

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

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This extraordinary colour image of Eliot was recently circulated; it is actually a b/w photo from the Life collection, demonstrating an artificial intelligence tool for 'colorizing' photographs called Palette

Editorial

As the evenings draw in and the clocks change, we can no longer deny that Autumn is here; soon, perhaps, it will be time for the ‘evening with the photograph album’, and other such reminiscent activities; and then the year’s end. But if last year, 2022, recalled ‘The Waste Land’ a century on, this current, closing year has resonance as the 75th anniversary of Eliot’s two great awards, the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature – as Society Committee member Christopher Southgate points out in his article below.

This edition continues with a personal appreciation by our Sussex correspondent Jay Phillips of his trip to Winchester to see a ‘performance’ of ‘The Waste Land’ – not a poem we are likely to forget simply because its centenary is past. Since Ralph Fiennes started the trend with his staging of ‘Four Quartets’ in 2021, we are seeing a growth in Eliot’s poetry leaving the page and the private realm and becoming more public and performative – as poetry has been in previous ages, of course. How will this performative trend develop, we might ask?

But the page, the personal and the private, still have their appeal, as Society Chair Paul Keers confesses in his article on his so-far fruitless search for a First Edition of ‘Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats’. Not everyone by any means is in the First Edition market, or can afford to be; but readers may well be persuaded by the article of the unique – if expensive – satisfaction ownership may provide.

If most lovers of Eliot are probably lovers of the poetry, and if they read Eliot for enjoyment and enlightenment, it is still the case that Eliot the critic has an honoured place among the foremost literary-critical writers of the twentieth century. In the final article in this edition of Exchanges, your editor reviews a new book by the ever-provocative Terry Eagleton. Eliot as poet, Eliot as critic: and the missing term may be ‘playwright’. If we are re-evaluating Eliot as poet and critic, shall we soon be returning with equal enthusiasm to his plays?

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

Eliot Awarded: 2023 reflections on the 75th anniversary of 1948

Anniversaries are a happy hunting-ground for those sad souls who become preoccupied with a particular artist. But after the huge excitements of the centenary of 'The Waste Land' in 2022, it might be thought that Eliot aficionados would be exhausted, and ready to relapse, with their idol, into the thoughtful consumption of cheese and claret.

2023 brought the 80th anniversary of the first publication of 'Four Quartets' (May 1943 in New York), but devotees of 80ths are perhaps clutching at straws. More substantially, 2023 is the 75th anniversary of Eliot's two great honours, the Order of Merit, awarded on January 1 1948 when the poet was fifty-nine, and the Nobel Prize in Literature, conferred at the end of that year, when he had turned sixty.

The timing of the OM is of interest. The honour is in the personal gift of the Sovereign. Of the writers



who had received it up to that time, who included Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and James Barrie (Kipling, Housman and Shaw had declined it), only Masfield, fifty-seven in 1935, received the honour at a younger age. Masfield had then been Poet Laureate for five years (and remained so till his death in 1967). It is tempting, then, to think of the OM as an acknowledgement that Eliot had been a kind of Laureate of the London Blitz, and a recognition too of the power and influence of 'Four Quartets' (originally the 'Kensington Quartets'), celebrating as they did that 'History is now and England.'

Of the Nobel, Eliot is supposed to have said that 'No-one has ever done anything after he got it.' (Ironically the next recipient, the fifty-two-year-old William Faulkner, went on to write five more novels.) But perhaps this saying was true of Eliot? We might argue over 'The Cocktail Party' (already complete in draft by the Stockholm ceremony), but I am inclined to discount the last two plays and the occasional post-Nobel poems.

The Nobel citation talks of Eliot's 'outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry'. The term 'pioneer' seems key. In his award ceremony speech (available at www.nobelprize.org and well worth reading), Anders Österling talks of Eliot's 'magnificent experiment in poetry, "The Waste Land"'. Though the Nobel Committee had moved away from honouring a single work, that poem, then twenty-six years old, with its extraordinary music and innovation, and its huge influence on the face and future of modern poetry, seems by itself to merit the award.



