

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



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*Appropriate for this holiday season, here are TSE and Valerie,
pictured on holiday in Jamaica in 1961 by Jane Walmsley*

Editorial

‘Summer surprised us’ once more this year, with the heat and drought of June and the contrasting cold and wet of July. We may not have endured again the scorching heat of the summer of 2022, but our forecasters are confidently – scarily – reporting that future summers will be 40°C as a matter of routine. At this point of climate crisis, what lies ahead is potentially terrifying for all of us.

But somehow there is a continuing timeless and tranquil feel to Little Gidding. At this year’s T S Eliot Festival there, on Sunday 9th July, the ‘dull façade’ of Nicholas Ferrar’s church of St John was as unperturbed as ever. The marquee pitched on the lawn of Ferrar House – together with the cars parked on the adjacent site of the former manor house, the only obtrusive sign of modernity – seemed not to trouble the atmosphere of the place, and even the arrival of a hundred-or-more Festival-goers did not unduly disturb this part of the universe. It’s remarkable that Little Gidding remains such a still point in our turning world.

And each Festival brings new insights. Last year’s bravura performance of ‘The Waste Land’ by actor Simon Callow was an astonishing, unrepeatable one-off; but this year’s reading of ‘Prufrock’ by poet George Szirtes trembled with an inner uncertainty that took us close to the consciousness of Prufrock himself. The ensuing discussion with Adam Begley enabled Szirtes to offer further interpretation, and critics would do well to follow his counsel: ‘to bring things out of the poem, not put them in’.

The two lectures – from Oxford professor Seamus Perry and Cambridge professor emeritus David Trotter, positioned before and after the lunch break – brought new perspectives. Perry’s exploration of verbal repetition in Eliot’s poetry conveyed a heightened awareness of the poet’s use of, even preoccupation with, the word ‘turn’, the word of conversion. And Trotter’s focus on the topographical nature of Eliot’s poetry, and in particular the significance of place in ‘Four Quartets’, offered a further direction for critical reflection. Both academics enriched the range of possibilities for readers of the poems.

The now traditional conclusion to the day’s Festival – a reading of ‘Little Gidding’ – took a new form. Recent years have seen readings - or rather performances - of the poem by actors; this year the poet Ruth Padel read ‘Little Gidding’ profoundly, without a hint of drama, and it was in its understated way quite revelatory. And that is the point of the Festival: it is to offer new illumination and understanding of Eliot’s writing: a ‘new beginning’.

In this Summer 2023 edition of ‘Exchanges’, that theme of beginning is strongly present, in pieces from three new contributors. Matthew Archer, an Eliot newcomer, writes on why Eliot now matters to him. Dan Dearlove, visiting the Festival for the first time, shares some reflections on the experience of the day and place. And Rhona Knight, ‘an Eliot novice’, reviews the Festival and its impact on her.

What might be added to these different responses to the Festival is a recognition that each year it is also not least a social occasion, where Eliot enthusiasts of all sorts are able to mix and meet. The T S Eliot Summer School brings an international cohort of Eliot students to the already eclectic bunch of English readers of Eliot gathered in Little Gidding, and discussion across national boundaries is one of the delights the Festival offers.

None of this would be possible, of course,



without the generous catering provided by Sue Cave and the staff of Ferrar House: it seems remarkable that here, in the midst of the deep Huntingdonshire countryside, is a place of meeting and sociability as well as a place of learning and exploration.

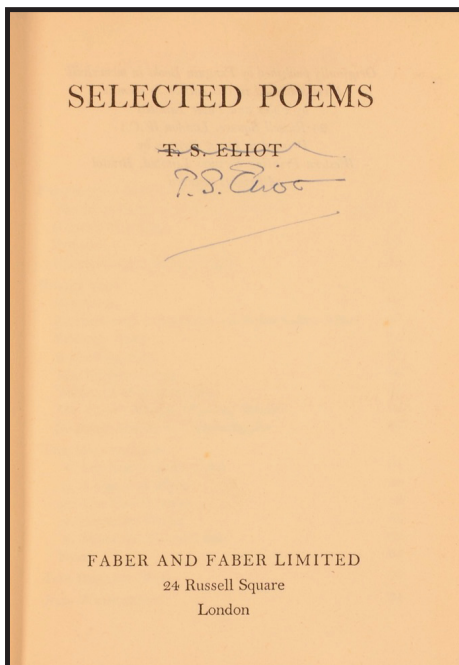
So let me offer what is now – I’m told! – known as a ‘shout out’ to the organisers of the Festival. The committee includes the T S Eliot Society and the Friends of Little Gidding, and that body’s chair Simon Kershaw remains a key member under the chairmanship now of Adam Begley. In recent years the Society has been represented by Pauline Davison, who has now after generous service handed the torch on to fellow-committee-member Christina Percy. To all these, every Festival-goer owes a grateful vote of thanks. I hope very much that readers will enjoy this edition of ‘Exchanges’; and for those who have not yet experienced the tranquillity of Little Gidding, and the stimulus of the Festival, why not put next year’s event in the diary?

