T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

Spring 2023

This illustration of a cheerful Eliot appeared in The Scotsman in 1958 accompanying a 70th birthday consideration

Editorial

This cruellest of months – Eliot has surely transformed for ever our understanding of April! – brings the Spring edition of 'Exchanges', and I hope readers will find it full of interest. Apart from the articles introduced below, it also offers a link to a new audio source for Eliot spoken voice recordings.

Our main article is 'T S Ee Bah Gum', the title alone of which will be a surprise to many readers. We are fortunate indeed to have secured from Graham Bruce Fletcher, nephew of Valerie and Tom Eliot, and to be able to publish here, some personal recollections about the poet from inside his own family. At a time when biographical studies – not least those exploring Eliot's relationship with Emily Hale, and its implications for others – are apparently predominant in Eliot studies, it is remarkable to be able to add to the formality of biography the informality and anecdote of personal memory. Your editor is still struggling to hold together the dual images of the extraordinary literary giant who is at the same time an ordinary uncle who visits the streets and the people of Leeds, Hull and Scarborough….

For our second piece, we go further afield, with a contribution from Jolly Das, associate professor of English at Vidyasagar University, Midnapore, West Bengal. One of the features of 'The Waste Land' which may not yet have been fully explored is the debt Eliot owes to Hindu thought, and Professor Das is well positioned to reflect on that, as well as noting that the newly-opened Emily Hale letters mark a step-change in Eliot studies, the implications of which are still to be fully understood. Our previous, Winter edition of 'Exchanges' carried a review of a centenary edition of 'The Waste Land', the foreword to which, by Qiu Xiaolong, the Chinese novelist, poet and translator, explains how Eliot, read in secrecy, 'proved to be truly instrumental' to young poets under the Chinese regime. We might well, in the light of this edition's 'View from India', ponder further the international, and intercultural impact of Eliot.

Which brings me to the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry, awarded for 2022 to the poet Anthony Joseph, for his volume *Sonnets for Albert*. Written after the death of the poet's father, these fine sonnets – rather, fourteen-line poems – reflect on the Caribbean context of his life, and the distance between the son's metropolitan culture and the simpler, more direct impulses of the father. Joseph's voice is clear, assured and powerful; he is a substantial poet who worthily holds the distinction of being a T S Eliot prize-winner.

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

T S Ee Bah Gum! Eliot in Yorkshire

In early 1956, John Hayward, TS Eliot's housemate, remarked, speaking of Eliot's soon-to-be second wife, Valerie Fletcher: '… there's more to that flower of the Yorkshire marshes than meets the eye ….'

Hayward was clearly a better observer of his housemate than a student of geography. Valerie was from Leeds, not so much marshy as the hard, urban landscape of industrial revolution prosperity, but soon to deprive Hayward of TSE's company.

In August 1956, around the time of Valerie's birthday, TSE visited Leeds to ask Val's father for his daughter's hand in marriage. As Val's four-year-old nephew I was present with my father – her older brother – on this family occasion. I was much impressed to meet the creator of 'Macavity the Mystery Cat'. Needless to say, despite TSE having been born in 1888 and Val in 1926, James Bruce Fletcher, her father (a trustee of Leeds subscription library) readily gave his blessing to the marriage. They wedded on the 10th of January 1957.

After the wedding TSE visited Yorkshire quite regularly and the family would also visit the couple's flat in Kensington, often for Valerie's birthday each August. Tom and Val also travelled to Yorkshire in May for Valerie's mother's birthday, particularly as Val's father had died not long after the marriage; and in June 1957 they came to the family home in Weetwood Lane, Headingley, Leeds, for my birthday when I was five.

This photograph of Tom in his deckchair in the garden, with me peering over the back, was taken then. Although the house was in Weetwood Lane, the entrance was on Glen Road, and the garden not easily visible to passers-by. Nonetheless, Professor John Whale of the Leeds Poetry Centre told the Yorkshire Post that, in the early sixties, students reported seeing TSE in his deckchair. They must have had superb surveillance skills. Or necks like giraffes.

A propos of sightings, Alan Bennett remembered as a boy running errands for his father's butchery shop in Headingley, delivering meat to Valerie Eliot's mother, but recalled seeing Tom only once, at Leeds Central Station, in 1964. On that occasion TSE was being pushed in a wheelchair by Valerie - his final visit to Leeds.

Apparently, Val told Alan Bennett at TSE's funeral that she remembered seeing Bennett doing his homework in the butcher's shop

when he was a child, a story Bennett himself described as unlikely, as his father would never have allowed it. Witness reports aren't always reliable.

