

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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"In and out of unwholesome lungs..."

Eliot and Chancellor Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago, 1950

Editorial

This autumn, following a very warm and dry summer, has proved scenically beautiful across England. Trees have been displaying a stunning range of colours – yellows, browns, deep-toned and light – more vividly than usual at this time of year. It's an obvious subject for celebratory poetry in the romantic tradition. There's Keats, of course, and here is W B Yeats, in 'The Wild Swans at Coole' (1919):

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky....'

From his very different, classical-traditionalist stance, we wouldn't, perhaps, expect Eliot to be as much into autumn beauty as his fellow Nobel laureate; but it's interesting that we associate him with other seasons than autumn. Spring, notoriously, in the opening line of 'The Waste Land'; winter, in the 'Midwinter spring' of the opening line of 'Little Gidding'; and summer – the summer of 'heat and silence' of 'East Coker'. But autumn is something of a rarity in his poems; it seems for Eliot to be a time not of natural beauty but of reflection, sadness, as in 'La Figlia Che Piange' (1917): 'She turned away, but with the autumn weather/ Compelled my imagination many days....'; and in 'The Dry Salvages': 'where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,/The silent withering of autumn flowers....' One wonders what it was in Eliot's experience that made autumn for him about 'withering' rather than about ripeness and beauty.

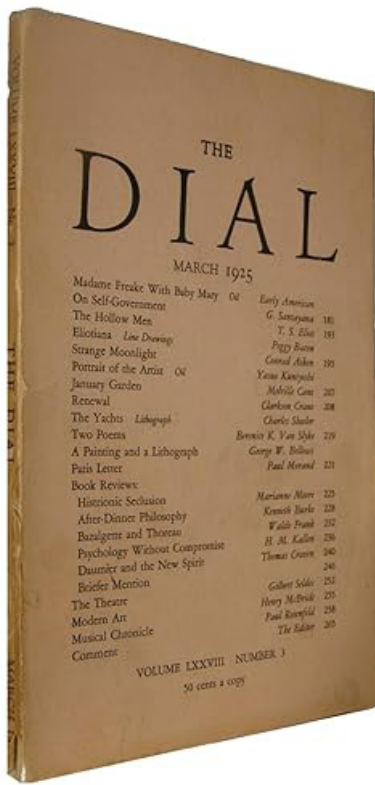
But here, in any case, is the Autumn edition of 'Exchanges'. In its centenary year, we offer two articles on Eliot's poem sequence 'The Hollow Men' of 1925: a piece by Robin Webb describing a strong personal interaction with the poem, and a reflection on the poem's origin by our Sussex correspondent Jay Phillips. And in the quatercentenary year of Nicholas Ferrar's purchase of the Manor House at Little Gidding in 1625, Society Secretary/Treasurer Kathy Radley describes a tea party, complete with unexpected mystery guest, to celebrate the event.

This year's T S Eliot Society lecture, generously hosted by Newnham College, Cambridge, and given by Eliot's biographer Professor Robert Crawford on 27th October, is reviewed by Society Committee member Fiona Bangor-Jones. Our final offering is a reflection by Dr Suchitra Awasthi of Uttarakhand Open University, India, on the current 'relevance' of Eliot's poetry, a topic highlighted in the recent collection *Eliot Now*, debated at July's T S Eliot Festival at Little Gidding. Her conclusion is entertainingly unhesitating.

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

‘The Hollow Men’: poems from a life hollowed-out in 1925



The first appearance of lines under the title ‘The Hollow Men’ was in The Dial in March 1925

It’s clear from *The Fall of a Sparrow*, Ann Pasternak-Slater’s 2020 study of Vivien Eliot’s life and writings, that 1925 was a desperately low time in Eliot’s life, let alone Vivien’s. ‘1925 should have been a happy year’, writes Pasternak Slater; ‘Three of Vivien’s pieces were already set up for the Criterion’s January number. Five more, under her full range of pseudonyms, came out in April and July....’ It looked, that is, as if a truly collaborative, creative partnership between husband and wife was developing. But illness dogged both their lives that year. In January, Eliot fell ill, with a possible influenza compounded, in Vivien’s view, by the effect of ‘working [ie at Lloyds Bank] in a dark airless basement for 6 months’ Whatever the cause, Eliot didn’t really mend for a month. To Virginia Woolf, he wrote: ‘I am rather in the doldrums at present – I feel like a shell with no machinery in it. The moment I try to use my mind at all, it’s no use, and then up goes the temperature.’

