

## Report on 2017 T. S. Eliot International Summer Institute

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Unlike many of my peers at the T. S. Eliot Summer Institute, I am not a scholar specializing on Eliot. Nonetheless, in my first year of graduate school at Emory University, I had written about the first Indian language translation of *The Waste Land*. As an international student from India, I had been delighted to find in Emory's library a volume of Odia poems titled *Poda Bhui O Anyanya Kabita (The Waste Land and Other Poems)*. The volume, published in 1956, came with an English preface by Eliot, in which he wrote about the reception and interpretation of his poems by readers who could not understand English. When I was an undergraduate in India, I had been mesmerized by "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but my later research as a graduate student helped me appreciate how in Odisha—a small state in Eastern India, thousands of miles away from London—poets and scholars tried to find a place in Eliot's tradition. In the summer of 2017, I was scheduled to be traveling in India, partly for research on my dissertation, which is on the reception of English education in colonial India. When I saw the notice for the Eliot summer school, I applied and was awarded a generous bursary to attend the school, which would also be my first trip to Europe. As I sat in the Departure Lounge of Delhi's Indira Gandhi airport, my excitement was tinged with apprehension. I was an Indian student of English literature going to London, a city that had been the heart of imperial and literary power, but I was not an expert on Eliot, the poet and critic I had long admired.

My fears were completely misplaced. Today, I count my time at the Institute among the most intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling I have ever spent at any institute. I came to London as a summer school veteran of sorts, having attended two iterations of the Theory-Praxis course run by Prof. Prafulla Kar, and one of the Institute for World Literature at Harvard University. Unlike those four-week courses, the Eliot Institute was shorter, clocking in at one week, but it was also marked by its focus on one writer, and it was this immersion in the cultural world of Eliot that I found most valuable, at least as much as the seminar and lectures I attended. The Institute gave me a chance to hear the world's foremost Eliot scholars talk about

reading and interpreting Eliot's words, and to visit the places that inspired those words.

The institute began on Saturday evening with a lecture by Alan Jenkins, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Mr. Jenkins began with a famous line from *The Waste Land*, "the awful daring of a moment's surrender," weaving a rich tapestry with quotations drawn from Eliot's letters, criticism and poetry. The most telling quotation was Eliot's 1935 letter to Stephen Spender in which Eliot argued that it was wrong to criticize an author to whom one had not surrendered oneself. Even as Eliot described reading as a process of giving oneself up and recovering oneself, he also maintained that "the recovered self was never the same" as the surrendered self (letter of 9 May 1935, qtd. *Poems* 1 701). These words formed an appropriate beginning to the Institute in which we would surrender ourselves, recover, and then, say something about Thomas Stearns Eliot.

The following six days were spent attending lectures and seminars, most memorable among which were Ron Schuchard on "The Man Who Suffers in *The Waste Land*"; Sir Christopher Ricks on Eliot and Bob Dylan; and Robert Crawford on autobiography and Eliot's poems. Two former students of the Eliot Summer Institute, Aviva Dautch and Oline Eaton, designed an exercise in which students were asked to read entries from the *Complete Prose*, and to make brief presentations on how the project shed new light on commonly held assumptions. I found a 1930 BBC radio lecture Eliot wrote, titled "Rhyme and Reason: The Poetry of John Donne." In direct contrast to his 1921 review of Grierson's anthology, the later Eliot called Donne a great but failed poet, attributing this failure to "a lack of belief."

We found ample cause to reflect on "belief" when on the sixth day we visited Burnt Norton. Robert Crawford read *Burnt Norton*, and Robert von Hallberg gave the annual *Burnt Norton* lecture. In a deeply moving speech, Professor Hallberg described what he called Eliot's "late style," defined as a more "prosaic" form of poetry, which allowed Eliot to reflect on matters of belief, matters which had become too urgent to be explored in the earlier style of, say, the *Prufrock* poems.

By the time it ended, the Institute had made me feel less of an outsider in the heart of London, a city where the outsider Eliot had also found a cultural home of sorts. Even though I came from a place outside England, where "prayer" had been equally "valid," I returned with a renewed appreciation for the reasons that made one poet pronounce, in one poem, that "History is now and England."