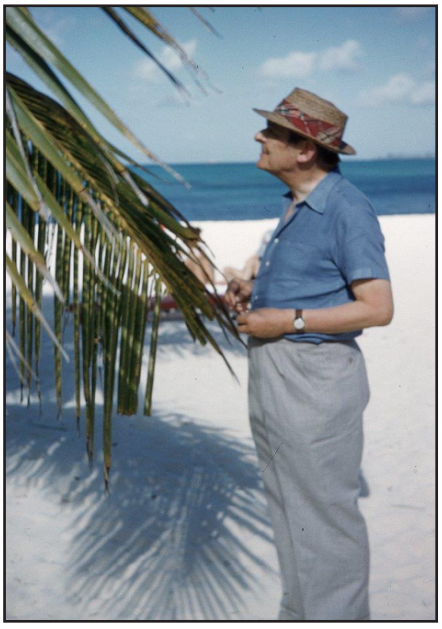
T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

Summer 2025



Happy holidays...

Editorial

Poetry, if it is to be truthful, has to engage not only with a writer's emotions – the Romantic fallacy - but with the world. And the world is not a happy place. There are all too many echoes of Eliot's vision of 'The Waste Land' around us, in the utter devastation of Gaza, the destruction of much of Eastern Ukraine, and the laying-waste of Sudan, to name but a few.

In Eliot's lifetime oeuvre we see a development from early urban and social critical observation to that vision of The Waste Land, and then beyond - through the 'Ash Wednesday' of repentance - to the spiritual discernment and revelation of the 'Four Quartets'. Isn't Eliot's discovery, and affirmation, of the spiritual realm something from which our increasingly desperate world needs to learn? But from that 'overwhelming question', let's turn to this Summer edition of 'Exchanges'.

We begin with an account of a London Review of Books event back in the Spring commemorating a century since Eliot first became involved with Faber & Gwyer; thanks for this to Society Committee members Christina Percy and Christopher Southgate. We then move to the high Summer, and a reflective review by new Society Committee member Dan Dearlove of the annual T S Eliot Festival at Little Gidding, held on 6th July. If you weren't there, Dan's account gives, I think, a vivid sense of what you missed!

Our final two pieces relate to the impact of Eliot audio recordings: a brilliant way, suggests Fergus Daly, of introducing people to the poet. And who knew that a 1960s rock n'roll singer had recorded 'The Waste Land'? Paul Keers, Society Chair, for one, and his article fascinatingly foregrounds the surely near-forgotten P J Proby as a vocal interpreter of Eliot. Do enjoy this edition of 'Exchanges'!

John Caperon
Editor

Exchanges *is the quarterly members' 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 Eliot at Faber & Gwyer

The London Review of Books hosted an event celebrating 100 years since Eliot joined Faber & Gwyer as a 'talent scout' (as he put it in his Eulogy for Geoffrey Faber) on 23rd April 1925. A small band of members of the T S Eliot Society (UK) joined the audience for an enlightening talk at the wonderful London Review Bookshop. The event was led by poet and critic Mark Ford; Emeritus Professor John Haffenden, former Faber Managing Director Toby Faber, and Senior Lecturer Aakanksha Virkar discussed Eliot's early years at Faber, his influence on the publishing house, and the enduring legacy of his work.

Toby Faber presented on Eliot's time at Faber & Gwyer. Over the course of the event, much new information about Eliot came to light, and some old was clarified – for example, before joining Faber

& Gwyer, Eliot's role at Lloyds Bank in the City was hardly that of a mere clerk: his post was significant, commanding a unit of ten staff.

Toby Faber explained how the first offer to Eliot was to bring 'The Criterion' into the newly formed publishing house, Faber & Gwyer. This was a good deal for both parties. Faber & Gwyer published a medical journal, 'The Nursing Times', and wanted to diversify and have access to the bright new talent currently being published in Eliot's journal. Eliot was struggling to publish 'The Criterion' due to personnel and professional calls on his time and attention. On the 6th April 1925, Eliot became Editor at Faber & Gwyer, and on the 23rd of April 1925, Eliot joined the company Board after a written testimonial from his friend Charles Whibley was taken in conjunction with earlier commendations from Whibley as to Eliot's good character and suitability.

