

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

Summer 2020

Page 2

Editorial

Page 3

Poems for the pandemic

Page 5

'A whispering under the door' – West Abelard, a parody of Eliot

Page 7

T S Eliot Prize for Poetry: Hannah Sullivan and Roger Robinson

Page 9

And finally...



It might now seem odd to premiere a play in August, when so many people are away on holiday, but three of Eliot's plays opened in August – at the Edinburgh Festival: *The Cocktail Party* (programme above) in 1949, *The Confidential Clerk* in 1953, and *The Elder Statesman* in 1958. All subsequently transferred to the West End.

Editorial

This last April was horribly cruel, as we noted in the Spring edition of 'Exchanges'; and though Summer has seen an easing in the pandemic, the Office of National Statistics has calculated that Britain had the highest levels of excess mortality in Europe for the period January to June. Things continue to be grim, with few sources of pleasure. Because of the continuing Covid-19 crisis, there was no Wimbledon, that summer-defining event – and no TS Eliot Festival, that other summer-defining event – and though Test matches were eventually allowed, they were played behind locked gates. Holidays abroad seemed a wistful dream: how good it would have been to enjoy continental travel, to have glimpsed summer 'coming over the Starnbergersee'! Instead, heedless of possible coronavirus infection, we flocked in our desperate hordes to the beaches of Bournemouth, Brighton, and Margate – the sands there more crowded than ever.

Thankfully, though, some of our cultural institutions offered imaginative and intellectual sustenance during the worst period of national crisis. Productions from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre available to view on BBC4 and YouTube won audiences of 'tens of millions', according to 'The Stage'; and we might conclude that there is a good popular appetite for culture. Some crude caricatures still exist, though, which stand in the way of a wider public accessing some of our greatest cultural works. And Eliot certainly continues to suffer in this respect.

One recent instance of unhelpful caricature was offered by the Anglican priest and journalist Giles Fraser, commenting on the decision of a Northern cathedral to disband its choir. Arguing – unfairly, it should be said – that Matthew Arnold 'did the idea of culture no favours', Fraser went on to describe what he saw as 'a worrying elision of high culture and social class'. Culture, he asserted, 'is an unashamedly elite activity for people with enough leisure time (ie money) and intelligence'. Fraser's critique is summarised in his sentence: 'Posh people go to the opera, learn Latin, read T S Eliot and long, improving novels.'

This deeply regrettable characterisation of Eliot (along with opera, Latin and, say, 'Middelmarch') as 'elitist', the preserve of the posh, needs rebutting. Our culture – in Arnold's terms, 'the best that has been thought or said' – is rightly the possession of us all. One of the challenges for all those who admire and enjoy Eliot's poetry is to work towards a recognition that he can indeed be widely accessible, and is not simply the preserve of a moneyed minority. The Society, and 'Exchanges', are part of that endeavour.

We offer three articles this Summer. Committee member Pauline Davison describes how among her circle of friends the Covid-19 crisis has provided an opportunity for poetry to be a healing influence; new contributor Christopher Garvin considers a lesser-known parody of Eliot, and the poet's response to parody; and your editor reflects on the past two years of the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry, and the contrasting styles and identities of each year's winner. At a point where poetry is being relegated for school examination purposes to an option rather than a compulsory element in 'English', the uses of poetry – whether for healing, for hilarity or for the expression and sharing of the whole gamut of human feeling and experience – need affirming.

John Caperon

Editor

All Members are invited to contribute to 'Exchanges', the quarterly of the T S Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute or if you have queries or suggestions, contact the Editor direct at Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk

Poems for the pandemic

When lockdown began, we had to think about how to manage this new and strange way of life. There was plenty of advice, especially for the prescribed physical exercise, but the first that I found helpful was from a poem, 'Pandemic', written by Lynn Ungar, an American Unitarian, which begins:

'What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath –
The most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
On trying to make the world
Different than it is.'

Fergal Keane's choice of poem on Radio 4, by John O'Donoghue, had a similar message:

'This is the time to be slow
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.'