Then, in mid-February, Vivien collapsed; Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken, ‘My wife has broken down as a result of the long strain.’ By early March, writes Pasternak Slater, ‘her illness abruptly morphed into something extreme and inexplicable’: and for Eliot, ‘... life is simply from minute to minute of horror....’. This initial ‘breakdown’ was simply the prelude to what became a whole year of extreme health-

related anxiety (and huge medical expense) for Eliot as Vivien’s condition worsened, and various treatment options were tried: he was profoundly affected. As he wrote to his brother ‘I am really in such a state that my mind and judgement and will are paralysed.’ Unsurprising, we might feel!

Although retrospective clinical diagnosis is a risky undertaking, Pasternak Slater argues convincingly that many or most of Vivien’s physical and mental issues can be traced to her use and abuse of the narcotic chloral hydrate. In 1925, that is, Vivien was an addict, her addiction manifesting itself through liver damage, confusion, severe pain, weakness, delirium, paranoia.

Can we therefore see ‘The Hollow Men’ as prompted directly by dire personal circumstances, one of the most personal suites of poems Eliot – that poet of impersonality – wrote? The epigraph to the whole suite ‘The Hollow Men’, ‘Mistah Kurtz – he dead’, from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* comes from the passage in the novel where the narrator visits the dying Kurtz and hears his appalling, last, whispered words: ‘The horror! The horror!’ Shortly afterwards, a boy announces ‘in a tone of scathing contempt’ the death of Kurtz. It is surely these last words of Kurtz which are the key to the poems: they express Eliot’s sense of horror at the apparent meaninglessness of human life when ‘civilisation’ – rationality, control, order, predictability – is stripped away. Vivien’s disintegration is the prompt.

‘A penny for the old guy’, the epigraph standing at the head of the opening poem, evokes a scene in which effigies of Guy Fawkes are hauled around the streets by children begging money for fireworks. Inside the guy is nothing, neither life or humanity; and its end is the bonfire, a funeral pyre. Eliot, we recall,

described himself in early 1925 as ‘a shell with no machinery in it’: the guy’s ‘headpiece’ is, like Eliot’s ‘filled with straw’. The utter desolation of this opening poem is expressed in a range of images: the old guys themselves, the wind in dry grass, the rats’ feet over broken glass, ‘paralysed’ force (recalling that letter of Eliot’s to his brother), ‘death’s other Kingdom’.

A friend has suggested to me that all five parts of ‘The Hollow Men’ amount merely to a ‘hollow poem’. On the contrary, we have in this suite of desolate, imagistic poems an evocation of inner hollowness, of the hollowing-out of human personality by the sheer destructive power of human experience, quite unparalleled in Eliot’s oeuvre, but evoking powerfully the state of mind underlying ‘The Waste Land’. Eliot’s own mental ‘breakdown’ of 1921 clearly surfaces in that poem:

On Margate Sands.

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

And in ‘The Hollow Men’, we surely have the ‘objective correlative’ of Vivien’s addiction and her resulting illnesses, of Eliot’s own emptiness and desperation, of a dual breakdown. These are poems deriving from two, intimately connected, hollowed-out lives.

Jay Phillips

‘The Hollow Men’ and I

“Eyes I dare not meet in dreams” from ‘The Hollow Men’ became one of my favourite lines from Eliot’s poems on a spring morning in 2023 while out running on the seafront in Brighton, where I live.

Twelve years ago I became a listening volunteer for Samaritans. Since then, I have listened to some people who suffer agonies – the word is not too strong – from mental ill-health. Among their torments, I have heard of experiencing voices which denigrate or deride and which feel every bit as real as those of other people; of nightmares encompassing flashbacks to terrible past experiences; and, occasionally, of living with quite arbitrary shifts of personality.

Personally, I do not have any sleep troubles beyond periodic insomnia. I have found that memorising poems provides a valuable resource for these times of unwanted wakefulness. I am still accumulating poems I know by heart and there are now a dozen in the Eliot section of this mental library, including ‘The Hollow Men’.

That morning on the seafront I was reciting ‘The Hollow Men’ to myself as I was running. Through hearing it in my head rather than reading it, the line became ‘I’s I dare not meet in dreams’, in other words I’s in the sense of ‘versions of myself’. I found it an extraordinarily powerful and moving articulation of the experience of those callers to Samaritans.

Of course, the ordeals of inhabiting oneself recur through Eliot’s poems, from Prufrock’s ‘butt-ends of my days and ways’ to ‘the rending pain of re-enactment of all that you have done, and been’ in ‘Little Gidding’. As an amateur enthusiast, I am probably managing at the same time to make observations which in the one case bear no scrutiny from Eliot scholars and in the other are simply platitudinous. Nonetheless, ‘I’s I dare not meet in dreams’ has fixed itself for good in my hearing of ‘The Hollow Men’.

