

## “Mr. Eliot has Re-Discovered a Portrait of Himself”: Reframing Lewis’s Rejected Masterpiece in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

by Jaron Murphy

Posterity would, indeed, take an interest in T.S. Eliot and has continued to know him, in a sense, by Wyndham Lewis’s singular portrait (in)famously rejected by the Royal Academy in 1938. In a supportive letter to Lewis dated 21 April of that year, Eliot expressly approved both the portrait and its possible role in shaping his legacy: “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 any interest in me at all.”<sup>1</sup> Considerable, enduring interest is evidenced in significant part, of course, by the very existence (since 2006) of the T.S. Eliot Society of the United Kingdom; and naturally, by way of a news item dated July 2017 on its website, the society drew attention to the appearance of the rejected portrait as part of the major retrospective *Wyndham Lewis: Life, Art, War* at the Imperial War Museums North in Manchester, which closed on 1 January 2018. The portrait constitutes, after all, arguably *the* iconic image of Eliot internationally, having featured in various art exhibitions in the UK and abroad, and – with much greater circulation, traction, and longevity – within and on the front covers of informative and influential books on Lewis and Eliot since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the well-intended, brief news item (which is still accessible on the website) alerting readers to the portrait being “currently on display” provides little in terms of evaluating and

illuminating its significance in relation to, specifically, Eliot. As we shall see, this is symptomatic of wider scholarly patchiness and, at times, sheer neglect in this regard – oddly, given not only the rather obvious and fundamental visual link between portrait and sitter but also the portrait's increased international renown and recognisability through high-profile art exhibitions and book reproductions. It is this curious phenomenon of a scarcity of scholarly attention to the relation between the portrait and, in particular, Eliot (rather than predominantly Lewis as artist) which this essay seeks to begin to address, not least in calling for increased acknowledgement and appreciation of Eliot's personal encounter with the portrait in the city of Durban in apartheid South Africa in 1954; and in urging, in this vein, a 'postcolonial' reframing, with the benefit of 21<sup>st</sup>-century hindsight, of the portrait's highly charged historical importance to Eliot's legacy, too, beyond merely the rejection controversy of 1938.

The news item, nevertheless, helpfully contains an image of the portrait; a link to a newsreel clip (also accessible via the Resources tab on the website) of Lewis answering a journalist's questions following the Academy's rejection of the portrait, next to which he is standing; and a link to the exhibition floor map and audio guide (no longer available on the Imperial War Museums website post-exhibition), which understandably focused on Lewis, primarily, in placing the portrait in its historical context:

Several of Lewis's sitters from this period [late 1930s] were writer friends, including the poets Ezra Pound and Stephen Spender, and the novelist Naomi Mitchison. However, his finest portrait was of his close friend T.S. Eliot. The portrait today is acknowledged as one of the greatest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It shows the aesthetic, be-suited Eliot formally, rather stiffly posed, yet his gaze is drifted left as if distracted by private thoughts. These are suggested in the scrolling abstract forms situated either side of the poet.

Despite its virtuosity it was Lewis's most controversial painting, owing to its rejection by the Royal Academy in 1938. Lewis's submission of the portrait was a surprise in itself. He had always disdained the institution, considering it hackneyed and commercially driven. Nevertheless, he described the portrait submission as a test case, a move perhaps intended to test the artistic climate of 1930s Britain. So when the portrait was duly rejected Lewis's worst suspicions were confirmed. The rejection, however, caused a press furore, stoked by Lewis's friend Augustus John's protest resignation from the Royal Academy. Even Winston Churchill weighed in, in support of the Academy, stating: "The function of the Royal Academy is to hold a middle course between tradition and innovation. It is not the function of the Royal Academy to run wildly after novelty."

The controversy gave Lewis a brief period in the limelight, restoring his reputation as an artistic rebel. However, the portrait's subsequent rejection by the Tate Gallery undoubtedly was a factor in Lewis's decision to depart Britain for his native Canada in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

Helpfully, too, the news item contains a link to an article – or rather, as it turns out, a series of snippets – by Skye Sherwin on the Guardian website (which is also still accessible), under the banner "Arts: Anatomy of an Artwork" and with the headline "Wyndham Lewis's TS Eliot: a jigsaw puzzle of rebellion and radicalism".<sup>3</sup> The page features a portion of the portrait (a close-up of Eliot's head and upper body, with background imagery)

beneath the sub-headline: "History remembers the artist as a Hitler sympathiser, but his guiding principle – as illustrated by this portrait, which the RA rejected – was a passion to agitate". A full image of the portrait appears below four brief sections of text and a closing line indicating the portrait's inclusion in the exhibition.

