

# T. S. ELIOT SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

Number 37

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### Helen Vendler

#### 1999 Memorial Lecturer

Distinguished critic of modern poetry, Helen Vendler, A. Kingsley Porter University Professor of English at Harvard, will deliver the 20<sup>th</sup> Eliot Memorial Lecture at the Society's Annual Meeting in September.

### The 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of The T.S. Eliot Society

Gloucester MA, 24-26 September 1999

#### Call for Papers

The Society invites proposals for papers or presentations to be selected for the Annual Meeting in Gloucester on the theme "T.S. Eliot and New England: Historical Contexts." Papers on other topics are also welcome. Proposals articulating clearly the central aim or direction of the paper or presentation, should be forwarded to the President, Linda Wyman, 621-6 Woodlander, Jefferson City, MO 65101, USA. *Please bear in mind that our panel format allows no more than 20 minutes to each participant.* This year, shorter (12-15 minute), less formal presentations focusing on Eliot's experience in Gloucester/Cape Ann are invited for a public panel co-sponsored by the Gloucester Lyceum & Sawyer Free Library, with which the Society is cooperating. To be considered, proposals must be postmarked by June 15; notification of acceptance will be sent by July 15. The Society has a small fund to help defray expenses of graduate students and new PhDs whose paper are selected for presentation.

#### Conference Update

Society members, along with Gloucester community leaders, have been invited to a reception at "The Downs" on Edgemoor Road. Built by Henry Ware Eliot in 1896 (a date which appears among interesting graffiti in the attic), the house is being restored by its new owners to its earlier style. The Gloucester Lyceum & Sawyer Free Library is planning several events in addition to the panel mentioned above, including a multimedia performance celebrating Eliot's roots in Gloucester and Cape Ann, and an exhibit of Eliot memorabilia.

During our visit, the Cape Ann Historical Association, site of the 20<sup>th</sup> Memorial Lecture, will be exhibiting the work of American painter Stuart Davis. Entitled "Stuart Davis in Gloucester," the show will later travel to the Delaware Art Museum and the National Academy Gallery in New York.

#### Getting to Gloucester

Since there is no scheduled shuttle service, the Society is looking into organizing transportation from Logan Airport, Boston, to Gloucester for the Annual Meeting.. Tentative plans are to rent a van and pick up members at Logan in the afternoon and evening on Thursday and again in the morning and early afternoon on Friday. Return trips to Logan would be available Sunday afternoon upon the conclusion of our Dry Salvages boat tour. The price of this shuttle service will depend on the number of members who need it, but should be approximately the same as a typical limousine service. In order to organize this shuttle, the organizers will need to have reservations in advance of the event so as to know what size van to rent. Look for reservation information in the Summer newsletter.

It would also be helpful to know how many members will have private or rented cars at the meeting. That information will be required along with your conference registration. Meanwhile, direct questions about transportation to Ben Lockerd at (616) 247-6919 or [lockerb@gvsu.edu](mailto:lockerb@gvsu.edu). Address other questions about the conference to the Conference Coordinator, David Huisman, at (616) 452-0478.

## American Literature Association 10th Annual Conference

Baltimore, May 27 - May 30, 1999

As in other years, the Society has arranged for two interesting Eliot sessions at the 1999 ALA Meetings. Details follow.

Panel 1: Chair: Linda Wyman (Lincoln University). Panelists: Patricia H. Sloane (New York City Technical College of the City University of New York), "Notes on the Notes to *The Waste Land*"; Elisabeth Daümer (Eastern Michigan University), "Paradoxes of Gender and Genre in Eliot's Drawing Room Plays"; Pamela Ward (Catholic University of America), "Ludicism, the Sublime, and T. S. Eliot".

Panel 2: Chair: Elisabeth Daümer (Eastern Michigan University). Panelists: Elise B. Aasgaard (St. Louis University), "'Knowing Myself Yet Being Someone Other': The Double Persona in Eliot's *Four Quartets*"; Tony Moore (Boston University), "'Ah, Tom, one muse, one music': Lowell Blesses Himself in Eliot's Voice"; Madeleine A. Vala (University of Michigan), "*Four Quartets* as a Context for Rorem's 'Poems of Love and the Rain': A Study in Opposition, Chiasmus, and Coexistence".

### Information from ALA

Program Information: Once again, the ALA has attracted many of the most distinguished scholars of American literature, and we have a very full and exciting program. A tentative program has been posted on the website: <http://www.public.coe.edu/ala.html>. Some corrections and changes may be made to it during the next few weeks, and a corrected program will then be posted at the main ALA website which you can now find at: <http://humanities.byu.edu/ALA.html> or <http://english.byu.edu/cronin/ala.html>. Printed programs will be mailed in early May to all who pre-register.