Robin Webb

400th Anniversary Garden Party at Ferrar House, Little Gidding

In 1625, Nicholas Ferrar and his mother bought the Manor House in Little Gidding. Christina Percy, Fiona Bangor-Jones and I joined Friends of Little Gidding, Trustees of Little Gidding and residents of Little Gidding to celebrate the 400-year anniversary of this event.



It was a pleasure to see in the audience, Judith Hodgson, who in 1970 bought the old farmhouse, together with her husband Tony. In 2004. The Little Gidding Trust was formed in order to keep Ferrar House as a 'household of faith'

After the laying of a wreath on the grave of Nicholas Ferrar in St John's churchyard, visitors enjoyed afternoon tea, with a splendid two-tier cake baked for the occasion, whilst watching Rutland Renaissance Dancers.

An unexpected guest was King Charles 1, who visited Ferrar House himself nearly 400 years ago, as 'a broken king'...



Kathy Radley

Robert Crawford – ‘Tradition(s) and the Individual Talent’
The Annual T S Eliot Lecture at Newnham College, Cambridge, October 27th 2025

The colleges were settling down for the evening when we arrived at Newnham at dusk to listen to the lecture, and walked through the autumn leaves into the College and the quiet, academic buzz that is unique to an academic environment. This buzz continued into the lecture theatre; Jean Gooder (Fellow Emerita and former Director of Studies for English, Newnham College) highlighted the appropriateness of the venue. Eliot’s second wife, Valerie, had held an honorary fellowship here and actively participated in the College’s life, including donating a substantial amount of correspondence and endowing a scholarship.

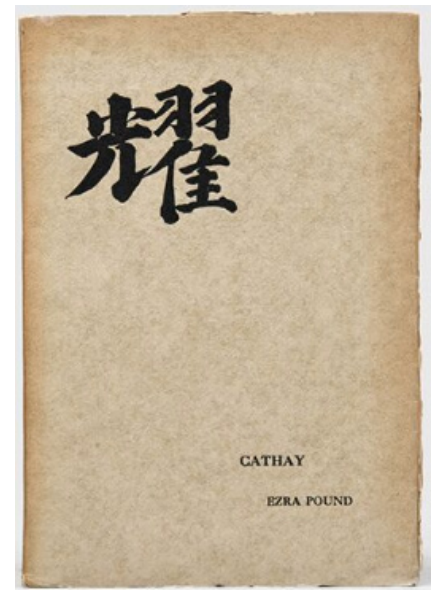
The theme of Eliot biographer Professor Robert Crawford’s lecture was ‘Tradition’ in the context of the allies that poets (in the broadest sense) form with both the living and the dead across cultures and centuries. The lecture’s pivot was the impact of the association between Ezra Pound and TS Eliot. They met in London in 1914 when Eliot was 25 and Pound was 28. The work of both poets reflects an attempt, argued Crawford, to write against the American Populist tradition whilst attempting to avoid elitism. Eliot had published ‘Prufrock’, but Pound was already a far more established writer. His well-known imagist poem ‘In a Station at the Metro’ published in 1913 is the result of a reputed 17 edits:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound’s work, ‘Cathay’ published in 1915 is a cultural ‘splicing’, suggested Crawford, of Chinese, Japanese and Anglo-Saxon works, including translations of works in the form of the ancient Japanese Haiku tradition and a translation of the Old English poem ‘The Seafarer’: all poems with a common theme of displacement. It was Pound’s influence on Eliot that enabled Eliot to adopt this cultural ‘splicing’ to such effect in his ‘essential and magnificent’ work ‘The Waste Land’, said Crawford.

In his essay ‘Tradition’, Pound opined that ‘Tradition is a beauty we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us’; and that ‘we need a literary tradition that weighs Theocritus and Yeats in one balance’. Professor Crawford highlighted what Pound saw as the narrowness of Eliot’s Euro-centric focus in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in contrast to his own more global or universal scheme of reference. However, Eliot had the philosophical training that Pound lacked, enabling him to express things in a way that Pound could not. By the time that he wrote his Cantos – something of a ‘spoil-heap’, suggested Crawford - under the influence of a totalitarian state, Pound, said Crawford, got his use of juxtaposition simply ‘wrong’.

The final part of the lecture looked at the sexual anxiety evident in some of Eliot’s work and the implications of the words ‘bearers’ and ‘quicken’ in an essay where he considered inheritance from other poets. No women are mentioned in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, and the only poets mentioned are Homer, Keats and Dante. Following the discovery of the work of the Sumerian Enheduanna (c. 23rd century BC), a ‘displaced and angry woman’, considered in some quarters to be the first named human author, perhaps Homer should give place to Enheduanna, queried Professor Crawford, for a more genuinely comprehensive and inclusive view of tradition?