So although Eliot nerds among us may be celebrating the anniversary of a somewhat early OM, we might think of the Nobel as a timely, even an overdue recognition of a poem which as Österling notes sadly 'has proved that its catastrophic visions still have undiminished actuality in the shadow of the atomic age.'

A Winchester 'Waste Land'

The A272 is well known as the slowest, most meandering road in Sussex, possibly even in England. Beginning obscurely on the High Weald near Heathfield, it twists and turns through the middle of Sussex to end in the Anglo-Saxon capital of England, Winchester: so it was the very road for me to travel to get to the biennial Winchester Poetry Festival, this year including three performances of 'The Waste Land'. Journeying the A272 – slowly, in search of Eliot - felt a bit like a pilgrimage.



The ancient heart of Winchester nestles around the cathedral (left): mediaeval streets with an abundance of churches. The theatre company 2Time, who staged 'The Waste Land', had chosen the church of St Lawrence, tucked away between the Buttercross and The Square, for the performance. It's apparently the only surviving parish church of Norman foundation within Winchester's city walls, and is thought of as the 'Mother Church' of Winchester. Old customs survive: when a new Bishop is about to be enthroned in the Cathedral, the first stop is at St Lawrence, to be presented

to the Mayor, clergy and citizens.

Inside, the space is open and intimate: St Lawrence (right) seats only about 120. Arriving early, I was directed just round the corner to a C16th building once the parish rectory – now the Eclipse pub. It was a good place to wonder, over a pint: how do you 'perform' 'The Waste Land'? I'd been at Little Gidding for the T S Eliot Festival a couple of years back to hear the actor Simon Callow do a 'reading' of the poem – and a tour-de-force that was, the poem's 'different voices' emerging stunningly and varied so that it was as if all the poem's characters were vividly present. That was a reading: what would a performance be?



Returning to the church, I bumped into 2Time Theatre's solo performer, twenty-three-year-old Winchester graduate Arthur L Wood. Learning 'The Waste Land' must be tricky, I suggested, given the poem's abrupt transitions, its fragmentary nature. The young actor responded - more or less - that it was all in a day's work; but I had to wonder whether all this youthful confidence would be justified in the performance....

Well, it was. Once the audience quietened, lights were dimmed, and the introductory live cello music was played, Wood stood centre stage on a tiny dais and confidently delivered one of the most famous opening lines in English verse: 'April is the cruellest month, breeding'. As it happens, my personal preparation for the performance had been to read Matthew Hollis's 'The Waste Land': A Biography of a Poem', and that had

sent me back to the facsimile edition of the manuscript, with its fifty-four initial lines mercifully scored through by ‘il miglior fabbro’, Ezra Pound. Where would Eliot – and his poem – have been without Pound’s editorial sanity?



As it was, ‘The Burial of the Dead’ continued clearly, the poem’s rhythms being well brought out, as perhaps they only can be by the human voice: reading with the eyes alone leaves so much of Eliot unexperienced. Wood’s style could be described as acted declamation: instead of Callow’s intense habitation of the at least half-dozen characters of the poem’s opening section, Wood simply hinted at the characters, maintaining the flow of the poem and ending the section with a direct appeal to the audience, as ‘mon frere’.

This audience interaction – an invitation for us to share the poem with the performer – proved to be central to the performance. If Simon Callow’s reading was in effect sound only, a radio version, here was the TV equivalent: the actor’s expression, facial response, physical movement were all part of the interpretation of the poem. And it was brilliantly effective: the small dais doubled as a seat, a simple chair became another prop, and for St Augustine’s despairing appeal ‘O Lord, thou pluckest me out!’ Wood fell to his knees at the altar rail, in perhaps the most dramatic moment of the entire performance.

