

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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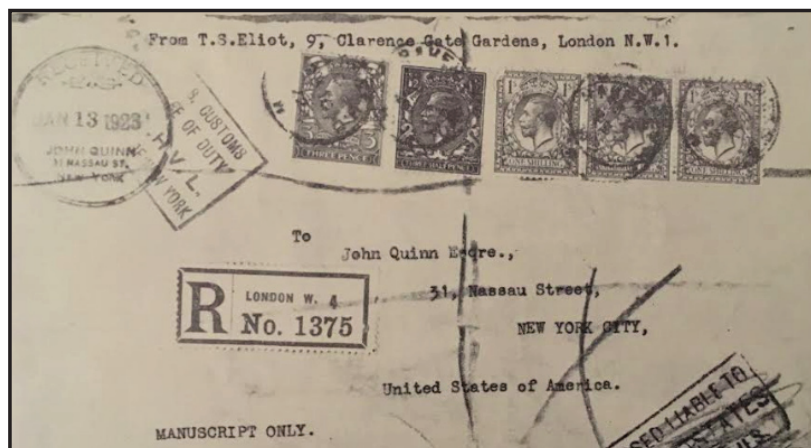
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The envelope in which Eliot posted the manuscript of The Waste Land to John Quinn in New York

Editorial

So here we are in 2022, the centenary year of the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922! Celebrated by the BBC in various series and special programmes on Radios 3 and 4, this epochal year might even find itself a little overexposed, one fears. Take the Radio 4 series *1922: the Birth of Now*, for instance. Presented by the cultural historian Matthew Sweet, the series ‘investigates 10 momentous events that took place in 1922, a crucial year for modernism, and traces their impact through to today, from the Soviet Shabolovka Tower to the development of the first aircraft carrier; from the revolutionary theatre of Berthold Brecht through to the new sounds of Louis Armstrong’.

Though the series regrettably foregrounds the significance of Joyce’s *Ulysses* rather than Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, it’s an enjoyable – if horizon-stretching – exploration of Modernism, as the quotation above suggests, and repays time spent in listening. But for the Eliot enthusiast, it is not so much the cultural construct ‘Modernism’ that’s of interest this year, but rather Eliot’s great poem itself, that lament for the wasteland of post-War Europe that is also a search for lasting values by which to live beyond it. Could the prominence of the notion of Modernism mean, say, undergraduate students of Eliot being encouraged to take their eyes off the poem and simply subsume Eliot and *The Waste Land* into the larger cultural landscape?

In this edition of *Exchanges*, Mary Morgan looks (seasonally) at Eliot’s best known winter poem, *Journey of the Magi* and reflects on her early experience of it. Paul Keers, Society chair, offers a fascinating insight into the most expensive editions of Eliot’s poetry. Tony Yates argues provocatively that we’ve had enough of performances with accompaniment to Eliot’s poems; your editor looks at the winning entry for the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry 2021, announced in January; and in a slightly cheeky envoi, Paul Keers reflects on Eliot’s surprising and unhappy use of the pince-nez.

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@tseliotssociety.uk

Recollections of *Journey of the Magi*

Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, described as one of 'Britain's greatest masterpieces' in the Christmas issue of *Country Life*, took me back to my schooldays a long time ago. We were introduced to T S Eliot by an inspirational English mistress and *Journey of the Magi* was probably the first of his poems (apart from *Macavity* at an earlier age!) to have made a lasting impression on me.

Understanding the meaning and imagery of the poem was the focus of our poetry studies then; we knew little of Eliot himself apart from the fact that he was a 'modern' poet and then still alive.

There was certainly a journey, but not the one portrayed in the carol *We three kings of Orient are*; there was no star of wonder, burning bright; and the journey did not seem like the joyous visit to Bethlehem of three kings armed with exotic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Written in the first person of one of the Magi, the poem seemed to describe something more like a difficult, personal, spiritual journey, looking back at a birth and forward to a death.

The poem is littered with Christian imagery from the New Testament: the 'three trees on a low sky' perhaps a reference to the three crosses of the crucifixion; the hands 'dicing for pieces of silver' perhaps a reference to Judas and the thirty pieces of silver. Might even the 'old white horse' have been a reference to Jesus' entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday?*

Our schoolgirl interpretation of Eliot's poem did not take in his personal background and in particular his own spirituality. The poem was published first in August 1927 as one of Eliot's Ariel Poems, a series of Christmas poems, illustrated with a cubist design by Edward McKnight Kauffer, who had designed many of London Transport's posters. The timing roughly coincided with Eliot's baptism and confirmation into the Church of England: he was confirmed privately at the Bishop's Palace at Cuddesdon by the Bishop of Oxford



in June 1927. Perhaps the Magi's journey he describes was in part his own conversion journey in his search for a suitable and lasting spiritual home?

