

# T. S. ELIOT SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

Number 27

Fall 1995

Published by the T. S. Eliot Society (incorporated in the State of Missouri as a literary non-profit organization), 5007 Waterman Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri 63108

### Summary of Recent Decisions by the Board

President Sanford Schwartz presided at the annual meeting of the T. S. Eliot Society Board of Directors in St. Louis on September 22. Among the Board's decisions are the following:

- The name *News & Notes* was changed to *T. S. Eliot Society Newsletter* to reflect more appropriately the character of the publication. Numbering of issues will be continuous from *News & Notes*.
- The Society endorses the activities of the Eliot Memorial Committee in its effort to create a memorial to T. S. Eliot in the City of St. Louis and recommends to the Memorial Committee that the President of the T. S. Eliot Society serve ex-officio as a member of the Memorial Committee.
- Virginia Phelan was re-elected historian of the Society.
- Amendment IX to the By-Laws was approved: The regularly scheduled meetings of the Board of Directors shall be open to the other members of the Society as spectators, except when the Board is in executive session to elect officers, to amend the By-Laws, or to conduct other business at its discretion.

The Board also adopted a resolution of appreciation to Grover Smith for his many years of service to the Board and to the Society. Joan F. Hooker and John Karel were welcomed to the Board.

### A Note about Abstracts Included in this Issue

Realizing that only about one-third of the members of the Society attend the annual meeting, the editor invited persons who gave papers at the 1995 meeting to provide abstracts of those papers for readers of the *Newsletter*. Abstracts by David Huisman and David Partenheimer appear in this issue, thus inaugurating a practice which the editor hopes to make traditional.

### ALA: San Diego 1996 Call for Session Topics and Papers

In 1996 the annual conference of the American Literature Association (ALA) will return to the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego, where it will take place on May 30 through June 2. At this time the Board is re-issuing its call for papers for session topics, proposals for which should be sent by January 10 to Sanford Schwartz, 465 Park Lane, State College, PA 16803 (814-867-3031; FAX 814-863-7285). Papers should take no more than twenty minutes to read.

For the 1996 conference, the Ezra Pound Society has proposed to join with the T. S. Eliot Society in offering a joint session devoted to Modernism and Mass Culture. Persons interested in presenting papers at this session should contact Sanford Schwartz by December 31.

TSE Society member Jo-Anne Capelluti would like to organize a session on either Eliot and Romanticism or Eliot and Lyric Conventions. Persons interested in working toward either of these sessions should contact Jo-Anne Capelluti at 1100 N. Lemon, #H-4, Fullerton, CA 92632 by December 31.

The ALA is a coalition of approximately forty American author societies and has sponsored an annual conference since 1990. Members of participating author societies are automatically members of ALA and are entitled to attend its conferences. Requests for additional information should be sent to Alfred Bendixen, Executive Director, ALA, California State University, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110.

### Partenheimer Assumes Bibliographer Role

The editor is very pleased to announce that David Partenheimer of Northeast Missouri State University has agreed to serve as bibliographer for *T. S. Eliot Society Newsletter*.

Kim, Dal-Yong. *Puritan Sensibility in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*. New York: Peter Lang, 1994. xii+202.

T. S. Eliot was born in St. Louis of parents proudly conscious of their New England descent. Early scholars such as F. O. Matthiessen and Herbert Howard point out this fact as a significant background for understanding Eliot's poetry. In a 1959 *Paris Review* interview Eliot himself acknowledged that "in its emotional springs [my poetry] comes from America." We know also that Harold Bloom has integrated *The Waste Land* in American literary tradition by suggesting it as Eliot's reading of Whitman.

