

‘This Picture Caused a Rumpus’: Revisiting the T. S. Eliot Portrait’s New Lease of Life at the Durban Art Gallery, South Africa¹

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It is, as Paul Edwards states in the catalogue which accompanied the ‘Wyndham Lewis Portraits’ exhibition at London’s National Portrait Gallery in 2008, Lewis’s ‘most famous portrait – rejected by the Royal Academy in 1938’.² Cropped in order to foreground T. S. Eliot’s head and upper body on the catalogue cover, the artwork is reproduced in full opposite Edwards’s brief commentary on its salient features, with his point of departure being how the Academy ‘claimed to object to the elaborate “scrolls” in the background, which of course had symbolic significance’ (Edwards and Humphreys, *WLP* 68). In a slightly longer and more contextualized account of the rejection controversy, in the catalogue published for the ‘Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)’ exhibition in Madrid in 2010 (also co-curated by Edwards and Richard Humphreys), high estimation of the artwork is especially pronounced: ‘It is now considered one of the finest British portraits of the twentieth century.’³ The account provides more of a sense of the dramatic falling-out, sustained media attention and enhanced notoriety sparked by Lewis’s bold and provocative masterpiece, also reproduced in full on the opposite page:

Lewis began a portrait of his famous friend and colleague, the poet and critic T. S. Eliot, in spring 1938 and submitted it for inclusion in the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy that year, the only time he put a work up for exhibition at the august institution. Its rejection by the Selection Committee led Lewis’s friend, Augustus John, to resign his RA status and the controversy dominated the arts and even front-page headlines for a number of weeks. Lewis’s friends rallied round him while opponents, such as the amateur painter and professional politician Winston Churchill, saw the portrait as an example of the modernism against which they believed the Academy should stand firm. Lewis appeared on a

newsreel, was interviewed repeatedly in the press and clearly relished a further incident in his career that underlined his rebellious character. (Edwards and Humphreys *et al.*, *WLM* 238)

As might be expected, the high-profile furore has been detailed extensively by Lewis biographers and scholars. In *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (2000), for instance, Edwards establishes that the spurning of the portrait by the Academy ‘did not become front-page news until Augustus John resigned’ (*EWL* 468). He quotes a portion from *The Star* of 25 April 1938, relating chiefly to the scrolls to which the Academy apparently took exception. Illuminatingly, the full front page containing the lead story with a photo of Lewis alongside the portrait is reproduced in Paul O’Keeffe’s *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (2000), on page 443. The reproduction helps bring to life the initial scenes, conjured in a contextual paragraph in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (1963), when ‘[n]ewspaper placards proclaimed the news on London streets; in a day the “rejected portrait” became a *cause célèbre* in the British press’ (*L* 250). Much beyond the general media sweep and time frame of ‘a number of weeks’ in the Madrid exhibition catalogue snippet quoted above, persisting media interest in the notorious Lewis can be gauged in part, for instance, from Walter Michel’s reference in *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (1971) to how the ‘rejection of the Eliot portrait by the Royal Academy had put the artist in the headlines; he was the “Personality of the Week” in the June 1939 *World Art Illustrated*’ (*MWL* 133).

Oddly, however, there has been relatively little focus from biographers and scholars on similarly illuminating the trail of the T. S. Eliot portrait itself in the aftermath of the rejection controversy – notably stopping short of following up on local newspaper coverage of its new lease of life at the Durban Municipal Art Gallery, South Africa, after its official re-homing there in December 1939. It is not only this journalism-related lacuna but, more accurately, a wider paucity of integrated scholarship of which it is symptomatic, in relation to the portrait’s somewhat patchily and unsatisfactorily ‘explained’ relocation to the Durban gallery, which this essay seeks to highlight and, in some ways, begin to address.

