

# **T. S. ELIOT**

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A Friendship

E. W. F. Tomlin

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Volume 9

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# T. S. ELIOT: A FRIENDSHIP

E. W. F. TOMLIN



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LONDON

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my grateful thanks to Mrs T. S. Eliot for allowing me to reproduce the letters her husband wrote to me. I also wish to thank her for help in many other ways, not least through personal exchanges over the years. Finally, in dedicating the book to her, again with her kind permission, I pay tribute not merely to the wife of a great man but to one who has earned distinction in her own right.

To my sister, Esther Tomlin, I am indebted for granting me permission to reproduce the letters written to her by T. S. Eliot on 3 November 1940, 27 May 1942, and the handwritten letter from Jamaica on 17 January 1961; together with permission to reproduce the copy of the drawing of T. S. Eliot by Mrs Henry Ware (Theresa) Eliot and presented to her by the artist. To George Every I acknowledge with thanks permission to reproduce the photograph taken of T. S. Eliot at Kelham; to the Houghton Library, Harvard University for permission to reproduce the photograph of T. S. Eliot in 1932; to the Felix Mann Estate for permission to reproduce the photograph of T. S. Eliot in his office; to Andrew Sanders for permission to reproduce the photograph of the Chapel at Kelham; and to Graham Hughes and Father Christopher Colven for permission to reproduce the photograph taken in St Stephen's, Gloucester Road.

A few passages from articles of mine in *Agenda* and *The Listener* have been incorporated in the text.

Since the completion of this memoir, in which I have endeavoured to set down everything I remember about T. S. Eliot, further recollections have emerged from the past and must await the opportunity of joining those on record. In this sense, no memoir is ever finished.

E. W. F. Tomlin  
London, June 1987



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TO VALERIE

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# INTRODUCTION

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The circumstances of my life, which, through no merit of my own, brought me into contact with a number of distinguished men and women, enlarged my perception of what makes a person notable. Above all I observed, even if only in retrospect, that great people had a *presence* which marked them off from the rest. It was as if, in addition to their physical embodiment, they had what might be called – except that it has unnecessary paronormal associations – a psychic presence. Another way of putting it would be to say that they possessed an extra dimension. And if you protest that you cannot fathom what I mean by that, I in turn will reply that in that case you have apparently never met a really great man or woman.

With such a presence and such an extra dimension, T. S. Eliot was a great man in my sense. I was never to meet anyone to whom I could ascribe greatness with such assurance.

This is a personal record. Books on Eliot continue to pour from the press, and there is no sign of the stream diminishing. The majority of these books are concerned with exegesis, as the *oeuvre* lends itself to this sort of approach. Save in order to point or reinforce an allusion, I am not here concerned with interpretation or analysis. I am concerned with the man himself, the personality. Someone as remarkable as Eliot – it is part of the mysterious ‘presence’ – commands attention in a way that a lesser figure cannot do : for just as we need little detail about a minor figure (save perhaps for the purpose of writing a doctoral thesis), in respect of a major figure we cannot have too much.

To read James Hogg on Shelley and Leigh Hunt on Byron is fascinating, not because they talk of the poetry but rather because they talk of the appearance, the manner, the behaviour of these men.

In the case of persons of great inner life, the outward appearance is still, and perhaps all the more, interesting, because it may serve to reveal something of that inner life in the course of masking it; and the more intensive that life, the more the mask reveals by apparent concealment. Only if behaviourism were true and behaviour were just a mechanistic function would it reveal nothing: it is only because behaviourism is not true, and could not be true, that behaviour becomes significant.

Sometimes when I saw Eliot at a public gathering, I would be seized with wonder that all that extraordinary poetry and prose could have come out of him. Indeed, as we grow older and our contacts multiply, personality becomes a more and more elusive thing. Consequently, anything that can help to shed light upon it, to delineate it, is of interest. And the number of people in a position to do this is, in Eliot's case, diminishing.

