

T. S. ELIOT SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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ALA: Baltimore 1997 Call for Papers

In 1997 the annual conference of the American Literature Association will return to Baltimore, where it will run from Thursday, May 22, through Sunday, May 25. Each society has the opportunity to run a maximum of two sessions. Certain members of the T. S. Eliot Society have already expressed interest in organizing topical sessions: David Chinitz has suggested a session on Eliot and popular cultural, and Sanford Schwartz is exploring the prospects for a session on Eliot and anti-semitism. Anyone interested in the former should contact David Chinitz, Dept. of English, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60626 (dchinit@luc.edu) as soon as possible. All other proposals for sessions or individual papers (approximately one page) should be sent by January 10 to Sanford Schwartz, 465 Park Lane, State College, PA 16803 (814-867-3031; Fax 814,863-7285, sxs8@psu.edu). After the conference, abstracts of the presentations will be published in the society newsletter.

The ALA is a coalition of approximately seventy societies and has been sponsoring an annual conference since 1990. Members of participating societies are automatically members of ALA and are entitled to attend its conference. Further information about the 1997 conference will appear in the Spring newsletter. Prior to that time, inquiries regarding registration may be directed to Sanford Schwartz or to the Conference Director: Gloria Cronin, Dept. Of English, 3134 JKBH, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602 (Fax 801-371-8623; cronin@jkbhrc.byu.edu).

Last Words on *Tom and Viv*, a play by Michael Hastings

I wonder now if it is possible to write an acceptable play about this couple who were miserable rather than tragic. To make them characters in a domestic comedy would be cruel and tasteless. One could write a farce; there are any number of fantasies with which to play. Suppose that the sequestered letters contain a Ms of "Waste Land II" by Vivienne? Or that Tom is denied entry to heaven because neither his baptism nor his marriage conformed to the rules of the Anglican church?

Better I think to remember his work. My review of the play ended with Rudyard Kipling's "The appeal," an appropriate valedictory for any poet.

Harold W. Shipton
Washington University, *emeritus*

Annual Meeting, September 1997, to Focus on "The Waste Land" at 75

The eighteenth annual meeting of the T. S. Eliot Society will begin on Friday, September 26, 1997, and continue through Sunday, September 28, in St. Louis. The entire 1997 meeting will be devoted to a celebration of the 75th anniversary of the publication of "The Waste Land." At the present time, the program is entirely open and the Board is issuing a first call for session topics and papers as well as suggestions for memorial lecturer, displays, performances, or other activities. Please send suggestions (as soon as possible) and one-page proposals for individual papers (no later than June 1) to Sanford Schwartz, 465 Park Lane, State College, PA 16803 (814-867-3031; Fax 814-863-7285; sxs8@psu.edu).

Summary of the Annual Meeting of the Board

President Sanford Schwartz presided at the annual meeting of the T. S. Eliot Society Board of Directors in St. Louis on September 27 and 29. Included among Board actions and reports are these items:

* Shyamal Bagchee (University of Alberta) has been elected to a three-year term as director.

* Grover Smith (Duke, *emeritus*) was elected to a three-year term as secretary.

* *Newsletter* initiatives during the past year included the publication of short notes on specific classroom practices in the teaching of Eliot, an effort to establish a directory of Eliot societies around the world (societies in Japan, China, and Korea have been identified so far), and the publication of abstracts of papers given at the annual meeting.

* The *Newsletter* will include abstracts of papers given at Eliot sessions at American Literature Association meetings.

* Sanford Schwartz will establish a web site on the Internet for the Society.

* The Society will invite students in the St. Louis area to attend its meetings.

Readers of the *Newsletter* are asked to up-date their directories of Society officers to include the name of the secretary, Grover Smith.

Persons having business with the secretary are advised to contact him directly at 215 W. Woodridge Drive, Durham, NC 27707.

“Who then devised the torment?” Love in T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays

Abstract of the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture for 1996

People who claim the attribute of “love poet” for T. S. Eliot are usually aware of having something to prove. To most of us, Eliot’s poetry is chiefly concerned with the ills and agonies of twentieth-century civilization. There is little human warmth in his work, and the “Little Gidding” stanza quoted in the title is anything but ingratiating. But it does indicate the great importance of love in Eliot’s work, and that is the topic of this talk.