To help bridge the newspaper coverage as a matter of historical record across both worlds, as it were, I start with reproduction in full – with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa – of the article headlined (strikingly in

'This Picture Caused a Rumpus'

conjunction with a photo of the portrait) 'This Picture Caused A Rumpus', published on page 19 of the Durban-based *The Natal Mercury* on Tuesday, 12 December 1939 (fig. 1).⁴ Sans caption, two subheads assist

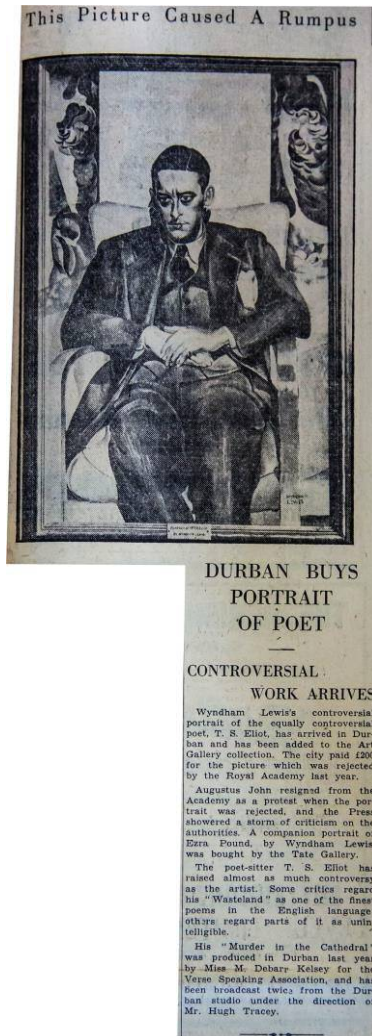


Fig. 1: 'This Picture Caused A Rumpus', *The Natal Mercury* (12 December 1939).

in conveying news of the acquisition and arrival of the controversial portrait. Notably devoid of direct quotations (such as from the gallery

director), the article is nevertheless clearly well informed on the controversial nature of the recent history of the portrait, its subject, and the artist – including the UK press frenzy. The article suggests something of a cultural triumph in landing the portrait, not least in referring to the companion portrait of Ezra Pound purchased by the Tate; and the significance of the portrait's arrival in Durban is enhanced by reference to local productions of Eliot's works.

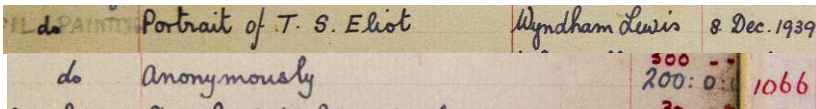


Fig. 2: Register entry, Durban Art Gallery.

That said, the newspaper article does not quite tally with the gallery's historical information about the portrait's entry into its collection. Whereas the newspaper article states that the portrait was bought by the city for £200, the acquisitions register entry – reproduced here with the kind permission of the Durban Art Gallery (fig. 2) – records that the painting, under the description 'Portrait of T. S. Eliot' and duly attributed to Wyndham Lewis, was acquired on 8 December 1939, donated anonymously, and insured for £200.⁵ There are other discrepancies and perplexities to consider. For instance, in *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (1980), Jeffrey Meyers specifies a sale figure which does not match the amount of £200 recorded in the acquisitions register of the Durban gallery. He writes that the rejection controversy 'aroused interest in the picture (which was refused by the Trustees of the Tate), and in 1939 T. J. Honeyman of the Lefevre Gallery sold it for £250 to the Municipal Art Gallery in Durban, South Africa. This money, and the fees for his other portraits of the late thirties, enabled Lewis to escape from England and travel to North America'.⁶ Moreover, according to the Durban gallery, the register simply indicates 'the work was an anonymous donation and no more documentation exists in our archives' relating to a sale (and therefore to Honeyman and the Lefevre Gallery) or the mystery 'donor'.

