T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

Spring 2024

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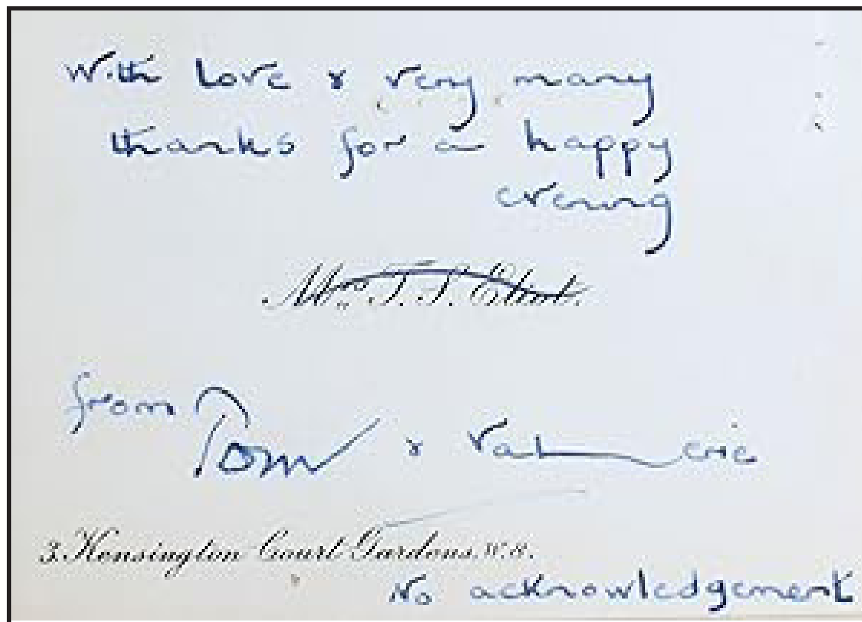


With love & very many thanks for a happy evening

~~Mrs T. S. Eliot.~~

from Tom & Valerie

3. Kensington Court Gardens. W.8.

No acknowledgement

The calling card of Mrs T.S. Eliot, used in thanks from the couple

Editorial

Welcome to this Spring edition of Exchanges. 'Spring?' might be a very proper response. This has surely been the most unseasonal of Springs, with endless rain and chill weather. To confuse matters still further, the ecclesiastical calendar had its own oddities. Ash Wednesday fell on 14th February, also of course St Valentine's day: was this a fast or a feast day? And Easter fell at almost its earliest possible point, with little sense of a following season of sunny joy. And yet the daffodils have come and gone, the trees are leafing, cherries blossoming, roses budding. It's as if the various forces of the natural world may be entirely at sixes and sevens, but we are nevertheless stumbling towards Summer.

This edition opens with Stephen de Winton's reflections on 'Eliot and Me'. De Winton considers an almost life-long familiarity with Eliot, and especially 'The Waste Land', highlighting lines which remain with him, and experiences linked with them. He concludes with a quotation from 'Choruses from 'The Rock'', prompting your editor to reflect that these pieces may have received too little critical attention in recent years. After all, they represented for Eliot 'a new verse experiment on my part' (Letters 2.6.34); and as he wrote to A L Rowse: 'I was deliberately trying to strike out a new line….' (13.6.34). We can be grateful to Stephen de Winton for taking us back to 'The Rock'; would other Society members like to offer their own pieces on unfamiliar Eliot?

In the next article, Dan Dearlove explores 'Ash Wednesday' and considers Eliot's sometimes contradictory accounts of the poem. How best to get to grips with 'Ash Wednesday', even to 'understand' it, is at the root of this interesting enquiry. After the inevitable but possibly excessive scrutiny of 'The Waste Land' prompted by its 2022 centenary, it's good to have a serious look at another major poem of Eliot's, one which one feels is central to getting an insight into the poet's own personal spirituality.

In this edition's final article, your editor reviews the winning entry of the T S Eliot Poetry Competition 2023: Jason Allen-Paisant's *Self-Portrait as Othello*. It's a fine collection, and highly recommended.