These encouragements to calm resonated with the frightening, unavoidable news and the quiet, empty streets of my new, unstructured life.

As the pandemic worsened and the fears of the disease were realized, we became aware of our dependence on the NHS and essential workers, that we were all in this together, that, in Auden's words, 'We must love one another or die'. The poem that perfectly captured the mood as we clapped on Thursday evenings, was Michael Rosen's paean of praise for the NHS, 'These are the hands':

'These are the hands
That touch us first
Feel your head
Find the pulse
And make your bed.'

In my poetry group we read Yeats's 'Byzantium'; and as the cracks in the handling of the crisis appeared, I was reminded of 'The Second Coming', written a century ago but so applicable to our world and our leaders:

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.....
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.'

Along with news of death and disease came the murder of George Floyd and the eruption of the Black Lives Matter movement, which brought back memories of the eight years I lived in Apartheid South Africa. The

poem that spoke to me then, was a Chorus from Heaney's 'The Cure at Troy', a translation of Sophocles' s Philoctetes and a commentary on the politics of Ireland. But he added this Chorus in response to the release of Nelson Mandela. It expresses the hope of many that this pandemic might lead to a kinder, greener, more equal society:

'Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

.....
History says 'Don't hope
On this side of the grave'
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme'.

But there was a benevolent side to lockdown. It gave us permission and time to go outside and look and listen, and at home to try different things. My dog and I walked a lot and I was more aware than usual of the unfolding of Spring, the bare, silver birch in my garden slowly turning green, the arrival of ducklings and cygnets, the wildflower meadow in the local park and the skylark above the down. The natural world was enhanced by the disorder of the pandemic and I read poets who rejoiced in it - Keats and Hopkins, Edward Thomas and Dylan Thomas, Heaney and Longley; because as Hopkins wrote, 'Nothing is so beautiful as spring'.

I missed my family and friends, of course, though our mutual concern brought us closer together. I missed my church too: online services were no substitute for the real thing. I turned instead to the poets who nourish my faith, particularly Herbert, Hopkins, R S Thomas and Eliot. On July 4th, the day of the cancelled TS Eliot Festival, I read Four Quartets and wondered when I would next kneel 'where prayer has been valid'.

I've only quoted snippets so far, but I want to end with a complete poem that somehow sums up my feelings about the pandemic and lockdown. It's an irregular sonnet written by Eilean Ni Chuilleanain in 1986. Though there are allusions to the Odyssey and Irish politics, no one seems fully to understand it, but its tone of weary optimism and mysteriousness seem to fit the times we are in.

'Swineherd
When all this is over, said the swineherd,
I mean to retire, where
Nobody will have heard about my special skills
And conversation is mainly about the weather.

I intend to learn how to make coffee, as least as well
As the Portuguese lay-sister in the kitchen

And polish the brass fenders every day.
I want to lie awake at night
Listening to cream crawling to the top of the jug
And the water lying soft in the cistern.

I want to see an orchard where the trees grow in straight lines
And the yellow fox finds shelter between the navy-blue trunks,
Where it gets dark early in summer
And the apple-blossom is allowed to wither on the bough.

Pauline Davison

‘A whispering under the door’ – *West Abelard*, a parody of Eliot

There are several parodies of Eliot, perhaps the best (and best-known) being Henry Reed’s *Chard Whitlow*. But another, worthy of attention, is *West Abelard*, a 53-line poem from a work written by Dylan Thomas, together with the less well-known John Davenport.