The first section, with the heading "Great Planes", offers an intriguing response to Lewis's portrayal of Eliot, chiming with the concept of a "jigsaw puzzle of rebellion and radicalism" introduced in the headline. Noting that "Modernist poetry's lanky luminary TS Eliot looks serious and far from comfortable in Wyndham Lewis's famed portrait", Sherwin adds: "His face is a jigsaw puzzle of shadowy half-moons and sharp planes. The hands droop from the oversized suit, suggesting the subtle creepiness of a limp handshake." Sherwin does not elaborate but this interpretative slice raises, tantalizingly, the question of whether Lewis possibly embedded, unbeknown to Eliot, a negative slant on Eliot within the image, particularly when we bear in mind Lewis's view on another giant of 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature, expressed in "W.B. Yeats" (1939), that the Irish poet "comes back to us as a memory of a limp hand. Or perhaps I should say, he does to me", and that "the limp-hand effect" largely typified Yeats.<sup>4</sup>

The second section, with the heading "Where there's smoke", clarifies which aspects the Royal Academy apparently disapproved of: "It was not the vaguely skin-crawling, anxious qualities that the Royal Academy objected to when it notoriously rejected this portrait from its annual show in 1938. It was the abstract bits in the background, pluming menacingly like the bomb smoke of experimental ideas." The third section, with the

heading "Rebel Yell", underlines Lewis's deliberately provocative stance as a "self-proclaimed rebel" who "knew the painting would be rejected": "Before the first world war, his vorticist movement marked him as the premier radical artist. After the war, he failed to become the British Picasso, a fact he blamed on the culture at large." The final section, with the heading "Despicable Me", aims at encapsulating what Lewis was ultimately all about: "History remembers Lewis as a woman-hating Hitler sympathiser," Sherwin writes, but Lewis's "politics are inconsistent. His book, *The Jews: Are They Human?* for instance, was a satire against antisemites". Sherwin concludes: "What ties it all together is a contrarian passion to agitate."

Strangely, however, acknowledgement and appreciation of Eliot's rather conspicuous and important contribution as Lewis's sitter – effectively lending himself, as it were, as a longtime friend and ally to both the artist's a) creative endeavor in the first instance, and b) licence in agitating against the perceived orthodoxy of the Royal Academy – remain perhaps implicit, rather than explicit, across the news item and Sherwin's snippets, which was the case, too, with the exhibition information. Eliot's letter to Lewis on 21 April 1938 makes clear his "feeling of relief" at the rejection, and affirms his position in solidarity with Lewis: "Had the portrait been accepted, I should have been pleased – that a portrait by you should have been accepted by the Academy would have been a good augury... But I am glad to think that a portrait of myself should *not* appear in the exhibition of the Royal Academy, and I certainly have no desire, now, that my portrait should be painted by any painter whose portrait of me would be accepted by the Royal Academy."

Further written evidence of Eliot's support could be adduced. In *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (2000), Paul Edwards explains that the "process of analysis by which Eliot's head was schematised can be seen in a sketch inscribed by Lewis 'Rough note for Eliot painting in Durban 1938'".<sup>5</sup> In a brief write-up about this charcoal-on-paper sketch, in *Wyndham Lewis Portraits* (2008), Edwards notes that Eliot himself signed it and speculates he did so "perhaps as a sign of his alliance with Lewis in the public controversy that attended the finished portrait".<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, a close-up of Eliot derived from the portrait appears on the cover of *Wyndham Lewis Portraits*; and the portrait is reproduced in full on p69, opposite a write-up on p68 which also insightfully, but all too briefly, relates the representation of Eliot in the artwork to the actual flesh-and-blood Eliot:

This is Lewis's most famous portrait – rejected by the Royal Academy in 1938. The Academy claimed to object to the elaborate 'scrolls' in the background, which of course had symbolic significance... In his smart suit, Eliot sits slightly hunched, avoiding our gaze. We are left to judge whether his respectability has been at the cost of turning his back on the sources of his creativity or whether they are still active in him. His haunted expression seems to chime with Eliot's own later belief that he had paid too high a price in personal happiness for being a poet.

Moreover, it is especially peculiar that Eliot's personal encounter with the portrait at the Durban Municipal Art Gallery, South Africa, in 1954, where Lewis's masterpiece had been rehomed post-rejection, in 1939, is not registered across the news item and Sherwin's account, and was not, too, in the exhibition

information – as has been the case with various past exhibitions and accompanying publications featuring the portrait, in the UK (including the National Portrait Gallery exhibition in London and companion publication *Wyndham Lewis Portraits* in 2008) and elsewhere. While the collected letters of Eliot is a multi-volume work in painstaking progress and will hopefully yield further relevant details in due course, reference might have been made, at least, to this remarkable occasion, captured in the standalone black-and-white photo of Eliot "pointing to the 1938 portrait of himself" which has long since appeared in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (1963), opposite p253, in between Lewis's salvoes concerning the rejection to the editors of the *Daily Telegraph* (dated 24 April 1938) and *The Times* (1 May 1938) respectively. As the caption also states: "(Photograph taken in Durban in 1954)"; while the book's list of Illustrations, on pxv, adds the source: "By courtesy of the Natal Mercury", a local Durban newspaper. Like various other exhibitions and publications, the book accompanying the recent Manchester exhibition, also entitled *Wyndham Lewis[:] Life, Art, War* (2017) and produced by Richard Slocombe (with a preface by Edwards), duly acknowledges the Durban Art Gallery as the portrait's custodian (above a short write-up, on p74, opposite a full-page reproduction of the masterpiece) but does not mention Eliot's encounter with the eponymous portrait at the gallery in 1954.<sup>7</sup> Nor do various news articles reviewing the exhibition, as might then be expected. Yet nor, too, is there reference to the encounter in the actual correspondence contained in the *Letters*.