This surviving group of friends is placed under particular obligation. Over a fairly long life I have been confronted with evidence, in cases where I was in a position to know the true circumstances, suggesting that the testimony of certain persons, otherwise of known integrity, was suspect: and that, on account of such testimony, a myth had been built up which, without evidence to the contrary, could not easily be demolished. In setting down my own memories, I trust that I may have avoided generating another myth. The precaution seems to me mandatory. For in the case of Eliot, there have been several myths in course of elaboration, and I know how much damage they have already done. But as confirmation of some of the things I myself shall say may not be forthcoming, the reader will have to take my word for them. His own judgment and the judgment of time will test my credibility. Also, I have a suspicion, which may amount almost to superstition, that if one were to exaggerate or to elaborate beyond probability, or to engage in wish-fulfilling surmise, the consequences would ultimately rebound upon one's own head. As it is the record must speak for itself in the hope that, over the years, testimony may accumulate in its support.

In recording TSE's conversation, either from notes or from a fairly retentive memory – which has been further reinforced by constant recollection through the years – I was astonished often how much of value and pungency he was able to crowd into the briefest space. There were, I believe, two reasons for this. As he spoke slowly, and with great deliberation, he released only what was worth saying.

Secondly, he had no small talk. The result is he never squandered his words. It was as if he rationed them. In recounting my friendship with Eliot, one of the most important events of my life, I begin by going back to the period in which his reputation started first to make an impact on me and on my own circle.

Since the reader will have taken up this book in order to find out more about Eliot, it must contain the minimum of me and the maximum about its subject; but the minimum must be an irreducible minimum, and therefore the provision of some background detail is necessary for the purpose of making the course of the friendship intelligible.

Few things are more rewarding in youth than the awakening of common intellectual interests, and the recognition of a mutual, if barely defined, mental need. Looking back, I see this as more crucial by far than sexual awakening, on which so much stress is now placed. For me and for my friends at my school, Whitgift, in the 1920s, books, music, and to a lesser degree art, fed our burgeoning libidos and psyches, and I would not have had it otherwise. Events were propitious. The early BBC opened a new world of music to us : the Croydon Public Library, excellent as it was then, offered us all the books we could need. In fact, 'the Library', as we called it, played a great part in our development. It was not merely a reservoir of books but a meeting-place. Occasionally it could become, however, briefly, a trysting-place too, because it must not be thought that girls played no part in our lives.



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## CHAPTER ONE

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How and when the *name* T. S. Eliot (a striking name at that, because of the combination of initial consonants) first came to my eyes or ears, I cannot now recall. I fancy that he was mentioned in a sermon by the Archbishop of York, then Dr William Temple, as an example of an intellectual who found faith rather than, as was more normal at that time, having abandoned it. Temple, who I was to meet at a weekend for public schoolboys, was closer to the intelligentsia than most other prelates, and certainly he had a powerful mind, even though his Christian Socialism did not appeal to me. My first contact with the Eliot *oeuvre* took place on one of the mid-platforms of East Croydon station, after a visit to the Library for purely bibliophilic purposes. I remember opening the slim volume of *Poems 1909–25*, with its brown jacket, and suddenly realizing that the words that met my eyes were ones I had somehow been waiting for. This was my poetry. This was what I wanted to have written. The result amounted to a kind of conversion. Immediately, as happens when a particular book is sampled, I wanted to read everything by T. S. Eliot. Enthusiasm consumed me, and in many ways it has remained undiminished. The year must have been 1928.

Whether I had communicated my enthusiasm to Burke Trend, almost my exact contemporary at Whitgift who sadly died in 1987, or whether he had made an independent discovery, my next recollection in the field of Eliot awareness was Burke's mentioning the precision of the *prose* of *For Lancelot Andrewes*. We were standing, I remember, in one of the school corridors. At that time I think I had a keener ear for poetry than for prose, because I trace my sensitivity to prose style from Burke's comment. From *For Lancelot*