The Gwyers were the majority shareholders in the business and made money through the nursing journals. Eliot published hardly any poetry during the Faber & Gwyer years (only his own and a collection by Ezra Pound) and the rift between Geoffrey Faber and the Gwyers finally came about because the book business was losing too much money. Later at Faber & Faber (the second Faber added to make the business sound more established, and grander) Eliot showed that he had a great gift for discerning the shape of a collection. And he often used second opinions, especially that of the poet Anne Ridler, but also of several secretaries at Faber & Faber. Eliot continued as editor until his death. It was a thoroughly good evening!

Christina Percy and Christopher Southgate

The 2025 T S Eliot Festival at Little Gidding

The last two years at the festival, we were blessed with blue skies and sunshine, with the marquee open and attendees wandering around the garden and the church. This year, it was raining heavily on the canvas roof as Sarah Kennedy began her rich and dizzying talk about Eliot's poetics of doubt. One cannot help thinking about the passing of the seasons when in Little Gidding; and I was surprised to find that I quite enjoyed the grey skies and rain: they somehow provided a moodier atmosphere for serious topics.

Kennedy guided us through Eliot's relationship to doubt as it evolves through his poems. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the doubt is adolescent, libidinal, and self-conscious. When we reach 'The Waste Land', the personal disquiet has morphed into a larger and more outward-looking anxiety about

Sarah Kennedy

the failures and traumas of modernity. In the later poetry, after Eliot's religious and spiritual turn, doubt, suggested Kennedy, reaches a breakthrough but not a resolution. In 'Four Quartets', doubt is recognised not as a problem to be solved, but as a mode of openness to the world: ' … in 'Little Gidding', the end of the quest for knowing is, paradoxically, to discover the importance of living in and with doubt.' Kennedy summarised this concisely by citing Eliot's own words: 'the demon of doubt […] is inseparable from the spirit of belief'.

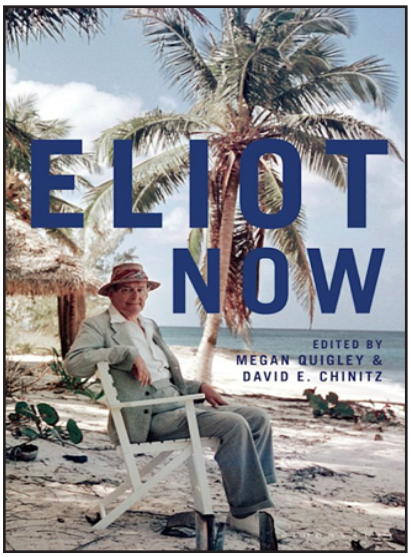
Giddy after this spiralling ascent, we broke for lunch. By now, the rain had cleared, and an optimistic crowd cautiously emerged from the tent, hoping to enjoy the garden. Tours of the seventeenth-century church ran every fifteen minutes, where one could glean insights into Nicholas Ferrar and the Anglican community he established here, as well as hear about his friendship with the poet George Herbert. The Society also had a stand, where visitors could take out memberships and purchase mugs, bags, pens and rare editions of Eliot's works.

After lunch, we returned to the marquee for 'My Favourite Eliot', in which attendees go on stage to read aloud passages from Eliot's work which hold personal significance. A stilled hush fell over the tent following a reading of 'The Hollow Men', with the reader, Eliot's nephew, remarking on how closely our society seems to echo the poem's prophetic final lines: 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.' The solemnity was broken by the next reading, which delved into one of the deepest metaphysical questions of all … 'The Naming of Cats'.

Following tea and cake, the day's intellectual core continued with a panel discussion on the new academic collection, *Eliot Now*. The panel was led by Anthony Cuda, the prominent Eliot scholar and Director of the Eliot Summer School, now held in Oxford, together with Patrick Query, author of *Freedom Is Not Enough: T.S. Eliot for Liberation, Resistance and Hope*, and David Chinitz, co-editor of the *Eliot Now* collection.. Cuda confessed his own ambivalence towards the book's title, noting how it could strike him as both profound and condescending. This tension is captured by the editors David Chinitz and Megan Quigley, who write that for some contributors the title 'could end in an affirmative exclamation point - Eliot Now! -for others more of a dubious question mark - Eliot, Now?' The panel did a good job of positioning Eliot between profit and loss.

L-R: David Chinitz, Patrick Query, Anthony Cuda

However, after reading some of the collection in the following days, I was surprised to see that many



of the authors seemed to treat Eliot's identity as a 'conservative Christian social/cultural critic' as a knockdown argument showing his irrelevance to our times. This stands in stark contrast to the arguments of historians like Tom Holland, whose work *Dominion* traces how profoundly Christian values, often undiscerned, continue to shape the very fabric of the Western mind - and raises the sobering question of whether the West will continue to flourish once it is cut away from its Christian roots. And indeed, I thought, the attitude in the book stands in stark contrast with the current political and societal movements of our time across the world.