Registration and Conference Fees: Please use the form [available at the internet address] to pre-register as soon as possible. Your pre-registration enables us to keep our conference fees very low. Everyone who pre-registers will be added to the mailing list automatically. Anyone else can be added to the mailing list for a one time charge of \$10. The conference fee is still only \$50 (\$10 for Graduate Students, Independent Scholars, and Retired Faculty). Please make your checks out to the American Literature Association and send them along with the registration form to Professor Alfred

Bendixen, ALA Director, English Department, California State University, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110.

Housing: It is vital that you make your hotel reservations immediately. The Renaissance Harborplace is offering Conference rates of: \$119 (single), \$129 (double), and \$149 (triple). First Night room deposit will be required with reservation. Cancellations may be made without penalty until May 13, 1999 and with a penalty charge after that date. For Reservations, please call the Harborplace Hotel at 410-547-1200 and ask for the American Literature Association rate. The Holiday Inn Express, 1401 Bloomfield Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21227 is also offering a conference rate of \$85 per night for a single or double as well as limited shuttle service to the conference hotel. For Reservations at the Holiday Inn Express, please call TRAVEL PROFESSIONALS at 888-293-9441.

ALA Conference Travel Information: You can receive a 10% discount on fares on American Airlines or U.S. Air if you make your reservations 60 days prior to departure. A 5% discount will be available for reservations made after March 24, 1999. To receive these discounts, please call: TRAVEL PROFESSIONALS at 888-293-9441 as soon as possible.

Further Conference Information: The conference will begin on Thursday evening, May 27, 1999 with an opening party. Sessions will be held on Friday, May 28, 1999 from 7:30 am until 7 p.m.; on Saturday May 29, 1999, from 8 am until 5:30 p.m.; and on Sunday from 8 am until 5:30 p.m. A closing party will take place at 5:30 on Sunday. The organizers and chairs of the various panels will inform all participants of program and registration information and make sure that their panels begin and end on time.

To have your books represented at the Book Exhibit, ask your publisher to contact Scholar's Choice or the AAUP, both of which will be organizing exhibits. The conference fee covers basic conference costs and two receptions; no meals are provided. Please note that the American Literature Association maintains the lowest conference fees of any major scholarly organization because it operates without a paid staff. We cannot help you find a roommate or spend a great deal of time answering personal phone calls.

If you have any questions that are not answered by this announcement or the websites, please contact the conference director Laura Skandera-Trombley at [lskander@coe.edu](mailto:lskander@coe.edu) or Alfred Bendixen, Executive Director of the ALA at [abendix@calstatela.edu](mailto:abendix@calstatela.edu).

### Submissions Invited

The Editor invites suitable submissions, proposals for book reviews, notes, and relevant news items for publication in the *Newsletter*. Copy sent in electronic format is particularly appreciated.

## Book Reviews

*T.S. Eliot and American Poetry* by Lee Oser.  
Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998.

T.S. Eliot was certainly an American, and he was also a poet. But "was he an *American* poet?" David Moody's answer in his recent book, *Tracing T.S. Eliot's Spirit* (1996), is a somewhat muffled 'yes.' Lee Oser's 'yes', like Eric Sigg's before him, is more assured and positive. Examining Eliot's papers as an *American* poet is not a new direction in Eliot criticism. Indeed it goes back to the 1930s, in, for example, F.O Matthiessen's *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (1935). It has been a persistent theme ever since.

Then again it needs saying that no critic has been foolish enough to seriously advance the view that Eliot is *not* an American poet but a *British* one. British critics, and Donald Davie more explicitly than most, have never been under any illusion of Eliot's brittle credentials as a British poet, and neither, as a self-anointed *metoikos* and *turdus migratorius*, was Eliot himself. Some American critical opinion, starting in the 1920s with William Carlos Williams, would perhaps *prefer* if he actually *were* a British poet (see, for a more recent example, Oser's polite rebuke of Helen Vendler [126]). But, for better or worse, America is stuck with him. And this, of course, is not a bad thing. We have had plenty of discussion of the European background, although I should add that a good book still remains to be written about Eliot as a *European* poet, not as a citizen of any particular European nation, but as a poet of that luminous country he called 'the mind of Europe.'

Eliot, then, *is* an American poet, although few have done the source and influence hunting necessary to put the matter on a sure footing. For that kind of richly detailed legwork we owe a debt to Lee Oser (and Eric Sigg in *The American T.S. Eliot* [1989] before him). *T.S. Eliot and American Poetry* traces the American Eliot beyond the early years (Sigg's area of concentration), taking the story through to *Four Quartets* and, in the last chapter, sounding the depth of Eliot's continuing presence in American poetry today. The book also amplifies and extends one of the most authoritative general source studies in the field, Grover Smith's *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: a Study in Sources and Meaning* (1956, 1974). Oser lays bare a whole new level of American cultural reference. Some of it is well-traveled territory (like the use of Henry Adams's *Education* in "Gerontion" [70-71]), but the richness and depth of detail should settle the matter of Eliot's essential Americanness for good.