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@tseliotociety.uk

Why T. S. Eliot matters to me



I remember the first time I encountered T S Eliot’s poetry. Several years ago, I was in bed ready to sleep. I had my headphones in and a poetry audiobook on play. As I began drifting off to serene poems from the Romantic era, on came ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. It thrilled through me, waking me out of my hypnagogic state. Ever since, I have returned to Eliot’s poems for their song, imagery, and spiritual reflections that offer me a way to experience life more deeply. Here are four aspects of his poetry that I think are the reasons why I was so captured that night.

Aspect 1: The beat and rhythm of the words, pulling me in. Eliot’s lines of poetry don’t always rhyme, yet they surge and soften, producing a patina of sound. It mattered that I heard ‘Prufrock’ that night, rather than reading it. In sound it was alive; it carried me along in giddy appreciation of its songlike quality – even when I did not understand it, I could flow with it.

Aspect 2: The evocative imagery, surprising me. Lines of exquisite observation form imagery effortlessly in my mind as I land on them. From ‘The Waste Land’:

*After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places ...*

In each line, in seven words or less, Eliot conjures an image of anger, contempt, and pathos. In 'Prufrock', the poem's narrator visualizes his shame:

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas ...*

In 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', Eliot uses a simile that is simple yet striking, invoking the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland with its slicing smile:

*... in the light of the door
which opens on her like a grin*

Often in life, images from Eliot's poetry return to my mind's eye, carried upon a thought or a feeling.

Aspect 3: Philosophical and spiritual reveries deepen my experience and speak to something primal within. Eliot's magnum opus 'Four Quartets' is a meditation on time, memory, self and existence. It begins:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past*

This theme returns later in a different form: 'In my beginning is my end': this reminds me of the connection that lives in every moment, woven into the fabric of what came before and what comes after. Memory and regret are given imagery:

*Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden*

The rose garden is a metaphor for the wistful mind-show of memory mingled with dreams – I walk in reverie between the flower beds, sampling the sweet scents and warm colors of 'what might have been'. As he writes later, we move to be 'distracted from distraction by distraction' in our lives, rather than face what is often too much for us, for:

*... human kind
Cannot bear very much reality*

'Four Quartets' also contemplates the mystical experience of losing oneself:

*...or music heard so deeply,
that it is not heard at all, but you are the music
while the music lasts*

One of Eliot's most-quoted passages is:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*

I read this and think of my own inner and outer journeys, after which I returned to the known, yet no longer the same person in relation to it. Eliot writes ‘That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here’. His poetry is infused with profound reflections on living. His words become mine after repeat encounters: they become a part of me, they give voice to tell my experience to myself as I live it.

Aspect 4: Eliot’s poetry is not easy, which forces me out of comfort into growth. It is ambiguous, it is mysterious, and it demands that I enter into it, to participate. It turns me into a pilgrim. His dreamlike images are often juxtaposed with one another, confounding me just when I’ve relaxed into a sense of understanding. This offers a grain of ambiguity around which I may crystallize myself.

So, T S Eliot matters to me because he writes about things that matter to me, with a depth, beauty and ambiguity that challenges me to engage its meaning in my own way, in my own life.

Matthew Archer

Matt Archer grew up in England and moved to the US in his early 20s; he is now a scientist at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, and ‘an avid reader’. During the pandemic, his ‘gaze, seeking new climes, turned from non-fiction towards poetry and fiction’. It was then that he discovered the voice of T S Eliot, which ‘reverberated through [his] inner life’.

Visiting Little Gidding for the T.S. Eliot Festival 2023

Little Gidding has become something of a pilgrimage site for Eliot enthusiasts. It is now the home of the Friends of Little Gidding retreat house, and home to the annual festival held there in Eliot’s honour, which I attended this July.

At the close of the day, while ‘Little Gidding’ was being read to us, as we sat on the grass outside the doors of the small church, I mused on how Eliot’s words subverted any straightforward reflections I might have taken away with me about my visit. He addresses the reader: ‘And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning ...’. He goes on: ‘Either you had no purpose / Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured / And is altered in fulfilment.’ Gathered there with others, these lines made me reevaluate what it was about Little Gidding (and places like it) that impart such gravitational force, drawing in first Eliot, and now us.

We know that in 1936 Eliot came here – the place where in 1626 Nicholas Ferrar had established an Anglican community focused on charitable works and the spiritual life of the residents. In the poem, we find Eliot describing what he must have found on his arrival: the Church of St. John, the grave of Ferrar, and the

pig-sty. The manor house that was home to Ferrar and his family was gone by Eliot's day. (Where it stood is now the car park). I was surprised on arrival that there is not much more about the spot beyond these features to describe.



