
The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 8: 1936-1938,
Ed. John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, 2019)

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It is well known that, in recent decades, the reputation and legacy of T.S. Eliot as one of the twentieth-century's foremost literary figures, who was also devoutly "anglo-catholic in religion", have been controversially shaken by criticism and characterization of Eliot as a man and writer tainted by such prejudices as anti-Semitism, misogyny and racism.¹² Among the most disturbing portrayals of, and assertions about, Eliot have been those concerning the alleged mistreatment of his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood – in particular, her abandonment and committal to a psychiatric asylum. Notable examples have been the play *Tom and Viv* (1984) by Michael Hastings and the subsequent film (1994) directed by Brian Gilbert; and the biography *Painted Shadow: The Life of Vivienne Eliot, First Wife of T.S. Eliot, and the Long-Suppressed Truth About Her*

¹² T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), ix.

Influence on His Genius (2001) by Carole Seymour-Jones. Moreover, in the authoritative and acclaimed *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (1998, revised edition 2012), Lyndall Gordon's clarification that Eliot "was not directly involved in her committal" nevertheless leads to an ultimately damning assessment:

He did, though, take the view that it was done for Vivienne's own good. This was no doubt a view shared by all the men who ruled Vivienne's affairs at this point – and Eliot did rule one essential area. What seems still questionable is that though Eliot had washed his hands of Vivienne, he became an executor, with Maurice, of the Haigh-Wood estate, which means that he authorised the use of Vivienne's own money to pay the costs of a life imprisonment that was undoubtedly convenient for him.¹³

Unsurprisingly, therefore, with the latest volume of letters covering the key period 1936-1938 in which Vivienne's fate was sealed, the succinct yet wide-ranging preface by John Haffenden begins by highlighting Eliot's correspondence

¹³ Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (1998; London: Virago, 2012), 302.

relating to his avoidance of her and to her committal. This prioritization is all the more telling given that the tragic and decisive events detailed in the letters between Eliot and her brother Maurice Haigh-Wood, supplemented by illuminating notes and correspondence pertaining to medical advice as well as financial and legal matters, occupy a relatively small proportion of the designated period of the volume, i.e. towards the end, from July 1938. The appropriately immediate focus on Eliot and Vivienne effectively heralds the volume's special importance to Eliot scholarship, and thus to Eliot's reputation and legacy, in this controversial regard: the letters and notes are now, of course, absolutely essential to the evaluation of Eliot's relationship with Vivienne, and his role in her fate, in the context of the preceding (and future) volumes and various negative accounts within the critical field.

An excellent example of the volume's value is the inclusion, with a related note, of Eliot's letter to Maurice dated 9th August 1938, in which he expressly grants his authority "so far as my authorisation is necessary [...] to apply for certification of your sister, Mrs T. S. Eliot, if Dr Bernard Hart thinks advisable, or to take any steps leading thereto which he thinks advisable, which may require my authorisation as well as

yours". As stated in the note, this letter "contradicts Seymour-Jones's comments, in *Painted Shadow*, 559", where she references research by Hastings and asserts that Eliot "was not prepared to take responsibility for Vivienne's final committal".

¹⁴ Other excellent examples are a note featuring a tentative query from Maurice, via Eliot's solicitor G.F. Higginson, as to whether Eliot "would be prepared to supplement her income" which "may well be inadequate to provide the expenses in the Home"; and notes containing defences by Valerie Eliot.¹⁵ For instance, in a letter to Harman Grisewood dated 23rd September 1993, she advises: "Please do not believe anything you read in any newspaper. You and your friend can rest assured that Tom did not ill-treat his first wife [...]"¹⁶ Ultimately, readers will need to consider for themselves, in light of the textual evidence, such keywords as "advisable" or "advice" and "necessary", the latter notably employed by Haffenden in the preface in Eliot's favour: "This volume of letters tells in detail the story of the decision taken by Maurice Haigh-Wood in the summer of 1938, following medical advice, to commit his sister Vivien Haigh-

¹⁴ Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (eds.), *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 8: 1936-1938* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 928.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 933.

Wood Eliot to a psychiatric asylum – after she had been found wandering in a distressed state in the streets of London. It publishes the correspondence in which her long-separated husband writes of the dreadful, necessary business, and of his concern for her well-being and security; as well as the available medico-legal documentation."¹⁷

However, as vital as Vivienne's committal is to the value and significance of this volume, it is as a veritable cornucopia of biographical and literary riches, and as a record of chronologically coherent facts and information, that the volume overall is likely to be of most educational and scholarly benefit to readers. There is, it must be emphasized, much pleasure to be derived from this volume, with abundant opportunities to luxuriate in Eliot's profound personal reflections, delightful sense of humour, and simply superb writing style and turn of phrase, not least in correspondence with renowned literary friends and associates forming part of his social and professional networks. In addition to the terrible events concerning Vivienne, the volume encompasses Eliot's close and complex relationship

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii. The letter from Maurice Haigh-Wood, referring to Vivienne being found wandering in the streets, is dated 14 July 1938: 909. The quotation at the start of the preface, regarding Eliot's avoidance of Vivienne, is from the letter to Dorothy Pound dated 28 July 1936: 305.

with Emily Hale; his many travels, including to such important locations as East Coker and Little Gidding later immortalized in *Four Quartets* (1943); his efforts to write a second play, and the emergence of the verses, which became *The Family Reunion* and *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* respectively, in 1939; and his myriad contacts, activities and achievements in both the professional role at Faber & Faber and, increasingly, as a public man whose star continued to rise in these years. His relationships with, among others, the extraordinary fellow Modernists who so powerfully impacted the literary, artistic and cultural landscape, serve up some of this volume's most memorable sentences. Several brief examples might suffice to entice potential readers:

"I had a pleasant time in your native city, a large part of the population of which seems anxious to erect a monument in your honour, and another part still anxious to forget your existence."
– *To James Joyce, 3 February 1936*¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

"I am returning to you herewith Ezra's letter to you of the 24th February. It is not quite clear to me, even with my intimate knowledge of his style, whether he meant the money book to come to us or not. But my position is that to deal with Ezra's poetry and literary criticism is as much as can be expect[ed] of any one firm, unless we decided to open a special Ezra Department, and I shouldn't care to be the head of such a department myself, at any salary whatever." – *To Laurence Pollinger, 9 March 1936*¹⁹

"I learn from the *Telegraph* that your portrait of me has been rejected by the Academy [...] But so far as the sitter is able to judge, it seems to me a very good portrait, and one by which I am quite willing that posterity should know me, if it takes an interest in me at all." – *To Wyndham Lewis, 21 April 1938*²⁰

Be sure that Possums can't refuse
A Tea with Mrs Woolf on Tues.
And eagerly, if still alive,
I'll come to Tea with you at five.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 873.

I'd like to come at half past four,
But have a business lunch before,
And feel responsibility [*sic*]
To do some work before my Tea.
But please don't let the kettle wait,
But keep for me a cup and plate,
And keep the water on the bile,
A chair, and (as I hope) a Smile.
– *To Virginia Woolf, exact date unknown [late February
1938]*²¹

²¹ *Ibid.*, 827.