To illustrate how Oser's book works to widen the notice of Smith's study, all you need do is look at some numbers. Compare, for instance, the number of references to Ralph Waldo Emerson in both scholars' indexes. Oser lists at least 45 separate references; Smith lists two. Oser discusses Emerson's importance to the making of Eliot's mind on over fifty pages, and that includes a whole chapter on the subject ("The Soul's Mysterious Errand" 104-25). Smith dispenses with Emerson in one page. Admittedly the two books cannot be so baldly (and crudely) compared, but it is interesting to see how much American material one perceptive and diligent scholar has been able to bring into critical contact with Eliot.

Numbers alone, of course, do not an argument make. How relevant or appropriate are Eliot's connections with American intellectual history, especially in its New England varieties? To what extent should we look to American antecedents, past the familiar influences that figure in the making of Eliot's verse — Laforgue, Donne, the Elizabethan dramatists, Baudelaire, Dante, other *trecentisti*, and Mallarmé to name only the most obvious? How firmly can Eliot be tied to his native roots? According to Oser very firmly indeed. And to a large extent I think Oser will carry most of his readers with him.

But some words of caution. A good deal of the influence, which he elaborates, is negative. Eliot is often found (once again) to be rejecting aspects of the cultural and intellectual milieu in which he grew up. This is, of course, a commonplace and Oser puts himself in the position of having to imply that the apostasy was wider, deeper, and stronger than we ever imagined. Because of the more explicit presence of European figures in Eliot's poetry and prose, Oser also has to argue for what he calls "American subtexts" that "accompany English [or other foreign] topics"(30). Whether in any particular case the "American subtext" is present in critically important ways requires careful assessment.

In most cases, Oser is excellent on these undercurrents. In "Lost Kingdoms" (Chapter 5), the elucidation of what he calls "late-Puritan anomie"(89) in the poetry from "Hollow Men" to *Ash-Wednesday* is intriguing. Occasionally, however, his arguments seem strained, as in his attempt to show 'affinities between Charlotte Eliot's poem "The Wednesday Club" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (31-34). His explication of "the Emersonian aspects of *Four Quartets*" (108) seems now and again to verge on wishful thinking.

One final point is worth making about the pursuit of the American Eliot. Oser seems to have taken the approach of the intellectual historian about as far as it can go. Certainly there will be further refinement of the

issues his book raises, but it seems to me that the most interesting advances in the discovery of the American Eliot are being made in the area of Eliot's debt to popular American culture at the turn of the last century. Judging from the activities of some younger scholars and critics, I suspect the first authoritative account of those connections is already under way. This should tell us not only something about the mind that could produce "Portrait of a Lady", but the mind that gave us the Bolo poems as well.

John Xiros Cooper  
*University of British Columbia*

***T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover* by Donald J. Childs. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.**

Readers interested in knowing more about Eliot's mysticism and how it works itself out in his essays and poetry would be well advised to read Donald Childs' *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover*. In this book, Childs examines Eliot's intellectual engagement with mysticism and demonstrates that the poet's interest was more than academic: he had his own mystical experiences which were a consequence of his failed human relationships. Childs moves with dexterity from Eliot's philosophy and biography to his poems and essays, linking them together in imaginative and unexpected ways.

Childs applies Eliot's depiction of Ealdrop (from his story "Ealdrop and Appleplex") as "a sceptic with a taste for mysticism" (p. 1) to Eliot himself. Clearly, the poet was ambivalent about mysticism for most of his life, drawn to its potential to mediate the spiritual and material realms while being skeptical about its lack of clarity and intellectual rigor. Eliot's contradictions are contradictory only in appearance, Childs argues, as they trace a spiritual development from which emerges an increasingly clear definition of what constitutes a mystical experience. In his student days at Harvard, Eliot defined mysticism by distinguishing it from the more popular and less critical forms of the occult (such as seances, fortune-telling, etc.). Further spiritual explorations led the poet to discover Bergsonian mysticism in Paris, where in 1910-11 he underwent a "temporary conversion" to Bergsonism. His extensive research on Christian mysticism in 1913-14, particularly Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, brought him to the brink of conversion to Catholicism. Though in light of his Christian spirituality he renounced Bergsonism as "a weakling mysticism," it clearly had a tremendous influence on the poet's subsequent thought.

