

**THE LETTERS
OF T.S. ELIOT**
VOLUME 5:
1930–1931



EDITED BY VALERIE ELIOT
AND JOHN HAFFENDEN

THE LETTERS OF T. S. ELIOT
VOLUME 5

By T. S. Eliot
THE COMPLETE POEMS AND PLAYS

verse

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FOUR QUARTETS°
THE WASTE LAND AND OTHER POEMS

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THE LETTERS OF
T. S. Eliot
EDITED BY
VALERIE ELIOT
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JOHN HAFFENDEN

VOLUME 5
1930–1931

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PREFACE

Volume 5 of the *Letters of T. S. Eliot* documents a period of two years in which the poet, critic and editor endeavours, between the ages of forty-two and forty-four, to place his newly avowed faith in Christianity – ‘the Catholic Church in England’, as he knowingly styles it – at the centre of his life. He tries too to express in his poetry some of the deepest and harshest implications of his faith, including a struggle with renunciation and a reaching for transcendence.

It is a tough time for Eliot, morally and socially. Several of his friends and associates, including Virginia Woolf, Herbert Read and A. L. Rowse, are at odds with his religious commitment; some are even antagonistic or patronising. ‘Anyone who has been moving among intellectual circles and comes to the Church, may experience an odd and rather exhilarating feeling of isolation,’ he remarks, though the sense of alienation is probably more upsetting than he would admit. The strain is both social and personal. He finds in his religion not devotional delight and balm, but a locus of moral and spiritual struggle very like that of the ‘dark night of the soul’ of the Spanish mystic St John of the Cross. ‘To me,’ Eliot writes, ‘religion has brought . . . not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery: the very dark night and the desert.’ And he tells his friend John Hayward: ‘I know just enough . . . of “the peace of God” to know that it is an extraordinarily painful blessing.’ Becoming a Christian means embracing a rigorous ascetic vocation: ‘Thought, study, mortification, sacrifice.’ The Church is for him fundamentally an institution of order and authority, with ‘fixity of dogma’. To William Force Stead he writes: ‘The man who disbelieves in any future life whatever is also a believer in Hell . . . People go to Hell, I take it, because they choose to; they cannot get out because they cannot change themselves.’ Thus his demanding faith gives ultimate meaning and purpose to his life: now and again in his earlier years, he discloses at this time, he had felt ‘on the verge of insanity or imbecility . . . If I had died even five years ago [that is to say, before he became a Christian in 1927], everything that I had suffered up to then would, so far as I can see, have been waste and muddle.’

Eliot becomes an active participant in Church counsels; joins the Literature Committee of the English Church Union, and undertakes to be a ‘Departmental Editor’ on a projected *Encyclopaedia of the Christian Religion*. In January 1931 he makes his first retreat at the Society of the Sacred Mission, at Kelham in Nottinghamshire. He becomes acquainted with the journalist and writer on mysticism Evelyn Underhill, and entertains at home in London the American journalist and like-minded philosopher Paul Elmer More, whom he considers ‘extremely kind . . . loveable’. More momentarily, he gains authority as a critical apologist for Church doctrine and deliberations, when he publishes in March 1931 an outspoken pamphlet in the ‘Criterion Miscellany’ series entitled, with deceptive mildness, *Thoughts After Lambeth*. This brief, sharp essay on the arguments and resolutions of the 300 bishops

assembled at the Lambeth Palace Conference of 1930 is written with advice from senior clergy including William Temple, Archbishop of York (and future Archbishop of Canterbury), who approve the value of Eliot's strictures on Christian doctrine. 'The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilised but non-Christian mentality,' writes Eliot at the outset of the 1930s:

The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from Suicide.

He composes during this period two of his most tantalising and admired poems. The first is the multilayered, hallucinatory, talismanic, prayerful and penitential set of six lyrics entitled *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) – initially dedicated 'To My Wife' – which he characterises as a 'deliberate modern *Vita Nuova*':

Redeem

The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream
While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.
[. . .]
Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken

Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew

And after this our exile

While denying that this sequence is 'devotional', he humbly declares that 'it attempts to state a particular phase of the progress of one person' – that is to say, 'an intermediate phase' of his own spiritual development. It is about 'the experience of man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal'. If it is obscure, he says, he hopes that it expresses a 'good' kind of obscurity – 'the obscurity of any flower: something simple and to be simply enjoyed, but merely incomprehensible as anything living is incomprehensible'.