It also transpires there is, unfortunately, no corresponding sale record in London. According to Lefevre Fine Art Ltd, the artwork was definitely sold by Lefevre in 1939 but 'because The Lefevre Gallery closed in 2002 and re-opened as Lefevre Fine Art, we were unable to keep old sales ledgers for legal reasons'. In the circumstances, O'Keeffe's version

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of events, evidently drawing upon the Durban register, seems (in retrospect) on relatively safe – but nevertheless rather peculiar and obscure – factual ground:

In the heat of the furore surrounding the Royal Academy's rejection of Lewis's portrait of T. S. Eliot, he told the *Daily Telegraph*: 'The picture is being bought by public subscription for a large national collection and will eventually be hung in one of the national collections in America.' There was nothing, beyond wishful thinking, to support this claim. But by the end of 1939 the portrait had indeed found a place in a collection, that of the Durban Municipal Art Gallery in South Africa. An anonymous donor supplied the necessary asking price of £200 and the purchase was confirmed by wire on the last day of August. The sale was providential, affording Lewis 'time to turn around and make [his] arrangements' during the following couple of months. On 2 September he left England, with his wife and their dog, and sailed for Canada. (SSG 399-400)

Yet why Durban? Understandably, Lewis's penury has been presented by biographers and scholars as the prime factor in the portrait's relocation there. Michel writes that, despite the headlines, Lewis's bank 'stopped his credit' in July 1939. He writes: 'Notoriety or fame had meant little in terms of money. [...] Fortunately, a few months later [after he was 'Personality of the Week' in the June 1939 *World Art Illustrated*], the Lefevre Galleries, through Dr T. J. Honeyman, then one of its directors, were able to arrange for the sale of the rejected portrait to the Durban Art Gallery' (MWL 133). Lewis himself uses the word 'sale' in writing to Honeyman. On 13 September 1939, he wrote from Toronto that 'the sale of the Eliot portrait to Durban was providential, as it will afford me time to turn around and make my arrangements on this side'; and from Buffalo on 5 October 1939 he thanked Honeyman 'very much for getting the money cabled: I am sorry that I had to bother you about it so much' (L 265). However, despite the impression of good fortune and haste in off-loading the painting amid a financial crisis, and the fact that the business end of the deal occurred in the latter half of 1939, it is significant that Lewis had, it appears, already settled on Durban as early as 1938, rather than in 1939.

In *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*, Edwards writes 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” (*EWL* 468). The sketch, as Edwards points out in *Wyndham Lewis Portraits*, is also signed by Eliot, ‘perhaps as a sign of his alliance with Lewis in the public controversy that attended the finished portrait’ (Edwards and Humphreys, *WLP* 70). Specifying (like Meyers) an incorrect sale figure of £250, Edwards argues in regard to the T. S. Eliot portrait that ‘incredibly, it was found so unsettling that the only public gallery that it could be sold to was in Durban, South Africa, for £250’ (*EWL* 469). Quite what this says or implies about Durban, if anything, is unclear. The view that there were no other potential takers for the portrait besides Durban, and Lewis effectively had no choice, seems unconvincingly reductive, failing to consider any other compelling reasons why Lewis might have approved of Durban as its destination.

The most illuminating account of the sale comes, unsurprisingly, from T. J. Honeyman who, in *Art and Audacity* (1971), recalls ‘persuading the Durban Art Gallery in South Africa to acquire the celebrated portrait of T. S. Eliot – the rejection of which by the Royal Academy led to the resignation of Augustus John’. He explains:

The lead in Durban was taken by a fellow medical student, Walter May, who returned to his native South Africa and became a leading cardiologist in Durban. We had, together, our beginnings in appreciation of art in the Art Gallery at Kelvingrove. When Walter became chairman of the Durban Art Gallery we renewed contacts on his visits to London, when he always looked in to see me in King Street. I introduced him to Wyndham Lewis and when the chance of the Eliot portrait came along he seized it for Durban. The Tate Gallery ought to have jumped at this opportunity.⁷

Readers of *The Natal Mercury*, however, were quite well informed in this regard, long before the publication of Honeyman’s book. An article published on page 9 of the Wednesday, 27 January 1954 edition – reproduced in full here with the kind permission of the Bessie Head Library (fig. 3) – covers the occasion when Eliot, while on holiday, ‘re-discovered’ and admired the portrait in Durban. Reporting that the portrait ‘set the whole art world in furore, [and] was featured on the front pages of every British newspaper’, the story also provides insight, along the lines of Honeyman’s later account, into how the painting ended up in the city. The photo of Eliot pointing to his likeness, which is naturally the