TSE was accustomed to being unrecognised when 'out of context,' and one resort in Yorkshire enabled him to enjoy himself untroubled by interruptions. These – had they occurred - might have been the literary equivalent of the popular newspaper promotion in which readers who spotted 'Lobby Lud' at a seaside resort could claim a cash reward for challenging him by name.

Scarborough was hardly expected to hold attractions for reputable intellectuals associated with high culture. But on visits to the town, TSE eagerly took me to the model railway display adjacent to the Futurist Theatre, where a plump tweed-jacketed enthusiast ad-libbed railway stories and produced sound effects by blowing into his microphone. Perhaps it resonated with the imagination that created Skimbleshanks? There was a miniature railway, too, up in Peasholm Park, and also a lake where Second World War naval battles were re-enacted with large, manned, scale-model ships, and model aircraft guided along wires. Together we felt like boys conspiring to amuse ourselves by engaging in activities of which the more boring adults would not approve.

One evening we all went to see a production of 'The Merry Widow' at the Open Air Theatre. This was preferable to the Black and White Minstrel Show, performing an annual summer season at The Futurist, as TSE, having been brought up in St Louis, considered the show demeaning and racist. He was certainly not opposed to Vaudeville style Music Hall, but for both Tom and Val the main attraction in Scarborough was the Spa and the concerts led by Max Jaffa. Tom and Val were both keen dancers, and the programme often included Viennese Waltzes – a musical genre in which Max Jaffa particularly excelled.

But there was the time that Tom's mother-in-law, Esmé, nearly killed him. Tom, Val and Esmé came to stay one Christmas in the early 60s in Kirkella, a suburb of Hull in East Yorkshire, with my father, Val's brother. TSE had intended to visit Philip Larkin at Hull University Library some time around the New Year, but for some reason the meeting was called off. At that time TSE was in poor health and tended to tire easily. The little he was writing at the time was done on an occasional table near the fire, using a very large Mont-Blanc fountain pen. It may be his emphysema was causing him some loss of sensation in his fingers which made it difficult to grip a conventional pen.

He and Val had the large back-bedroom to the rear of the house, near to which Val's mother took over my bedroom, consigning me to a single bed in the room I'd occupied as a nursery when I was a toddler. A few days after Christmas my uncle decided to have a rest after lunch and went up to his room to lie on the bed. I ran up to my former nursery to read a book – probably whatever Uncle Tom had given me for Christmas – and Val, Esmé and my mother talked in the drawing room, where my father was smoking the corn-cob pipe that TSE had brought back from a visit to America and given to him as a Christmas present.

In mid-afternoon my grandmother came upstairs to check on us, and decided that, as it was beginning to get dark, my uncle might be getting cold. There was a convector heater with radiant bars plugged into a socket in the corridor outside the back-bedroom with its cable holding the door slightly open, through which my grandmother could hear my sleeping uncle breathing steadily. So as not to disturb him my grandmother did not open the door fully, but simply switched the heater on, and returned downstairs.

It couldn't have been very long before I smelt burning and as soon as I stepped into the corridor saw the smoke coming from the back-bedroom door. Shouting down the stairs for help, I went to the back bedroom and discovered a blazing bath-towel draped over the heater, pulled it off by the unburnt end, took it to the bathroom along the corridor, threw it in the bath, and ran water over it.

By this time Val had woken Uncle Tom and got him out of the room. Surprisingly he was unaffected

by the smoke, and lived to tell the tale. Not that he did tell the tale. Having had a bath in the morning Val had draped her towel to dry over the heater which was cooling down. It had never crossed her mind that her mother would turn it on without looking. And as far as I remember I got a few extra books from Uncle Tom over the following year.

Graham Bruce Fletcher

A View from India: Eliot's spiritual search – and mine

University Gate at the author's Vidyasagar University, in Midnapore, West Bengal

When I first read 'The Waste Land' as a college student, nearly thirty years ago, it made almost no sense: the poem was so different from others I had read! Since then, I don't know how many times, I have returned to this poem which remains for me a source both of academic fascination and of personal, spiritual encouragement. When there is mixing of 'memory and desire', the past and future stand in an interface in the present (albeit fleeting) moment of anxiety and fear: the modern individual's crisis couldn't have been better (re)presented.

'The Waste Land' does not stop here: the final lines lead to Eliot's (and my own) search for 'Shantih', via 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.' It is this quest for 'the Peace which passes understanding' which, as I have grown older, has become more meaningful for me. Eliot's training in Philosophy, his wide reading, and his experiences, personal and public, have had a profound bearing on his writings, which in turn, have served to sustain readers like me even today.