The other great lyric of this period is the beautifully tactful, wondrous *Marina* (1930). 'The theme is paternity,' he explains: the poem functions as 'a comment on the Recognition Motive in Shakespeare's later plays'. In addition, the first part of the satirical–political and personal nightmare of *Coriolan*, entitled 'Triumphal March', is published in October 1931, with illustrations by the fine artist and designer E. McKnight Kauffer. 'Difficulties of a Statesman' (the second part of *Coriolan*) appears in the French periodical *Commerce*. Eliot publishes too his translation of *Anabase*, by St-John Perse (*nom de plume* of the French diplomat Alexis St Léger Léger).

Eliot's output as critic and lecturer remains as high as ever, despite – and perhaps because of – a home life that is perennially edgy and distressing. He writes an Introduction to Christopher Isherwood's 'bad' translation of Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes*. He delivers a series of six radio talks on seventeenth-century poetry, covering aspects of the work of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, Traherne, Marvell, Milton,

Cowley and Dryden. He writes an introduction to G. Wilson Knight's study of Shakespeare, *The Wheel of Fire*; an introduction to Johnson's *London: A Poem and The Vanity of Human Wishes*; and an introduction to Pascal's *Pensées*, for the Everyman Library. He admires what he terms Pascal's 'unique combination and balance of qualities'. He also contributes three BBC talks to mark the tercentenary of the birth of John Dryden. And he publishes in an American anthology the influential essay 'Donne in Our Time'. Eliot pronounces there: 'Donne was, I insist, no sceptic.'

In his professional career, as a director of Faber & Faber and editor of the small-circulation but influential periodical *The Criterion*, he remarks, with ironic asperity: 'I am not really interested in contemporary literature to begin with, and it frequently happens that what I do like is, by a natural coincidence, published by my own firm.' Despite affecting occasional jadedness – 'Qua publisher I always take a depressed attitude about verse' – he continues to prove himself one of the greatest talent-spotters of the century. In the period covered by this volume of letters, he promptly recognises the talents of the new generation of poets headed by W. H. Auden ('I have been struck from the beginning, not only by his remarkable literary abilities, but by his general activity and curiosity of mind and variety of intellectual interests'), Stephen Spender ('I have hopes, but he is a mere nurseling'), and Louis MacNeice (whose poetry he finds 'very interesting', although he will wait until 1935 to publish MacNeice's collection *Poems*). He prints Auden's *Paid on Both Sides* in the *Criterion*, and brings out Auden's first collection *Poems* from Faber & Faber later the same year. 'Publishing is more venturesome than banking,' he tells an old colleague at Lloyds; and as if to prove the point, he encourages his fellow directors at Faber & Faber to put out James Joyce's *Haveth Childers Everywhere* (the complete work, *Finnegans Wake*, lies some years in the future). But perhaps the one slip of the period occurs when Eliot and his fellow directors turn down a proposal by Eric Blair (George Orwell) to translate from the French a Zolaesque fiction about a Parisian prostitute by Jacques Roberti entitled *À la Belle de Nuit*. (Blair says he is quite familiar with the milieu and the slang made use of in the novel, but that does not avail him.)

In his capacity as mentor and fosterer of upcoming writers, Eliot meets and likes Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of C. M. Grieve). He invites Marianne Moore to contribute to the *Criterion*. He delights in making friends with the curious, charismatic poet Ralph Hodgson. He writes introductions for Seán Ó'Faoláin (among others), with a view to securing for him a foothold in literary journalism and publishing. In addition, he inaugurates regular meetings of the 'Criterion Club' – some of them held at Harold Monro's famous 'Poetry Bookshop' opposite the British Museum – for getting together with regular contributors to the *Criterion* including Bonamy Dobrée and Herbert Read, and with the guests whom they wish to cultivate (they include William Empson).

The domestic background to all this successful professional enterprise remains disrupted and distressing. Virginia Woolf, one of the witnesses to the continuing torment of the Eliots' marriage, relates in her diary that 'Poor Tom is all suspicion, hesitation and reserve . . . There is a leaden sinister look about him. But oh – Vivienne! Was there ever such a torture since life began! . . . This bag of ferrets is what Tom wears round his neck.' According to another friend, Vivien is 'positively

