

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

Autumn 2021

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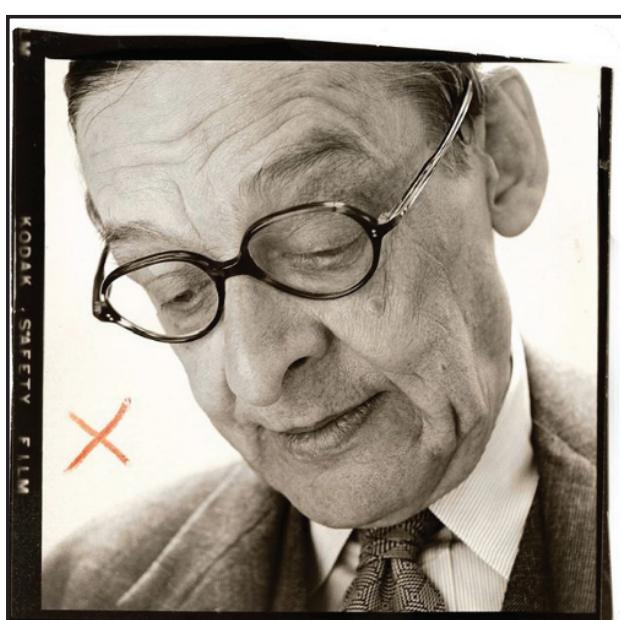
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This previously unpublished portrait of TS Eliot, taken by Richard Avedon in 1958, was posted online by the Richard Avedon Foundation. (The red chinagraph X indicates the photographer's rejection of the image.)

Editorial

This is, of course, the last edition of *Exchanges* to appear before the momentous anniversary year of *The Waste Land*, 2022. How might we sum up the intervening century? The economic gloom of the nineteen-thirties made way for the Second World War; that tumultuous conflict saw Eliot's greatest poetic work, *Four Quartets*. Post-war austerity gave way to the more confident fifties and the style-changing sixties, ending traditional social deference and sexual restraint and giving at long last a more prominent place to the interests of women. Eliot's death in 1965 – just two years after Larkin's *Annus Mirabilis* – truly marked the end of an era.

The tense years of the seventies and eighties gave us all a taste of nuclear apprehension, as Russia and America 'circled each other'; but the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 seemed to close the era of Soviet threat, and an 'end of history' was - prematurely - proclaimed. The new era of the nineties made way for the third millennium; but so far had secularism progressed that any religious future for a Western civilisation once rooted in Christian belief – the very 'idea of a Christian society' – had receded: and as the new, patriotic Russia rose to prominence, so too did the world's most populous and industrious nation, China. Things were set to change.

Now, almost a hundred years on from the *The Waste Land*, we face an increasingly uncertain world order, and a climate disaster. Writers, meanwhile, have been pursuing newer subjects – the place of liberated woman, sexual identity, racial equality – alongside the ancient themes of literature: the meaning of human life on earth; love, death and the hope of immortality; liberty and justice. What, one wonders, might 2022 bring in the way of era-defining poetry? It seems safe to say that nothing with quite the revolutionary impact of *The Waste Land* is likely to emerge. One recalls Thomas Hardy's remark to Robert Graves to the effect that all one could do as a poet was to write about the old things in the old way, but try to do it better....

In this last pre-2022 edition we print a response by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, editors of the annotated edition of Eliot's *The Poems*, to a remark of Tony Yates in his contribution to the Spring issue of *Exchanges*. It's good to think that we can provide in this newsletter a space for debate, discussion and even correction, as required, and we're grateful to both distinguished editors. There's also a reflective piece by Sandra Newton, an Emeritus Professor of English at Austin, Texas, on re-encountering Eliot's poetry after a significant time lapse of twenty years. Her article is a reminder of the way in which critical practice – reading practice – in the second half of the twentieth century was dominated by the purist, text-centred approach associated with the 'new criticism' and the work of F R Leavis. Has the twenty-first century brought something of a liberation?