Without any available written record by Eliot and Lewis regarding the encounter, then, it is difficult to discern Eliot's thoughts upon becoming reacquainted with the portrait, or what Lewis would have made of it. Nevertheless, the absence of any

mention of the encounter in their correspondence contained in the *Letters* is also remarkable, especially as the photograph of the encounter is incorporated into the book. Significantly, too, the photograph in the book, published in 1963, forms part, in fact, of an earlier historical record – with the same (or possibly an almost identical) photo having appeared, as we shall see shortly, in *The Natal Mercury* in 1954, not as a standalone image such as that in the book but as the focal point of a far more illuminating news article on Eliot's re-discovery of the portrait. The photograph thus preserves for posterity a seemingly benign instance of Eliot as smiling public man, in direct relation to the artwork, in the Durban gallery in 1954. In *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (1971), Walter Michel briefly draws attention to the existence of the image: "A 1954 photograph (reproduced in *Letters*) shows T.S. Eliot animatedly inspecting his portrait at Durban... When that portrait was rejected by the hanging committee of the 1938 Royal Academy exhibition, he had said that he would be quite willing to be known to posterity through it; he had reason to be pleased, for Lewis had made a profound painting." <sup>8</sup> Judging by Eliot's facial expression and overall body language, he evidently remained pleased with the 'recognized' masterpiece at the Durban gallery, and took pleasure in the occasion, in 1954. Notably, however, while there is a perhaps (un)intended kind of symmetry between the shadows around the heads of each Eliot, the juxtaposition is also striking in that the 65-year-old Eliot appears to be in good spirits while the "haunted" younger Eliot is clearly not. <sup>9</sup> Beyond the patent positivity of the elderly Eliot's gesture, it is difficult to gauge any levels of poignancy and nostalgia as he comes face to face, as it were, with his younger self at the centre of the controversial artwork. Nor is it clear whether his gesture was, as an honoured

and obliging guest of the city, at the behest of the photographer's likely 'staged' direction or a spontaneous "animated" response to the portrait.

Whatever we might deduce from the photograph, Eliot's personal encounter with the portrait in Durban in 1954 has, inherently, a biographical significance that merits due attention, rather than a line or two in passing and general neglect, in the critical field. Curiously, the lacuna concerning the encounter also – indeed, especially – afflicts Eliot scholarship. Perhaps the most striking example is Peter Ackroyd's biography *T.S. Eliot* (1984), the front cover of which is so arresting owing to the incorporation of a portion of the portrait (a cropped close-up of Eliot) into the design. As the sleeve duly acknowledges: "The jacket design by Mon Mohan is based on the painting of T.S. Eliot by Wyndham Lewis. Reproduced by kind permission of the Durban Museum and Art Gallery, South Africa." <sup>10</sup> However, the rejection controversy and subsequent rehoming of the portrait in Durban do not get a mention in chapter 12, entitled "Out of the Storm 1935-1939", and later attention to Eliot's holidays with the Fabers to South Africa in the 1950s. Near the end of chapter 14, entitled "The Rigours of Life 1946-1949", Ackroyd explains that "for once he [Eliot] had planned to escape the worst excesses of the English winter, and at the beginning of 1950 he embarked with the Fabers on a six-week cruise to South Africa: two weeks getting there, two weeks on the beach at St James near Cape Town, and two weeks back". <sup>11</sup> Commencing chapter 15, entitled "The Public Man 1950-1956", Ackroyd reports that Eliot "had arrived in South Africa by the time *The Cocktail Party* opened in New York on 21 January 1950, at the Henry Miller Theatre". Outlining Eliot's growing celebrity status internationally, he adds that when Eliot "arrived in South Africa, a crowd was waiting at

the dock to greet him" – a fact "[r]eported to the present author by A.L. Rowse", Ackroyd clarifies in a note – and "on later visits to the United States he was besieged by autograph hunters and press photographers waiting for him after readings".<sup>12</sup>

It is well known that Ackroyd laboured under severe constraints. As he writes candidly in the "Acknowledgments": "I was forbidden by the Eliot estate to quote from Eliot's published work, except for purposes of fair comment in a critical context, or to quote from Eliot's unpublished work or correspondence."<sup>13</sup> Yet such strictures do not account for Ackroyd's neglect of Eliot's encounter with the portrait – and local press – in South Africa in 1954. Nevertheless, he helpfully conveys the ageing Eliot's susceptibility to bronchitis and places the trip to South Africa in the context of Eliot's health issues, all of which is relevant information lacking in the photo caption (and only very slightly referred to, by Lewis in a letter to Eliot dated 19 December 1953, on pp553-4) in the *Letters*:

He had been urged by his doctor to escape the English winter and at the end of the year [1953] he went once more to South Africa for a ten-week holiday, sailing to Durban and then proceeding in a leisurely fashion to Cape Town. Although this cruise was to be in the nature of a 'rest cure', almost immediately after his return in early March 1954, he suffered an attack of tachycardia, marked by an acceleration of the pulse. He went into the London Clinic for three weeks and after X-rays, blood tests and cardiographic treatment it was discovered that the disorder had no organic origin – its source was essentially a nervous one and seemed likely to have been the result of over-exertion and worry.<sup>14</sup>