John Caperon
Editor

Incidentally …. on T S Eliot's pervasive cultural reach

A recent letter in 'The Guardian' from a reader in East Sussex notes a possibly new sphere in which Eliot is a reference point: 'At times I wonder why I still read the Guardian, then your chief sports writer quotes TS Eliot in his report (23 April) on Arsenal's thrashing of Chelsea and I realise why.' (https://www.theguardian.com/football/2024/apr/23/chelsea-arsenal-football-premier-league) *NB* the quotation is not simply one of those clichéd references to April being the cruellest month. (But see this issue's *Envoi*...)

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

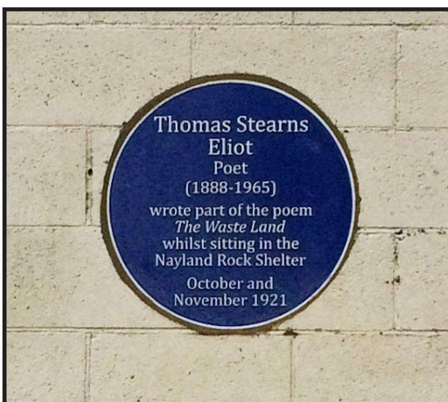
Eliot and Me

I was introduced to 'The Waste Land' early in my secondary school career in 1957, the year Eliot married Valerie Fletcher. The poem made no sense to me then, but subsequently it has been a sustaining and perennial influence in my long life. In 1991 I was mentioned in despatches for a response in a *Times Educational Supplement* competition to 'compose details of a celebration for a literary figure'. As I recall, my effort was 'The T S Eliot Thames Experience'. This included readings of ledgers and documents at Lloyds Bank in the City, a Fancy Dress Competition featuring Albert and Lil, the young man carbuncular, and Elizabeth and Leicester, among others.

I am proud of the fact that a student of mine as a leaving present once gave me a generously inscribed volume of the facsimile edition of 'The Waste Land', edited by Valerie Eliot. I was pleased that I seemed to have got across some of my enthusiasm for Eliot's poetry. For some years recently I was a volunteer guide at Southwark Cathedral and whenever I could manage it, I mentioned an Eliot connection. The tomb of Lancelot Andrewes is in the Cathedral and I would always refer to Eliot's essays 'For Lancelot Andrewes' and his interest in Andrewes as an Anglo-Catholic and his quotations from Andrewes' sermon in 'The Journey of the Magi'.

Lancelot Andrewes' tomb in Southwark Cathedral

The proximity of London Bridge to the cathedral was important, and for me the lines: 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many.' are memorable. I have always been fascinated by Eliot's mention of places, churches and so on: St Mary Woolnoth, Magnus Martyr, the Cannon Street Hotel, Lower Thames Street. Together with 'Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London', I love the fact that there is also 'The Metropole' (Brighton) and 'Margate Sands'!



The Eliot 'blue plaque' at the Nayland Rock shelter, Margate

I enjoy visiting Eliot places such as Little Gidding, East Coker and St. Stephens, Gloucester Road; a few years ago I was pleased to discover the Nayland Rock Shelter on Margate Sands, which is suitably 'blue-plaqued'. I spent some time there and was eventually joined by a small posse of teenagers, perhaps truanting from school, but I was able to direct them to the information about Eliot. My efforts provoked barely-concealed derision for the most part, unsurprisingly; but one of them did ask me something about the plaque and I like to think that - just possibly - this person has now become a keen Eliot afficionado.

I am an enthusiast for the Notes on 'The Waste Land' and was early fascinated with the Dante references, which got me into the 'Purgatorio' and 'Inferno'. The sexual encounter in 'The Fire Sermon' is, I think, powerfully explicit and has some brilliant lines:

Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.

I think that the somewhat overlooked 'Choruses from The Rock' explain Eliot's view of society, which

in my view has not dated; and among my favourite lines are:

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,
The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,
And the wind shall say: ‘Here were decent godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls.’

Stephen de Winton

Stephen de Winton has a London University degree and Nottingham University teaching certificate. He taught English and History in Leicestershire and Kent until retirement in 2003.

‘Ash Wednesday’ and sublimation

Ash Wednesday (1982) by Roger Wagner

Stephen Spender, a friend of Eliot’s, remembers an incident during a session of the Oxford Poetry Club in 1929, in which a student asked Eliot to clarify one of the mysterious lines in ‘Ash Wednesday’. ‘Please, sir, what do you mean by the line: ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree’?’ To this, Eliot replied, ‘I mean, ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree.’’