Journey of the Magi was always among the readings for the school's annual service of Nine Lessons and Carols. It was not at first sight an easy read but I practised hard in the hope of being chosen to read it. There were no auditions - you were 'selected'. In the event, I was not, but was given 'The Oxen' by Thomas Hardy to read instead!

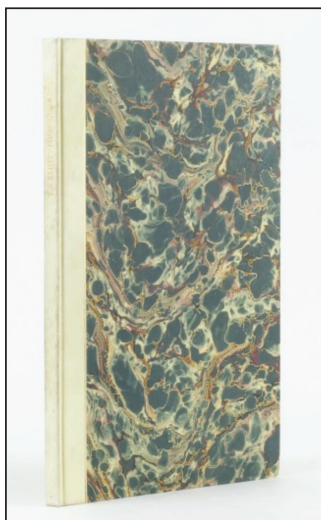
Describing how he came to write the poem Eliot says: 'I wrote it in three quarters of an hour after church time and before lunch one Sunday morning, with the assistance of half a bottle of Booth's Gin'. In a follow-up letter in *Country Life* the current curate of St. Stephen's Gloucester Road (where Eliot was churchwarden for 25 years) adds that Eliot 'remains an "austere" inspiration on our earthly pilgrimages ... and I hope the great poet is pleased to know that the gin still flows.'

Mary Morgan

*Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue suggest in the annotated Poems that 'the old white horse' derives not from the Gospels but from the book of Revelation; though the editors add that Eliot was reported as saying: 'the white horse was part of a remembered French landscape with no mythic significance'. Ed.



Readers vs Bibliophiles: The Mardersteig Editions



It's unfortunate that The Mardersteig Editions sound like a Bach collection or a Jason Bourne movie. In fact, these handmade books, printed in limited numbers, are rated as among the finest examples of the art of bookmaking.

Hans Mardersteig, who changed his first name to Giovanni, established his private hand printing press, Officina Bodoni, in Italy in 1922. He has been described as “probably the finest pressman the world has ever seen or is ever likely to see.” His Officina Bodoni books were printed by hand, in limited editions, on handmade paper, bound in vellum and marbled boards, and presented in slipcases. Usually of classic works, they now sell for huge sums on the bibliophilic market, from his *Oedipus Rex* (£5,300) and his *Fables of Aesop* (£6,500) to his edition of Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman* limited to just ten copies (£9,000).

By arrangement with Faber, Mardersteig published an edition of *The Waste Land* in 1962, limited to 300 copies, each one signed by Eliot. Two years later Mardersteig published a matching edition of *Four Quartets*, limited to 290 copies, with each again signed by Eliot. When they were first published, they cost 10 guineas each, which would now be about £250; copies actually sell today for around £4,500.

(A while back, an American contacted us about selling a copy to an appreciative member. It was offered in the Members Area for the equivalent of £3,500. A bargain – but there were no takers.)

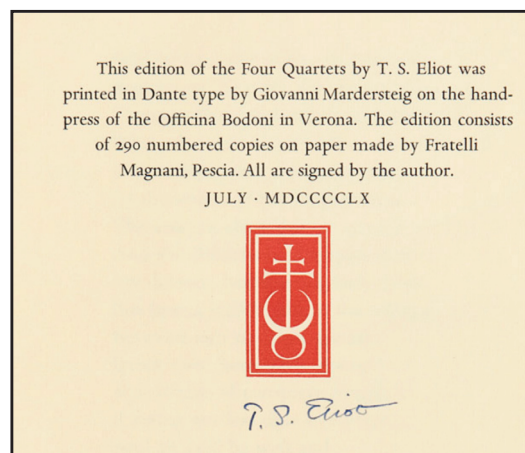
I had never seen a Mardersteig edition in real life myself, until a *Four Quartets* came up for auction. Although I knew it would go for much more than I could afford, I took the opportunity to visit the preview, and hold a copy in my hands. Nervous hands, I should add.