hostile' to Eliot's involvement in religious affairs, deriding them as 'monastic'. It is perhaps symptomatic of the mutual discontent of Eliot and his wife that they cannot settle on a place to live in peace: they move house every few months, from 177 Clarence Gate Gardens (near Regent's Park) to 43 Chester Terrace (close to Eaton Square), and then back to 68 Clarence Gate Gardens. After dining with the couple, Eliot's old friend Conrad Aiken gossips that he found Vivien 'shivering, shuddering, a scarecrow of a woman' who 'directed at T[om] a cold stream of hatred'. Vivien reports feeling a 'fearful shock' when her brother Maurice suddenly marries, without notice, a young American named Ahmé Hoagland. Eliot confirms that this event has 'desolated' her. (Perhaps her brother's rush to marry a young American revives in her sorry feelings about her own rushed and secretive marriage to Eliot in 1915.) Eliot seeks to encourage her to develop independence and her own circle of acquaintance, and strives to ensure that friends including Ottoline Morrell, Mary Hutchinson and Alida Monro see as much as possible of Vivien by herself: 'the more people she can see without me the more people I might be able to see without her!' Having said so much, he promptly rephrases the observation more positively: 'If she can be persuaded to believe that people she likes want to see her, the more self-confidence and independence she might acquire.' The American academic Willard Thorp, who visits the Eliots at home in London at this time, notes that Eliot is obliged to deal with Vivien 'like a patient father with a fractious child'.

A respite from the developing moral void of his home life is held out by an irresistible offer from Harvard University that he become Charles Eliot Norton Lecturer for the academic year 1932–3. Eliot promptly resolves to go there alone. Whether or not he sees this development as a chance to leave Vivien for good cannot be known at this stage. For the time being, as another friend, Robert Sencourt, remarks, Eliot strives diligently to 'establish serenity between them'.

JOHN HAFFENDEN
2014

VALERIE ELIOT EDITING THE LETTERS

The Letters of T. S. Eliot owes everything to Valerie Eliot (1926–2012). She had been Eliot's greatest fan ever since, aged fourteen, she listened to a recording of 'Journey of the Magi' played to the class by her English teacher at St Anne's School, Reading. From that moment Valerie Fletcher (as she then was) felt a spiritual connection. 'I was overwhelmed by it,' she wrote. 'I remember intense excitement, as though a bomb had exploded under me. I knew something had happened, I knew this was different.' One of the first things she read by Eliot was his self-revealing introduction to the *Collected Poems of Harold Monro* (1933): 'There is no way out. There never is. The compensations for being a poet are grossly exaggerated; and they dwindle as one becomes older, and the shadows lengthen and the solitude becomes harder to endure.' It moved her profoundly. 'It was extraordinary that I felt I just *had* to get to Tom, to work with him. That introduction to Monro's poems haunted me.' Later, she sought out ways of working for him, and she hoped to become his secretary. For a year after leaving school, 1945–6, she worked in the Rare Manuscript Library of the Brotherton Library at Leeds University; and in 1948–9 she was secretary to the author Charles Morgan. However, her passion for all things Eliotic persisted, and became something of a family joke; and even Dylan Thomas – for whom she did occasional secretarial work in the late 1940s – knew her open secret. He was going to see Eliot at his office, Thomas told Valerie one day. 'What is it worth to you if I push his secretary down the stairs?' In time, astonishingly, a tip-off from a family friend meant that she did secure the position as Eliot's secretary, in 1949, and she acquitted herself admirably in the job. She revered the man and his work, and she came to love him – though she did not tell her love. Eliot considered her the best secretary he had ever had, and favoured her so far as to give her an introduction to Max Beerbohm one summer when she was holidaying in Rapallo. However, after seven years of working with Valerie, his admiration grew into deep love, and the 68-year-old Eliot found the courage to propose to her by letter – 'Dear Miss Fletcher' – in November 1956. They were married at St Barnabas Church, Addison Road, London, on 10 January 1957 (when Valerie was just thirty). The marriage lasted for eight years – 'minus four days', as Valerie would poignantly say – and it brought them both the most intense happiness.

T. S. Eliot enjoyed reading the letters of many writers from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Baron von Hügel to James Joyce, and he shared his enjoyment with Valerie: they would often read aloud to one another. She it was who kept on pleasantly pestering him about his own letters, and her enthusiasm for having them published at some point. Taking the hint, the uxorious Eliot came to agree that she might in due time make a selection – posthumously. In a memo to his executors, signed in December 1960 – indeed, it was set down earlier than one might imagine – he stipulated: 'I do not wish my Executors to facilitate or countenance the writing of any biography of me.' However, he went directly on to authorise an edition of his selected letters – 'if the selection is made by my wife'. (In June 1970 Valerie would tell T. S.