*Andrewes* I went back to *The Sacred Wood*. In intellectual matters, as in much else, Burke was far ahead of me; but we found ourselves engaged in that sharing and pooling of experience which I have described as productive of so much elation; and we had something else in common, our mothers had been widowed at an early age, so that for us life was real, life was earnest in a literal sense. We lived – Burke perhaps more than I, as he was an only child, whereas I had an elder sister and brother of similar tastes – on a level of high-mindedness with which I can hardly now credit myself; but it was undoubtedly so. Any form of entertainment was the greatest luxury – a contrast to today when work or study for the schoolchild and the student seems to amount to a tiresome interruption in an endless round of diversion. At any rate, I forthwith devoured *For Lancelot Andrewes*, with its eye-opening preface (of which more anon); and I found especially in the essay on Machiavelli some observations which were permanently to alter my mental viewpoint. I have always regretted that Eliot never wanted that essay republished. But there was more to the spare volume than that: the seminal essay on ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’, for instance, and evidence of a growing interest in political and social problems. No longer was literature purely literary. No longer was religion divorced from true humanism, which was itself to be distinguished from humanism as a form of *ersatz* religion.

A digressionary paragraph is necessary here in order to set the scene more clearly. I am told by educational experts that candidates for university entrance today have sometimes to be cajoled into recollecting any of the English classics they may have read or glanced at, and also that one of the impediments to their pursuit of study is the emotional turmoil in which they are already enmeshed, or, on arriving at the university, soon become involved. For nothing in youth takes up so much time, or consumes as much valuable psychic energy, as sexual involvement, which must exceed the common cold in the amount of absenteeism it causes. (This, I am told, is especially true behind the Iron Curtain, where so much spare psychic energy has to be discharged in the private sphere.) I am glad to have belonged to a generation which, as I have implied, did not regard an active sex-life to be a sign, or rather *sine qua non*, of sophisticated living. The result was that our ‘education sentimentale’ was largely brought about by exploring works of imagination and in an, admittedly, sometimes excessively idealistic pursuit of the nature

of a just society. This meant above all that we read voraciously. And so, when we presented ourselves to the university interviewers, we could talk, no doubt sometimes with absurd cocksureness, about books and movements and the latest literary or artistic sensation in Paris (for example) in a manner calculated to impress, if sometimes slightly to alarm, our future instructors. I had hardly gone into long trousers (a rite of passage which some fond parents delayed for as long as possible) when, in the train, I would spread a capacious volume such as Spengler's *Decline of the West* on my knees, and cause an almost sensory reaction – not always of approval – from my fellow-passengers, who were mostly of the middle-management type, and therefore belligerently low-brow. In other words, higher education for us – and this applied not merely to Burke, who excelled us all, but to Paul Crowson, Peter Shaw, Philip Martin and Rupert Neville, from each of whom I learnt something of value – implied, when we arrived at the university (which for all of us, as it happened, meant Oxford), a still higher education. It was not a case, as now, of having to be brought up to standard on arrival there, or, as has happened despite indignant denials, of gradually lowering standards to meet the aspiring students half-way. Now, having engaged in a certain measure of self-praise, I must admit to defects. One was the tendency, inseparable from youth, towards mono-enthusiasm. By the time I sat for university entrance, I tended to see everything through the Eliot *oeuvre*. I must have bored everyone to distraction by my championship of original sin, the dissociation of sensibility, and the objective correlative. I must have distressed lovers of the Romantic poets, especially Shelley, or the Georgians, who included most of the dons who had the corvée of dealing with me, by my blanket contempt for these figures, many of whom I have since re-admitted to the pantheon. Above all, I denounced Marx, a figure whom I still exclude; and this sometimes got me into trouble, as many of the dons were convinced Marxians or at least *Marxisants*. But I received the impression then, as indeed I do now, that many of these armchair revolutionaries had, in contrast to myself, never read a word of Marx in their lives. But of that I shall need to speak further.