Yet behind its unassuming appearance, Eliot seems to have found a significance, one that Ferrar's community had breathed into it. 'If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season, / It would always be the same'. An inevitability of finding oneself in Little Gidding is implied here – or perhaps places like it. Indeed, Eliot acknowledges that '[t]here are other places / Which also are the world's end'. He seems to explain what makes somewhere 'the world's end' by finally informing the reader the real reason for their visit: 'You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid.'

Mulling over this line, I wondered whether the gravitational pull of Little Gidding and kindred locations result from what they quietly demand of us – a kneeling, as Eliot says. And they demand this because countless others have also been drawn to them, searching for they know not what – a place where people have sincerely prayed.

I am reminded of a line from another poem, one by Philip Larkin. On stopping at a church, the speaker remarks that it is, 'A serious house on serious earth' – where people with a hunger to be more serious find themselves gravitating. And feeling rather serious on my visit to Little Gidding, I felt such questions swell within me: these places, where time seems to stand still, what is it that they demand of us, as demand they do?

I wondered if locations like these ('the world's end') are what Eliot elsewhere calls 'the still point of the turning world'. They stand apart from the passing world, being meeting places not just in space but in time. We resonate with them because through them we participate in a living history – communing with others long since under earth and others still yet to come.

Dan Dearlove

Dan Dearlove is a postgraduate Philosophy student at King's College, London, with a particular interest in the works of Immanuel Kant.

An 'Eliot novice' at the T S Eliot festival

I arrived at Little Gidding for the annual T S Eliot festival as an Eliot novice. A chance encounter on a train fifteen months previously had resulted in a three-way conversation with a gentleman about to give an anniversary talk on 'The Waste Land', a Roman Catholic nun still working in addiction services in her 70s, and me. An unlikely trio finding life in talking about poetry. Our conversation, reflecting on the lyrics of pop music, had begun exploring the work of songwriters like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.

Our meandering then took us to the poetry of John Clare and Gerard Manley Hopkins and I seem to remember George Herbert and maybe Emily Dickinson. Our journey together culminated on the platform 6

of Crewe station, with each of us waiting for our connections, talking about ‘The Waste Land’ and Eliot. That was the point when my adventure into what was to be a new way of reading and experiencing poetry was conceived. It was this developing poetic adventure that drew me to the T S Eliot Society, Little Gidding and the TS Eliot Festival 2023.

Arriving at the Festival, I had not known what to expect. The gentle countryside drive to Little Gidding still doesn’t quite prepare you for the stillness and tranquil beauty of Ferrar House, the church, the gardens and the surrounding views. The welcome and hospitality on arrival set the scene for what was to be an enthralling yet gentle day with others, exploring the works of Eliot through the eyes of those who had been embedded in his poetry and prose for many years.



A conversation earlier in the month with a young woman from Slovenia, whose favourite Eliot poem is ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, which had showed me how relevant Eliot still is for the younger global generation, framed my hearing of the reading of this poem by George Szirtes. George and Adam Begley’s discussion after this rendition encouraged us to think of the embodied nature of the articulation of poetry spoken aloud. This, and George’s comment later in the day about poetry as personal psychological liturgy, spoke to me of other dimensions

of the relevance of Eliot’s poetry in the area of trauma.

Seamus Perry’s exploration of repeated words, focusing on the words ‘turn’ and ‘turn again’, was placed in the context of the use of repetition, and the idea of turning, by other authors, for example Jane Austen in Mansfield Park. I found myself wondering how Eliot might have responded to Pete Seeger’s lyrics in the folk-rock song based on the words in Ecclesiastes 3, which became an international hit in 1965, the year that Eliot died: ‘To everything (Turn! Turn! Turn!), there is a season (Turn! Turn! Turn!), and a time to every purpose under heaven.’

The day ended with us all gathering by the church in the quiet sunlight under a canopy of blue skies and trees, with Ruth Padel’s reading of Little Gidding. For the friend I went with and me, this setting expanded and deepened our encounter with the hearing of the last of the Four Quartets that day, bringing to life David Trotter’s earlier words on the warmth of memory and topography. We hear things in a context – and in Ruth’s reading, the words of Julian of Norwich, the links to St John of the Cross and the allusions to Ignatian attachment, detachment and indifference seemed to breathe more deeply and become ‘feathers on the breath of God’.



Rhona Knight

Before ordination, the Revd Dr Rhona Knight was a GP and medical educator. Now retired, she continues as a retreat leader, spiritual director and pastoral supervisor and is currently researching trauma in curacy in the Church of England.

Envoi

With so much of this issue concerned with Little Gidding, thanks are due to the indefatigable John Haffenden, who spotted and circulated on Twitter a link to this reference in *The Guardian*, opening an article about the luxury Swiss ski resort of Gstaad:

It's easy to forget that Gstaad is just a village. The locals - and there are fewer of them than there are cows - still work to the seasons, taking cattle to pasture in summer and gathering them in when the weather gets cold. They smoke pipes and make their own cheese. By rights, it should be no better known to the outside world than, say, Little Gidding.

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