Matthews: ‘It was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him not to ban the publication of his letters.’) In the same memo, Eliot expressed his loving faith in his wife, though not without mentioning the hope, or the heavy hint, that she would safeguard his interests exactly as he saw them. ‘I wish my wife Esmé Valerie Eliot to have sole control over my correspondence, to preserve or destroy letters written to me, and copies of letters written by me, at her discretion.’

Widowed at thirty-eight, Valerie dedicated the best part of the remainder of her life – nigh on fifty years – to recovering as many of her husband’s letters as possible. ‘I suppose it’s an emotional outlet, if I’m honest,’ she once said. ‘I’ve put everything into it.’

Originally, long before he met Valerie, the very thought that anyone might publish his letters went wholly against the poet’s wishes. He dreaded in particular the likelihood that the story of his unremittingly unhappy private life with Vivien Haigh-Wood Eliot (1888–1947) – from whom he formally separated in 1933, but from whom he was not to be divorced – might one day be played out for a curious public.

So too, when he learned, late in life, that his intimate friend Emily Hale had placed all of the letters he had written to her – more than a thousand, covering thirty years of their relationship – in the Firestone Library of Princeton University, so ensuring that they would be preserved for the interest and instruction of posterity, he reproached her with some vehemence:

I have the greatest dislike to revealing my private affairs to the public now or at any time merely because of my importance in the world of letters whatever that may be. I have indeed no desire to give information about my private life to the scholars and biographers who have nothing better to do than pry into the biographies of men of letters, and I am afraid that in the same spirit I have destroyed your letters to myself. The thought that posterity may be interested in my work naturally gives me some pleasure but not the thought of posterity being interested in my private life.

It did not seem to occur to Eliot that what he thought a selfish and tasteless decision on her part might well have been meant as a generous tribute to him. It was an unusually ill-tempered letter, begotten by shock. Those letters were to be embargoed until fifty years after Emily’s death; but Eliot could scarcely countenance even the idea that an archivist, in a professional capacity, might read his private letters and keep the confidence.

To Ann Bowden, at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Eliot wrote in August 1961 in more measured vein on a related subject: ‘As for the Aldington correspondence, I appreciate your interest in these letters but I cannot at present adjust my mind to the publication of any volume of my correspondence during my lifetime. It seems to me that this is a matter better left to my executors, and perhaps even better to a remote posterity, if that remote posterity is still interested in my correspondence . . .’ With the writer Richard Aldington he had enjoyed a close but at times warily ambivalent relationship through the 1920s, only for the friendship to be betrayed by the publication of Aldington’s spiteful lampoon *Stepping Heavenward* (the present volume details that particular falling-out, and the enmity that ensued). At least in his dealings with third parties, therefore, Eliot was realistic enough to appreciate that a selection of his letters was bound to be published at some time.

We know that Eliot himself destroyed some batches of letters written by himself, and indeed some written to him (including perhaps most of Emily Hale's: a few have survived); and we must suppose he destroyed, or arranged to destroy, others. It seems possible, for example, that a box of papers faithfully burned by his editorial colleague Peter du Sautoy at Eliot's direction included some letters from Eliot's first wife Vivien. In addition, Eliot's bibliographer Donald Gallup informed Valerie on 9 November 1987, 'I remember Theresa telling me that she and Tom burned most of Tom's letters to Henry.' (Theresa Eliot was T. S. Eliot's sister-in-law: the wife of his older brother Henry.) Similarly, following the death of Eliot's mother Charlotte in 1929, Henry returned to his brother a number of the letters he had written to her; and Eliot told Henry on 25 May 1930: 'I am glad to have the letters to make ashes of. I should never have wanted to read them again, with all the folly and selfishness; and I don't want anyone else ever to read them and possibly print them; and if I could destroy every letter I have ever written in my life I would do so before I die. I should like to leave as little biography as possible.'

However, since Eliot made his firm decision to allow his wife to edit the letters as early as 1960, it seems likely that he grew much warmer towards the project during his declining years as he came to appreciate Valerie's passion for it. Her joy was his greatest gratification. The journalist Michael Davie, in a profile of Valerie Eliot published in the *Observer* on 15 May 1983, reported: 'Mrs Eliot told me a moving thing. "Tom did destroy a lot of letters. He told me, "If I had known I was going to marry you, I wouldn't have done it."'"