What I seek to convey to the reader is the truth of Peter Ackroyd's statement in his 1984 biography, that Eliot had emerged in the mid-1920s as 'the new voice' in poetry, the originator of a 'new music', and as something else much less easy to define, namely, the initiator of a sort of cultural mutation. Every now

and then this kind of writer-cum-cultural prophet emerges, and as a result there is a shift in the kaleidoscope of taste, the release of a new language of image and sensibility. But it is more than just change. As Eliot said in an early essay 'Sensibility alters from generation to generation in everyone, whether we will or no: but expression is only altered by a man of genius'. Eliot seems to me the most innovative example in English literature since Arnold, a 'cultural' figure if ever there was one. And we heard the music, and sensed the kaleidoscopic shift. Indeed, so great has been Eliot's influence that, if we survey the literary scene prior to the publication of *Prufrock and other Observations*, it seems strangely denuded and bare. Moreover, the Georgians, and not least Masfield, whose attempted resuscitation recently has proved abortive, now make pretty dull reading, with their dream-pastoral-animal-welfare ethos. True, two of my pre-Eliot enthusiasms, Brooke and Flecker, still, for that reason, seem to me to have some merit: the one because he had wit and the other because he, like Eliot, was aware of French poetry, and also because of promise tragically unfulfilled. The other reason no doubt why Eliot excited such interest was because he furnished a new idea of a poet. He was fascinating in not looking the part. Here was an efficient, business-like, personable, and at that time still young-looking individual, writing in a manner different from anyone since the seventeenth century metaphysicals. When years later I saw in the flesh Charles Morgan, not merely Bohemianly cloaked but talking with solemn sententious gravity, it was like a *revenant* – indeed he was a *revenant* – and I realized what a clean sweep Eliot had made of all this literary flummery. Finally, and this was not the least part of the charm, Eliot was by birth American.

Now the oldest of the 'new' countries, the United States was in the 1920s still the land of promise, at least to us tired inhabitants of the Old World. Only a few years earlier, we had seen the Yankees arriving and bringing with them youth and hope. For they all appeared youthful, athletic, early-risers, with a cleanness of look and figure which was hopefulness itself. Then there had been Hollywood. Then there had been jazz, 'everybody's doing it', and something called the blues. Then there had been the breakfast cereals. Then there had been the Rodeo. And then, though to be one of us by naturalization, there had been this equally clean-looking, lean poet, T. S. Eliot. In many ways very English,

and perhaps trying a little too hard at first to make himself so, he nevertheless betrayed his American origins by the slight drawl and an occasional American expression – ‘the gashouse’, ‘boost’ (then very much a trans-Atlantic word) – and by his regular features, that one associated with some of the stars of the silver screen. Can it be my fancy, or is it a plain fact, that the America of the later twentieth century, weary with world-responsibility and the Vietnam and Watergate traumata, has reflected its anxieties and fatigues in the grey complexions of its menfolk and the dry cosmetic skin of its women, both sexes assuming in old age a cragginess of feature, whereas twenty years into the century Americans had been among the handsomest and most comely people on earth? Or have they acquired this arid look as a result of being slowly cooked, over two generations or so, by excessive central-heating? As for Eliot he first matured as an American, but he aged as an Englishman.

Reverting to schooldays, it was inevitable that we should communicate our enthusiasms not only to our friends (and here I must make a special mention of Ben Weinreb) but also to those few masters who might be expected to sympathize. I think we were lucky at Whitgift in having some highly competent men placed over us. Three of them were exceptionally gifted persons, though differing totally in character: H. G. Woodgate, A. H. Ewen and John Garrett. All were aware of Eliot’s growing fame; but being accustomed to the mono-enthusiasm of youth, they received my ardour in particular with certain reservations. The first found *The Waste Land* by no means to his taste, but surprisingly, in view of his agnosticism, he had taken to *Ash Wednesday*. The second, who had an extraordinary knowledge of the ‘modern movement’ in art, music and literature, was more interested in Eliot’s poetic technique than in his ideas, which he found suspect. The last and most enthusiastic, though he may have had less detailed knowledge of the *oeuvre*, was quick to grasp the significance of the man and his achievements. Woodgate and Ewen (in those days we still stuck to surnames and would have regarded the use of first names an intolerable liberty) were rationalists in the Rationalist Press sense. Indeed, Ewen was as near to being a radical behaviourist or reductionist as I have ever encountered. Hardly had I written that sentence when, opening the current school magazine, I came across his photograph, and there he was, the last of the triumvirate,