What are we to make of Eliot’s response? In the poem, the narrator describes how under the tree, the leopards fed on his body and organs, leaving only bones. ‘And God said / Shall these bones live? shall these / Bones live?’ In Eliot’s playful reply to the student, he seems to suggest that we should look no further than the literal ‘meaning’. But is he really suggesting that the images don’t have an underlying significance?

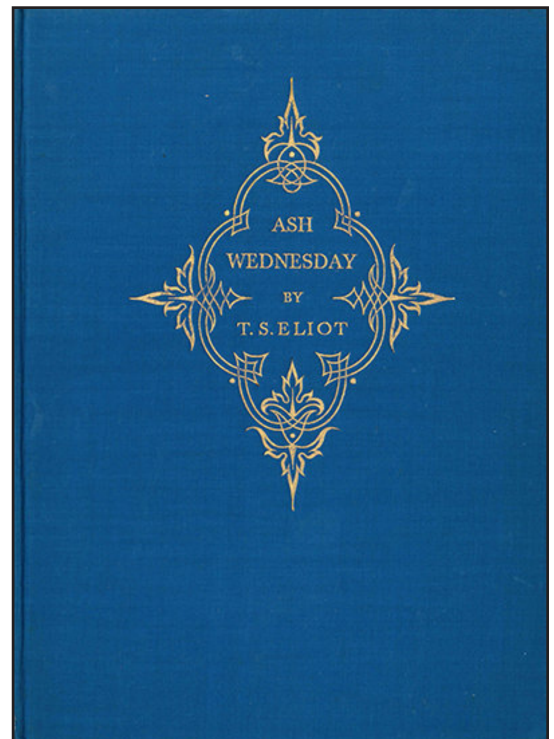
Eliot’s response can partly be understood as addressing a specific concern: namely, that by seeking a definite meaning, readers fail to engage with the imagery directly, translating it into a neat formula. However, Eliot’s remarks on this same passage in his private letters complicate matters; it is clear that we cannot take his reply entirely at face value. As Eliot explains in a letter to the Bishop of Chichester, The Rt Revd George Bell, on 20 July 1930:

‘You would be shocked yourself to learn how much of the poem [Ash Wednesday] I can’t explain myself. Certain imagery – the yew trees, the nun, the garden god – come direct out of recurrent dreams, so I

shall abandon them to the ghoulish activities of some prowling analyst. The three leopards are deliberately, however, the World, the Flesh and the Devil; and the whole thing aims to be a modern Vita Nuova, on the same plane of hallucination, and treating a similar problem of 'sublimation' (horrid word).'

As the 'prowling analyst' here, I suggest that the key to making sense of these remarks is understanding the concept of 'sublimation'. Derived from the Latin word 'sublimare' meaning 'to elevate', sublimation refers to the transformation of something base or physical into a higher, more spiritual state. We see this echoed in how Eliot elsewhere describes Dante's 'Vita Nuova' – which Eliot says deals with the same problem: it is a 'brave attempt … to fabricate something holy out of his personal animal feeling ….' ('Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', p. 137).

Dante's 'Vita Nuova' ('New Life') recounts, through a combination of poetry and prose, the transformations of Dante's love for Beatrice. Initially driven by passionate desire, this love transcends the earthly realm after Beatrice's death at the age of 24. The young Dante is plunged into grief and despair. The book ends with Dante vowing not to write again 'until [he] could do so more worthily'; for he hopes 'to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman.' He wants to write so that 'it [may] please Him who is the Lord of courtesy that my soul may go to see the glory of my lady, that is of the blessed Beatrice, who now in glory beholds the face of Him ….' In one sense, then, Dante's theme remains the same, his love for Beatrice; but it has been transfigured. We might say, it now exists in a new, holy light.



Eliot tells us that 'Ash Wednesday' aims to deal with the same problem of sublimation, which we now understand concerns fabricating something holy out of personal, animal feeling. Let us return to Eliot's leopards – which are identified with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. In this light, the devouring of the speaker's physical being seems to be a necessary step, leaving behind the bare essence – the bones – which hold the potential for spiritual renewal.