As this illustrates, Sherwin's notion of a "jigsaw puzzle" could be extended to piecing together the elderly Eliot's encounter with the portrait at a time when he was an established international celebrity – not least for having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 – and therefore of continuing interest to the public and press within his own lifetime, as well as to posterity. That said, Ackroyd's book is symptomatic of how, in Eliot scholarship, the encounter can be simply, like the elusive Macavity, not there. A more recent example, and puzzling in its own way, is Lyndall Gordon's revised biography, entitled *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (2012). Gordon refers to the portrait almost immediately, on p1, where she offers a layered perspective on Lewis's representation of Eliot, in terms of a distinction between the outer surface and inner substance:

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 26 September 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, the son of a New England schoolteacher and a St Louis merchant. Thirty-eight years later he was baptised as an Anglican in an English village. Such facts tell little of a man for whom there was usually a gap between his outward and his private life, the constructed, highly articulate surface and the inward ferment. Wyndham Lewis painted Eliot's face as if it were a mask, so that he might distinguish Eliot's formal surface from his hooded introspective eyes, and the severe dark lines of his suit from the flesh of his shoulders beneath. Virginia Woolf wrote that his hazel eyes seemed oddly lively and youthful in a pale, sculptured, even heavy face. Eliot's admirers played up his mask, while detractors stripped it only to find the flaws: both overlooked a man of extremes whose virtues and flaws were interfused.<sup>15</sup>

In chapter 6, entitled "Conversion", Gordon refers again to Lewis's portrait in highlighting "another picture of Eliot's detachment in a sketch by Vivienne called 'Fête Galante'":

At a bohemian party, a lively girl called Sybilla encounters an American financier-poet. She describes him leaning with exaggerated grace against the fireplace, refusing to speak. Her portrait is rather like the one painted by Wyndham Lewis of Eliot a few years later – a heavy, slumbering, white face; long hooded eyes, unseeing and leaden-heavy; a large sleek head.<sup>16</sup>

Oddly, however, despite Gordon's recourse to Lewis's portrait as a point of reference in seeking, ultimately, to bring an "interfused" Eliot to the fore, she also does not touch upon the rejection controversy, subsequent rehoming of the portrait in Durban, and Eliot's personal encounter with the portrait there in 1954. That the encounter took place in her country of origin (although in Durban rather than her birth city of Cape Town) makes the neglect all the more perplexing. Nevertheless, Gordon's layered perspective is certainly compelling and intersects, notably, with the notion of a "mask" in the brief write-up on the portrait in the Manchester exhibition book. Describing the artwork as "psychologically charged", the writer explains that "the scrolling abstract forms situated either side" of Eliot "serve also to undermine his mask of inscrutability". Reconciling mask and man must inevitably, it would seem, involve taking cognizance of the relation between the portrait and Eliot.

I have located and provide, therefore – with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa – a reproduction in full of an article published on p9 of the Wednesday, 27 January 1954 edition of *The Natal Mercury*, covering the occasion when Eliot viewed the

portrait in Durban during the first week of his holiday in South Africa.<sup>17</sup> It features, as a natural focal point reinforced by the 'eyebrow'-type headline 'Poet With Early Portrait' and caption, a photo of Eliot pointing to the portrait which appears to have been subsequently supplied for standalone publication in the *Letters*. The main headline (or heading) 'Controversial Eliot Portrait in Durban' is rather less newsworthy given that the portrait had been in Durban since December 1939; but the intro nevertheless accentuates Eliot's renown and the controversial history of the painting: "The work of Mr. T.S. Eliot, world-famous poet and playwright now in Durban, has stirred up controversy in many countries. But in the Durban Municipal Art Gallery Mr. Eliot has re-discovered a portrait of himself which in 1938 stirred up more controversy than any of his works."

The article duly sketches the rejection fallout, including how the portrait "set the whole art world in furore, [and] was featured on the front pages of every British newspaper"; Augustus John's protest resignation from the Royal Academy; and the longstanding association between the "as famous" Lewis and Eliot. Beneath the crosshead 'EAGER BUYER' there are quotes from a former director of the Durban gallery, E. C. Chubb, on the Tate being a potentially willing purchaser of the portrait, but perhaps the most illuminating supplementary information in the article concerns how the rejected portrait was acquired by the Durban municipality. The article discloses that the portrait "was given to the Art Gallery anonymously, but is understood to have been procured by a Dr. May, in 1939 chairman of the Art Gallery Advisory Committee, through Dr. T. J. Honeyman, now chairman of Glasgow's Vasco Art Gallery, and formerly partner in the West End firm of Reid and Lefebvre [sic] art dealers. It is said to have been bought from the artist himself and, though the