and still, I am sure, interested in practically everything, if as much a thoroughgoing sceptic as ever. It does no harm to a young person to be exposed, at an impressionable age, to a mind that was so corrosive, yet well-stocked; and if, in later life, I have approached theoretical matters with scepticism – in some cases no doubt with undue caution – I owe it partly to ‘Percy’ Ewen, as we called him. For instance, although my partiality to Eliot’s ideas has often caused mild amusement to my friends, and no doubt excited derision in others, I remain far less orthodox in my beliefs than a disciple of Eliot might be expected to be. Nor has my devotion excluded other loyalties. However, the temperate encouragement of these three masters proved fundamental; and a further reason for alluding to them here will soon become apparent. In youth, one’s teachers are not so much vibrant personalities as slightly distant archetypal figures. Nor did we wish them to be otherwise. That was how their influence was exerted, across a boundary. They had their personal concerns and we had ours; but of course we regarded ours as the more important, and we judged the value of their instruction by the degree to which it helped to sort out our own preoccupations.

That the intellectual world was ringing with Eliot’s name cannot be said at all. Even in the early 1930s, the establishment was largely hostile to him. Many of the detractors have passed into oblivion, though Edmund Gosse has been resurrected owing to a notable biography. Sometimes the hostility reached fever-pitch; and even in the 1950s I heard Lord Dunsany denouncing *The Four Quartets* in terms which he thought, poor man, might, even at that late hour, do something to reverse Eliot’s reputation, of which he was almost pathologically jealous. As to Arthur Waugh’s description of Eliot and Pound as ‘drunken helots’, there could hardly have been a more inept description of the patrician Eliot or the Confucian Pound. What seemed slightly amusing about these hostile manifestations was that the new literary movement, with its revolutionary reappraisals, was led by a man who, from another point of view, seemed to be the champion of reaction. And when we – that is to say, our little circle – had first seen Eliot’s photograph, I believe in the *Radio Times*, we were intrigued to find a striking-looking man, extremely well-groomed, brows slightly knit, who was as unlike our idea of ‘a poet’ as could be imagined. It must be remembered that our conventional notion implied someone ‘romantic’ like Shelley,

Browning, Tennyson or Yeats in appearance. The businessman poet was altogether a novelty.

And then one day, about 3.30 p.m., while wandering in my school cap and blazer round Bumpus's in Piccadilly – at that time the bookshop most frequented in the West End – I spotted a small typewritten notice saying that T. S. Eliot would be giving a lecture on John Marston at King's College, London, at eight o'clock that same evening.

I jumped at the idea of going. My mother, who accompanied me, was equally enthusiastic, because the name of T. S. Eliot had become as familiar to her as a favourite pop idol would be to the modern parent of a star-struck child. Although we were obliged to turn our arrangements upside down, this mattered not at all. What remained in my memory was the extreme difficulty, once we had arrived at King's in the Strand, of finding the right lecture-room. First of all, we encountered an irascible porter, moustacheod with twiddles like the last German Emperor. Of the lecture itself, no one knew anything at all, least of all the porter; and I recall my indignation – kept with difficulty in check – that the most humble lackey was not bursting with excitement that the great poet was due shortly to arrive. On the contrary, the name, even after insistent repetition, meant nothing to anybody, and the additional information 'the poet – you know, the *poet!*' – far from jogging their memories, tended, to my bafflement, to diminish their interest. It was only by chance that, after wandering through the dismal, grubby green, peeling corridors, like those of a decaying hospital, we reached the library, where the lecture was billed to take place. Already there had assembled a few people, mostly academic figures, with Professor F. S. Boas, his moustache (this was an era of moustaches) encircling his mouth like a corona, occupying the chairman's seat. On the right of a room much longer than broad, my eye was on the door. Punctually to the moment, a tall figure in a large lightish-brown overcoat, American cut, swept into view, pausing to verify that he had hit upon the right place. Seeing Boas, whom he evidently knew, and smiling in recognition, he strode in. I at once recognized the 'round of his skull', the abundant brown hair, glossy with brilliantine, and the accurate slashed parting. The yellowish parchment skin was almost wholly unlined. With him was a short woman who seemed to melt into the audience, and on whom I bestowed no more than perfunctory attention.