The arrival in the public domain of his letters to Emily Hale has ushered in a new era of Eliot studies, revealing much about his awareness of the spiritual crisis of modern individuals, and his search for 'Shantih'. In his other personal letters, he does not show such intimacy and frankness as he does in this private correspondence. His future plans, present concerns, relationships — all have been so candidly poured out in them. One cannot resist sharing them with scholars and students, inviting them to engage with them, and to reconsider their previous understandings of his creative as well as critical writings. These letters invite us to read 'between them', as it were, to imagine Hale's now destroyed letters to Eliot.

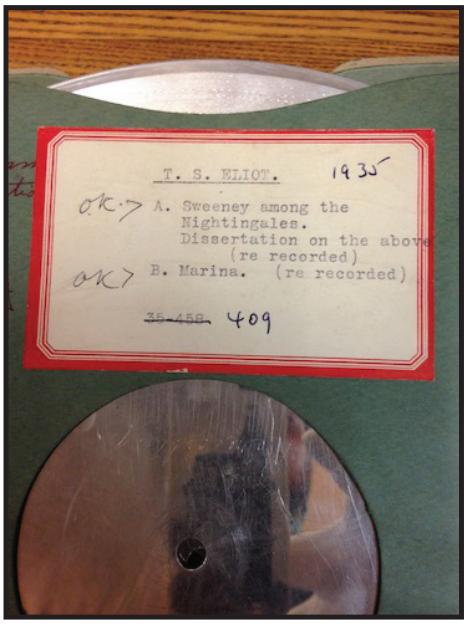
Eliot's works form a larger scheme of which 'The Waste Land' is just a section; and for those like me who re-search Eliot's purpose in writing them, his letters to Hale will certainly be useful. In (re)viewing Eliot's quest in the light shed by these letters, I hope to be able to understand the man he was in a better way than before.

As I read Eliot's works and correspondence again and again (this time with the addition of these letters),

I have more light cast upon my understanding of the meaning of life. Being a Vaishnava Hindu, believing in Krishna's love and following his words enshrined in the Bhagavata Gita, it is easy for me to notice Eliot's journey from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad to the words of Krishna to Arjuna: 'Nishkama karmayoga' (selfless or desire-free action) is the way to Shantih. So, for an Eliot scholar like me the motto will always be, not thinking of the fruit(s) of my action, but to follow what Eliot wrote in 'The Dry Salvages': 'Fare forward, voyagers'.

Jolly Das
Vidyasagar University

T S Eliot: The Spoken Voice



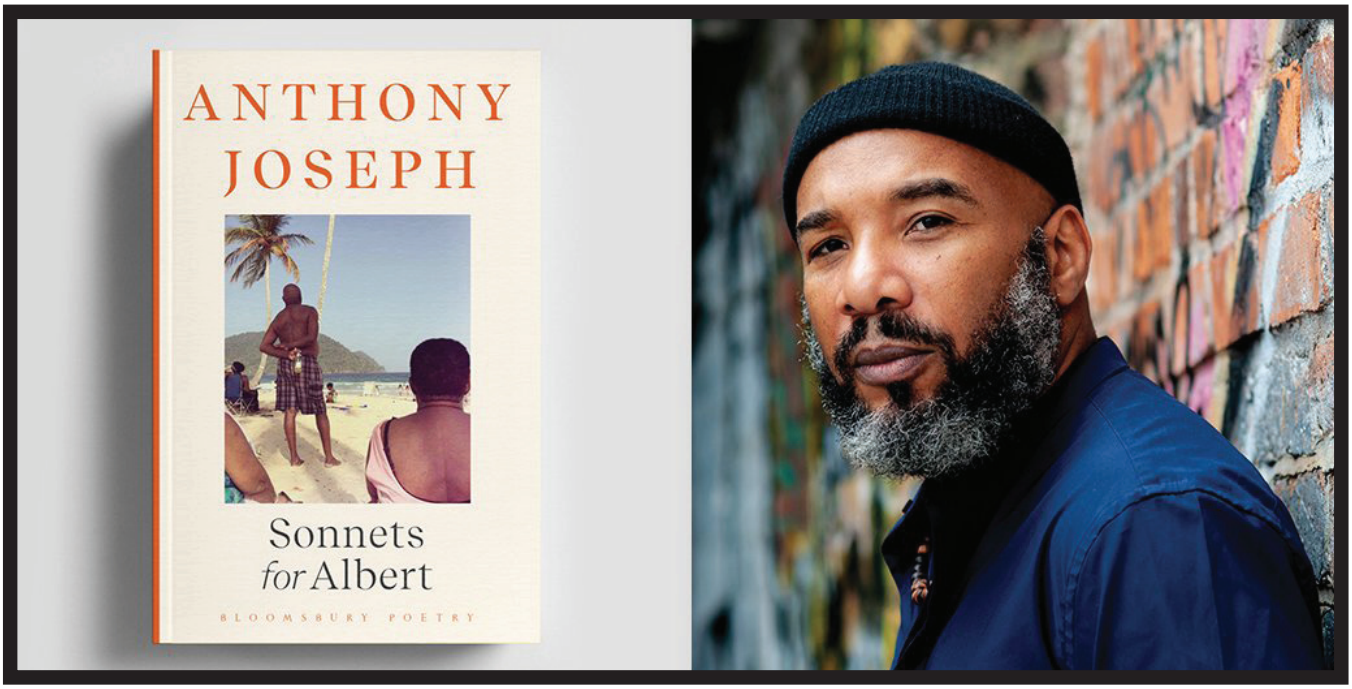
'Exchanges' contributor Sara Fitzgerald writes from the States that there is now a new T S Eliot page available at PennSound, the website from the Centre for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. The page of Eliot recordings is at: https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Eliot.php