Notwithstanding Eliot's gentle promptings in the memo to his executors quoted above, I have come across no evidence to suggest that Valerie destroyed any letter written by Eliot. Everything in her temperament and conduct points to her wish to conserve everything written by her late husband. Morally, she was incapable of junking any piece of paper on which he had written anything. My conviction in this regard is supported by Karen Christensen, who worked as Mrs Eliot's assistant in the 1980s – and who is in certain respects critical of her ways and means – in an article entitled 'Dear Mrs Eliot . . .' (*The Guardian*, 29 Jan. 2005): 'it would have been impossible for her to destroy anything of Eliot's'. And Valerie offered her own testimony, which I believe to be reliable, in March 1969: 'I was . . . to destroy papers at my discretion, but this I have not done.'

Innumerable carbon copies of the letters Eliot posted from Faber & Faber, following his appointment as director in 1925, are kept in the Faber Archive. The archive, then, was Valerie's first recourse – and at Faber's, in the days before the firm took on a full-time archivist, the tactful editor John Bodley would be tasked to help her hunt down obscure items in neglected corners. But Valerie quickly realised that the carbons did not always tell the full story, since Eliot often 'had the blithe habit' (as she put it to Frederick Tomlin in 1977) of making holograph additions and emendations to the top copies which were not routinely recorded on the carbon copies. Thus her necessary objective was to track down the signed originals wherever possible.

Further problems came to daunt her: 'up to 1925, when my husband went to Faber's,' she wrote in a letter, 'he was casual about keeping copies of letters and many of them were written by hand, too. So a good deal of time has to be spent in seeking

the whereabouts of the early ones. Many of the correspondents, too, are now dead, and they were not necessarily writers of importance whose papers have been preserved, or are easily available.’ She was referring in particular to the early years when Eliot edited the *Criterion* – before the periodical was adopted by Messrs Faber & Gwyer Ltd – and when he wrote many letters by hand. (He had a very legible hand, but in later years he would always prefer to write a letter on the typewriter, blaming writer’s cramp.) Consequently, before the age of the computer and the internet, Valerie had to write hundreds of blind letters of enquiry to widows, children or associates, and even to remote possible connections, and to hunt down wills at Somerset House. In the beginning she had little idea as to which libraries in the UK and elsewhere held major and minor collections; she knew of the foremost Eliot holdings at King’s College, Cambridge, and at Harvard and Texas (which she had visited with her husband), but not much else. Richard Ellmann (who had once hoped to be able to write a biography of Eliot’s early life, up to the period of *The Waste Land*) obliged her by typing out a comprehensive but not exhaustive list of US research libraries. Thus the track of her work for years to come was immediately laid down; as she told an American friend in May 1966:

I am kept busy answering a large correspondence about Tom and his work and I foresee that I shall be trampled under foot and vituperation (when permission is withheld!) by the increasing number of would-be PhDs who want access to Tom’s unpublished papers. And I chase round the world (metaphorically speaking) after his letters. Some were sold in a New York saleroom recently and have gone to earth in the University of Texas who have kindly supplied me with copies. There is a fair amount of detective work involved as I look up wills in order to trace the estate of deceased friends and writers to whom Tom wrote. I find it satisfying and moving to see the picture of him that emerges in his own words over the years but one cries too over his anguish at certain periods.

As that last phrase indicates, the pursuit of the letters was by no means a disinterested academic exercise. It was emotionally taxing, often exhausting, as she lived with him, in all the troubles and triumphs of his earlier life, through all the months of her grieving widowhood. Her work on the letters, she told another correspondent, was ‘occasionally rather desolating, when Tom is describing his current troubles’. Yet she never failed to find her vocation invaluable and fulfilling. ‘It’s fun,’ she would say. ‘It’s very exciting to recover him in this way.’ She became addicted to the research; it was all-consuming, and she relished in particular that ‘detective element’. As Michael Davie reported in 1983, ‘Mrs Eliot is not being dilatory. She works seven days a week, absorbed by the chase.’

The editing and annotating were demanding work, too: she told her intimate friend Mary Lascelles on one occasion: ‘It is a Ulalume sort of day, wet too, and . . . this morning was spent grappling with an article on “A Method of Rearranging the Positive Integers in a Series of Ordinal Numbers Greater than That of Any Given Fundamental Sequence of Ω ”, in order to annotate a letter from Tom to Norbert Wiener, the “father” of cybernetics. This editorial work is an excellent discipline but how my imagination longs to have its way!’ However, at other times – since she had a great sense of humour, and a love of gossip and anecdote – she thoroughly enjoyed the chase after teasing references that might never be solved. For example, she told her friend Carol Rothkopf in 1975: ‘I am thinking of offering a prize for the solution of the following: the carbon of a letter to a Dr Moore: “I return herewith with my humblest apologies