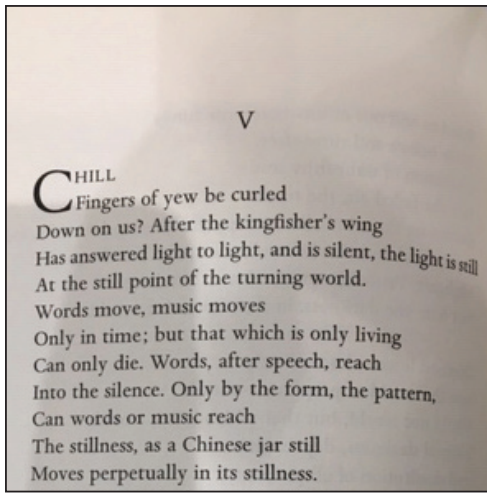
It's larger than most books, about the size of a magazine, with marbled covers and an ivory vellum spine. For enthusiasts like us, it is a thrill to see Eliot's signature ‘in the flesh’ – and here it is, in dark blue fountain pen.

The type certainly looks nicer on the page than the usual printing; crisper, firmer, and the lines have been set by eye, to achieve a more attractive layout of the broken lines on the page. The paper feels richer. And I'm sure the physical construction of the book would impress those who appreciate such things. But I didn't feel as if I was holding some kind of sacred volume; just a slightly more attractive book.

And it seems to me that these editions are not really for collectors of literature, but for collectors of fine books. Hand presses, vellum, mould-made paper, marbled bindings, slipcases... this is the territory of craftsmen, and of connoisseurs of fine bookmaking. For those who appreciate such things, perhaps prices in the thousands of pounds are appropriate. But for someone drawn primarily to the author, they seem exorbitant. Especially when the book contains a printing error.

Oh, yes. The beautifully made, limited signed edition Mardersteig *Four Quartets* contains a huge printing error. In *Burnt Norton*, Mardersteig misplaces the break between sections IV and V. So section IV is only five lines long; and section V begins with an ungrammatical question (‘Chill/Fingers of yew be curled/Down on us?’).





*A snatched photo of the error
in a Mardersteig Four Quartets*

You pay £4,500 for a book, and it contains a mistake.

The story goes that Mardersteig was working from an equally erroneous Ninth Impression of the Faber *Four Quartets*. In Faber's case, they spotted the error after publication, and managed to replace the page in half of the printed copies. But by then Mardersteig had duplicated the error. An erratum slip was prepared for the Mardersteig edition, in two versions, one of which actually stated 'This error is not due to the printer.' Nevertheless, an erratum slip was not issued, 'in deference to the printer's wishes.'

Still, as someone concerned primarily with content, I now have in my collection an example of that printing error. I acquired a second-hand copy of the Faber Ninth Impression of *Four Quartets*, containing the original error. Its previous owner may have replaced it with a corrected edition, or sadly may not even have noticed. So I do possess a copy of *Four Quartets* with one quintessential distinction of a Mardersteig edition – only it cost me £4,497 less.

Paul Keers

The dealer Peter Harrington currently has a Mardersteig edition of The Waste Land for sale at £6,000: see <https://www.peterharrington.co.uk/the-waste-land-152583.html>

Misappropriations: can't Eliot stand alone?

The news that this year more actors are lining up to read Eliot, and that in some cases there will be a piano and even an orchestral accompaniment, is, I believe, a serious mistake, and what philosophers would call a category error. It arises from a misunderstanding that because both involve music of a kind both can be performed in the same venue at the same time.

Reading a poem involves hearing a subtle blending of two voices inside one's head: the poet's and one's own. When an actor reads he introduces a third and public voice; and when, with the best intentions, instrumental music is further added the result is a mismatch between competing voices, competing content, and competing mediums. It is analogous to publishing an illustrated version of *Four Quartets* in the belief that its original imagery is too subtle for our jaded imaginations and needs enlarging with graphic pictures.

What is driving all this, I believe, is the correct assumption that Eliot's poetry is now incompatible with our age, and that unless he is newly dramatized and physically enacted by celebrity actors on stage, and acoustic music is added to his verbal music, we will no longer understand him or bother with him. The digital and AI wasteland in which we now live is even bigger and more toxic than it was in his day. Rather than Eliot, we desperately need his modern equivalent. That surely is what he meant when he wrote: 'Last year's words belong to last year's language, and next year's words await another voice.'

