan highlighted Eliot's 'abandonment' of the original text of 'The Waste Land', his giving of the whole thing to il miglior fabbro Ezra Pound. An act of creative humility, or simple, irresponsible, shoulder-shrugging handing-over? Could he not be bothered? Was it significant, she asked, that the aesthetic-poetic method of 'The Waste Land' was also left behind once the poem had been published?

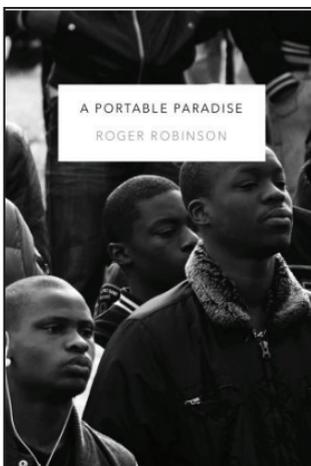
Asking the larger question, 'Why did Eliot abandon the writing of poems altogether?' Dr Sullivan suggested that deliberately abandoning his finished poetic texts, and even manuscripts, was a constant feature of his writing career. His was an art, she argued, 'that wants to remain small'. And this raised for her the question, what to make of the annotated edition of the poems, with its completeness, its inclusion of 'uncollected poems' and 'private verses' of various sorts. Might it be true that while The Poems contains everything, that means that it abandons everything? What really do we mean by 'the poems of T S Eliot'?

This was a fascinating, involved and detailed lecture which offered penetrating insights, and asked for the closest of attention. In some ways it struck me as an academic paper rather than a lecture, given its close texture and its relative lack of oratorical flourish; and it didn't help that for some technical reason audibility was an issue. But the audience was appreciative and responsive, and Hannah Sullivan had raised newly-framed questions about Eliot which it will be well worth pursuing. And after the lecture and the tour of Eliot's rooms was over, it was no surprise that a large group of followers set off with her to the pub: if only I hadn't had to leave to return to the Park and Ride!

Jay Phillips

A recording of Hannah Sullivan's lecture is available on the Society's Audio Recordings page of the website

The T S Eliot Poetry Prize 2020



After Hannah Sullivan's win last year for her Three Poems, the prize this year has gone to Roger Robinson for his *A Portable Paradise*. Originally classified as a 'dub' poet – 'dub is the poetry of working-class suffering and protest', he says – Robinson, both poet and musician, now hopes that his poems can 'be useful and help people practice empathy', according to Claire Armitstead, writing in *The Guardian Review* (18/1/2020). Robinson's title poem has a compelling clarity and reflectiveness, but for the moment that is where any further comment from the Editor has to stop: he's still hoping that his copy of the book will eventually turn up from Oxford's premier bookseller when Peepal Press has printed some more copies!

The TS Eliot – Emily Hale archive



It was billed as the literary event of the new decade, and the early impressions of the opening of the archive containing Eliot's letters to Emily Hale, and the revealing of the poet's own stated view that Hale 'would have killed the poet in me', have created something of a literary storm. Did he truly love her? What impact did she have on the poetry? These are just some of the questions which have been asked.

Until there is the opportunity for a thorough examination of the letters – and the absence of the other side of the correspondence is a limiting factor – it seems right to suspend any judgement. In due course, though, *Exchanges* will hope to offer something substantive....

Filming 'Cats'

At the last count, no member of the T S Eliot Society committee had actually seen the new film of 'Cats'. Significant or not, this fact does mean that the Editor was short of a volunteer to review the film for *Exchanges*. Perhaps published reviews had put us all off: The Guardian had as its headline 'Claws out for a feline fiasco', and the prospect of watching Dame Judi Dench, among other luminaries, disport herself in cat hair was certainly unappealing. However, Peter Bradshaw in that newspaper took the opportunity of parodying Eliot's style in Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats to produce a brilliant pastiche:

*The filming of Cats is a difficult matter,
It isn't just one of your holiday games,
Each actor involved here looks mad as a hatter ...*

And so hilariously on. Members can read the whole piece at: <http://bit.ly/2U3xn8G>