In a letter to Spender (9 May 1935), Eliot provides further clarity on the transformation he has in mind:

'Ash-Wednesday … is an exposition of my view of the relation of eros and agape based on my own experience. I think and hope that I have overcome any desire to write Great Poetry, or to compete with anybody. One has got at the same time to unite oneself with humanity, and to isolate oneself completely; and to be equally indifferent to the 'audience' and to oneself as one's own audience. So that humility and freedom are the same thing.'

Whereas in English, we have one word for 'love', the Greeks had several – two of which are Eros and Agape. How exactly we should think about these two forms of love is a topic explored by C.S. Lewis in 'The Four Loves'. Put simplistically, we might say that Eros represents self-interested love, while Agape signifies a more selfless, universal love. In Eliot's own case, he hopes his desire to write Great Poetry, or to compete with others, is transformed into a love in which he can simultaneously unite himself with humanity and isolate himself completely.

I hope to have shown that we shouldn't take Eliot's playful response to the student completely at face value, given his own private musings. Still, I don't want to suggest that this resolves the mystery of the

poem – analysis can usefully orientate our approach, but it is never a replacement for the images themselves. Eliot admits there are many images in 'Ash Wednesday' that he cannot himself explain; writing in reference to the obscurity of the poem:

'Why should people treat verse as if it were a conundrum with an answer? when you find the answer to a conundrum it is no longer interesting. "Understanding" poetry seems to me largely to consist of coming to see that it is not necessary to "understand".'. (T.S. Eliot, to Geoffrey Curtis, 17 June 1930)

It is no accident that in the last sonnet of the 'Vita Nuova', right before his vow to stop writing until he is up to the task, Dante describes how his thought ascends to regions so high – to witness Beatrice's soul in glory – where his 'intellect cannot follow'. As Eliot writes elsewhere in reference to Dante, 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' (Dante, p. 238). Perhaps this insight applies as much to the reader as the writer?

Dan Dearlove

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

The T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry 2023

Described by former poet laureate Andrew Motion as 'the prize poets most want to win', the T S Eliot Prize has been awarded in 2023, its thirtieth anniversary year, to Jason Allen-Paisant for his collection Self-Portrait as Othello (Carcanet). The judging panel of Paul Muldoon (chair), Sasha Dugdale and Denise Saul chose Allen-Paisant's volume from the 186 entries submitted by British and Irish publishers, saying: 'Self-Portrait As Othello is a book with large ambitions that are met with great imaginative capacity, freshness and technical flair.'

But buying the book is no longer, of course, the sole way of accessing the poems. The advent of YouTube as a universal communications medium means that we can hear the poems read by the author, enjoying much of what would only earlier have been available to those attending a live reading. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHWRBbks_uY) We can also hear the poet introducing his work – Allen-Paisant does this fascinatingly and illuminatingly at Jason Allen-Paisant talks about his work (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfW3AFnPF4k)..

Explaining how the collection 'revisits' Shakespeare's play, he argues persuasively that 'Othello' fails to imagine all there could be to the character of its central figure, to understand fully 'what makes him

tick'. He lives inside 'a limiting set of ideas', suggests the poet; there is a 'missing back-story' to Othello – where did he come from, what was his language, his experience?

I entirely see his point. As it happens, I bookended my secondary teaching career with Shakespeare's play. 'Othello' was a set text for my first A level group as a young teacher in Uganda, isolated in the classroom by my whiteness. And in my final teaching year, it was 'Othello' again: but now the RSC production we went to see in Stratford had a Black actor as Othello – isolated on the stage by his blackness. And it is blackness that is at the heart of Allen-Paisant's work, and in particular 'the place of black male bodies in the Europe of today'.