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focal point of the article (enhanced by the 'eyebrow'-type headline 'Poet With Early Portrait' and caption), also appears (courtesy of *The Natal Mercury*) as a stand-alone photo in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (see opposite L 253), betwixt Lewis's missives concerning the Academy's rejection of the portrait to the editors of the *Daily Telegraph* (dated 24 April 1938) and *The Times* (1 May 1938) respectively.⁸ The actual newspaper story which accompanied the photo – albeit with its oddly less newsworthy main headline (or heading) 'Controversial Eliot Portrait in Durban' – goes further than the December 1939 article in disclosing 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 Lefebre [*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.'



Fig. 3: 'Controversial Eliot Portrait in Durban', *The Natal Mercury* (27 January 1954).

Honeyman was not alone, clearly, in his view that the Tate ought to have snapped up the portrait. Below the crosshead 'EAGER BUYER', former director of the Durban gallery, E. C. Chubb, is quoted on the Tate's apparent desire to secure the portrait at the earliest opportunity, recounting director Sir John Rothenstein's expressed interest during a 'flying visit' to Durban around eight years before. As this article indicates, and as the pages of *The Natal Mercury* during that period powerfully confirm, Durban was very much on the cultural map in relation to Britain. Honeyman's choice of the word 'seized' speaks volumes in such a context.⁹ Moreover, in this vein, it is also possibly significant, in seeking to more fully understand Lewis's rationale in approving the destination of his (in)famous portrait, that it should arrive in Durban – a port city around 6,000 miles from London, as the proverbial crow flies – with World War II under way. On 6 and 10 September respectively, South Africa and Lewis's native Canada had joined Britain and fellow independent dominions of the British Commonwealth as allies in declaring war on Germany. In the build-up to war, removing the painting from hidebound (as Lewis saw it) Britain to culturally friendly and relatively safe shores abroad, away from the threat of bombs, could also have been an attractive proposition for the artist – who himself promptly left Britain, using the money from the sale of the portrait to fund his new 'arrangements' in North America. That anxieties regarding war were possibly a factor in Lewis's rationale can perhaps be inferred from his letter of thanks to Honeyman on 5 October for getting the money cabled:

I am sorry that I had to bother you about it so much. I thought, however, that in the present rather peaceful period of the war it would be easier to carry through such transactions than it would in a moment of great confusion, should the war suddenly come to life. (Let us hope that it will not, and that it goes on being a nice quiet war.) (L 265-6)

That was the business end of the deal in 1939, but what else might have informed the apparent decision on Durban already made in 1938? In both the 1939 and 1954 newspaper articles reproduced here, the close association between Lewis and Eliot is naturally explained in brief. The latter article, in particular, goes beyond merely the painting itself, explaining that Lewis 'published some of the poet's first work in 1918 [*sic*] in a magazine called "Blast," and is himself as famous as the author of

“The Apes of God”, “The Lion and the Fox,” “Tarr” and other books’.¹⁰ However, there are other artistic and literary associations to consider, expressly in relation to Durban, which might also help to explain why the city was agreeable to Lewis as the new home for his portrait. In a fascinating essay entitled ‘Lewis and the Men of 1938: Graham Bell, Kenneth Clark, Read, Reitlinger, Rothenstein and the Mysterious Mr Macleod: A Discursive Tribute to John and Harriet Cullis’, published in the 2016 edition of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*, Edward Chaney writes that ‘Graham Bell and Anne Bilbrough had become an item in South Africa in 1931, at around the time that the 20-year-old Bell exhibited more than forty pictures at the Town Hall in Durban (which city by the end of the decade would acquire Lewis’s rejected portrait of T. S. Eliot)’.¹¹ This backdrop in relation to the Bell exhibition is indicative of the cultural credentials and credibility of Durban, in the arts, evidently underpinning the Eliot portrait transaction.¹² Roy Campbell, of course, represents a particularly strong Durban connection. A contextual paragraph in the *Letters* states that Lewis ‘readily appreciated Campbell’s personality and talent. He drew his portrait in line, and in words – as “Zulu” Blades in *The Apes of God*, as Rob McPhail in *Snooty Baronet*. Significantly, the ‘two supported one another publicly until their deaths, which occurred within a month of one another’ (L 205).¹³