Its introduction asks: 'What place, if any, can Eliot take in a renovated, reconceived, globalized, decolonized literary culture and the scholarship that attends to it?' That question, I think, presupposes a negative answer. But the crucial words here are 'the literary culture and the scholarship that attends to it': and I mean to indicate the narrowness of that domain. Surely the question is not what place Eliot can take in a 'renovated literary culture', but what our culture as a whole stands to gain or lose by ignoring his thought? And that question remains far more open than some academics seem to allow.

Still, a serious and unavoidable question raised by the book, and by any contemporary engagement with Eliot, is the apparent antisemitic stance of some early poems. This troubling topic was broached in the final lecture of the day by the poet George Szirtes, and as if on cue, the rain returned with vengeance. Szirtes has a complicated relationship to Eliot's work. He was born into a secular and agnostic Jewish family in Hungary; both his parents were in wartime concentration camps; and he came to the UK as a refugee in 1956 following the uprising.

For Szirtes, the question 'What of Eliot Now?' echoed his own personal reckoning. He loves the poems and had found deep spiritual depth in them. He acknowledged that Eliot's prejudice was, in part, a product of a milieu in which such views were common. He did not excuse it, however; instead, he saw it as part of an immature, still-developing voice. He concluded that he could not 'beat over the head' the poet that he loved but would instead hold the discomfort alongside his love for the poetry.

George Szirtes

The T S Eliot Festival 2025 came to a close, as it does each year, with a reading of the poem 'Little Gidding'. As Szirtes's voice filled the marquee, I reflected on how the whole day had been about living in tension. We began with Kennedy's idea of doubt not as a problem, but as a way of living — to live in and with doubt. It moved on to the panel, and the question of Eliot's very relevance today. And it ended with Szirtes and his commitment to holding his discomfort with Eliot's unsavoury remarks alongside his love for the poetry and the man. The question seemed to be how we can preserve Eliot's profound spiritual vision, whilst acknowledging the ugly prejudices. I suggest that it requires the patience to carefully disentangle these — resisting the urge to collapse this tension by letting the assumptions of the present moment too quickly judge what is and is not relevant.

Dan Dearlove

(Festival photos by Kathy Radley)

Ways into Eliot

Our school English class was introduced to the work of T S Eliot ('Four Quartets') by a passionate teacher, though it was not part of our 1969 A-Level syllabus: I rather preferred 'Bleak House', 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' and 'The Metaphysical Poets' (ed Helen Gardner), all of which were. I remember getting through the Dickens in less than a week, utterly engaged to the exclusion of almost any other activity including sleeping. I don't think I gave Eliot another thought.

Exactly forty years later we caught the BBC *Arena* profile at home one Saturday night, and the whole family was entranced from the opening moments, including our two young daughters who would typically have left the room whenever anything remotely cultural was broadcast. The programme can be watched in six or seven broken chunks on YouTube; but for a few months, a few years ago, was available to download as a single convenient clip. I've watched it countless times; and, looking for it, found two separate clips from the same source – Jeremy Irons in one extract from 'Burnt Norton' and another from 'East Coker'. The inexpressible added value comes from the overlaid music accompanying both.

When played in the car, any passenger is immediately gripped and listens in stunned silence to the end: then "What was that?! Who was it?!" I also bought on CD the full spoken works from Jeremy. Wonderful as they are, I had wrongly anticipated that all would be similarly accompanied and always feel that there's something missing from them …. Most members of this Society (real afficionados) will regard that as a heresy, I am sure. Finally, a clip from 'Little Gidding' read by Eliot himself, interspersed with longish pauses, and set to (I think) Zimmer's soundtrack from 'The Last of the Mohicans', is similarly quite riveting. Second to the pleasure to be gained from reading or listening to Eliot is that obtained by introducing him to any enthusiastic new acquaintance through these means.

Fergus Daly

When P.J. Proby recorded T.S. Eliot

P.J. Proby

Many distinguished voices have recorded 'The Waste Land'. One thinks of Jeremy Irons, of Sir Alec Guinness, of Fiona Shaw. But perhaps one might not think of the Sixties rock n'roll singer, PJ Proby. For those too young to remember PJ Proby, think of a young Elvis Presley. Indeed, the two knew each other, and Proby used to demo the songs for Elvis's motion pictures. 'Any Southern boy with a country voice can do Elvis,' Proby insisted to one interviewer.