purchase price is unknown, it is thought that this was in the region of £200." Readers of *The Natal Mercury* were therefore quite sufficiently in the picture, so to speak, on the portrait's history and significance, including the new development of Eliot's personal encounter with it, long before Honeyman's recollection of the portrait's sale to Durban appeared in *Art and Audacity* (1971), where Lewis rather than Eliot is understandably in focus.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, in light of Ackroyd's extraordinarily thin account of Eliot's trip, it is worth highlighting that Eliot's fame meant his arrival in Durban had already been made known to the newspaper's readers prior to the article on his re-discovery of the portrait at the municipal gallery. I have also located and provide – with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library – a reproduction in full of an article published on p9 of the Saturday, 23 January 1954 edition of *The Natal Mercury*, which features a headshot of Eliot above the headline "S.A. May Inspire Eliot To New Prose Works". The ship Eliot arrived on is named in the intro, as are his travelling companions in the final sentence: "SOUTH AFRICA may well prove the inspiration for the next work of Mr. T.S. Eliot, poet and playwright, and a Nobel prize-winner, who arrived in Durban yesterday aboard the Rhodesia Castle... With him to Durban travelled Mr. Geoffrey Faber, the publisher, and Mrs. Faber." I have, furthermore, located and provide – with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library – a photo which appeared in a society news section of the Wednesday, 27 January 1954 edition, of the Fabers and Kellys enjoying drinks, sans mention of Eliot and/or a cross-reference to the article on his re-discovery of the portrait. The caption reads: "SIR GEOFFREY AND LADY FABER (right), who are at present in Durban during a visit to South Africa from England, last night

held a cocktail party in the Butterworth Hotel's Magnolia Room. They were photographed with two of their guests, Mr. and Mrs. C.A. Kelly, of London, who are touring the Union." (illustration 1) Evidently taking the titled Fabers' fame for granted, the caption adds: "Mr. Kelly is a director of Gordon and Gotch, London, and of the Central News Agency." News of where Eliot was headed, and when, must have spread quickly. The Saturday article also reveals: "After spending a week in Durban, Mr. Eliot will travel via the Garden Route to the Cape, from where he will sail for England on February 25."

After reading the article there can be little surprise that, as Ackroyd says, Eliot fell ill "almost immediately after his return" to England. The article sheds light on the 65-year-old Eliot holidaying in South Africa to improve his health but being, in reality, unlikely to be able to switch off from his work and associated anxieties. As we have seen, Ackroyd reports in regard to the first trip that Eliot "had arrived in South Africa by the time *The Cocktail Party* opened in New York on 21 January 1950". Similarly, in 1954, it is reported in the article that during his stay in South Africa "Mr. Eliot will be waiting anxiously for the New York verdict on his new verse play 'The Confidential Clerk,' which opens there next month. He expects a cable on the opening night." Eliot was also evidently pressed, perhaps awkwardly, for word of a local production: "'The Confidential Clerk' is expected to be brought to South Africa as soon as production difficulties will allow."

Moreover, quotation of Eliot by a *Natal Mercury* reporter also appears quite contradictory in regard to his work. Eliot initially claims that "I am doing no work at all on this trip, which is in the nature of a health cruise, and am making as few plans as

possible for the future." Yet in the next sentence it is clear that work is still very much on his mind: "But my next work will be different. I want to turn to something new – prose, probably essays." Eliot gives the impression that, wherever he might be, he literally lives and breathes his work, such that it is "very probable that South Africa will give me the inspiration for them". Retreating into a somewhat Paterian sensibility, he adds: "But I am not consciously seeking that inspiration. I find it better to absorb impressions as they are made on me and let them take their effect as they will."

Tracing any possible influence(s) on Eliot's works in later life arising from his holiday(s) to South Africa is beyond the scope of this essay, which seeks rather to convey that, in all, Eliot's 'health holiday' in South Africa and encounter with the portrait in Durban in 1954, especially, merit improved scholarly and, by extension, public attention and appreciation, by way of future exhibitions and books (not least biographies) on Eliot and Lewis. To adapt lines from "Burnt Norton" (1935), the remarkable encounter raises questions of the relationship between "Time present and time past" and how both are "perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past".<sup>19</sup> For instance, had the relation between Eliot and the portrait markedly changed by 1954 compared to 1938 – and if so, in what way(s)? To what extent is Eliot's, rather than solely Lewis's, legacy intertwined with the portrait, as a lasting and dominant image of him (among many other images) exhibited and published internationally, not least on the front covers of books? To what extent has the portrait's cultural as well as monetary value derived from the stature of its subject, rather than solely of the agitator-artist and quality of the artwork, over time? As might be expected, the portrait is now worth a

considerable sum. According to a Durban Art Gallery Permanent Collection Catalogue document, the artwork was revalued at R6 402 440 in 2002 – a fortune in South Africa but a less impressive amount when converted into British pounds. However, gallery staff believe the portrait would fetch substantially more were it ever to be put up for sale. Unfortunately, the catalogue document is not supplemented by any written record of the rationale justifying the revaluation figure, which would perhaps have offered fascinating insights into the estimation of Lewis, Eliot, and their legacies.