To some extent, the distinctive note of pain that accompanies Eliot’s treatment of love belongs within the framework of a tradition; the contention that love hurts is one that poets have expressed from classical times onward. But in Eliot’s work, unlike that of Catullus and Shakespeare, obstacles to union are not the issue: people suffer because they are unable to love in the first place.

Relationships between men and women, especially in the pre-*Ash-Wednesday* poems, are characterized by a striking lack not only of closeness, sympathy, and affection but even of sexual passion. Eliot was always ambivalent about Freud; and the latter’s view of human love as essentially sexual, and a vehicle of human happiness, contrasts with Eliot’s bleak representations of “the coupling of man and woman / And that of beasts.” In addition, Eliot’s work has nothing to say of what the Renaissance sonneteers called the *innamoramento*, the heady experience of falling in love. Nor does it show us the reality of loving another person in the way that present-day authorities on love define that passion, as “an *appreciation*, a recognition of another’s value” (Robert A. Johnson, *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, London 1983, pp. 191-2).

On the very few occasions where Eliot does allow us a glimpse of his view of perfect human love, the accent is on the identity of the lovers, the two who are as one. Conversely, modern experts on love are tireless in warning their readers and listeners to steer clear of this conception of *eros*, which is often discussed with reference to Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*—a passage well known to Eliot.

Nevertheless, that conception is one of the two poles of human love in Eliot’s poems and plays. The other consists in the contemplation of a female figure who is loved and praised but not desired as a woman, for instance the “veiled and silent sister” in *Ash-Wednesday* and the “daughter” in “Marina.” It is significant that she is referred to by terms that express very close bonds of affection and affinity while ruling out any hint of a sexual relationship. This figure is, as many Eliot critics have pointed out, greatly indebted to Dante’s Beatrice.

The adored “sister, mother, daughter” takes us close to the line of demarcation between human and divine love, a distinction to which Eliot paid close attention. In an Eliot context, whether what we strive for is earthly or heavenly love, we cannot possess it until we have divested ourselves of our selves. Our egos are not good enough to love other human beings with, and they certainly cannot be fit bases for our love for God. We cannot reach out and touch the mighty force emanating from the still point of our own accord; but if we renounce that which keeps us apart from it, it can, perhaps, reach us. Our desire for God’s love, never mind how strong, is not going to secure it for us; we can only pray, and wait. “Teach us to care and not to care. / Teach us to sit still.”

The image of God’s love as a consuming fire in “Little Gidding” may seem terrifying, but we recall that the unbearable torment which the Nessus shirt inflicted on Heracles was a stage he passed through on his way to immortality. In addition, anguish is tempered with grace and mercy by way of Eliot’s allusions to the revelations of Dame Julian of Norwich, whose “shewings” are suffered by love from first to last.

I cannot think of any poet, ancient or modern, who rates love so highly while filling his work with such harrowing descriptions of what it is like *not* to be in possession of it. That, to me, makes Eliot a great poet of love. The hyacinth girl; the Thames daughter; the “Lady” in the “Portrait” who shall sit there, serving tea to friends; the Hollow Man who wonders whether it is “like this / In death’s other kingdom / Walking alone / At the hour when we are / Trembling with tenderness / Lips that would kiss / From prayers to broken stone”—all testify to the overwhelming importance of the love they lack. Such passages do more for me in terms of letting me feel the centrality of love in human life than *The Elder Statesman* with its explicit incarnation of love in Monica: a touching tribute to the fulfillment that Eliot’s second wife brought him, but as far as I am concerned a matter of saying rather than showing. It does nothing to alter my view that the love poet T. S. Eliot is greater when he deals with love unrealized than with love achieved—which is just as well, considering how much more there is of the former.