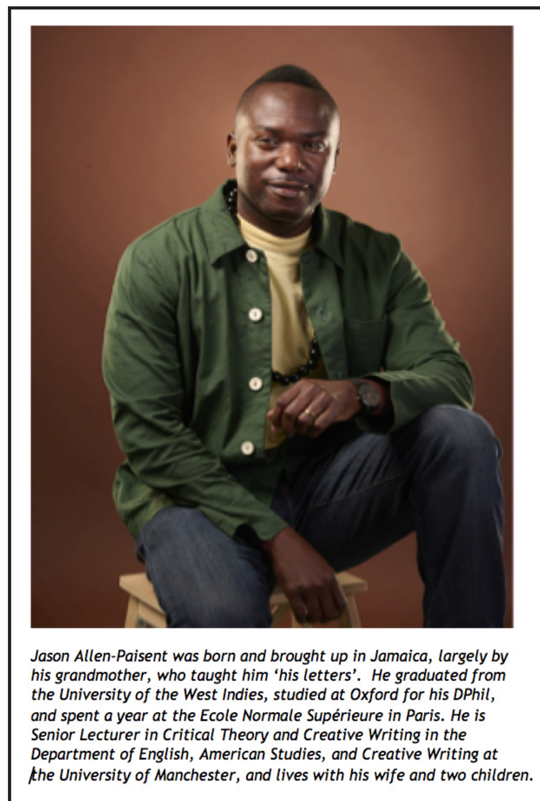
This incarnational perspective, a concern for embodiment and place, runs through the collection, here in 'The Picture and the Frame 1':

Nothing makes sense until it makes sense in the body, till the
body is present at the making-sense.

And together with this intense consciousness of the Black male body, there's a joyous sense of astonishment at how very far this particular body has come from its Jamaican origins, as in 'I sit on the barbecue':

I'm flying through the clouds. Ever see a man
Travel more, seen more lands than this boy from Coffee Grove,
Where hope is like the dry root of a red dirt rockstone?
Now a doing road, dancing through Prague, Paris, Rome ...

… I am dancing
Through Europe, actor and spectator in a carnival of bodies.



Jason Allen-Paisent was born and brought up in Jamaica, largely by his grandmother, who taught him 'his letters'. He graduated from the University of the West Indies, studied at Oxford for his DPhil, and spent a year at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He is Senior Lecturer in Critical Theory and Creative Writing in the Department of English, American Studies, and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester, and lives with his wife and two children.

The poet's self-identification with Othello illuminates both Shakespeare's tragic hero and his own cultural predicament, here in 'Othello Walks':

Othello walks through
the marbled city;
his skin betrays him.

He is striving against
badmind. This is Othello's life –
Trying to beat the odds.

That's an astute critical comment on the play; and it's unsurprising that this Black poet should make it, having so inwardly inhabited the role of Othello, as his poems make clear. Though lest as readers we should be too tempted to identify poet and Shakespearean hero as one and the same, the collection's cover offers a witty and irreverent look at that identification as a proudly posing Othello/Allen-Paisant grasps his sword in a display of ironic power.

At the same time, of course, 'trying to beat the odds' is a comment on the life of Black people in the modern European context – somehow more tricky than in sixteenth-century Venice, when, as in the

paintings of Carpaccio and Veronese, black men simply held a natural place, as 'The Picture and the Frame' argues. For the poet today, in contrast, there is something startling about the usual racial hierarchy being disturbed, as it is when he is being served by a white man:

Look at them teeth how they white
As I sail down the river Cherwell
With a white man punting my punt

This curious disjunction between earlier and post-colonial Black experience is a theme that runs through the collection. So, too, does the theme of the lost father, the subject of the penultimate poem of the collection, a sonnet. Here, the father who deserts and is unknown to his children faces some bitter questioning:

Did you tell your name to the others, teach them
how to pronounce it? Or did you keep on forgetting
everything, including those you brought to life
and could not name?

This is a splendidly powerful collection from a remarkable poet. Widely varied in form – from the opening sonnet to couplets, quatrains, free verse and prose poems - the volume encompasses both reflections on the poet's rural Jamaican origins and on the utterly different worlds of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the Paris night scene, London, Oxford and the Venice of Shakespeare's epoch. Themes of loss and identity, eroticism and sexuality, body and blackness, slavery and subjection, and cultural transplantation are prominent, and Allen-Paisant is adept (as was Eliot) at the poetic ventriloquism that enables us to hear the different voices of various speakers. For my money, this is certainly the most outstanding T S Eliot prizewinning collection of recent years.

John Caperon

Envoi

Incidentally...some quotes from Eliot are used less appropriately than others...