A more integrated and considered understanding of the portrait’s re-homing in Durban, then, must entail going some way beyond Lewis’s financial difficulties and a perceived lack of other potential takers as determining factors. As ‘providential’ as the sale was financially, Durban must have struck Lewis (not least via Dr May) as a rather congenial destination for the portrait. Certainly, the city did him – and the art world – a great service. As O’Keeffe says, the ‘Art Gallery in Durban, South Africa, rescued the first Eliot portrait from undignified rejection and brushed away the stigma of the chalked cross on its back’ (SSG 545-6). The city evidently remained a beacon of hope in Lewis’s imagination. In his account of Lewis’s poverty and difficulties in landing paid work in the 1940s, Meyers mentions that Lewis ‘even thought of teaching and painting in Durban, South Africa, where a spark of light had emerged when the Municipal Gallery bought his portrait of Eliot.’¹⁴ This was not to be. However, both Lewis and Eliot continue ‘to be known to posterity’ (MWL 132) through the portrait, thanks in no small part to its custodian, Durban.¹⁵

While the portrait has not been on public display there for many years, according to staff, it remains part of the gallery's permanent collection, under lock and key.¹⁶ It has been loaned out internationally, including for full retrospectives of Lewis at the Manchester City Art Gallery in 1980 and the Fundación Juan March in Madrid in 2010, and for the exhibition entitled 'Wyndham Lewis Portraits' at the National Portrait Gallery in 2008. It is currently on loan for the exhibition entitled 'Wyndham Lewis: Life, Art, War' at the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester until 1 January 2018. Predictably (and here we cannot but feel sympathy for the struggling artist during his lifetime), the portrait is now worth a tidy sum. According to a Durban Art Gallery Permanent Collection Catalogue document – reproduced here with the kind permission of the gallery (fig. 4) – the portrait, again faithfully recorded as an anonymous donation (but with an updated insurance figure of R4 000 in 1966), was revalued at R6 402 440 in 2002. Gallery staff believe it is worth, in 2017, markedly more. (The revaluation figure is comfortably a fortune in contemporary South Africa, although loses some lustre when converted into British pounds.) Coincidentally and amusingly, the original catalogue number 1066 strikes one as rather British – but whether this might yet taunt and tempt the Tate (which currently displays 24 of Lewis's artworks on its website), and bring another twist of fate, remains to be seen.

Durban Art Gallery
PERMANENT COLLECTION CATALOGUE

CAT NO. 1066
ARTIST PERCY WYNDHAM LEWIS
1882 - 1957
TITLE PORTRAIT OF T.S. ELIOT
MEDIA OIL ON CANVAS
SIZE 133.3 x 85.1
DATE ACQUIS DATE 8 DEC 1939
WAY OF ACQUISITION (Artist/Donor/number): ANONYMOUS DONATION
CONDITION (On date of acquisition):
PURCHASE PRICE DONATION INSURANCE R4000 (1966)
REVALUATION AND DATE R6 402 440 (2002)

Fig. 4: Durban Art Gallery Permanent Collection Catalogue document.

