

The Russell–Eliot correspondence (with texts)

by *Kenneth Blackwell*

Valerie Eliot, ed. *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*. Vol. I: 1898–1922. London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988. Pp. xxxi, 639; 32 plates. £25.00; US\$29.95.

BERTRAND RUSSELL WAS not merely T.S. Eliot's friend and teacher in the period 1914–17: he was his mentor and, jointly with F.H. Bradley, his philosophic model. We must understand that Eliot thought very highly of Russell and at the same time owed him much for his friendship. For Russell accepted his precipitous marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood at a time when his parents were aghast, even giving the couple a room in his flat. Russell took a paternal interest in Eliot's philosophical career, introducing him to editors of philosophical periodicals, reading his articles and reviews in draft, and arranging a lecture for him.¹ It has been remarked that Russell was father-confessor to the No-Conscription Fellowship.² This role was an extension of his relationship with Eliot (and earlier with Wittgenstein). A witness of some of these and later events was Brand Blanshard:

I well remember Eliot's figure as he sat at the dining room table each morning [Christmas vacation, 1914] with a huge volume of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* propped open before him. He had a certain facility in dealing with its kind of symbols; he said that manipulating them gave him a curious sense of power. Russell was the most accomplished philosopher he had

¹ Eliot's lecture to the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, "The Relativity of the Moral Judgment", given in Russell's rooms on 15 March 1915, is mentioned in Mrs. Eliot's valuable Biographical Commentary and on p. 90. Since the topic was of research interest to Russell at the time, one would like to know whether the paper is extant.

² See Thomas C. Kennedy, "Philosopher as Father-Confessor", *Russell*, no. 5 (1972): 11–13.

met. Like Eliot, he had been a disciple of Bradley, but he had turned strongly against him. Eliot was so much affected by Russell that for the present he had laid his Bradley aside. But in the contest for Eliot's mind, Bradley won. Russell had been very kind to him when he first came to England, and later lent him his London flat more than once when he was in need of lodging. But as time went on, Eliot became more religious and Russell more outspokenly anti-religious until, with Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, they recognized that the chasm between them was impassable, both intellectually and emotionally.³

Russell's letters to Eliot belong to that unfortunate class of his correspondence that was either destroyed or otherwise not kept by the recipient. Only two short letters from Russell survive in the Russell Archives. I have been awaiting this volume for years, not in hope of any new letters between Eliot and Russell, but for the context Eliot's other letters would bring to the reading of Russell's. There are indeed no new letters in the Eliot–Russell correspondence printed here, although Mrs. Eliot has recently given the Archives copies of five new letters from Russell and one from Eliot.⁴

Altogether for the period covered by this volume sixteen of Eliot's letters to Russell survive, and Valerie Eliot has printed all but one. The one is concerned with hotel arrangements. Only one letter is not in the Russell Archives. It is in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library. Someone else had it, and its sale history goes back at least as far as 1970. One letter appeared in Russell's *Autobiography*, Vol. II. Mrs. Eliot also prints two letters apiece from Vivien Eliot, Tom's first wife, and Charlotte C. Eliot, his mother, to Russell. There is one very intriguing letter⁵ from Vivien that she doesn't print, but as it is undated perhaps it will be in the next volume.

The volume contains four new letters from Russell, all of them hitherto unknown to Russell scholars: two to Eliot's mother, a cable to his father, Henry Ware Eliot (quoted in a letter to J.H. Woods), and one to Prof. Woods. All were written during the war years. Although few in number, the letters are revealing. Eliot and Vivien were being put up in Russell's spare room during this time, and Eliot, while writing his dissertation on Bradley and preparing for his oral exam at Harvard, was realigning his ambitions to poetry, literature and criticism. At one point Russell assures Eliot's mother that her son is no longer seeing the "vorticists" (probably Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis *et al.*) and intends to pursue philoso-

phy. Writing this thoughtful letter, on 3 October 1915, was a kindly act on Russell's part. It must have reassured Mrs. Eliot—however unwarrantedly—both about her son's prospects and his marriage.

