

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

Spring 2019

Page 2

Editorial

Page 3

Exploring life and death: Hannah Sullivan's Three Poems

Page 4

Eliot and Intertextuality – further thoughts

Page 5

Collecting T.S. Eliot

Page 6

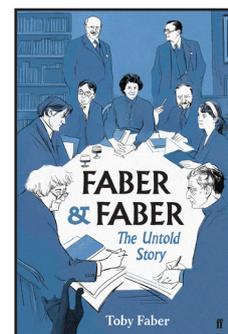
'To Caunterbury they wende ...'

Page 7

Wall-to-wall presence? Inescapable Eliot ...

Geoffrey Faber to TS Eliot, 22 September 1953

Something must be said, and put into our Minutes. But it cannot possibly contain any real acknowledgement of the debt which I owe to you. We are both of us men of reserve. Neither of us finds it easy to down defences and speak our inmost feelings. So let me say, Tom, simply that, poetry and publishing and plays put aside - and that is to put aside something! - nothing better has ever happened to me, short of my wonderful good fortune in marriage, than the meeting with you which [the literary journalist] Charles Whibley planned twenty-five years ago, or thereabouts.



Excerpted in The Guardian, 28/4/1019, from *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*, by Toby Faber

Editorial

It's never quite clear these days when Spring starts or finishes, in a climate more and more subject to change and confusion. But this is officially the 'Spring' edition of Exchanges, so I trust that readers will find here prompts to thought and reflection, whatever the weather may be doing. As I write at the end of April - that cruellest of months - we have just veered wildly from semi-arctic to Mediterranean temperatures and back again, and with the neurotic uncertainty of a Prufrock I have been baffled by the overwhelming question of what to wear on any one day, and what might be suitable for walking on the beach....

Thankfully, the uncertainties of the season have not prevented our contributors from writing. This edition carries a review of Hannah Sullivan's *Three Poems*, recent winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, by Committee member Christina Percy; a reflection on the delights (and costs) of collecting Eliot First Editions by Society Chair Paul Keers; a piece on an Eliot evening at the University of Kent by our Sussex correspondent Jay Phillips; a further short piece on Eliot and Intertextuality; and a note on some recent Eliot-related Press coverage. A century and more after the publication of his earliest poems, Eliot may be the poet whose ongoing presence is still most evident in common use and reference.

I hope that readers will in response be prompted to pen their own thoughts: all contributions for the next, Summer edition are welcome, and will of course be considered for publication.

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

Exploring life and death: Hannah Sullivan's *Three Poems*

Hannah Sullivan Three Poems

Hannah Sullivan's *Three Poems* is a thought-provoking exploration of life and death and all that comes in between. Sullivan's modernist credentials are given a thorough airing in this masterfully female depiction of life and death. *Three Poems* will disturb and delight in equal measures and it is a collection to revisit and to linger over. Eliot enthusiasts will find immense pleasure in the echoes and revisions of Eliot's characters and imagery, from the Prufrockian angst in 'New York City' to Feynman as blind Tiresias watching over the 'world's first count-down' to the testing of the atomic bomb.

The collection begins with 'You, very young in New York'. Sullivan's choice of second person perfectly encapsulates the dislocation and loss of self experienced by a young woman trying to establish her place in society. It is also an invitation. The 'I' of Eliot's narrator conspicuously absent, the reader experiences the destabilising effects of the city alongside the young narrator. Sometimes unsettling in its veracity, Sullivan charts the 'huge lost innocence' with originality and humour. An encounter with the narrator's ex has him 'pressing and stroking it like someone testing the grass for a picnic'. Much like the typist's tryst in *The Waste Land*, whose lover's 'vanity requires no response', there is 'No murmured approbation' in this encounter and the narrator leaves 'sated / By self-abjection'. Other relationships are explored and the morass that is social media is rendered poignantly through the lines 'And your mother asks / To be your friend again, but the request just hangs in the sidebar'. There is much in this poem that will remain long after reading.