Our Sussex correspondent, Jay Phillips, takes a quick look at Eliot's letters of November 1921, and ponders the significance of the writer's state of mind and heart as the great poem of 1922 began to take shape. And your editor offers an initial response to this year's T S Eliot Society Lecture at Merton College, given by Seamus Perry, Fellow and Tutor of Balliol College, Oxford and, since 2014, Professor of English Literature in the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. Twenty-twenty-two is just around the corner!

John Caperon

Editor

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@tseliotsociety.uk

Eliot Then and Now

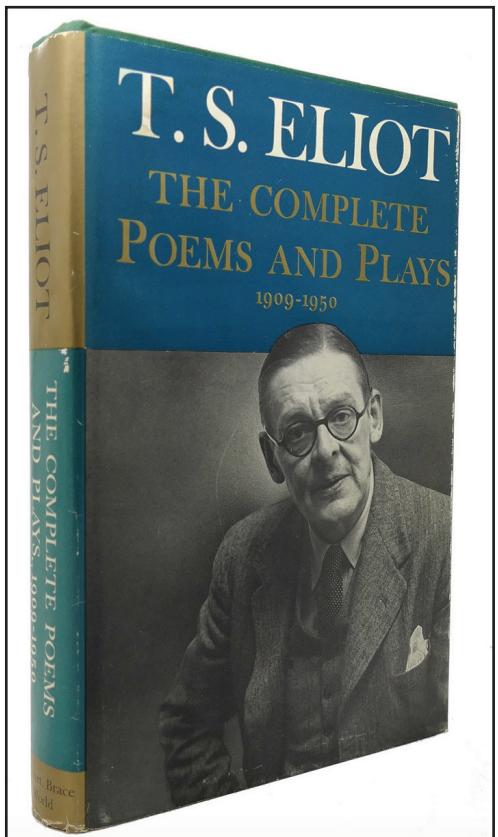
When I was in college and introduced to T S Eliot's poetry, I fell in love. Something in his words, the arrangement of his lines, the ideas, simply snatched me up in a spiritual and intellectual embrace. I talked about his poetry so much that my boyfriend at the time bought me *The Complete Poems and Plays 1901-1950* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962); it seemed ironic that someone who loved me would woo me with the words of someone else (whom I loved). It was a weird kind of Cyrano de Bergerac. When he saw my delight, he remarked, 'I would have liked to give you diamonds, jewelry of some sort, but a book? I never gave a woman a book to demonstrate my love.'

Unlike that relationship, my love for Eliot's work remained with me but was dormant for so many years. Yes, when the opportunity presented itself (in introductory literature classes), I would read his poetry aloud to the classes I taught, but I generally stopped reading and re-reading the poetry for my personal pleasure. I thought of him as one of the 'authors of my youth'; i.e., writers who appealed to me when I was young.

Last year, however, I discovered a trove of Eliot books I had stacked on a bookshelf for at least twenty years. There were copies of his various publications (sometimes two copies—one for marking up and using, one for safekeeping), critical books on Eliot, essays, poetry, even magazine articles folded and tucked into the books and, in addition, my class notes on yellowing sheets of paper or on index cards wrapped with a rubber band (that was now stiff and crumpling), all shoved into notebooks filled with notes about Eliot. The discovery was like a light turned on in a dusty corner of the attic. I started to read Eliot again.

Then, I started surfing the Internet about Eliot; the Internet was nonexistent when I first discovered my love for Eliot, so this was something new. There were hundreds of articles, YouTube videos, copies of his poems, websites of quotations from his work. And all of this did not satisfy so much as it whetted my appetite for more. When I first read, studied, and taught Eliot, I agreed with his dislike (to put it mildly) of biographical criticism. Knowing the poetry was foremost; knowing the man almost verboten.

Now, however, I bought biographies of Eliot (at least five) despite the fact that he insisted he wanted no biographies written about him. I discovered his much-discussed platonic relationship with Emily Hale (and the opening of the one-thousand-plus letters he wrote her) as described in blogs on the Internet. I read about his disastrous marriage, his conversion to Anglicanism, his acquisition of an English accent and British citizenship. I bought the first two volumes of his letters — he was an avid letter writer! — and have purchased a third (this is a slow process of acquisition). I had an epiphany: I once loved Eliot's work for the sound and the emotional sense; I now loved it even more for the intellectual challenge and discovery. And, in a reversal that may have more to do with maturity than with intellect, I find that knowing more about the man sometimes illuminates the poetry but, more significantly, sets the poetry more firmly in its position as a unique voice that speaks, at once, universally and personally.