Dear Madam,

I am venturing to write to you, because your son has been consulting me on the subject of his prospects, and I thought you might wish to know what I had said to him. He was one of my best pupils when I was at Harvard a year ago, and already then I felt him a friend as well as a pupil. Since he came to England, I have come to know him better, and have been struck by the seriousness of his moral purpose and his strong wish to live up to every duty. He has asked me what I think of the financial outlook for him if he stays in England. I do not, of course, know what reasons there may be against his staying in England, but on this one point I felt bound to say that I thought the outlook for him in England just as good as in America. His Oxford tutor is, I know, prepared to recommend him warmly, and owing to the war the openings are much more numerous than usual at present, and are likely to remain so for many years. Practically all educated men of military age, except the physically unfit, have felt it their duty to join the army, so that the supply of teachers is at present extraordinarily short. Of those who have gone to fight, a very large proportion, I fear, are sure to be killed or disabled, so that the deficiency will by no means cease with the cessation of the war. Under these circumstances, I think he may rely with considerable confidence upon obtaining suitable work when he has taken his Ph.D.

I inquired carefully into the work he still has to do for his Ph.D., which was all the easier as I had taught him. So far as I can judge, his work at High Wycombe will not prevent him from getting through the necessary preparation, and I understand that the school is willing to let him be absent during the summer term.

I have taken some pains to get to know his wife, who seems to me thoroughly nice, really anxious for his welfare, and very desirous of not hampering his liberty or interfering with whatever he feels to be best. The chief sign of her influence that I have seen is that he is no longer attracted by the people who call themselves "vorticists", and in that I think her influence is wholly to be applauded.

He seems to me to have considerable literary gifts, and I have hopes of his doing work which will bring him reputation as soon as he is free from worry as to ways and means. (*Letters*, I: 118–19)

Mrs. Eliot's reply is not extant, but she evidently sent Russell a copy of her biography of *William Greenleaf Eliot: Minister, Educator, Philanthropist*.⁶ His reply to that letter is also printed in Volume I. It still concerns Tom's philosophical writing and Vivien, and not his poetry:

⁶ It is not in Russell's library as it was received at McMaster.

³ "Eliot at Oxford", in James Olney, ed., *T.S. Eliot: Essays from the 'Southern Review'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 32.

⁴ Three fall into the period covered by Vol. I, but are minor. Two are from 1924–25, and are not. The letter from Eliot concerns a *Criterion* note on Russell.

⁵ RA I 710.049766. The volume offers no new information on Russell's relationship—whatever it was—with Vivien.

Please accept my very best thanks for your kindness in sending me your biography of Dr. William G. Eliot, which has arrived safely, and which I am most glad to possess. I am sending you my *Philosophical Essays* though I fear most of them are rather uninteresting.

I have continued to see a good deal of your son and his wife. It has been a great pleasure having them staying in my flat, and I am sorry to lose them now that they have a flat of their own. She has done a great deal of work for me, chiefly typing, and consequently I have come to know her well. I have a great respect and liking for her: as she has a good mind, and is able to be a real help to a literary career, besides having a rare strength and charm of character.

Tom read me his review of Balfour's Gifford Lectures, which I thought *admirable*, and so did the Editor of the *International Journal of Ethics*. I am glad he is joining the Aristotelian Society. It is a good thing for him to be moving to Highgate, as, besides a slight increase of salary, it makes it easier for him to get to know philosophical people in London. I hope to introduce him to several during the Christmas vacation. It seems to me that he would have every reason to hope for a distinguished philosophical career in this country if it were not for the worry and the great fatigue of his present struggle to make both ends meet. I have an affection for him which has made it a happiness to be able to help him, and I hope opportunities may occur again in the future. (*Letters*, I: 122–3)

Then, when Eliot was about to embark for Harvard and his oral exam, Russell cabled Eliot's father: "strongly advise cabling Tom against sailing under present peculiarly dangerous conditions unless immediate degree is worth risking life" (I: 136) Mr. Eliot was very annoyed, to judge from his letter to Woods of 7 April 1916. Russell followed this up with a letter that is not printed and may be lost. It is Mrs. Eliot's answer to this letter that is quoted in Russell's *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, and in which she made the memorable remark, "I have absolute faith in his Philosophy but not in the *vers libres*."

Within half a year, however, Russell had come to appreciate Eliot's poetry and had heard the opinion of others. He wrote to Woods, who chaired Harvard's philosophy department then:

I am looking forward to your answer as to my lectures next year. I am very anxious to give the sort of course that will be acceptable. But what I want to write about now is Eliot. I hope he is all right for his Doctor's Degree. I have seen a great deal of him since his marriage, and have got to know a new side of him, which I never suspected. He has been poor, and his wife has been ill. He has had to work very hard to make a living, and has spent his spare hours in looking after his wife, with the most amazing devotion and unselfishness. I can't help fearing that he may have grown rusty in his work—but if he has it is not from laziness, quite the reverse. It has driven me almost to despair to see his really fine talents wasting; he is so reserved and modest that I am sure Harvard will never learn anything of his private circumstances from him.