'Repeat until time The Heraclitus poem' offers more than a nod to Eliot in both structure and form. Echoes of 'there will be time' abound. The sense of the repetitive life is both comic and devastating. The heart of the poem is a paean to the transformational power of language and 'the outward transfer of angular momentum' birthing a world 'So precise, so utterly different from the world, so lovely / As that language of ours, these words, could arise in one of them.' But Sullivan ends this poem with a countdown to an atomic explosion: 'Feynman discards the welder's glass, / His eye socket ground blind.' The Director, 'Blood in bruised ears', utters the devastating line 'Now we're all motherfucking sons of bitches'. The final line of the poem, '[*And Repeat*]', needs no analysis.

In the final poem, 'The sandpit after rain', the meaninglessness of existence is perfectly countered with the meaningful in this beautifully honest poem dedicated to the poet's father. The narrator expresses with originality and candour her disappointment at having to have a caesarean birth. She describes the experience as 'It was as if I had been planning to fly to Greece, / But ended up on a coach, listening to the toilet's slurry' and 'It was like dying at the hairdressers.' It is in this poem that 'you' becomes 'we' and 'us', until finally 'I have never heard a person so incredulous with rage.' The birth of a son is mixed with the sadness of the death of a father: 'The blur of oxytocin after labour is called joy, / But it is only like the morphine someone dying dies enjoying, / And everyone else is embarrassed by'.

Overall, one is left with a feeling of muted joy rather than sadness. There is a wholeness to the collection in which the reverberations of the earlier poems provide essential counterpoint to the sentimentality of the last. Enthusiasts of Eliot's poetry will find much here to stimulate and inform the readings of both poets. But, a warning: Sullivan certainly 'Make[s] it new'.

Christina Percy

Hannah Sullivan, Associate Professor at New College, Oxford, is to give our Annual TS Eliot Lecture 2019, at the end of the year. Details to follow in due course.

Eliot and Intertextuality – further thoughts

Eliot is an almost inescapable presence in some recent writing. My own reading is nothing if not random, but Eliot seems to pop up everywhere I happen to turn. Two recent instances come to mind. First, in Anthony Burgess's hilarious and politically incorrect *Enderby* novels. Prompted by a display in Waterstones of 'books by local writers' to wonder how Burgess qualified – it appears that between 1960 and 1964 he lived in the village of Etchingham, East Sussex – I picked up *The Complete Enderby* (Vintage, 2012) and read a page or two: enough to make clear that this was a book to be bought, not browsed.

Burgess's *Enderby* is a poet, a Rabelaisian creation whose unusual way with words earns him an unlikely award. The invitation to the ceremony, though, puts him into a spin: 'London. He was flooded with horrid images...'. So, deciding that he really must spruce himself up for the journey he resolves to '...wash nearly all over in the basin. More, he would shave with exceptional care and trim his hair with nail scissors.' The stage is set for Eliot:

'Gloomily, *Enderby* reflected that most modern poets were not merely sufficiently clean, but positively natty. T.S. Eliot, with his Lloyd's Bank nonsense, had started all that, a real treason of clerks. Before him, *Enderby* liked to believe, cleanliness and neatness had been only for writers of journalistic ballades and triolets. Still, he would show them when he went for his gold medal; he would beat them at their own game.'