The encounter also raises questions of how Eliot himself might have evaluated and interpreted (aspects of) the portrait, in line or not with Lewis's imaginative vision and possible or even likely symbolical meaning(s), bearing in mind such thought-provoking responses as Sherwin's and Gordon's, and, predominantly in the field of Lewis scholarship, those of Edwards. That Eliot admired the portrait and endorsed its role in his legacy is backed by the photographic and textual evidence, including what Paul O'Keeffe, in *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (2000), describes as Eliot's "hearty testimonial in the pages of *Time* magazine", which is reminiscent of his letter to Lewis dated 21 April 1938: "I shall not turn in my grave if, after I am settled in the cemetery this portrait is the image that will come into people's minds when my name is mentioned. It seems to me also a good picture, as well as a good portrait; and if it were the portrait not of myself, but of someone whose features I could contemplate with more tenderness, I think I could live with it."<sup>20</sup> However, given the long and complex nature of the relationship between Lewis and Eliot, should we not also venture to question whether Eliot's approbation was as wholehearted as it might seem, as well as factor in the sensitivities referred to by

Jeffrey Meyers in "Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot: A Friendship" (1980)? Meyers writes that Eliot "greatly admired this portrait, which captured the essence of his mind and art, and told Lewis he was quite willing for posterity to know him by that image (a photograph of 1954, reproduced in Lewis' *Letters*, shows Eliot pointing to the portrait with smiling admiration)". Yet is a germ of doubt detectable, for instance, in Eliot's qualification in the letter dated 21 April 1938: "And though I may not be the best judge of it as portraiture, I am sure that it is a very fine painting"? Are "seems" and "quite" in the letter also perhaps telling subtleties, when he affirms that it "seems to me a very good portrait, and one by which I am quite willing that posterity should know me"? The *Time* testimonial quoted above also reflects Eliot's preference for "seems" rather than a definite "is". While his choice of words might merely bespeak the characteristically "cautious and circumspect" Eliot depicted by Meyers, could a possible hint of dubiety and reticence towards Lewis have been lingering in 1954?

Meyers also explains that "Eliot's respectability, religion, success, wealth, and fame impeded his friendship with Lewis — who had none of these acquisitions", with Lewis in late life having "continued his rivalry with Eliot". Although the "friendship of Lewis and Eliot was based on intellectual sympathy and mutual esteem", Meyers writes, Lewis "used his failure and Eliot's success to his own moral advantage, for both men felt that Lewis had received much less recognition than [sic] he deserved. Eliot, somewhat embarrassed by his own fame, freely expressed his admiration for Lewis in a dozen books and essays published between 1918 and 1960." <sup>21</sup> Such factors, then, along with the portrait's rejection perhaps also having remained something of a sore point for Lewis, who was by then ailing and

largely blind, might help us to make sense of the remarkable absence (unless the multi-volume collected letters shed light on the matter in due course) of correspondence between Eliot and Lewis regarding the encounter and concomitant publicity despite Lewis's reference to the trip to South Africa in the letter to Eliot dated 19 December 1953. <sup>22</sup> Eliot's self-image, so to speak, in relation to Lewis, might also be more closely considered by setting his revealing admission of an inability to contemplate the portrait with "more tenderness" and to "live with it" alongside the image of him "pointing to the portrait with smiling admiration".

In 2018, Eliot's holidays in South Africa and, specifically, his opportunity to view the portrait in Durban in 1954 might give scholars and the public pause for thought in terms of historical realities and revisionist perspectives. It is well known, for instance, that a number of critics have, controversially, attacked Eliot's reputation in recent decades, alleging anti-semitism and misogyny. However, a measure of 'post-colonial' reappraisal, along with improved acknowledgment and understanding of the times he lived through, might also be prompted by flagging an extremely ugly side to his rather genteel holiday(s) in South Africa (not explicitly mentioned by Ackroyd) and personal encounter there with the portrait: they took place, of course, in a racially segregated society. In the context of South Africa's longstanding colonial ties with Britain (recently reaffirmed by a post-war royal family tour, in 1947) but in particular the advent of apartheid in 1948, Eliot enjoyed, even as a tourist from abroad, a range of local privileges on account of his 'white' background rather than merely literary celebrity status, including access to public amenities and services (such as the Durban Municipal Art Gallery itself, prime hotel facilities, particular means of transport,

and select beaches) which were denied to those routinely referred to in the pages of *The Natal Mercury*, and wider South African society, as “natives” (among other negative terms).

That it was a deeply and very visibly segregated society, including prominent racist signage in public places and an oppressed ‘black’ servant underclass at beck and call, might be factored in, at least, to scholarly reflection on his holidays there with the Fabers, to speculation that South Africa might inspire his work and host productions of his work, and to his somewhat refined and rarefied preference, as stated while in Durban, for absorbing impressions as they were made on him and letting them take their effect as they willed.<sup>23</sup> It should be recognised, too, just how culturally agreeable ‘white’, largely English-speaking Durban of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was as a new home for the rejected portrait and as a holiday destination for cultivated British travellers such as the Fabers and Eliot. As the pages of *The Natal Mercury* show, the paper and its readership in the coastal, usually sunny city were indeed fundamentally and generally racist long before the advent of apartheid yet were also by and large liberal. Proud of the city’s rich colonial heritage and the country’s support of Britain in World War Two, Durbanites were ill at ease with the prospect and establishment of Afrikaner rule. We might therefore adapt and extend Eliot’s own contention that “no art... can exist in a vacuum” to this exceedingly complex historical context and view the occasion of his encounter with the portrait against a much bigger picture, as a remarkable event far more complicated in retrospect than the standalone snapshot in the *Letters*, or Ackroyd’s account of the 1954 trip especially, or the photos and articles in *The Natal Mercury* reproduced here, convey to us in themselves – not to mention the myriad publications and

exhibitions where the trip and encounter have simply not been registered at all.<sup>24</sup>