This is where the deft direction of the 2Time Theatre’s Rachel O’Neill needs to be acknowledged. Putting a young actor up to perform ‘The Waste Land’ undirected could have been a recipe for disaster; but O’Neill’s careful direction kept the whole performance on track and provided necessary variety of movement and posture. Interspersing the poem’s sections with solo cello music was also a brainwave, briefly diverting attention from the actor and marking – and demarcating – the sections of Eliot’s poem well.

Wood’s enunciation of the poem’s closing line – ‘shantih shantih shantih’ was followed by silence, but then by warm and loudly appreciative applause. My guess is that few in the capacity audience knew the poem at all intimately, but they’d been given an experience of it, and their curiosity to learn more was indicated by the fact that the following Q and A session with actor, director and visiting Eliot ‘experts’ kept them all from the pub around the corner for a further three-quarters of an hour.

The poem’s words will echo, without doubt, in the minds of many. And young Arthur L Wood is about to apply for a place at drama school: we may well hear of him in years to come. Did the performance justify my long, slow pilgrimage? Indeed. I felt I’d met Eliot again in the words of the still startling 1922 poem which marks the beginning of his own pilgrimage from the empty waste land towards a place of spiritual security.



Jay Phillips

The Lure of Old Possum's ... First Edition

This summer, I failed yet again to acquire a First Edition copy of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. I was outbid in two auctions. And a copy I saw in a London bookshop window was selling for £750, which is beyond my means. No, I don't want a copy without a dustjacket for £950 – or one with a dustjacket 'neatly restored and repaired' for £2,025.

There is a particular pleasure in First Editions, owning a book exactly as it first appeared in public. The First Editions of many of Eliot's early works are now extremely rare; but there are particular reasons

behind *Old Possum's* scarcity and value. It is perhaps Eliot's most popular book, and First Editions of any popular book are always sought-after. *Old Possum's* is also a children's book – which means that there are collectors of children's books out there who are looking for a copy, as well as Eliot enthusiasts. And the chances of a children's book surviving without stains, scribbles or rips from little fingers, let alone with its original dustjacket intact, are small.

This is also a book whose popularity was unanticipated. We're familiar with the story of how the poems originated in Eliot's letters, often with accompanying drawings,

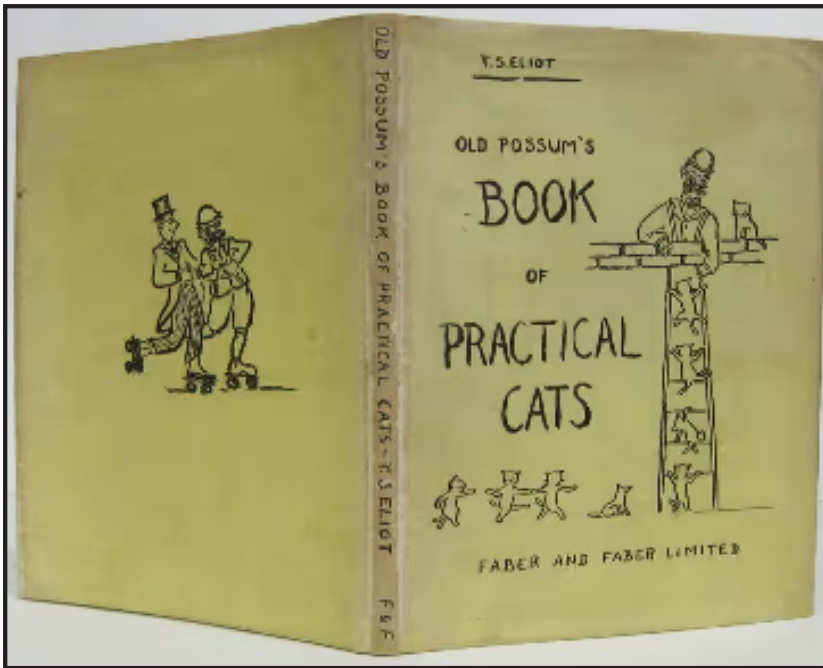
to his godchildren. But although they delighted those children, Eliot was nervous about their prospects as a book. 'I am more and more doubtful of my ability to write a successful book of this kind,' he wrote in a memo to Geoffrey Faber. 'There are several ways in which this might be a failure.'