Marianne Thormählen
University of Lund, Sweden

"Eliot on the Air: 'Culture' and the
Genres of Mass Communication"

Abstract

Eliot's radio broadcasts remain among the least considered aspects of his work. Generally, we fail to acknowledge both the extent and the seriousness of his concern with the mass media. This scholarly neglect is unfortunate because in Eliot's broadcasts and in his defense of the BBC's "Third Programme" we find a humane tolerance of mass culture unusual among modernist critics. Particularly instructive is Eliot's difference from Theodor Adorno, the eminent leader of the Frankfurt School whose critique of mass culture developed in the very period when Eliot was most actively participating in the BBC. By the mid-fifties Adorno's hostility toward radio, film, and other mass media had virtually scripted an academic orthodoxy that essentially endured through the seventies. Even today his arguments are routinely invoked whenever the media are subject to intellectual discussion. Eliot's position on the issue is harder to identify, because his published commentary on radio comes primarily in the form of letters to editors, or of talks delivered to other than literary audiences. For the most part, his overt comments are just enough to guide our understanding of his actual practice.

Between 1929 and 1964 Eliot delivered at least 37 broadcasts. At first his topics were explicitly literary--Tudor or Elizabethan poets, dramatists, and translators, or Dryden, Tennyson or Joyce; but by the outbreak of the war his talks turned almost invariably to the question of "culture," distinguishing between unity and uniformity, between organicism and organization. Eliot's wartime broadcasts anticipated the conclusion of hostilities and argued for an internationalist sense of European culture. Again, Eliot rejected the political "uniformity" of Europe and urged a cultural "unity" that drew strength from political and social difference.

It is a variation of this opposition that informs Eliot's distrust of television and his hopes for radio: his interest in addressing a mass *audience* did not translate to appearing before a mass of *spectators* because the visual image is less able to support the different connotations that can be carried by the voice. Realizing that different media construct their consumption in different ways, Eliot supported radio as the mass medium most suitable to the strengthening of cultural vitality. He hoped to use radio to simulate not so much the intimacy of a group chat, but that quality of disembodied vocalicity sometimes possible when a priest speaks for his flock. It wasn't then so much the quality or content of his radio talks that makes them historically distinctive, but rather their attempt to form their audience. In their final and perhaps least looked-for contribution to our understanding of his work, Eliot's broadcasts give further dimension to his career-long endeavor to transcend the limits of personality.

Michael Coyle
Colgate University

Fair Fields and Waste Lands, 1348-1942:

T. S. Eliot, William Langland, and the
Rebuilding of Christian Community

Abstract

The number of times that critics and editors of Langland's lifelong opus, the medieval allegorical epic *Piers Plowman*, have cited T. S. Eliot in comparison with William Langland is remarkable. In his introduction to the C-text, Derek Pearsall compares the work to *The Waste Land*; in various footnotes to the text he quotes Eliot as if the modernist deliberately attempted to clarify Langland's theological and poetic imagery. Comparisons between the works of Langland and Eliot illuminate deeper similarities in the common cultural outlook and response to two widely separated periods in British history in which the religious community had been shattered by disasters of human origin: 1348, the year in which the Black Death first occurred, and 1914-1945, that period of thoroughly modern was, political chaos, and mass devastation.

Langland's and Eliot's writings illuminate each other's visions of collective spiritual recovery from the catastrophes of their respective historical periods. In *Piers Plowman* and *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, and Eliot's later cultural criticism, a number of striking structural and material parallels present themselves which outline the re-construction of a Christian society in eras of medieval and modern disaster. These include Langland's and Eliot's depictions of the chaos and despair of postapocalyptic society; their descriptions of the inversion of divine/natural order and its consequences, in particular the disruption of fertility and reproductive cycles; their criticisms of corrupt procapitalist and capitalist institutions; and their visions of the salvation of the community as a whole through the teachings and self-sacrifice of a central messianic figure, manifested in Langland's work as Piers/Christ and in Eliot's as the fisher king. Their final prescriptions--Langland's allegories of the lives of Dowell, Dobetter, and Dobest and Eliot's use of the *Book of Common Prayer* and his exploration of the Upanishad tale of the thunder's words to his three sons--require the survivors of both eras to acquire and adhere to a sense of divine order and to reconstruct their respective communities accordingly.

For both poets the relationship between the salvation of the individual and the salvation of the community was a lifelong preoccupation. The literary and spiritual kinship between the two writers gives Langland's lifelong work a rather twentieth-century sense of sociopolitical urgency at the same time that it gives Eliot's apparently conservative cultural theories an interesting context of populist medieval social commentary.