If the voluminous amount of material about Eliot on the Internet is any measure, he will continue to be studied, admired, lionized, and appreciated for many decades to come. Eliot observes at the opening of *Burnt Norton*:

‘Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.’

His assertion that ‘All time is unredeemable’, in my mind, means that time cannot be saved, improved, or corrected, nor needs to be, because

‘... the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.’
(*Little Gidding*).

So, what could be more glorious than to discover that reading Eliot in the twenty-first century brings the same delight (yet more luminous) that it brought in the twentieth century?

Sandra S. Newton, Ph.D.

Preludes IV: a clarificatory note

Tony Yates writes in the Spring [2021] issue of Exchanges that when annotating *Preludes IV* in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, “Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue quote the metaphysicality of William Empson: ‘It springs from a peculiarly twisted and tormented, but very painfully suffering soul’”. Mr Yates complains that this betrays our “purely secular interpretation”.

The words “It springs from a peculiarly twisted and tormented, but very painfully suffering soul” are not Empson’s; they are, as specifically introduced in the Commentary, from a letter that Eliot himself wrote to A. L. Rowse on 3 March 1941.

Eliot’s description of Empson shares with the lines of *Preludes IV* the words “soul” and “suffering”, while, as the note adds, “recalling also the next poem, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* 24–32: ‘twisted things ··· twisted ··· broken spring ··· curled and ready to snap’”.

Christopher Ricks & Jim McCue

Eliot Then: a dip into T S Eliot's letters of November 1921

Significantly, the first of the November 1921 letters printed in Valerie Eliot's *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, is not from Eliot at all, but one from his first wife, Vivien(ne), to Bertrand Russell, and dated 1st November. It ominously prefigures *The Waste Land*:

'As you probably know, Tom is having a bad nervous – or so called – breakdown. He is away, and I am answering all his letters. Otherwise of course he would have written himself. He is at present at Margate, of all cheerful spots! But he seems to like it!'

How much there is to speculate on here: the Vivien-Bertie relationship; Vivien's grasp of her husband's condition; her understanding of his state of mind. Eliot's own lines from *The Fire Sermon* suggest another story altogether:

'On Margate Sands.

I can connect

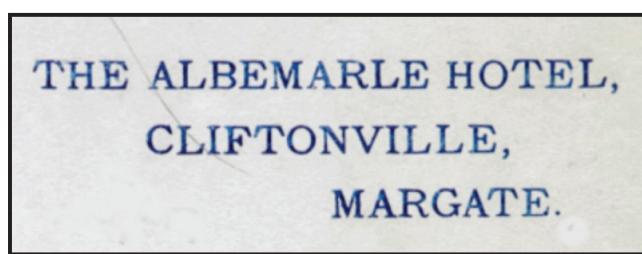
Nothing with nothing.'

And Eliot's letter of 4th November to Sydney Schiff takes us directly into his experience of writing *The Waste Land* that November:

'I have done a rough draft of part III, but do not know whether it will do, and must wait for Vivien's opinion as to whether it is printable. I have done this while sitting in a shelter on the front – as I am out all day except when taking rest. But I have written only some fifty lines, and have read nothing, literally – I sketch the people, after a fashion, and practise scales on the mandoline.'



Eliot's state of nervous uncertainty about his own writing, his dependence on Vivien's judgement, the touching vignette of this great Modernist poet plucking at his mandolin: all convey a rather different picture from Vivien's perception. Within a very few days Eliot is writing to Richard Aldington (6th November 1921) to outline his plans for therapy:



'I shall be going to the Continent within the fortnight My idea is to consult, and perhaps stay some time under, Vittoz, who is said to be the best mental specialist in Europe I am satisfied, since being here, that my "nerves" are a very mild affair, due, not to overwork, but to an aboulie and emotional derangement which has been

a lifelong affliction. Nothing wrong with my mind'

Whether a 'bad nervous breakdown', or a 'mild affair', 'simply an aboulie and emotional derangement', Eliot's mental and emotional condition in November 1921 somehow contributed to one of the twentieth century's greatest poems. Might he today simply have been put on the usual drugs, and pacified into writing incapability?