The chairman, with many 'er-ah' interpolations, introduced the speaker as someone with a 'great reputation'. It reminded me that, at this stage, Eliot had written, with the exception of *The Four Quartets*, almost all his great poetry, and much of his best prose. When he rose to speak, it was with a steady propulsive movement, and I could not help noting the contrast between his spare, athletic figure and the tousled slumped pedants who had come to listen to him. He had a direct look, assisted by face-confidence. He articulated well, and he improvised an opening paragraph in which he stated that Marston was in many ways a difficult writer, and one from whom he had been able to steal only twice. The remark brought a laugh, as one of the subjects of contention and censure had been Eliot's habit, a unique one, of incorporating in his verse odd lines from other people. ('Immature poets imitate : mature poets steal'.) The practice later became common, but with much less success, witness Richard Aldington. Although Eliot was a beautiful verse reader, and the more so because there was no artifice – and certainly no Yeatsian 'low drone' – he experienced difficulty with lines,

The black jades of swart night trot foggy rings  
'Bout heaven's brow,

where 'trot foggy rings' stumped him momentarily, and he inserted, with a slow smile that creased his brow, the equally slowly delivered words – 'some of Marston's lines are difficult to read' – which, plain statement though it was, achieved by the slight drawl, the remnant of his southern accent, much greater effect than it could otherwise have done.

The paper, dated in the *Selected Essays* as belonging to 1934 and obviously much revised, was what Boas declared it to be, 'a work of art'. W. J. Lawrence, in broad Scottish accent, and Percy Allen, added, among others, their comments, both with considerable brio; and Boas announced the discovery of new facts about Marston's life, which Eliot duly noted down on the back of an envelope. The information brought a sudden smile to his face, the lips curving, symmetrically, but revealing irregular and nicotine-stained teeth.

Reading the essay in its final form, I realized how much thought had gone into it, and how it contained clues to Eliot's own methods of composition, including those to be exploited in



the later drama. He spoke of 'the doubleness of the action' of poetic drama at its most profound, a 'pattern behind the pattern' of the kind that

we perceive in our own lives only at rare intervals of inattention and detachment, drowsing in the sunlight. It is a pattern drawn by what the ancient world called fate: subtilized by Christianity into mazes of delicate Theology; and reduced again by the modern world into crudities of psychological or economic necessity.

These words have been open to inspection for half a century, but you have no idea what an impact they made at the time, or how extraordinarily stimulating it was to find a literary critic who could pronounce with such authority on matters beyond most 'literary' men's compass, or even conception. Moreover, the passage just quoted has, like much of Eliot, worn well because he was talking, especially in the final sentence, about matters that have become still more relevant. And here was the man himself uttering the words. They included some references to the French neuro-psychologists Ribot and Janet, of the University of Nancy, which he evidently struck out, but which, as one who hung upon his words, I vividly recall. This leads me to hope that the printed version may, in this and in other cases, be checked with the original, if it has survived; for I am convinced that some gems would thereby be recovered. At any rate, my mind, then I suppose at its most receptive, found the talk, by one who looked so much more alive than most of the audience, vibrating at several levels at once, as I was later to perceive happen with so much of Eliot. Nor did I fail to note another of his characteristic habits, that of using one work to shed light on another. He spoke of a

Marston tone, like the scent of a flower, which by its peculiarity sharpens our appreciation of other dramatists as well as bringing appreciation of itself, as experiences of gardenia or zinnia refine our experiences of rose or sweet-pea.