Perhaps as a consequence, its first print run was cautiously small. Three years earlier, Eliot's preceding collection, *Collected Poems 1909-1935*, had a First Edition print run of 6000 copies; but there were just 3005 copies printed of *Old Possum's* First Edition.

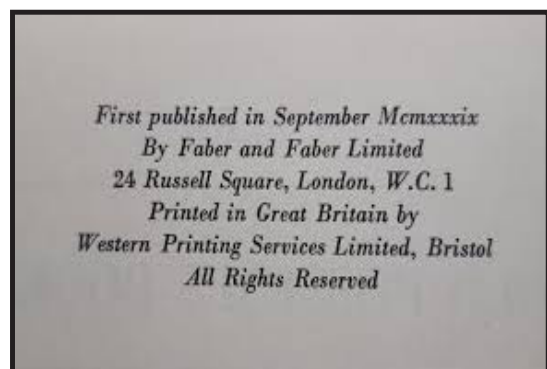
The working title for the book was *Mr Eliot's Book of Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats as Recited to Him by the Man in White Spats*. (John Hayward, Eliot's literary colleague and one-time flatmate, was acknowledged by Eliot as 'the original Man in White Spats'.) The early plan for the structure of the book was revealed by Eliot in that 1936 memo. 'The idea of the volume was to have different poems ... recited by the Man in White Spats ... in a variety of metres and stanzas, not that of the narrative which connects them. After this opening there would only be short passages or interludes between the Man in White Spats and myself. At the end they all go up in a balloon, self, Spats, and dogs and cats.'

And it was intended to be an illustrated book. There is a typescript headed 'with pixtures [sic] supplied by The Man in White Spats'. But in the end, the drawings on the dustjacket and boards were by Eliot himself, and the first edition was published unillustrated.

This all suggests a greater role for the Man in White Spats than that in the eventual book, and perhaps explains Eliot's drawing of Old Possum and the Man together on the back cover (and front board). Eliot's



original of this drawing also has cats dancing along behind the roller-skating pair, in a Pied Piper manner; these cats were omitted from the printed version, but link the drawing more clearly to the intended structure. The idea behind the cover illustration itself is less clear, but Ricks and McCue observe that the rhythmical base for Eliot's 'Invitation to all Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats' came from the nursery rhyme 'Boys and Girls Come Out to Play' – which contains the lines, 'Come with a good will or not at all ... Up the ladder and down the wall'.



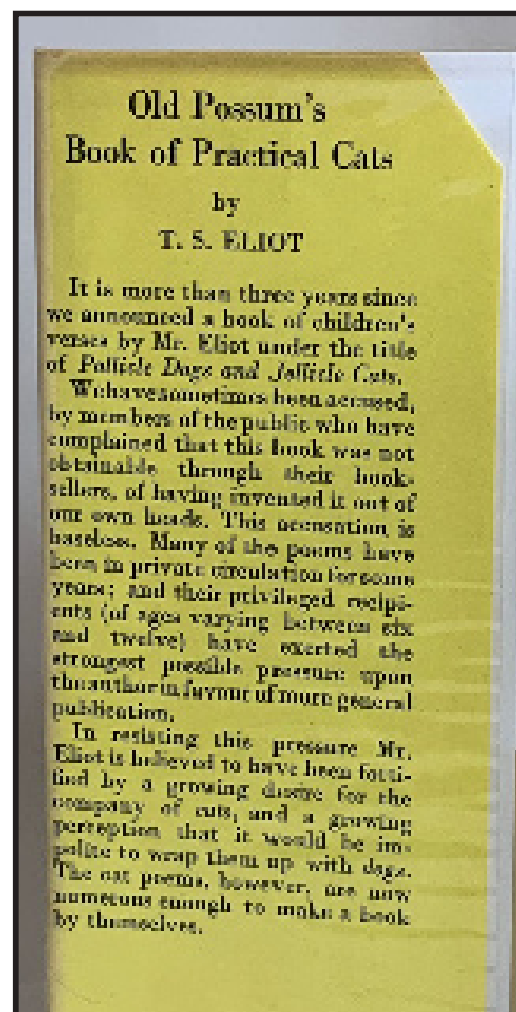
The colophon, or publication details (left), states that the First Edition was published by Faber & Faber in September 1939; it actually came out on October 5th. Following its positive reception, a second impression was published just a month later. An illustrated edition, for which 'Nicolas Bentley drew the pictures', was subsequently published in November 1940; but despite the success of the illustrated edition, the (cheaper) unillustrated original version remained in print alongside it, with a second edition published in 1953 to incorporate the later poem, 'Cat Morgan'.