The book's most intriguing and convincing premise is that the mystical moments in *The Waste Land* arise from the discovery of the "absolute void between one human being and another" (p. 107). Each of the four mystical moments Childs identifies in the poem results from contemplating the silence or void at the center of human relationships and the disparity between imagined or potential passion and any actualization of it. For support, the book launches into an extended psycho-biographical analysis of Eliot's troubled relationship with his first wife Vivien and his nostalgia for a time when his relationship with the real-life "hyacinth girl," Emily Hale, might have succeeded. The words uttered by the speaker in the hyacinth girl scene--"I was neither/ Living nor dead"--are the same words Dante uttered when he saw Satan. As a result, Childs concludes that perhaps the hyacinth girl, representing the material world, is antithetical to the speaker's spiritual fulfillment, which would explain the perceived need to cut her off.

The book's failure to define how it understands mysticism, however, is troublesome. Childs hides behind Eliot here, claiming that his project will be to point out how Eliot's mysticism emerges. But without his own working definition, how will he recognize it when he sees it? How, for example, does he identify the four mystical moments in *The Waste Land*? The reader, asked to go along as mysticism ranges from "an attitude toward the mystery of life" (p. 44) to "the loathing and horror of life itself" (p. 149), is likely to get as frustrated with the vague use of the word as Eliot did when he griped that "mystical may be almost anything" (p. 72). This failure to define mysticism is particularly problematic when it allows for the possibility of Eliot's constructing his "visions of human emptiness and depravity" (p. xx) as mystical experiences. By not defining the term, Childs does not clearly dissociate himself from Eliot's "mystical misogyny" (p. xx), causing his use of Luce Irigaray to be suspect.

In addition, the complexity of the book's philosophical arguments, together with the continual doublings-back and contradictions in Eliot's thought, risks losing the reader in the void at the center of the author-reader relationship. Even complex material can be discussed clearly; Childs would have done well to pay more attention to articulating his argument in a fully elaborated introduction linking the individual chapters. The stylistic and structural complexity of the book make a conceptually difficult subject even more elusive. If, however, the reader can stay afloat on Childs' journey into the heart of light, she will be treated to some savvy

readings of Eliot in which critical attention is paid to the gap between what Eliot says and what he means. It's certainly an enriching ride.

Nancy Goldfarb  
*Western Kentucky University*

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**Member News:** Robert Fleissner has just published *Shakespeare and the Matter of the Crux: Textual, Topical, Onomastic, Authorial, and Other Puzzlements* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).

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## Modernist Studies Association An Announcement

Dear Colleagues,

I'm writing to you as a member of the steering committee of the newly formed Modernist Studies Association, which is designed to bring together scholars who are working on all facets of literary and cultural activity between the later 19th- and the mid- 20th century. I hope that you will agree that the following announcement is appropriate for The T.S. Eliot Society's *Newsletter*.

The inaugural conference of the new association will take place October 7-10, 1999 at Penn State University (University Park). The title of the conference, "The New Modernisms," speaks to the revitalization and the variety of new developments in the field over the last several years. At our first conference, we will run sessions on topics such as the expansion of the modernist canon, particularly in light of recent concerns with race, class, gender, region, and ethnicity; the "postmodern" reevaluation of modernism; the new interest in modernism, science, and technology; the reassessment of the socio-political contexts of modernism; issues of nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism; the marketing of modernism; the impact of new editorial principles and procedures; and new approaches to the relations among the various arts and sciences of the era.

You should be hearing about the conference over the next few months. We'll be distributing flyers over the next month or so, and the official conference brochure, which will contain a call for papers and a registration form, will appear in early spring. You can also check out our website (still under construction) at <http://www.psu.edu/dept/english/MSA/msa.htm>.

For further information, feel free to contact me or any one of the conference planners:

Michael Coyle ([mcoyle@mail.colgate.edu](mailto:mcoyle@mail.colgate.edu)),  
Cassandra Laity ([CLAITY@drew.edu](mailto:CLAITY@drew.edu)),  
Gail McDonald ([g\\_mcdona@uncg.edu](mailto:g_mcdona@uncg.edu)),

Sanford Schwartz ([sxs8@psu.edu](mailto:sxs8@psu.edu)).

Since we are still in the process of constructing our mailing list, I wondered if you could suggest the names of several colleagues (along with their institutional affiliations and e-mail addresses if you have them) who might be interested in the organization and the conference. I or one of the other members of the steering committee would be happy to contact them. I hope to see some of you next October.

Michael Coyle, Colgate University

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## FOR HELP WITH SOCIETY MATTERS

To submit papers for any reading session sponsored by the Society, or to make suggestions or inquiries regarding the annual meeting or other Society activities, please contact the president:

Linda Wyman  
621-6 Woodlander, Jefferson City, MO 65101  
(573) 681-5233 (office), (573) 634-5431 (home)  
FAX: (573) 681-5040; email: [wymanl@lincolnu.edu](mailto:wymanl@lincolnu.edu)

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To pay dues, inquire about membership, report a change of address, or report failure to receive the *Newsletter*, please contact the treasurer:

William Charron  
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Grover Smith  
2 Silver Maple Court, Durham, NC 27705  
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