Professor Crawford concluded with the idea that since we live and write in a globalised milieu, awareness of 'Traditions' - rather than simply 'Tradition' as in Eliot's essay - is what is needed. The questions raised by the audience in the short time left following the lecture touched on topical debates surrounding cultural identity and appropriation. I conclude this overview of Professor Crawford's lecture with a deepened recognition of how much reading and thinking across time and cultures I need to do!

Fiona Bangor-Jones

Is Eliot's poetry relevant now?

Eliot knew the importance of contemporary poetry's urge to 'make it new' and relevant. How then to contain and present today's Reality? Eliot recognised this in 'East Coker':

That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion....

Is Eliot's poetry now such a periphrastic study?

What would keep older poetry alive and usable by the living? To start to answer this, we only have to look at how Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* fed into and sustained James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Homer and Dante had been long dead and yet something about their work resonated in the minds and beings of the two geniuses of Modernism. Their mastery of their languages and poetic forms and the beauty of their words and phrases helped, as too the sophistication of their analysis of human motives and relationships, and so did the depth of their insights into what living Life as a thinking, feeling, spiritual human being entailed.

Did Eliot manage to do this enough to be deemed 'relevant' to people living today? To the supermarket checkout operator serving customer after customer minute by minute, hour by hour, do Eliot's lines provide the solace or appreciation of what she does? One could say that yes, it does. Look at these lines, for example, and transfer the essence of the situations being described here to the contemporary experience of the supermarket checkout operator:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street...

It's the same underlying sense but do any of these lines appease the sensibility of the supermarket checkout operator, or does she, like us, seek contemporary expressions by living poets of the precise experience without having to work to realign them, or failing that, write them for herself? In the same way that Bob Dylan claims that he started writing his early folk songs of 1962 onwards because the pre-existing

repertoire of folksongs didn't assuage the lack that he felt, did not describe what he was thinking and feeling. The urgency of what he felt in New York in 1962 needed language of brand-new coinage:

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.

Or as Dylan revolutionised it – 'How does it feeel!?'

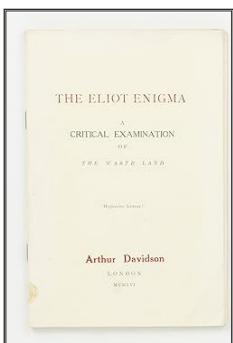
How to contemporise the myth of Sisyphus, for example? By seeing that the ignoble and yet really noble equivalent now is those boys and girls, men and women pushing carts endlessly (until their shifts end) around the supermarket, repeated circuits made around the aisles picking out the items ordered online by customers awaiting home delivery. Does T S Eliot's poetry redeem their time? That is impossible as such jobs were never suitable for thinking, feeling spiritual beings. For the duration, they make automatons of the people fulfilling the orders and yet... and yet... the human camaraderie and the group solidarity of the order-pickers belies this.

When one reads *Four Quartets* and dips into it at random and realizes the enormity of what has been achieved by one slight and already-dying man, one starts to weep at the reach and scope of Man's aspiration. This is the same motivation, ingenuity and determination which created Filippo Brunelleschi's dome for the *Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore* in Florence. Eliot addresses the same themes in all the Quartets, but is so inventive in his words and phrases that one hardly realizes.

In answer to the question posed, to us there isn't the option of discarding Eliot's poetry. At the same time that we experience the hunger to read modern, contemporaneous poetry written by someone alive at the same time as us, from someone subject to the same horrors and terrors bombarding every one of us, the cancer or the vaccine of Eliot's poetry is too entrenched in us to dislodge. So when the present reader of *Four Quartets* finds themselves weeping in the realization that the words set down by this long-dead Master reach deeper, and stand more beautifully assembled than the myriad components of the reader's own life, they have to come to the one conclusion - So Yes, yes, several times repeated, as per Molly Bloom's soliloquy or Meg Ryan's Sally at the restaurant table in 'When Harry Met Sally': the poetry of T S Eliot remains highly relevant!

Suchitra Awasthi

Envoi



A copy has come to light of *The Eliot Enigma. A Critical Examination of 'The Waste Land'*, a now scarce pamphlet written by Arthur Davidson, printed by Arthur Davidson and indeed published by Arthur Davidson, in 1956. It ends with the following sentence:

'Scatter as he will his Classical and Oriental, his Italian, French and German scraps; his mythological, scriptural and historical bits and pieces; his philosophical, psychological and metaphysical doles and scantlings "Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks" in a petite maitre affectation of learning, he does but make one the more regret the crass

misuse of his opportunities and acquirements which is only too apparent throughout the greater portion of that weed-grown, pleonastic expanse so justly entitled by its author "THE WASTE LAND"'.