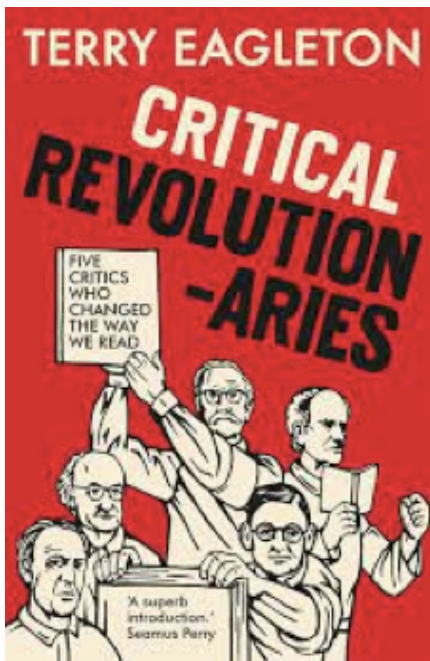
Even later impressions of the original unillustrated edition can be relatively valuable; a 1966 printing is being sold by Oxfam online for £65, while that London bookshop had a twelfth impression for £80. But what distinguishes those from a First Edition worth ten times more?

The dustjacket is immediately identifiable. The First Edition alone carried a delightful blurb about 'Mr Eliot' and his verses on the inside front flyleaf. Anything else on that flyleaf, such as quotes from reviews, or a price which isn't 3s 6d, means it is a dustjacket from a second impression or later. Similarly, the dustjacket drawings must be in black, not the blue or brown of some later printings.

The colophon is also unique. It must refer only to being 'First published in September MCMXXXIX' – any reference to subsequent impressions with later dates mean that it is not a First Edition. These may seem like tiny differences, but they mark a survivor from those first, 3005 copies out from all the tens of thousands which have followed. I hope you're lucky enough to have one on your bookshelves – and that I might eventually manage to acquire one myself!

Paul Keers





Last year's centenary of the publication of 'The Waste Land' inevitably focused attention on Eliot the poet. Here, after all, was one of the key texts of literary Modernism. But last year also saw the publication of *Critical Revolutionaries: five critics who changed the way we read*, Terry Eagleton's study of the critical impact of the writings of T S Eliot, I A Richards, William Empson, F R Leavis and Raymond Williams. Eagleton's contention in this book is that these five critics brought about 'a critical revolution, one that transformed the academic study of literature and lent it a fresh centrality in Britain and beyond.'

Eagleton's own stance as a Marxist critic is well known, and his influential 'Literary Theory' must have been on the reading list of anyone studying literature since its publication in 1983. He has been a distinctive, carefully analytical voice since then; but that isn't his only characteristic: he also has a brilliant way of coming out with highly memorable one-liners.

Take this, for instance, on Eliot's style: '... Eliot occasionally writes as though he is preaching in a particularly resonant cathedral.' Even Eliot's most ardent admirers would have to see the truth – and brilliance – of the observation.