Born in Houston, Texas in 1938, James Marcus Smith was renamed PJ Proby and got his first recording contract in 1960. He managed to get a place in The Beatles' first TV spectacular for Rediffusion, and his first UK show was at the Albert Hall, bottom of the bill to Adam Faith. His hits included 'Hold Me', 'Together', 'Somewhere' and 'Maria' - the latter two his versions of songs from 'West Side Story'.

'On stage,' Nik Cohn wrote, in his 1969 book *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom*, 'he was magnificent; the most mesmeric act we had ever seen. He was intuitive, hysterical, imaginative, original and irresistible….' Albeit, as *The Independent* described him, 'massaging his thighs as he executed pelvic thrusts whose coarse vigour appalled the parents of his young female audience.'

As a consequence, PJ Proby is most widely remembered in the UK for an incident in January 1965 when, touring with Cilla Black, his velvet trousers split onstage during a show. As a result, he was banned from every major theatre in Britain, and from appearing on BBC and ITV. As he put it, 'In England I started at the top and worked my way down.'

A 1997 profile of Proby for *Mojo* magazine by Rob Chapman (now at https://www.savoy.abel.co.uk/HTML/pjpeop.html) reveals something of his subsequent life and career. He had problems with wives and guns, knives and taxmen, but he recorded more than fifteen LPs in a range of musical styles – and amongst them was his unlikely recording of 'The Waste Land' for Savoy Records.

Michael Butterworth, co-founder of Savoy, remembers that 'The reading came about when we were looking for material for Jim Proby to read, to add something interesting to the repertoire of song recordings we were making with him at the time.

'We wanted to use his incredible voice to do the same thing that he himself had done with the 'West Side Story' songs, which was to 'bend' them with his vocal phrasing. We wanted him to do the same thing with contemporary youth anthems of the seventies and eighties.' Hence Proby recorded a version of 'Anarchy in the UK'. 'And when we had run out of songs we thought, well, why not try poetry?

'Jim's aptitude for different 'voices' made 'The Waste Land' a perfect match, in our eyes.'

It is an extraordinary recording. One has only just become accustomed to hearing the familiar opening lines delivered in a deep, growling, almost threatening Texan accent … when Marie appears. Proby's voice retains its accent, but jumps up a register, akin to a male impersonator attempting Dolly

Parton. And his first idiosyncratic pronunciation occurs, as summer surprises her 'comin' over the Starnburg'.

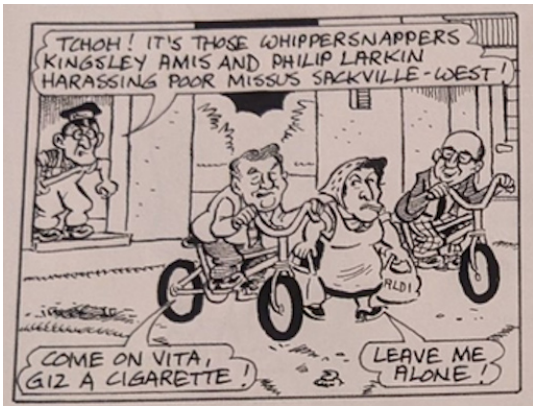
He returns to this high-pitched voice for the other female characters; for the Hyacinth Girl, the protagonist in A Game of Chess, and, most disturbingly, in the pub scene, whose Cockney women sound like barmaids from below the Mason Dixon line.

His emphases are sometimes unusual ('supine', 'Leman', "expert") and his pronunciations unique; "Mylae" becomes the Vietnamese 'My Lai', while as if from Silence of the Lambs we encounter 'you hypocrite Lecter'. His natural accent brings us 'neither livin' nor dayed', 'white bodies nekkid', and a 'paytronising kiss'.

But having said that, when the characters have gone from the poem, and his delivery settles into a monologue, his slow, rich voice brings an ominous foreboding to sections IV and V. The Savoy label's own site for the recording is at http://www.savoy.abel.co.uk/HTML/waste.html and you may be able to hear it by searching online – a voice indeed to fill all the desert.

Paul Keers

Envoi



Seemingly inspired by a pun on the concept of the T.S. Eliot Estate, *Viz* magazine once ran this cartoon strip, featuring T.S. Eliot as janitor on a housing estate, populated by literary hooligans such as the Inklings and the Bloomsbury Group – who, come to think of it, do now sound rather like street gangs...