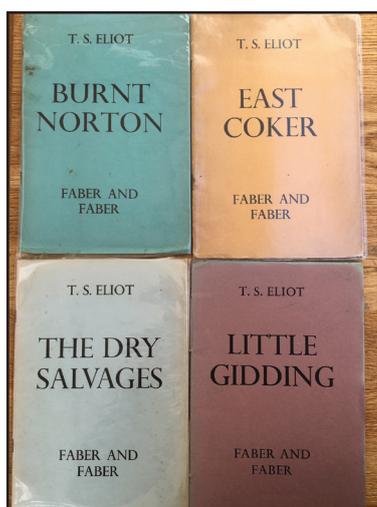
Eliot also appears – more by allusion than through his physical presence – in Edward St Aubyn's *Bad News*, the second volume of his Patrick Melrose novels (Picador, 2018). Melrose, finally buoyed by the death of his abusive father, is in New York to collect his father's ashes. In search of drugs to make this trip endurable, despite his resolution to abstain from them, he feels 'excited and sick and guilty': 'So what if he had changed his mind? And nobody was more flexible when it came to giving up drugs, nobody more open to the possibility of taking them after all. He hadn't done anything yet. He could still reverse his decision, or rather reverse his revision.' Patrick's self-doubt, his indecision and weakness, have their origin, evidently, in Prufrock's. Eliot nailed the modern sensibility.



It is a far cry from the novelists Burgess and St Aubyn to the popular young singer-cum-columnist Charlotte Church, but here is the opening sentence of a recent piece of hers: 'T.S. Eliot wrote of 'faces /Distracted from distraction by distraction/ Filled with fancies and emptied of meaning/ Tumid apathy with no concentration'. Evidence suggests that from *Prufrock* to *Four Quartets*, Eliot's words have 'echoed' throughout our culture, appearing in both unexceptional contexts and some far more surprising ones.

John Caperon

Collecting T. S. Eliot

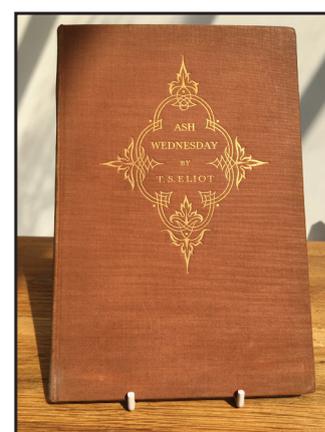


When I counted them up, I realised that I own seven different books, each containing *Burnt Norton* – and last week I bought another. Which led me to consider, for myself as much as anything, why I collect vintage and First Editions of T.S. Eliot.

There is something special about First Editions. It's about owning the works as Eliot himself published them at the time, in the format, dustjacket and layout that he personally approved. That could mean the stark simplicity of the individually published Quartets, little more than pamphlets (left); or the original cover design of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which was drawn by Eliot himself.

In some cases, the books are redolent of their time; the UK First Edition hardback volume of *Four Quartets* was published in 1944, and the paper, produced under wartime constraints, is almost transparently thin.

It's also a different experience reading Eliot's works as standalone publications, rather than within the stream of his lifetime's poetry. *Ash Wednesday* is a particularly good example; its beautiful First Edition of 1930 (right) contained just 13 pages of poetry, within gilt-embossed boards, and dedicated 'To My Wife'. It is like holding a small, perfect jewel of a book, and reading the poetry like that feels quite different to reading the similar pages of text sandwiched within the bulk of his Collected Poems.



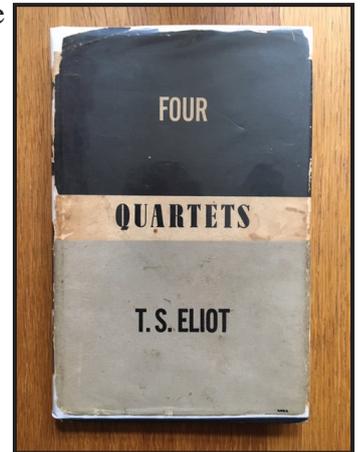
And of course many of Eliot's works are no longer available as standalone hardbacks; they are now only published as paperbacks, or their contents have been subsumed into larger Selected and Collected volumes, none of which give the work quite the same significance as an individual hardback book.