In this vein, a key component of the overall purpose of this essay is to contend that scholarship concerning the portrait has, over many years, evidently fallen deeper and deeper into the kind of culture trap delineated by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said takes issue with a notion of culture that “entails not only venerating one’s own culture but also thinking of it as somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world”; and he argues, persuasively, that critics of such writers as Carlyle, Ruskin, Dickens and Thackeray have frequently “relegated these writers’ ideas about colonial expansion, inferior races, or ‘niggers’ to a very different department from that of culture, culture being the elevated area of activity in which they ‘truly’ belong and in which they did their ‘really’ important work”. He adds: “Culture conceived in this way can become a protective enclosure: check your politics at the door before you enter it.”<sup>25</sup> While an appraisal of Eliot’s attitudes to colonialism and race is largely beyond the scope of this essay, it is expressly my objective to highlight that his photographed encounter with the portrait at the Durban gallery in 1954 provides a startling example of a remarkable cultural moment seemingly divorced from the everyday apartheid realities which in fact facilitated and literally surrounded it. This was, we could say, an ‘exclusive’ in more ways than one, with the cultural veneration intrinsic to the event underpinning what was clearly a public relations success for the gallery via *The Natal Mercury*. Unfortunately, it appears the event and its circumstances may not have inspired a written record by Eliot for posterity; while biographical accounts of Eliot’s spheres of

activity, in turn, have not been perceptibly troubled by the complexities of the South African situation and connection.

Moreover, for decades, the limited nature of information on the iconic artwork at exhibitions, in accompanying publications, and in books has effectively and reductively placed it in a "protective enclosure" whereby, while Durban is routinely acknowledged as the custodian, no mention is made of the Eliot encounter and its intersection with the complexities of the portrait's history as the property of Durban, not least in relation to politics – including in the much longer term, given South Africa's transition from apartheid to a post-apartheid democracy. It is a troubling fact, for instance, that, while Durban has loaned the portrait to exhibitions internationally, the portrait has not been on public display in Durban, according to gallery staff, for many years. While crowds, in the UK especially, flock to exhibitions featuring the portrait, the vast majority of Durbanites and more broadly South Africans, from all backgrounds, are not aware of the portrait's existence and significance, and its ownership by the city gallery. The political climate has, of course, shifted dramatically post-apartheid, with celebration of long-dead 'pale male' writers and artists from abroad like Eliot and Lewis (among many others) hardly topping the cultural agenda in forging a new national identity and promoting local talent and achievement. However, more pragmatically, security issues and, linked to this, far from ideal government funding for the arts, have been major areas of concern for gallery staff.<sup>26</sup>

It is hoped that by urging a reframing of Lewis's masterpiece in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, expressly in relation to Eliot, this essay will help to spur scholars (including biographers) to pay special heed to Said's pointed reflection on how he "found it a

challenge *not* to see culture in this way – that is, antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliations – but as an extraordinarily varied field of endeavour". The portrait has certainly not existed in a vacuum since the rejection controversy and should not continue to be taken merely at face value, so to speak. It is incumbent upon scholars, as this essay has sought to show and emphasize, to begin to rise, in regard to the portrait, to Said's own stated 'postcolonial' challenge "to connect [works of art and learning] not only with that pleasure and profit [of acquaintance with them] but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part". The 'postcolonial' extends in this case, of course, to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa; and the portrait and news coverage of the Eliot encounter are testament to Said's suggestion that "rather than condemning or ignoring their participation in what was an unquestioning reality in their societies... what we learn about this hitherto ignored aspect actually and truly *enhances* our reading and understanding of them".<sup>27</sup> Context matters; efforts to view the portrait against the backdrop of historical and contemporary realities and complexities are, surely, overdue.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> W.K. Rose (ed.), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Methuen, 1963), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Transcribed from audio which was available on the Imperial War Museums website at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/wyndham-lewis-audio-tour#entry4>. [Accessed 3 August 2017. No longer available post-exhibition, i.e. from 2 January 2018.]

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jul/07/wyndham-lewis-ts-eliot-jigsaw-puzzle-rebellion-radicalism>. [Accessed 3 August 2017.]

<sup>4</sup> Paul Edwards (ed.), *Creatures of Habit, Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society, 1914-1956* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 285. See also my essay "Passion and Imagination: Yeats's 'Fundamental

Agreement' With Lewis at Phase 9 in the Great Wheel of *A Vision*", *Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 7 (2016), 194-201.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 468.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Edwards (with Richard Humphreys), *Wyndham Lewis: Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2008), 70.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Slocombe and Paul Edwards (Preface), *Wyndham Lewis[:] Life, Art, War* (London: IWM, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Drawings and Paintings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 132.