Recent Eliot studies seem to have reached the stage in which we can no longer discuss his works without taking account of his American origin, as we may recall Eric Sigg's and John Mayer's studies, both published in 1989. These works concentrate on Eliot's poems written in his American youth and suggest the roots of his later poetry. Dal-Yong Kim in his monograph has made a step forward by trying to show that Eliot's imagination is a Puritan one; his historical sense includes the living continuity of his mind with New England Puritanism. Kim therefore speaks of Eliot's "Puritan mind," which not only shaped his aesthetic sensibility but also contributed to the formulation of his intuitions on human nature. For Kim, "Eliot's poetry demonstrates the necessity of Puritan morals in the modern age." To support his point, Kim uses numerous texts by New England Puritan divines.

It is Kim's thesis that Eliot's modernism was a reaction to "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy." His poetry has the structure of Puritan typology. In fact Kim sees in "the Word in the desert" a typically Puritan worldview which informs Eliot's poems from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets*. Kim sees a moral intention of showing the path to a "promised land" underlying Eliot's aesthetics. Eliot's critique of the modern self has parallelism with the tormented Puritan soul's self-denial in order to reach divine reality.

Kim thinks that Eliot's mysticism is Puritan mysticism rather than that of St. John of the Cross and other Catholic mystics: "Eliot imitated the Puritan devotion which emphasizes the period of humble yearning and rigorous discipline followed by mystical experience as the beginning of the Christian life." Using ample texts, Kim concludes that New England Puritan heritage gave Eliot tenacity to stick to his artistic and moral idealism in the face of modern sordidness, emptiness, and desolation. His was a

prophetic voice in the tradition of Puritan ministers' Jeremiads in the modern world. But according to Kim it was Eliot's Puritan distrust of human emotion that limited the range of his poetry.

All in all, Kim has raised an interesting point, but whether or not we can make a satisfactory account of Eliot's entire poetry by adverting to "Puritan sensibility" remains still a question to be discussed among Eliot scholars. Eliot is a complicated poetic *persona*, describing himself as a man "who combines a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament" ("Goethe as the targe").

Shun'ichi Takayanagi, SJ  
Sophia University, Tokyo

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**Neither Bang nor Whimper:  
Notes towards the Detonation of Closure**  
*Abstract*

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collective sigh of relief has often taken the form of some permutation of the concluding lines of "The Hollow Men," lines which, written two decades too early, could have nothing to do with the nuclear threat. Yet, as Hugh Kenner points out, "The nature of [Eliot's] poetry is to appropriate anything that comes near," and we are left with a poem to which the bomb is somehow pertinent.

Among the collateral casualties of the atomic age was the mind of Europe. Andrew Sinclair states that "the age of nuclear fission decomposed English literature." Eliot had written "the most illuminating long series of poems of the war," but as the price of victory became apparent, he succumbed, with everyone else, to "a wish for oblivion," and turned to escapist comedies. Is Sinclair's assessment fair to the Eliot who declined to comment on the Spanish Civil War because he reportedly "disliked the idea of poets 'cashing in' on other people's misery"? Peter Ackroyd comments that Eliot's "scepticism about his own motives . . . made him refrain from [the] easy judgment or fashionable 'stand' in which others indulged." This idea parallels Paul Boyer's remark concerning post-Hiroshima artists: "Silence may have signaled not a failure of imagination, but . . . a recognition of the folly of two quickly trying to assimilate this monstrous novelty."

Yet Eliot was not completely silent. On August 24, 1945, he wrote to Philip Mairet in a tone reminiscent of "The Hollow Men." Depressed by the empty merriment of the V-Day celebrations of Japanese surrender after the atomic bombing, he feels trapped in London, where fireworks jar his nerves more than the Blitz had done,

and where he is a captive spectator to the frenzied rejoicing of young women. The letter's emphasis upon the Japanese betrays ambivalence about the victory. The Gunpowder Plotters failed in their attempt; does the atomic bombing signal the failure of civilization? Finally, Eliot's indignation at the girls' incarnation of "The Hollow Men's" parody of Maypole rites is palpable.

