How a Persistent Scholar Landed an Invitation to T.S. Eliot's Archive

By Tom Bartlett
Atlanta

The first letter was dated June 19, 1970. "Dear Mrs. Eliot," it began.

The recipient was Valerie Eliot, widow of T.S. Eliot. The writer was Ronald Schuchard, a young literature scholar. "I have been researching Mr. Eliot's lesser known writings for over three years," he wrote, "and I have written a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation on my findings."

He asked for permission to read some of Eliot’s unpublished writing, permission that could be granted only by Mrs. Eliot, who controlled the estate.

So commenced a correspondence, and eventually a friendship, between an extremely patient academic and a woman known for fiercely protecting—some might say overprotecting—the papers of the revered poet who ushered in High Modernism.

That first letter was never answered. Four years later, Mr. Schuchard received a note from Mrs. Eliot in response to a message he had sent her through a mutual friend. "Miss Pinnard tells me that you are in London until after Christmas, and would like to see me in connection with your work," Mrs. Eliot wrote. She invited him to her London flat, the one she had shared with her late husband, for a drink.

For an Eliot scholar, the invitation was like a ticket to the inner sanctum. When Mr. Schuchard arrived, Mrs. Eliot poured him a glass of Old Grand-Dad whiskey (neat) and they talked poetry. Mr. Schuchard told her that he was born in Abilene, Tex., and Mrs. Eliot told him how she and her husband, whom she called Tom, once visited Texas and returned with a Stetson cowboy hat.
Toward the end of the afternoon, Mr. Schuchard asked for permission to see the manuscripts of eight unpublished lectures on metaphysical poetry that Eliot had delivered in the 1920s.

"I'll let you see it," he remembers her telling him. "But you can't use it. You can’t quote from it. And I don’t want you to ever ask me again."

In the years that followed, Mr. Schuchard wrote to Mrs. Eliot from time to time, although she never replied. (She received a canvas bag full of mail from scholars each week, she’d told him.)

Then, out of the blue, in 1987, she wrote to ask if Mr. Schuchard would be interested in editing for publication those lectures he had perused years earlier. "I should like it done as soon as conveniently possible," her letter said. Turns out, she hadn’t answered his letters but had read and appreciated them. He happily agreed.

Nearly 30 years after they first met, Mrs. Eliot, who was fiercely protective of her late husband’s work, told Mr. Schuchard, “It's time to bring all of Tom together. And I’m going to need your help."

The two met multiple times in London. Once, in the mid-1990s, Mrs. Eliot even came to Emory University, where Mr. Schuchard had become a professor of English. They grew to be close. Both had found their lives forever altered by the poems of T.S. Eliot. Mrs. Eliot, who was 38 years younger than her husband, was first an ardent fan, then his secretary, and finally his spouse. Mr.
Schuchard had been a pre-med major until he read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and soon after abandoned medicine for literature.

Even so, Mrs. Eliot maintained her tight grip on Eliot’s archives. Scholars, knowing of her friendship with Mr. Schuchard, sometimes asked him if he could put in a good word so they would be allowed to see a certain letter or manuscript. "She wouldn’t even let me see that," he would inform them.

Before her husband died, in 1965, Mrs. Eliot had promised him that she, and she alone, would edit and annotate the mass of poems, essays, and letters he would leave behind. For her this was a solemn vow, and she spent most of the rest of her life tending his literary garden. She seemed almost to channel his will: "Tom wouldn’t want me to give you this" was a common refrain.

In August 2004, nearly 30 years after their first meeting, Mr. Schuchard and Mrs. Eliot, the now not-so-young scholar and the still-protective widow, sat down together for afternoon tea. He had recently seen a letter that the poet Ted Hughes wrote to Mrs. Eliot in 1988, asking her to consider publishing Eliot’s collected prose. Mr. Schuchard reminded her of Hughes’s request, expecting her to react with nothing more than a smile.

Instead she was quiet for a few moments. Then she said, "It’s time."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It’s time to bring all of Tom together," she replied. "And I’m going to need your help."

**Project of a Lifetime**

Those were the words he had hoped to hear at the beginning of his career. Better now than never, he thought. It would be two more years before Mrs. Eliot could actually bring herself to relinquish control of the papers, even to the scholar she had come to know and trust.

Since 2006, Mr. Schuchard has been digging through Eliot’s archive—the essays published in far-flung journals; the texts of
speeches given once, then tossed in a drawer—the remains of an exceptionally productive writing life. There are 125 unpublished essays and 200 more that were published but never listed in Eliot’s official bibliography. He weighed in on matters political (British colonialism in India), philosophical (Leibniz’s monadism), historical (17th-century Germany), and literary (the death of Henry James).

Mr. Schuchard, 75, and a team of undergraduate and graduate students have been busy for years now collecting these pieces, hunting for undiscovered gems, annotating the notes Eliot scribbled for a class he taught once.

The first two installments appeared online this fall, published by Johns Hopkins University Press’s Project Muse in cooperation with the British publisher Faber & Faber. Mr. Schuchard has already received notes of appreciation from scholars around the world, including Japan, a country that seems to have a special fondness for Eliot. Mrs. Eliot died in 2012, so she wasn’t around to see the fruits of Mr. Schuchard’s long labor, though she knew it was under way. He visited her on her deathbed and told her how much their friendship meant to him.

In all, Mr. Schuchard expects there to be eight online "volumes," of roughly 900 pages each, for a total of about 7,000 pages.

Faber & Faber, where Eliot served as an editorial director and which continues to publish his work, was originally going to publish a print version of Mr. Schuchard’s project but later backed out, apparently because the process was taking too long (requests for a comment from Faber & Faber went unanswered). So the publisher asked another scholar, Archie Burnett, a professor of English at Boston University, to put together a simpler, unannotated edition of Eliot’s prose. It will be, according to Mr. Burnett, a "more modest effort" than the online version. He expects his edition to be published next year.

"It’s a fine idea to be a completist," says Mr. Burnett of Mr. Schuchard’s work, but he’s not sure there will be widespread interest in lots of "odd little scraps." Mr. Schuchard, for his part, doesn’t understand why Mr. Burnett would take on an editorial task that is "not scholarly."
Genteel sniping aside, it's worth asking what is to be learned from the avalanche of Eliot prose that will soon be available—in two different editions, no less. What does it reveal about Eliot? One answer is that, while he was parsimonious with his poetry, publishing two or three poems a year, he cranked out essays and reviews at quite a clip. Taken together, Mr. Schuchard believes, this material will establish Eliot as "the great prose master of the 20th century" and will set in motion a golden era of Eliot scholarship.

Mr. Schuchard is officially retired, but he shows up at his tiny study carrel, crammed with books and manila folders, in Emory's library nearly every morning, working for several hours before returning home to continue his writing and research. It's painstaking labor, a million little details, but he loves it, in part because he never thought he would have the opportunity. He had resigned himself to the likely possibility that the archive would remain off-limits during his lifetime.

"I respected her vow to him," he says, referring to the promise Mrs. Eliot made to her husband. The last line of that naïve, hopeful letter he sent to Mrs. Eliot in 1970 is, in retrospect, a fitting summary of their relationship. "Thank you," he wrote to her then, "for your patience and cooperation."

**Ronald Schuchard's First Letter to Valerie Eliot**

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