He has here,⁷ among all the younger literary men, a very considerable reputation for his poetry. All sorts of cultivated people who have never met him think his work in that line the best work done by any young man. For a long time, I was unable to see any merit in it, but now I agree with them. It takes time to get used to a new style. My view is that he is right to live in Europe, because the atmosphere of Europe is better for that sort of work; and that is the sort of work he ought to aim at doing. (*Letters*, I: 132–3)

Russell sent his cable just a month later. He appears to have been instrumental in persuading Eliot that it was too dangerous to cross the Atlantic for his oral.⁸

Sometimes Eliot gives us a new look at Russell. Just after meeting Russell in England in October 1914 Eliot wrote Eleanor Hinkley:

I had a pleasant time in London, and saw several pleasant people. Do you remember Bertie Russell, whom you admired? I met him on the street and found that he was living quite near me, and went and had tea with him. As I expected, he is a pacifist, but he talked very interestingly on the European situation. It was he who said that the Germans made the same mistakes in their warmaking that he had always found in their scholarship—where, said he, a German writer had always read every book under the sun except the one which counted: so in war they were careful to provide their soldiers with forceps for cutting barbed wire but managed their diplomacy in just such a way as to unite everybody against them—He has a little apartment furnished in very good taste, not overcrowded, in fact almost preciously simple, with only one picture on the wall.

Eliot wrote again to her the next year about visiting Cambridge:

The temper of the place is *scientific*, whereas that of Oxford is *historical*; and history is a more aristocratic pursuit than natural science, and demands a more cultivated mind. Not that Bertie Russell is not an aristocrat, but not quite in that sense; he has a sensitive, but hardly a cultivated mind, and I begin to realise how unbalanced he is. I do enjoy him quite as much as any man I know; we had breakfast with him, and stayed talking with him one full night till one o'clock; he talked very well about the war, and is wonderfully perceptive, but in some ways an immature mind: wonderfully set off in contrast to Santayana....

⁷ The printed text incorrectly has "now" for "here".

⁸ The story of this almost-won Ph.D. is upsetting for those who like to see academic enterprises completed. Eliot had visited Harvard as recently as August 1915. In June 1916 his thesis was accepted without reservation. Russell was a sometime lecturer for Harvard (in 1914, and reappointed in 1916 for 1917, although he could not take up the latter appointment). Members of the Philosophy Department occasionally came to England during the war. Could not an oral involving such visitors and Russell have been arranged in England? Would it have changed the course of Eliot's life?

We learn that Russell approved not only Eliot's first philosophical publication, the review of Balfour, but his next, a review of Nietzsche. Russell's conversation is quoted a couple of times (pp. 97, 170), although the content is not remarkable. We learn that Eliot wrote something on *Principles of Social Reconstruction*. Russell approved the piece, or at least encouraged Eliot to go on with it, but Eliot was dissatisfied with it. It appears that his overall opinion of the book was negative. He comments to Woods in March 1917 that Russell's book is "very weak". Russell had not recently published any other book, and under its American title, *Why Men Fight*, *Principles* had appeared in the U.S. in January 1917, so this book is the subject of these references. Ironically, if the British had let Russell go to the U.S., he would at this time have been giving the substance of the book as a course on ethics.⁹

The lost piece on *Principles* is one instance of Eliot breaking free of Russell. The next volume should show more. This self-assertion on Eliot's part continued until the end of his life, as is evidenced by his last letter to Russell, in 1964. There Eliot was careful to point out that "I disagree with your views on most subjects...."¹⁰

The editing is generally reliable and the notes full of useful and often new information. The design is clear and attractive. One would like to know, however, whether the letter to which Eliot is replying at any given point is extant, and whether a rejoinder is. The letter from Vivien Eliot on pp. 138–9 is said to be in the Houghton Library, Harvard. Actually it's in the Russell Archives and was quoted in Russell's *Autobiography*.¹¹ The document in Houghton must be a copy. (This is consistent with the three minor errors in the printed transcription.)

I like the sight and feel of original letters, but for reading purposes I prefer them collected and presented uniformly. It's happening at last for Eliot. Will it ever for Russell?

The Bertrand Russell Archives
McMaster University Library

⁹ *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 13: *Prophecy and Dissent, 1914–16*, ed. R.A. Rempel with B. Frohmann, M. Lippincott and M. Moran (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 339–40.

¹⁰ *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. III: *1944–1967* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 52.

¹¹ Vol. II: *1914–1944* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), pp. 58–9.