Jay Phillips

'TS Eliot's Liberalism': the T S Eliot Lecture 2021



What better setting could there be for the Society's T S Eliot Lecture than the lecture theatre named for him at his old Oxford college, Merton? Helen Small, Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, reminded the audience, in her welcome address there on 15th November, that Eliot's connection with the college had begun when he had formally signed in as a member of Merton on 6th October 1914.

What followed was to be a graduate year of hugely important relationships for Eliot: Aldous Huxley, Ezra Pound, Bertrand Russell, not to mention Vivien Haigh-Wood. But despite his research in Philosophy focusing on F H Bradley, then a Fellow of the college, Eliot – astonishingly - never met him. Today's Merton College is clearly a more sociable place altogether: following the lecture a generous college wine reception was open to all who'd been in attendance, and conversation flowed.

Introducing his topic, Professor Seamus Perry admitted that at first glance, 'Eliot's Liberalism' offered 'slim pickings' for the lecturer. But it was the kind of challenge, he later suggested, that helpfully prompted less familiar but fruitful lines of thought. In the early part of his lecture, Perry argued that Eliot had left Harvard and the USA precisely to get away from the predominant, liberal thinking of the time, and noted that he adopted a 'tactful silence' about his relative, Charles William Eliot, President of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909.

For Charles Eliot embodied in his thinking and educational practice just the kind of 'liberalism' that T S Eliot abhorred, argued Perry. Take Charles Eliot's emphasis on 'elective education': built on the notion that 'one subject of study was as good as another', to T S Eliot this seemed in its side-lining of the Classics simply a recipe for superficiality. And one of Eliot's own teachers, Irving Babbitt, even detected in Charles Eliot the 'ignorant heart' of liberalism and romanticism. 'The idea of wisdom disappears', observed Perry.

So for Eliot, there was 'an unacknowledged chaos' lurking beneath the liberalism of contemporaries such as Middleton Murry, whose 'priority of the individual judgement' added up for Eliot to nothing more than 'doing as one likes'. Eliot's own temper by the late 1920s could be gauged from his description (in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*) of his stance as 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion'. But his critique of liberal ways of thought reached its peak, suggested Perry, in *After Strange Gods* (1934), where his sense of being out of kilter with liberal thinking is most baldly declared:

'We experience such profound differences with some of our contemporaries, that the nearest parallel is the difference between the mentality of one epoch and another. In a society like ours, worm-eaten with Liberalism, the only thing possible for a person with strong convictions is to state a point of view and leave it at that.'

(After *Strange Gods*, Preface)