Moreover, Eliot played a part in the creation of a British Council of Churches Commission Report, *The ERA of Atomic Power* (1946). A letter from the Commission's chairman to Eliot reveals that he had critiqued drafts of the Report--negatively, it seems. Clues to his response survive in pencilled marking on a copy he gave his secretary, including grades assigned to chapters, and the words "nil/null" for the last two chapters. Eliot was apparently dissatisfied with the Report's tendency toward abstraction, especially with respect to the religious witness a Church Commission might be expected to articulate. Seldom does the Report approach the trenchancy of Eliot's call to the Church in his "Thoughts after Lambeth" (1931), to redeem the time through the coming dark ages, "to renew and rebuild civilization and preserve the World from suicide."

Eliot's decision not to speak publicly on the atomic bomb may stem from a sense that patience was the proper strategy in that dark hour. In "the conscious impotence of rage at human folly," he anticipates Denis Donoghue's wish to be spared "the embarrassment of having poets seek to influence [public] affairs." Yet Eliot's familiar compound ghost leaves us with a kind of valediction. Our concern for speech impels us to "urge the mind to aftersight and foresight." If Donoghue's quiescence strikes us as abdication, with Eliot we must not cease from exploration, distracted by the occasional bang, seduced by the urge to whimper.

David Huisman  
Grand Valley State University

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### A Land Larger than *The Waste Land*: The Literary Apocalypse

*Abstract*

As a means of surveying a literary work, I seek a tradition, with boundaries, structures, and elevations larger than the work itself. This tradition is a landscape in which the work is at home and gains significance from its surroundings.

An apocalypse is such a landscape for getting the lay of *The Waste Land*. An apocalypse is a revelation of the design of the cosmos through symbols

understandable to the faithful but hidden from others. I suppose that the members of the T.S. Eliot Society would constitute the "faithful" regarding the symbols of *The Waste Land*.

Is *The Waste Land* an apocalypse, is it merely apocalyptic, or is it something else? A most useful place to begin is with Northrop Frye's discussion of archetypal "apocalyptic" and "demonic" imagery in *Anatomy of Criticism* because his broad survey allows us to consider numerous possibilities concerning *The Waste Land* and the apocalyptic tradition(s) in a fairly simple fashion. "The apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion," says Frye, "presents, in the first place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire. . . ." "Opposed to the apocalyptic symbolism," Frye continues, "is the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects; a world of the nightmare, bondage, pain, and confusion . . . ."

Where does *The Waste Land* fit into this polarity, if at all? It is an effortless task to show "a world of the nightmare, bondage, pain, and confusion" in *The Waste Land* and to crosscheck its images with those cited by Frye as demonic: deserts, rocks and waste land; whirlpool; the world of fire as a world of malignant demons; the world of water as the water of death.

In contrast, it is demanding to find a single unequivocal apocalyptic image. "Water" is the only image in *The Waste Land* that Frye specifies as apocalyptic though "water" can also function as a demonic image, depending on context and interpretation. For example, in "What the Thunder Said," "Then a damp gust / Bringing rain" may function as apocalyptic hope for purification. On the other hand, these same images may be a mirage, a parody of an apocalypse, for a "damp gust" is hardly enough to cleanse and revive the wasteland nor is it comparable to ". . . the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city" of Revelation.

However, even a slight hope is enough to transform a wasteland into a paradise, depending on whether a reader finds such matters as a "damp rain" and "shantih, shantih, shantih" enough to extend the poem beyond demonic territory into an apocalyptic landscape. In any case, *The Waste Land* is a poetic aporia whose contested boundaries and elevations form the design of an apocalyptic mandala for contemplation. It is terra firma metaphor of the complexity of life itself at the highest levels of meaning--paradox, ambiguity, and utter mystical ignorance.

David Partenheimer  
Northeast Missouri State University

## T.S. ELIOT SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP LIST

December 1995

In this list of current members of the Society, an asterisk indicates that dues for 1996 have been paid. If no asterisk appears after your name, please send a check, and/or any queries concerning your dues, to William C. Charron, Treasurer, 709 S. Skinker Blvd, #401, St. Louis, MO 63105.

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