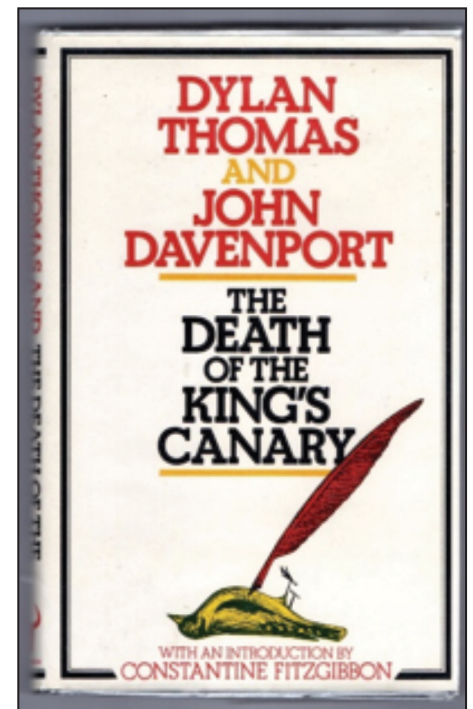
Davenport was an English critic and book reviewer who wrote for *The Observer* and *The Spectator* amongst others. In the early Thirties Davenport had been a promising young poet, but he had dried up; he used to relate how he had gone to Eliot for advice, and Eliot had told him to write nothing for ten years; he had never forgiven Eliot for what he regarded as this bad advice, as he never wrote poetry again.

In 1955, a couple of years after Dylan Thomas’s death, Davenport wrote in a memoir of his friend that, in the early Forties, ‘Dylan was staying with me at my home in the Cotswolds with his wife and child, and remained for several months. We wrote a satirical novel together, writing alternate chapters. It was called *The Death of the King’s Canary*.’

The plot of this novel involves a murdered Poet Laureate (the ‘King’s canary’ of the title). As part of selecting a new Poet Laureate, the Prime Minister must read the work of a dozen shortlisted candidates; this provides an opportunity for the authors to parody the work of a dozen or so contemporary poets, including Auden, Barker, Spender, Empson and the Sitwells. Inevitably, these parodies – and the comments upon their authors – made the novel unpublishable. It remained so until 1976, ten years after Davenport’s death.

As the novel opens, the Prime Minister is faced with reading through a ‘pile of brightly wrapped poets’. Midway, he reaches his Private Secretary’s notes on the poet John Lowell Atkins:

‘J.L Atkins. B. Boston 1890. Ed. Harvard, Heidelberg and Trinity, Cambridge. Naturalized 1917. Very sound, but I don’t think quite right for the job.’



The Prime Minister then reads *West Abelard*, from Atkins' *Collected Poems*. It would be spoiling the fun to identify every Eliot reference – and breaching copyright to quote the poem in its entirety – but the first section of *West Abelard* begins:

'Everything is the same. It only differs
in the subjective mind which is the same
being or not-being, born, unborn,
a wind among leaves deciduous or dead.
It does not matter where
It does not matter.
Windfall or wordfall or a linnet's feather
In rank orchards where perpetual turns the worm'

It continues later:

'Lord if I suffer now and not hereafter
if it be graver, Lord, to bear one's sin
than pay the fine of death at the time of lilacs
when wings and wind in the orchard ruin the blossom
Lord, if I suffer now?'

The poem's second section employs a distinctly familiar structure:

'Augustine fervent in belief
preferred to fight the flesh in men
than to obtain the false relief
whose advocate was Origen.'

And concludes:

'Fulbert crept up on priestly foot
quenched the hot fever in the bone
his knife struck at the problem's root:
Abelard lay at peace, alone.'

The third and final section opens with:

'Even the end is similar. It ends
and there's an end.
A whispering under the door, a weeping
In violet darkness when the last wheels are still.'

And concludes:

'It is not different and it is better
that so it should be.
Everything is the same.'

In the novel, the Prime Minister ‘felt queerly depressed, and reached once more for the brandy...That was a lugubrious poem, and the problem was that it was true. Everything was the same. Dull, too. But it would never do to tell [the people] so.’

The parody remained unpublished, of course, during Eliot’s lifetime. He did once praise *Chard Whitlow*, but Eliot also said that “Most parodies of one’s own work strike one as very poor. In fact, one is apt to think one could parody oneself much better.

‘(As a matter of fact, some critics have said that I have done so.)’