Again, to my mind, such sensory analogies make Eliot a poet much nearer to sensory experience than those held to be more overtly sensual, like Auden or Dylan Thomas. He had a keen olfactory sense, as his early poems or indeed his very last make clear: and his nostrils were always slightly flared. After the lecture, when comments were being called for, his otherwise smooth brow crinkled and his

eyebrows rose, and then he would plunge in thought by directing his eyes to the ground. His gestures were minimal, but they seemed charged with significance.

Then, too soon for my liking, the session was over, and Eliot slid once more – I retain the word used in my diary, struggling as I did to find the *mot juste* – into his large overcoat, and left with the woman. Once outside, my mother, who had a talent for quiet manoeuvre, managed to convey to him that I wanted to ask him a question or two: and I still remember the tall figure pausing and bending over to listen, though I myself was a good six foot. Even with the boldness of youth, I felt a certain awe in his presence, which was never to leave me. I asked him when the three books he had mentioned in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* would be coming out – *The School of Donne*, *The Outline of Royalism* and *Principles of Modern Heresy*. He nodded, smiled, and then, looking at the ground, shook his head. ‘I did think of writing them at one time,’ he said, ‘but now I’ve changed my mind. Perhaps I’ll write something else. I’ll try.’ Another enquirer then need his attention, but what then took my attention was the short fidgety figure hovering at his side. As she had her face half hidden by a scarf, I could not make out her features, but I noticed that she kept plucking him by the sleeve, as if impatient of the homage he was receiving. To this he appeared to pay no attention whatever. Even though I knew nothing of her at that time, my impression was that she was a bundle of nerves. I recall them going off together, a forlorn pair. This was my first and, so far as I know, my last view of Vivien Eliot.

On 8 December 1931, in the middle of an economic crisis, I took the train to Oxford with Burke Trend. He was to sit for a classical scholarship at Merton: I had switched at the last minute from English to History and was aiming for a scholarship at Brasenose. As this is not an autobiography, I omit details, and confine myself to saying that Burke got the top scholarship at his college and I won a Hulme Exhibition at mine. Seeing that I had prepared so little and have never been good at examinations, this was a source of surprise to me. Burke’s success, the prelude to so much else, did not come as a surprise at all. The result was that both of us had the best part of a year at our disposal before going up. I at once sat down to reading all the books that my concentration on topics such as the Tudors and Peter the Great (of

which for some reason I had made myself something of an expert) had prevented me from sampling.

One book that came my way was the recently published *Politics and the Younger Generation* by A. L. Rowse, a Fellow of All Souls. It was Percy Ewen who, in addition to so much else, had stimulated my interest in politics. Indeed, he seemed so well informed, and in receipt of so much up-to-date intelligence about both home and foreign affairs, and convinced of the way in which the country should be run, that we sometimes fancied that, one day, he would be summoned by the powers-that-be, desperate for guidance, to assume overall control. On the other hand, I was by this time so deeply read in Eliot – which included studying from cover to cover every issue of *The Criterion* that arrived at the Reference Library in Croydon, and in particular the Commentaries signed ‘T. S. E.’ – that my views began to take a direction totally different from those of Ewen, which were predictably left-wing. No wonder that when I began reading A. L. Rowse, with his sustained eristic, I found myself even more in disagreement with the left; for in those days he well merited Eliot’s description of him as ‘our ferocious friend’. Hardly had I finished the book, or even before, but I began writing a sustained refutation chapter by chapter. For this task I considered myself qualified at least to the extent of being decidedly of the younger generation. It proved to be the longest essay I had written: in point of exuberance it was perhaps the best I ever wrote. I am sure it was over-confident and in many ways naive. I decided to call it ‘The Younger Generation and Politics’; and because Rowse’s book had been published by Faber and Faber, I wrote a letter to that firm explaining that I was a schoolboy and therefore of the younger generation, and that I wanted to ‘answer’ Rowse’s book if possible in the *Criterion* Miscellany series. To this I received an answer

E.W.F. Tomlin Esq.,  
Kylemore,  
157 Brighton Road,  
Purley.

March 22nd 1932.

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your interesting letter of the 17th. Your suggestion is attractive, and if you are writing the pamphlet anyhow we should like very much to see it. But we have so many