'For much of the twentieth century', writes Eagleton, 'the most revered, influential figure in English literary criticism was undoubtedly T. S. Eliot.' And if that opening statement of Eagleton's opening chapter appears surprisingly adulatory, it's not long before it is undermined by what follows, even on the same page, where he refers sardonically to 'Eliot's consecration as high priest of English letters'. It's as if Eagleton wants to exploit for all it's worth the curious fact of Eliot's religious faith: referring to 'His publicly-proclaimed conversion to royalism, conservatism and Anglo-Catholicism in 1927...', he adds: 'The more attracted he was to incense, the more his own reputation was wreathed in its fumes.'

Scarcely a page goes by, in fact, without some further witty or withering put-down of the writer Eagleton claims – surely correctly – to be 'a critic who changed the way we read'. And the waspish nature of Eagleton's critique of Eliot's faith commitment seems designed to prompt the reader towards a more general dismissal of Eliot's views: 'Like many a conservative thinker, Eliot equivocates between the view that things are getting steadily worse and the claim that they have been pretty appalling from the outset.' Eagleton himself isn't immune, it seems, to the charge of grand over-generalisation; and he's in clear pot-and-kettle-territory when he accuses Eliot of an 'oracular and supercilious tone', of being 'a past master of the suavely malicious put-down.'

But at this point in his essay, Eagleton appears to recognise that his hatchet-job on Eliot may just have gone a bit too far: 'By this point, the enlightened reader may well be wondering whether anything of value can be salvaged from this full-blooded reactionary.' (And what exactly is an 'enlightened' reader, we may wonder? Someone of Eagleton's own leftist persuasion, perhaps?) Abruptly changing tack, he affirms Eliot as a 'radical of the right' – 'right' of course being a condemnation in itself, but 'radical' being a grudging admission that in Eliot's social stance there are some moderately praiseworthy features – his 'innovative and iconoclastic' approach, for instance.

So in the latter part of his chapter, Eagleton rows back considerably on what initially felt like

a full-scale demolition of Eliot: even Eliot's conservatism may be tolerable, as he 'is less hidebound by his conservatism than one might expect'; and 'Nor is his attitude to tradition at all traditional.' In fact Eagleton's lengthy discussion of Eliot's treatment of 'tradition' is illuminating, and intuitive: 'Eliot's desire to belong – to a church, tradition or social Establishment- is in part a result of his émigré status', he writes.

One of the difficulties of reading Eagleton is trying to discern where exactly he's heading. An introductory paragraph, along the lines of: 'I intend first to de-bunk Eliot for all I'm worth, with wit and incisiveness; then I propose to offer a few positive reflections, and to conclude by surprising you all with a hugely positive overall estimation ...' might have been helpful. As it is, the reader encounters in the latter part of the chapter some interesting explorations of a few key insights of Eliot's critical career: poetic impersonality, the place of feeling, the fundamental importance of rhythm in poetry, the 'dissociation of sensibility', Eliot's antagonism to 'individualism'.

All this leads to a final paragraph significant for its generosity of judgement. 'More or less single-handedly, this mild-mannered ex-banker and churchwarden inaugurated a literary and critical revolution which still reverberates across the globe ... [and] it is with his reflections on literature that a distinctively modern criticism is forged. His recasting of the English literary canon is breathtakingly bold, his cosmopolitan breadth of knowledge remarkable....'. Now here - eventually - is a valuation of Eliot the critic that seems correct, according him his rightful place as the major instigator of the literary-critical revolution of the twentieth century.

John Caperon

A version of Eagleton's chapter on TS Eliot was published online in June 2022; visit our News Archive 2022 website page (at the foot of the current News page) and scroll to June 2022 for a link.

Envoi

As we're observing the 75th anniversary of his Nobel Prize award, enjoy what may well be the most *au naturel* photograph of TS Eliot. It was taken in Sweden, as Mary Trevelyan recounted: "At 6.30am, the Nobel Prizeman got out of bed...Attired in vest and pants, he was shaving when the door into his suite opened and a procession of six young ladies dressed (so it seemed to him) in nightdresses and carrying crowns of lighted candles on their heads, marched into his bedroom – singing. Poor Tom...appeared before them thus clad and half shaved."