Christopher Garvin

The T S Eliot Prize for poetry: Hannah Sullivan and Roger Robinson

Inaugurated in 1993 in celebration of the Poetry Book Society’s 40th birthday, and in honour of T S Eliot, who founded the Society, the T S Eliot Prize is probably the most prestigious, and lucrative, poetry award in the land, its monetary value standing currently at £20,000. Awarded annually for ‘the best collection of new verse in English first published in the UK or the Republic of Ireland’, the prize retains a close connection with Eliot himself; prize money was originally donated by his widow Valerie and subsequently by the T S Eliot Estate. This has added gloss to the award; and an almost inevitable question posed each time its winner is announced: ‘How does this collection relate to the poetic achievement and place of Eliot himself?’



That any one year’s prize can produce a result wildly different from the previous or following one is built into the way the award works: who knows, after all, who is going to publish what in the course of the year, and what the nature of their collection is going to be? Even bearing this in mind, the winners in the past two years have been almost startlingly different.

Hannah Sullivan (2018, for ‘Three Poems’) and Roger Robinson (2019, for ‘A Portable Paradise’) represent widely divergent streams in contemporary verse, and something too of its diversity.

Sullivan (left) is a white British academic, who was awarded a double First in Classics at Cambridge. She gained her PhD in English and American literature at Harvard, taught subsequently at Stanford, and is now associate professor of English at New College, Oxford. She gave our 2019 Annual TS Eliot Lecture.

Robinson (right) is a black British writer and educator, musician and performer; born in Hackney, he grew up and was schooled by the Jesuits in Trinidad until the age of nineteen, when he returned to this country, living first in Essex and then in Brixton; he has described himself as ‘a British resident with a Trini sensibility’.

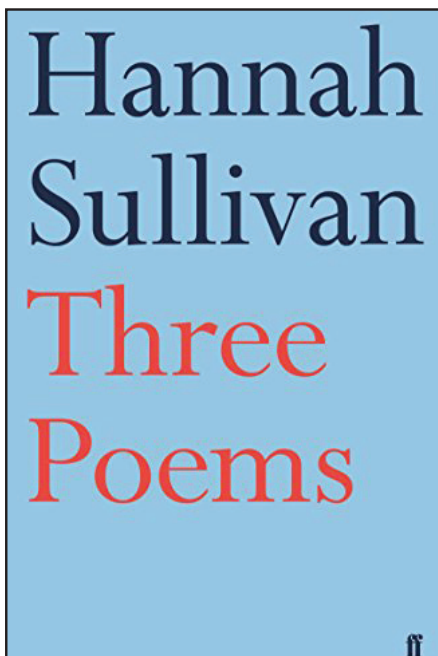
‘Diversity personified’, we might feel. And that external diversity is echoed by the contrasts between the poems of each writer.

Hannah Sullivan’s ‘Three Poems’ – ‘You, very young in New York’, ‘Repeat until Time’, and ‘The Sandpit after Rain’ – take us successively into the frenetic, sexualised world of a naïve young woman in the city; to the West Coast, in an extended reflection on time, change and poetry; and into the core human experiences of birth and death as experienced by the poet herself through childbirth and the death of her father. All three poems are differently powerful, evocative, and draw on the poets of the past; Sullivan has a sense of tradition, though she is sceptical of its conclusions:

‘What will survive of us?

Larkin thought the answer might be ‘love’,

But couldn’t prove it.’



And tradition isn’t the only echo of Eliot; there is something in her rhythms that recalls him:

‘All cancers were once benign,
Then the DNA forgets its prosody
And cells divide interminably:
The raddled beauty of doggerel.’

The *New York Times* description of her work as ‘pellucid and startlingly intelligent poetry’ seems just. And Sullivan wrestles with language, as did Eliot, as do all writers:

‘There is saying the same thing again in a different form,
There is saying something new in the same form,
There is saying the same thing again in the same form,
There is not much saying something new in a new form.’