Tony Yates

The T S Eliot prize for poetry 2021: Joelle Taylor's 'C+nto and Othered Poems'

It's astonishing that as many as 177 collections, a record number, were submitted by British and Irish publishers for consideration for the 2021 prize. Who realised that so much poetry was being published? The judging panel, consisting of poets Caroline Bird, Zaffar Kunial and chair Glyn Maxwell managed to reduce that huge number to a shortlist of ten, described in *The Guardian* in October last as 'Ten books that sound clear and compelling voices of the moment'.

Describing the shortlist, Maxwell said: 'Poetry styles are as disparate as we've ever known them, and the wider world as threatened and bewildered as any of us can remember ... these are the 10 voices we think should enter the stage and be heard in the spotlight, changing the story.' It's as if the panel were already prepared to look for a winner who would 'change the story' in some major respect, while being also a 'compelling voice of the moment'. Those criteria are powerfully met in the final winner, Joelle Taylor's volume *C+nto and Othered Poems*.

Taylor's title declares her stance: here is a writer who is concerned above all to rage against what she describes as the 'othering' and persecution of those who share her self-described 'butch lesbian' sexuality, and to create a world in which women she has known – some of whom have not survived – have a realised identity. From the book's dedication – 'for my bois, my beautiful bois' – Taylor is lamenting (here with her own term for young, masculine presenting, lesbian women) the marginalisation and oppression of her subculture: her book is written, she says, against a 'backdrop of rising global homophobia, transphobia and misogyny', and her concern extends to all sexual minorities, not least 'our gay brothers'.

In 'Vitrine', a 'scene poem', Taylor's sharpness of observation is on display: 'here come the tourists/ dressed as our mothers'; and identity is forefront: 'when my picture is taken/ where is it taken to?/ who will it become?' And in 'C+nto', her long, prose-like lines can be expressive, memorable; and there's maybe a distant echo here of the exploited young woman from Eliot's 'Fire Sermon':

'some girls fall from sunlight skies straight down into
flat-pack floral dresses grab their smiles from a hook
behind the door'

An indignant, angry perspective pervades the volume: 'you are a trespasser in your own body the landowners/ are men who pass you in the street.' And sometimes the anger spills over into outright, gender-based hostility: 'men are broken things breaking things.' But the cause for all this anger is clear, and poignantly expressed: 'I can't remember the names of all my dead friends'

There's no doubt Taylor has a cause, a perspective, a voice, and an urgent, passionate message. So much is unmistakeable. What some may feel, though, is that her writing – designed it seems essentially for performance – drifts too often into over-insistent, prosy assertion; that her undoubted ability to capture a perception in brief lines ('the wind nailed to the wall') is too often concealed beneath the breathless, forward rush of her passionate indignation, of what Eliot termed 'undisciplined squads of emotion'. But that Taylor is a powerful, distinctive voice of 2021 cannot be gainsaid: her compelling writing does indeed 'change the story'.



John Caperon

And finally...

Pince-nez, those armless spectacles which prioritise form over function, are now regarded as little more than a once-fashionable affectation. So it came as something of a surprise when Craig Raine revealed in the TLS recently that Eliot, a man noted for his conservative appearance, had once experimented with a pair.

In 1939, Eliot wrote to John Hayward saying simply that he had bought a pair, 'but they will not stay on my nose'. However, in one of the letters to Emily Hale, a few weeks later on 22nd September 1939, it seems that Eliot says rather more about this impractical eyewear:

'I have got my pince-nez, which look impressive and are really useful many times a day. The difficulty is that they fall off if I smile, sneeze, yawn, sweat, blow my nose or lean over; and it is difficult to eat in them because they tend to fall off when I chew, and the cord gets gravy on it ...'.

There is, of course, quite a literary tradition of pince-nez. Raine's theory is that Eliot, moving at the time into drama, was inspired by the pince-nez of Chekhov. But it must be equally possible that he was attempting to echo his closer contemporaries, Yeats and Joyce.

Instead, though, Eliot went on to adopt more traditional – and more practical – spectacles. And in terms of dramatic inspiration, forgotten spectacles would become an important plot device in *The Cocktail Party*. Perhaps, in its turn, that was inspired by memories of Vivienne's frequent loss of her own. (She wrote in her diary, 'I always seem to lose spectacles round about Tottenham Court Road.')

Unrecorded in photographs, Eliot's pince-nez are a great loss to literary heritage – and, indeed, to the memorabilia market. A pair belonging to WB Yeats – gilt-framed and with cord – were sold at auction in Ireland in 2017 for €10,000. And a year later, a similar pair belonging to James Joyce sold in Dublin for €17,000. What price TS Eliot's rare pair?