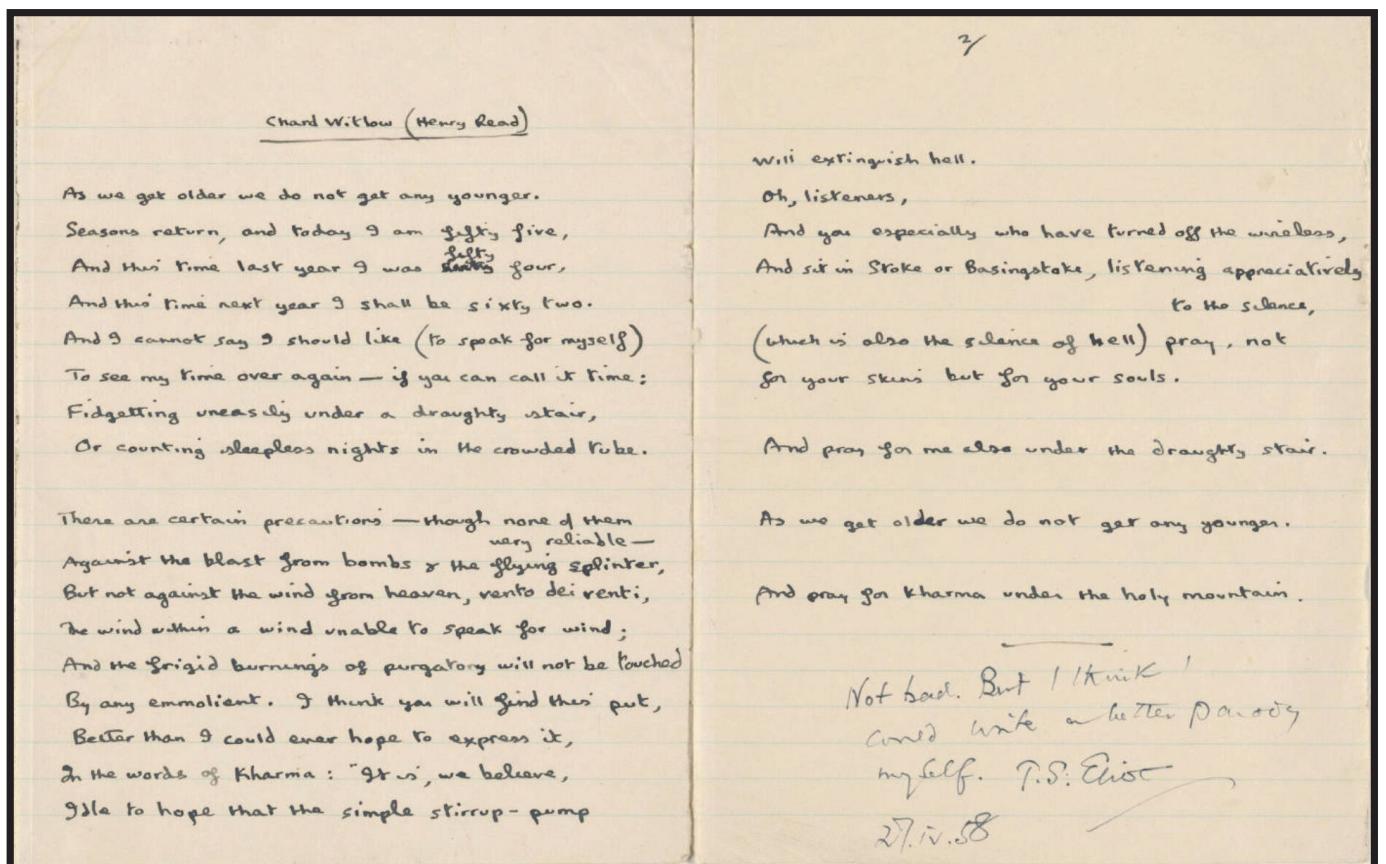
For Eliot, it was, said Perry, the (un-met and invisible!) F H Bradley who 'broke the authority of Mill', the great nineteenth-century proponent of liberty and liberalism, and set out the need for a 'greater idea or reality than our own selves', an 'Absolute'. Bradley it was, argued Perry, who lay behind Eliot's sense of tradition, the poet's debt to the wisdom of the past, the sense that no poet writes on his own.

And just as Bradley was a critic of Matthew Arnold, so too was Eliot. Professor Perry described Eliot as 'endlessly patronising' about Arnold; but any serious attempt to think about 'culture', he acknowledged, would need nonetheless to respond to Arnold: '...it is not to say that Arnold's work was in vain if we say that it is to be done again.' In what was an entertaining and fascinating lecture, Perry had pointed us to further, deeper exploration of the writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who had formed the intellectual context for Eliot's poetic and critical work and shaped his fundamental patterns of thinking.

John Caperon

And finally...

Many members will be familiar with *Chard Whitlow*, Henry Reed's parody of Four Quartets. (Anyone who is not will find a link to it on our website, under Resources/Miscellany/Parodies.) But some may not have seen Dylan Thomas's copy of the poem, with Eliot's handwritten comment appended at the end:



"Not bad," writes Eliot. "But I think I could write a better parody myself."