The master recordings available are from one of Eliot's earliest recording sessions, made at Columbia University in the early to mid-1930s. There may well be lovers of Eliot's poetry who feel that Eliot's own later readings somehow fail to capture the essence of his poems; and after last Summer's T S Eliot Festival, at which actor Simon Callow performed 'The Waste Land' with immense insight and brio, the less charismatic readings of the poet himself may seem even less convincing.

These newly available recordings, digitized from the original aluminium transcription discs, give us the opportunity to hear a younger Eliot, and judge accordingly!

The T S Eliot Prize for poetry 2022

The T S Eliot Prize for poetry has in recent years produced a wide variety of winning entries, from the intellectuality of Hannah Sullivan's 'Three Poems', to the moral indignation of Roger Robinson's 'A Portable Paradise', to the subcultural assertiveness of Joelle Taylor's 'C*nto and Othered Poems'. The latest prizewinner, Anthony Joseph, with 'Sonnets for Albert', takes us into different territory. This is reflective, autobiographical writing, in which Joseph interrogates his memories of his late father, and using the sonnet form as his guide, offers a sequence which declares his love for the man who had been absent for so much of his son's life.



David Wheatley's review of the volume in The Guardian (1/7/22) states baldly: 'Albert is a rogue, and encounters with him take place on the run.' But this much-absent rogue of a father is beautifully memorialised in Joseph's volume. For the Chair of the judging panel Jean Sprackland, who was joined by 2021 Costa book of the year winner Hannah Lowe and 2019 TS Eliot prize winner Roger Robinson, 'Sonnets for Albert' is 'a luminous collection which celebrates humanity in all its contradictions and breathes new life into this enduring form.'

In a fascinating Prize interview (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7iWeUlz1p0) Joseph describes how he set out to write in the strict, classical sonnet form, only to find that his father's voice 'came through' and brought a creative fluidity to the sonnets – still recognisable as sonnets, fourteen lines long, but very seldom meeting formal, prosodic requirements. Joseph reminds us that the sonnet form is traditionally a vehicle for the expression of love; and describes how writing in the form enabled him to discover his love for his rogue father.

As well as expressing affection, these poems reflect on mortality: his father's death reminds Joseph of his own. Hoping, in 'Memory Ghost 1', that his daughters 'will also remember me', he concludes: 'I hope that there is time still / to shape the ghost / that must enter their memory.' In 'The Trembling Unto Death', Joseph recalls two sides of his father, how he would 'flirt with the cashier', grin 'at a policewoman at the beach / with a towel round his waist': then '… suddenly he would darken.' But the poem closes with self-revelation: 'I have seen this in myself as well, the rain at dawn / - fear – in Kierkegaard; the trembling unto death.' And the impact of death is clear in 'Tumulus 1': But when that first dirt dash the casket lid, / no amount of ritual or bouquet /could protect you / from that sound /when it hits.' 'Dash' is a perfect choice; this is precise, powerful writing.

Though 'Sonnets for Albert' has a clear Caribbean ethos, emphasized by the few photographs of Joseph's father interleaved among the poems, and though Joseph's language shares that sense of locality, the volume feels mainstream rather than regional or segmental. Its themes – paternity, sonship, love, loss – are universal, and the volume's gentle and profound humanity is deeply touching. Joseph says that he sees the volume – and the T S Eliot Prize – as a 'culmination'. One can only hope that there is much more to come from this superb, accomplished poet.

John Caperon