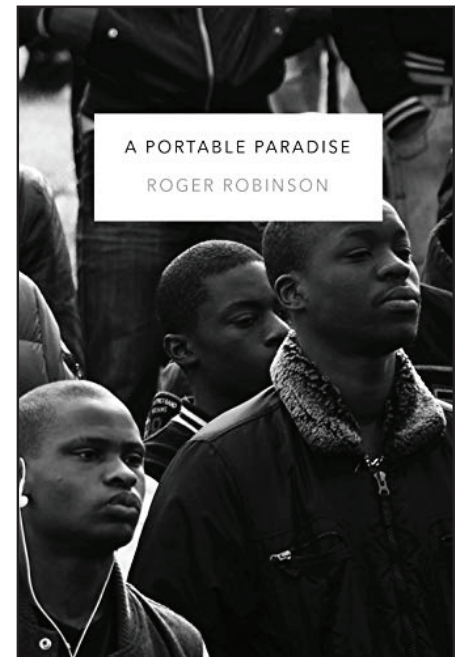
Turning to Roger Robinson's 'A Portable Paradise' is shifting into a different world. Instead of cool intellectuality we have burning indignation, what one commentator has called 'a voice of our communal consciousness', where 'our' has a particular, edgy, black British resonance. Robinson's verse is motivated by - and imbued with - a distinctly passionate sense of racial injustice: much of what he observes and records in 'A Portable Paradise' simply appals him, and his achievement is to turn his passionate indignation into precisely structured verse.

It's too simple to say that Hannah Sullivan is all intellect, Roger Robinson all passion: but it's far from fundamentally misleading. And whereas we can hear and see direct echoes of Eliot in Sullivan's verse, Robinson's links more naturally with the worlds of rap, of spoken and performance poetry. His precursor is Linton Kwesi Johnson, who helped establish 'dub' poetry through his 1978 album 'Dread Beat an' Blood', which critiqued police behaviour in London and forecast the 1981 Brixton riots. That is Robinson's immediate tradition.

But in his poems it is disciplined, shaped and made available to an audience far wider than would be accessible to most dub poets. The collection's main preoccupation is the Grenfell Tower fire, which Robinson sees as symbolising British racial injustice, the powerlessness of the poor and black. The case is set out in 'Blame':

'The building burned,
so the Council blamed the contractors
who shredded all the papers;
so the contractors blamed
health and safety for passing
all the required tests;
so the prime minister
came, saw, and left,
and talked to no-one
and shook no-one's hand....'

At a live Arvon reading during the recent lockdown, Robinson said, 'the job of poets is to bring empathy', and his understated account here does that, with economy and elegance. Asked at the reading how to develop as a poet, he replied that one should read other poets and concentrate on form: 'You need to read a lot to write a little.' It's clear that Robinson has done that reading; and though his range of cultural reference is less cosmopolitan than Sullivan's, his sensibility is questing, searching to understand the place of blackness within British culture.



It's almost as if Robinson's poems are precursors to the Black Lives Matter movement of Summer 2020. Black slavery, the marginality of black servants: these BLM themes, exploding this summer in events like the toppling of Edward Colston's statue into Bristol harbour, are foreshadowed, in 'A Young Girl with a Dog and a Page':

'In the painting you're behind the dog,
an accoutrement....'

and in '(Some) Sweat':

'Catching a fever in the hull of the slave-
ship, he became drenched. Sweat dripping
off his face like tears....'

As they whipped him it wasn't the pain
of the stroke that hurt, but the salt of his own
sweat seeping into his wounds that made
him cry out.'

How does Robinson relate to Eliot? Asked about this at the reading, Robinson responded: 'I love T S Eliot. 'The Waste Land' isn't my jam; but 'Four Quartets', that's my jam.' If his writing doesn't directly echo Eliot as Sullivan's does, his distinctive sensibility offers accessible insights into the Black British perspective, providing an education for the white consciousness. And if Hannah Sullivan's remarkable verse made her something of a shoo-in for the 2018 T S Eliot Prize judges, Roger Robinson stands as a wholly contrasting, but equally powerful poetic voice, who rightly earned their decision in 2019. What, one wonders, will 2020 reveal?

John Caperon

And finally...

You know those moments when you're looking for the appropriate lines from TS Eliot as you feed your baby, hang up your keys, or even tenderise some meat? Problem solved, with these extraordinary items genuinely on sale, with prices from £5.99. Search on ebay for 'Quote by T.S. Eliot'. If you must.