<sup>9</sup> The photograph which appeared in *The Natal Mercury* appears to have been doctored in the production process, removing the elderly Eliot's shadow around the head and underarm which can be seen in the *Letters*. That said, it is conceivable that perhaps a different, almost identical photo was supplied for publication in the *Letters*.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 251.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 299; 361 (note).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>15</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (1998; London: Virago, 2012), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>17</sup> I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Senior Librarian (Periodicals) Eshara Singh and her team at the Bessie Head Library for so warmly and kindly facilitating my search for material in the newspaper archives.

<sup>18</sup> See T. J. Honeyman, *Art and Audacity* (London: Collins, 1971), 91-2.

<sup>19</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (1969; London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 171.

<sup>20</sup> Paul O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 546.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot: A Friendship", *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 1980), 455-469. Alternatively, see [www.vqronline.org/essay/wyndham-lewis-and-ts-eliot-friendship](http://www.vqronline.org/essay/wyndham-lewis-and-ts-eliot-friendship). [Accessed 3 August 2017.]

<sup>22</sup> It could be speculated that Eliot may have had a hand in the claim that Lewis was "as famous" as Eliot in the article in *The Natal Mercury* on his re-discovery of the portrait.

<sup>23</sup> Eliot's trips to South Africa occurred when apartheid was being legally and rapidly entrenched. See

<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01828/05lv01829/06lv01857.htm>. [Accessed 15 December 2017.]

<sup>24</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Poetry and Propaganda", *The Bookman* (February 1930), 598.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (1993; London: Vintage Books, 1994), xiv.

<sup>26</sup> I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Director of the Durban Art Gallery, Dr Mduduzi Xakaza, and his team for assisting me so generously and considerately with my enquiries concerning the portrait.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

**\*photographer, Peter Upfold (& by kind permission of the Bessie Head Library)**



Illustration 1

## Poet With Early Portrait

MR. T. S. ELIOT, the poet, looks at his portrait which now hangs in the Durban Art Gallery. It was painted in 1935 by Wynham Lewis.



MR. T. S. ELIOT

## S.A. May Inspire Eliot To New Prose Works

**S**OUTH AFRICA may well prove the inspiration for the next work of Mr. T. S. Eliot, poet and playwright, and a Nobel prize-winner, who arrived in Durban yesterday aboard the Rhodesia Castle.

## Controversial Eliot Portrait In Durban

**T**HIS work of Mr. T. S. Eliot, world-famous poet and playwright now in Durban, has stirred up controversy in many countries. But in the Durban Municipal Art Gallery Mr. Eliot has re-discovered a portrait of himself which in 1935 stirred up more controversy than any of his works.

It is not the whole art world in France, was displayed on the front page of every British newspaper and led to the resignation of Augustus John from the Royal Academy.

The painting is one of Mr. Eliot by Wynham Lewis, who published some of the poet's first work in 1913 in a magazine called "Blind" and is known as famous as the author of "The Waste Land," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and other books.

The painting was submitted to the Royal Academy and rejected. The rejection stirred the whole art world. Augustus John, resigned from the Academy in protest, and it was not until some months later that he was persuaded to resign. But the painting never went to the Royal Academy.

### EAGER BUYER

Yesterday, Mr. E. C. Clark, former Director of the Durban Art Gallery, said that should the Corporation ever decide to dispose of the portrait, an eager buyer would be the famed Tate Gallery—although the Royal Academy is interested.

"About eight years ago," said Mr. Clark, "the Tate Gallery, Director of the Tate Gallery paid a dying visit to Durban and was given a civic reception in the Art Gallery."

"As soon as he caught sight of the T. S. Eliot portrait he rushed over to the Mayor, then Chamberlain Len Boyd, and asked him to let the Tate Gallery have it even the painting was for sale. He said they would have it."

The painting was given to the Art Gallery anonymously, but is understood to have been purchased by a Dr. May, in 1935 chairman of the Art Gallery Advisory Committee through Dr. T. J. Thompson, now chairman of Glasgow's Winton Art Gallery, and formerly partner in the West End firm of Reid and Lauder, art dealers.

It is said to have been bought from the artist himself and, although the purchase price is unknown, it is thought that this was in the region of £200.

Mr. Eliot told a "Natal Mercury" reporter last night: "I am doing no work at all on this trip, which is in the nature of a health cruise, and am making a few plans as possible for the future."

"But my next work will be different. I want to turn to something new—prose, probably essays."

"It is very probable that South Africa will give me the inspiration for them. But I am not consciously seeking that inspiration. I find it as they are made on one and let them take their effect as they will."

### VERDICT AWAITED

While he is in South Africa, Mr. Eliot will be waiting anxiously for the New York verdict on his new-verse play, "The Confidential Clerk," which opens there next month. He expects a cable on the opening night.

"The Confidential Clerk" is expected to be brought to South Africa as soon as production difficulties will allow.

After spending a week in Durban, Mr. Eliot will travel via the Garden Route to the Cape, from where he will sail for England on February 25.

Born in the United States, Mr. Eliot, who assumed British nationality in 1927, was awarded the Order of Merit in 1948. He is 65.

With him to Durban traveled Mr. Geoffrey Faber, the publisher, and Mrs. Faber.