Collecting the First Editions and vintage hardbacks which provide these experiences need not be as expensive as you might think. Rare book dealers are only interested in pristine copies; if, like me, you will

settle for a copy with a previous owner's name penned on the flyleaf, the price immediately drops. It's also cheaper if you buy later impressions, the exact same First Edition but after the initial print run had sold out.

And you get caught in the thrill of the chase, of finding a book you've been seeking at a price you can afford. Sometimes people will sell a 'job lot' of books by Eliot, perhaps the collection of a deceased relative, with little idea of what they are selling. I was lucky enough, in a set of six for sale online in this way, to spot among them the rare essay collection which Eliot suppressed, *After Strange Gods*.

If you go online, you can buy not just from booksellers and auction platforms like eBay in this country, but from the rest of the world as well. And hence my latest *Burnt Norton*; a scruffy US First Edition of *Four Quartets* (right) – which, technically, was *the* First Edition as it preceded the UK version – bought online from the States. I think I found a bargain – although the shipping from the States cost twice the price of the book.



Of course there are some things one is never likely to possess. A First Edition of *The Waste Land*, for example, hand-printed by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. Only 460 copies were printed, and the survivors change hands at rare book dealers for between £4,000 and £10,000 each. You're unlikely to find one in your local second-hand shop.

But you never know...

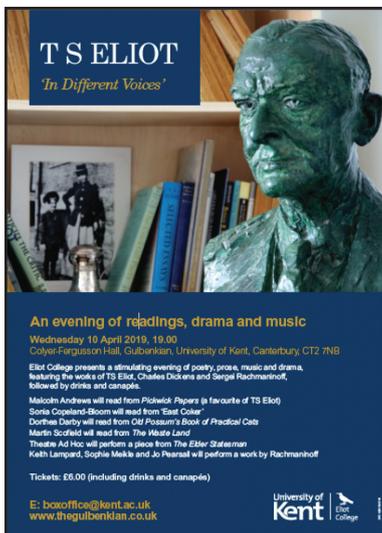
Paul Keers

The Society will have a selection of T.S. Eliot First Editions, collector's items and original hardback books for sale, all at affordable prices, on its stall at this year's TS Eliot Festival, at Little Gidding on July 7th

'To Caunterbury they wende ...'

A previous Exchanges article highlighted some of the Eliot memorabilia held in the library at the University of Kent and its Eliot College, named for the poet. Here, Jay Phillips describes an Eliot evening at the University this Spring.

It's an hour and a half's drive from the Sussex High Weald across to Canterbury, and we timed it just right to arrive as the show was getting under way. In past years UKC's Eliot College has promoted a T.S. Eliot memorial lecture. But college Master Steven Burke and his advisors have hit on a different approach: on Wednesday 10th April we were promised 'An evening of readings, drama and music' under the heading *T. S. Eliot 'In Different Voices'*. And show rather than lecture it very much was.



The university's cavernous Colyer-Fergusson Hall was our venue. With steeply-tiered seating and a capacious performance area, the wooden-walled hall felt more suited to large-scale musical performance. But individual readers and performers created an intimate atmosphere: notably Martin Schofield reading skilfully from *The Waste Land*, and Malcolm Andrews performing (the only word possible) an extract from one of Eliot's favourite novels, *Pickwick Papers*, quite brilliantly.

If you think that 'one of Eliot's favourite novels' indicates an eclectic programme, you'd be correct. We enjoyed the sung extracts from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, but the Eliot connection was so tenuous as to be obscure. We were on surer ground with the well-performed scene from *The Elder*

Statesman. Here, the local group Theatre Ad Hoc brought Eliot's dialogue vividly to life, reminding us that the currently neglected plays show the same skill in listening to and imitating the speaking voice which the poet had displayed long before in *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Waste Land*.