Kathleen Ricker
Loyola University Chicago

**Eliot as "Dead Master":
The Case of John Ashbery**
Abstract

Harold Bloom's ongoing elaborations of an oedipal model of poetic influence have encouraged a discourse in which critics offer evidence of one writer's impact upon another. Bloom believes each "strong" poem is a rewriting of a precursor poem, but he also believes a "strong" poet regularly returns to the same precursor poet. This one-to-one model, as complex as Bloom's elucidations of it are, tends toward an overly simplistic view of literary history and naturally leads to reductive genealogical analogies. For instance, Bloom has included the contemporary American poet John Ashbery among the truest "sons of [Wallace] Stevens."

Despite the proliferation of this discourse on influence, and despite his eminence among early twentieth century poets, T. S. Eliot's contributions to contemporary American poetry go relatively unrecognized. Bloom's promotion of Stevens as *the* major modernist poet, coupled with his antipathy toward Eliot, may partly account for this, but so does a widespread tendency to identify a central postmodernist poetics originating with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Perhaps equally significant, to the extent that his critical partisans agree with him, is Eliot's own idea that poetic influence is relatively diffuse: the individual talent orients himself toward the existing monuments (plural), the avatar of which is necessarily "little Gidding"'s *compound* ghost, with no single voice predominant.

One poet who would benefit immensely from critics' recognition of his Eliotic aspects is that "son of Stevens" himself, John Ashbery. Reading Ashbery as second-generation Stevens leads Bloom and other critics to miss Eliot's importance for Ashbery, but it also leads them to ignore or even to characterize as abortive poems that owe more to Eliot than to Stevens. In the context of his writing on American painter R. B. Kitaj, Ashbery has remarked on Eliot's profound impact on all contemporary art: he credits *The Waste Land* with giving the first full expression of a modern view of the world as random and fragmentary. Critics should take the hint and explore Ashbery's own radically disjointed style in terms of Eliot's example.

Not only does Ashbery seem to derive from Eliot his notions about fragmentation, but he has also rewritten or otherwise invoked specific Eliot poems: for instance, his first long poem, "Europe," appears to be a reworking of *The Waste Land*. Although Ashbery's poems are often assumed to lack organization, his second long poem, "The Skaters," mirrors *Four Quartets*' structure, themes, and imagery rather closely. In fact, *Four Quartets* seems to engage his imagination particularly. His poem "Soonest Mended" evokes it in its conclusion, and his "Blue Sonata" opens with a parody of it. A more recent poem, "Quartet," conjures up a meeting between Eliot and Ashbery, in which the older poet plays the part of "Little Gidding"'s "dead master." Perhaps this more than anything else justifies a re-evaluation

of Ashbery's career--reading him in terms of many influences, including Stevens, Eliot, and others--as well as a reconsideration of Eliot's continuing relevance for American poetry.

Robert West
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**T. S. Eliot and Literary Authority:
Parental Citations, Maternal Intertexts**
Abstract

Eliot's critical and poetic work raises significant questions concerning the constitution and transmission of literary authority within modernist texts. Until recently, literary authority has been understood within largely paternal models of literary influence in which authorial power has passed from father to son, as it were, whether benignly or through violent usurpation. However, Eliot's authorial self-constitution through his use of citations--which include quotations, allusions, and a host of related intertextual references--generates an internal errancy. Not only do citations invariably stray from their appointed task, but the filial relations instituted by citations in Eliot's work are continually troubled by female literary authority, what I call the maternal intertext of his work.

For Eliot, the task of becoming a poet entailed establishing an authorizing filiation with a series of paternal predecessors. His citational practice enacts an erotics of domination and submission between father and son, and the structure of literary relations enacted by this practice is masochistic. By contrast, female sexuality and maternal authority are violently abjected in Eliot's early poetry.

Eliot wished to establish exclusively masculine lines of authority from father to son, but in his poetry and plays he wrote incessantly of dead or incapacitated fathers and of phallic women whose power he could neither master nor admit. In this sense, Eliot's poetry is errant, straying from his apparent intentions and attesting to a power that he disavowed.

Colleen Lamos
Rice University

REMINDER

Due date for ALA proposals:

January 10

Due date for proposals for annual meeting:

June 1