Notes

- ¹ The images reproduced in this essay were provided by Peter Upfold.
- ² Paul Edwards (with Richard Humphreys), *Wyndham Lewis Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2008), 68. Hereafter Edwards and Humphreys, *WLP*.
- ³ Fundación Juan March (with Paul Edwards and Richard Humphreys *et al.*), *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2010), 238. Hereafter Edwards and Humphreys *et al.*, *WLM*.
- ⁴ I express my thanks and appreciation to Senior Librarian (Periodicals), Eshara Singh, and her team at the Bessie Head Library for kindly facilitating my search for media coverage of the portrait. Reproduction of both articles is by kind permission of the Bessie Head Library.
- ⁵ I also express my thanks and appreciation to Director of the Durban Art Gallery, Dr M. Mduduzi Xakaza, and his team for kindly facilitating access to the acquisitions register and revaluation document. Reproduction of both items is by kind permission of the Durban Art Gallery.
- ⁶ Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 240.
- ⁷ T. J. Honeyman, *Art and Audacity* (London: Collins, 1971), 91-2.
- ⁸ Curiously, while the impending trip to South Africa is mentioned in Lewis's letter to Eliot dated 19 December 1953 (*L* 553), Eliot's encounter with the portrait does not come up in subsequent letters.
- ⁹ Steeped in colonial history and maintaining (at that time) distinctly British ties and affinities, Durban was situated, of course, within South Africa's exceedingly complex (inter)cultural and geopolitical context germane to the advent of apartheid. As the pages of *The Natal Mercury* also confirm, the newspaper and its readership were by and large liberal but fundamentally racist – the page on which the December 1939 article appears, for example, features a story headlined 'Kitchen Boy Turns Business Man' which provides a glimpse into the entrenched racism of the time.
- ¹⁰ The second edition of *BLAST*, published on 20 July 1915, contained Eliot's poems 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'.
- ¹¹ Edward Chaney, 'Lewis and the Men of 1938: Graham Bell, Kenneth Clark, Read, Reitlinger, Rothenstein and the Mysterious Mr Macleod: A Discursive Tribute to John and Harriet Cullis', *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*, 7 (2016): 34-147, at 44.
- ¹² It should be stressed that Durban newspapers from that period amply reflect readers' abiding and discerning interest in the arts locally and internationally, with news often evidencing the long-established cultural ties and traffic between Durban and London. This can be gauged in part, for

example, from a piece with the headline ‘Graham Bell Converted’ in the Saturday, 30 December 1939 edition of *The Natal Daily News* (i.e. soon after *The Natal Mercury*’s story on the arrival in Durban of Lewis’s Eliot portrait), which treads a fine line between approval and reproof of the local artist abroad. Reporting that the ‘old problem of “the artist and his public” is approached from the artist’s point of view by Mr Graham Bell in the latest Hogarth sixpenny pamphlet’, the writer highlights that Bell’s ‘fellow citizens of Durban who were shocked by his earlier experiments in free expression on canvas may be interested to learn that several years of study and the practice of art in London have brought him to believe in the doctrine that there are no short cuts in art’. The writer adds: ‘Mr Bell, like most of his young contemporaries, having had his fling in imitating the styles and mannerisms of some modernist masters, is now convinced that painting is a very serious business, that a painter like any other professional must learn to handle his tools and his materials and not rely solely on his sensibility’. Notably, the writer quotes Bell’s criticism of the Royal Academy: ‘This sort of conscience reaches its most ridiculous when it touches the Royal Academy and one finds respectable old gentlemen throwing away a lifetime of one kind of pretentiousness to gain an Indian summer of another.’

¹³ For more insight into their friendship, see *Wyndham Lewis: Roy Campbell* (1985), published by the University of Natal Press (Pietermaritzburg) and edited by Jeffrey Meyers. The *Letters*, of course, illuminate the enduring alliance, such as when Lewis writes to Campbell in July 1951 expressing his gratitude for a favourable article on *Tarr* (and Lewis himself): ‘To find you still at my side is a matter of the greatest satisfaction to me: and I hope we shall always remain comrades-in-arms against the forces of Philistia’ (L 543).

¹⁴ Meyers, *The Enemy*, 275.

¹⁵ In a supportive letter to Lewis dated 21 April 1938, expressing his view on the Academy rejection, Eliot writes: ‘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’ (L 251).

¹⁶ The portrait is not normally on public display at the gallery, and this has indeed been the case for many years, but I have ascertained (courtesy of Dr Xakaza) that it last appeared in Durban among dozens of artworks in the Art of the Ball exhibition for the FIFA World Cup which took place in South Africa in 2010. Durban was one of the host cities for the tournament. Amusingly, Eliot was positioned as one of the ‘spectators’ in a football pitch installation; and his haunted expression befitted England’s performance in the actual tournament, with elimination by Germany 4-1 in the Round of 16. Eliot’s native United States did not fare much better, losing 2-1 to Ghana, also in the Round of 16.