The evening's audience was appreciative, but all-too reminiscent of a matinee audience in the provinces: mostly middle-aged, even a bit elderly. Perhaps an out-of-term-time date made that inevitable. But the youngest performer of the evening – a current drama undergraduate – redressed the age balance with aplomb. Reading her own selection of Eliot's poems, she concluded with *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*. Over a hundred years after its composition in 1910 or 11, this poem had an extraordinary contemporary resonance in the voice of a young black woman. Better, perhaps, a show than a lecture after all.

Jay Phillips

Wall-to-wall presence? Inescapable Eliot ...

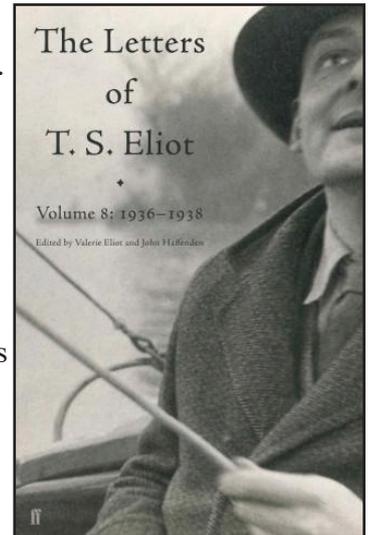
Readers may have noticed – it's been hard not to – a recent rise in Eliot-related writing in the serious Press. Back in March, *The Tablet* carried in its 'Food for the Lenten Journey' series, in which writers recommend 'a book that has brought meaning and hope at a turning point in their lives', a reflective article by Frank Cottrell-Boyce on *The Waste Land*.

Recalling how as a youngster 'Eliot's *The Waste Land* went flying over my head', and how even at university reading English 'I never made my peace with Eliot', Cottrell-Boyce went on to describe how *The Waste Land* had become a place of meeting with his father, who now suffers from dementia: 'The poem is Eliot's attempt to organise memories, impressions, chunks of poetry into some kind of meaningful whole. "These fragments" he says, "I have shored against my ruins." This is what my dad is doing every day, struggling to forge some kind of sense out of the noise and music of his daily life... the poem has alerted me to the heroic creativity that dad has to use to steer his wobbly course through every day.'

The article concludes movingly: ‘So this is the hope that I found in *The Waste Land* – that the beautiful things that somehow stay with us without us knowing are echoes calling us forward to something unimaginable.’ Eliot’s spiritual longing still communicates.

The Letters of T.S. Eliot – the eighth volume having now appeared and taken the story up to 1938 – have also recently prompted a number of reviews and articles. Geoffrey Elborn, again in *The Tablet* (13/4/2019), re-tells the story of Eliot’s formal conversion to the Church of England in 1927 and the subsequent difficulties he experienced in remaining close both to his new faith and to his friends, Christian beliefs being ‘anathema to Bloomsbury.’

Elborn’s article takes this direction perhaps partly because the *Letters* themselves he finds less than enticing: ‘...the latest volume, spanning just three years, has 1,100 exhausting pages’, he writes, noting that it is much taken up with the financial and other tricky issues surrounding Eliot’s editorship of *The Criterion*.



More entertaining is the selection of letters emanating from Eliot’s publishing house of Faber and Faber, published in late April by ‘The Observer’. A pre-publication puff for the new book *Faber and Faber: The Untold Story of a Great Publishing House* by Toby Faber, this selection of letters culled by Robert McCrum from the new book is fascinating. As the heading for the article suggests, ‘Every letter tells a story – untold tales from a lost literary Britain.’ McCrum, a former Faber editor-in-chief, writes with understandable nostalgia: ‘We took it for granted that we should be reading a new Pinter play or editing a Kundera translation and arranging to meet Ted Hughes or Seamus Heaney. Perhaps only later did we realise how lucky we had been.’

John Caperon

Exchanges invites and welcomes contributions from Society Members on any Eliot-related theme. Our aim is to be a place of genuine exchange between members about the poet and critic who links them together. If you would like to offer a contribution or have comments or queries, please contact the editor John Caperon at: Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk