



May the Record Speak: The Correspondence of T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale

Frances Dickey

Recognizing increasingly in this year of our lord 1957 Vital Truth is a priceless heritage in the world of letters or Mankind, to pass on to future generations, I bequeath this collection to a public perhaps yet unborn. The length of time before it is made available is under Eliot's insistence. I have had much kindness and happiness of experience in this friendship—as well as inevitable pain. May the record speak, all this in itself.

—Emily Hale (1957)

So concludes Emily Hale's brief, handwritten narrative of her half-century relationship with T. S. Eliot, sealed and reposed with his 1,131 letters to her in Special Collections at Princeton University Library.¹ The long-awaited opening of the letters on January 2, 2020 did not disappoint; they were like Lazarus, "come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all" (*Poems* 8). Eliot openly discusses his emotional life, childhood memories, details of his marriage and Bloomsbury friendships, provides an autobiographical key to figures and scenes in his poetry and plays, describes "moments" that became passages in *Four Quartets*, expresses political opinions, and provides a weekly diary of his social and professional activities. In thousands of typed pages, he reveals a trove of personal information of the kind that he successfully withheld during his life. Rivaling Virginia Woolf's diaries in significance, Eliot's letters to Hale will reshape our understanding of the poet and the literary era that bears his impress. This essay attempts a preliminary assessment of the "Hale letters"—appropriately, yet ironically called, for her own letters to him did not survive the fire, and their destruction is only one of several ways in which the record also does not speak.²

A little over two months after the letters opened, they closed, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, halting the flow of scholars and journalists. Very few were able to read through the whole collection in that time. Apart from select quotations that have appeared in the press, Eliot's record has remained largely silent since its opening, awaiting publication by Faber and Faber in 2021 or later. Beyond such restrictions on his words, their author knew how to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (*Poems* 6). Although he reveals himself to Hale with a frankness unmatched in any of his other writing, our view of him is still partial. Eliot's ability to express himself outstripped his self-knowledge, and there may also have been an element of intentional deception in his dealings with Hale. The loss of her letters means that we must rely on his telling of their story, always reading between the lines to guess what Hale, a professional dramatist and speech coach, not a "Lady of silences" (89) said to him in return. However, despite these important limitations, Eliot's letters to Hale significantly enlarge and change our understanding of the poet's mind, his life, and his writing. These aspects of "Eliot"—the entire subject evoked by his name—are not separate; the letters show us just how intertwined were his life and work with each other, and with her.



Emily Hale at the Berkeley Street School, ca. 1900–1905.

For those not already familiar with the figure of Emily Hale from Lyndall Gordon's sketches in *An Imperfect Life* (1999), she was the daughter of Boston Unitarians who moved in the same circles as the Eliot family. Her father, Edward Hale, a Unitarian minister and architect, taught at Harvard Divinity School and led the First Church of Chestnut Hill in Newton, Massachusetts. Her mother was institutionalized when Emily was a child. Born in 1891, she attended the Berkeley Street School in Cambridge with Eliot's cousin, Eleanor Hinkley, before completing her education at Miss Porter's School in Connecticut.³ Both girls were dramatically inclined, and it was their friendship that brought Hale and Eliot together, as she wrote in her 1957 narrative: "In 1911–12, T. S. Eliot was working at Harvard University toward a doctorate in Philosophy. I met him during this period, or a little earlier in his undergraduate and master's working days, at the home of his cousin, Miss Eleanor Hinkley, living in Cambridge with her mother, who was Eliot's mother's sister" (*NWEH* 1). In her career, Hale acted and directed amateur plays and taught drama and speech at Simmons College, Milwaukee-Downer College, Scripps College, Smith College, and girls' boarding schools. Without a college degree, her prospects for promotion were slim, and Eliot's letters to her reflect her anxieties about money and job security. She gathered a loyal group of female friends who appreciated her wit and generosity, but she had few opportunities to meet eligible men, as Eliot observes, which may help explain why Hale was still single when they reconnected:⁴ "In 1922 and on later visits, when I went to England for a summer holiday, we renewed acquaintance. The circumstances were difficult, he was very unhappy in his marriage, and he found himself once more in love with me. The correspondence of so many years began in 1930, when I was living with a friend in Boston, in an interval between teaching positions" (3).

Hale's collection begins with a handwritten letter dated October 3, 1930, in which Eliot opens his heart after meeting her for tea in London, and ends with a breezy note of February 10, 1957, a few weeks after his marriage to Valerie Fletcher—a period spanning almost his entire middle age. Their correspondence reaches beyond these twenty-six years as well, for Eliot refers to events in their shared past going back as far as 1905–6, when he was a student at Milton Academy outside Boston. Eliot takes care to update Hale on events in his past, especially between his departure for Germany in 1914 and the reopening of communication between them in 1923. These were momentous years, and his letters fill

out and significantly revise his biography. The most important revision is, of course, the addition of a major figure in his life, probably *the* central emotional attachment of his adulthood. Gordon's *Eliot's New Life* (1988) first posited Hale's significance, assembled the existing evidence, and read between the lines with remarkable accuracy, but we have lacked details about their interactions, to the point of not even knowing when they saw each other. The letters answer many questions about their relationship, such as how Eliot fell in love with Hale but left Cambridge without asking her to marry him, what transpired between them when he came to the United States in 1932–33, when and under what circumstances they visited Burnt Norton and locations in New England, Hale's role in Eliot's dramatic career, and why they did not marry after Vivien Eliot's death in 1947. Each letter further develops the dimension of his personal life that was most closely connected to his writing. From October 1930 to the end of 1935, Eliot wrote 418 letters to Hale, amounting to over one-third of their total correspondence. During this time, Eliot made many of his most interesting revelations, and their relationship took the shape it was to hold, with diminishing vitality, for the next twenty years. In what follows (relying primarily on paraphrase), I focus on these early years, culminating in the composition of "Burnt Norton," the work that has occasioned the most speculation about their affair. The richness and variety of the letters makes a single overview almost impossible, but I explore two general findings here: how Eliot's art reflects his life to an extent previously unknown, and how his life also followed art, in a pattern of renunciation imposed both on himself and on Hale.

An Epistolary Pas de Deux (1930–32)

Eliot's preserved correspondence opens with a passionate letter expressing his regret for the past, declaring his adoration, and revealing that loving her has guided him to his spiritual life, as he has shown her in *Ash-Wednesday*. Hale's reply to this letter opens the door to further disclosures and, Eliot writes on November 3, gives him "the only kind of happiness now possible for the rest of my life . . . and though it is the deepest happiness which is identical with my deepest loss and sorrow, it is a kind of supernatural ecstasy." He explains that when he was at Oxford in 1914 and 1915, he convinced himself that he was not in love with her, because he did not want to go back to America to be a professor of philosophy, and so he married a woman he did not love.

He experimented with adultery, which brought him no satisfaction.⁵ He tried to believe that his heart and thus his love for Hale were dead, but after seeing her in Eccleston Square in London (probably 1923),⁶ he began to reorganize his life, and this was the beginning of his spiritual journey. He tells her that his love for her has been central to his life. He also finds her similar to his mother, whose death the year before has left him feeling very alone. Finally, he asks her to reread some of his poems, especially the “Hyacinth girl” passage and “My friend, blood shaking my heart” in *The Waste Land* (l. 35–41, 400–409), and compare these to “Pipit” (“A Cooking Egg”) and *Ash-Wednesday* to see how his love for her has developed. He concludes by telling her that he will always write for her.

The intensity and even perfection of these early love letters suggest that the words and emotions had long gestated within Eliot. Their release is spontaneous and heartfelt, but he had planned for this moment. He treasures Hale’s responses, even the paper they are written on. He proposes to save her letters and eventually donate them to the Bodleian Library, to be opened fifty years after his death; he tells her that he wishes the world to know his debt to her (he will obviously change his mind about this). He seems to view their correspondence as the complement to his literary oeuvre, as that which explains and justifies his poetic work. But a correspondence involves two people, and soon Eliot must acknowledge and negotiate with Hale’s own point of view. By January 7, 1931, Hale has used a word to describe their relationship that recurs in quotation marks in *his* letter and that also appears in her 1965 narrative: “abnormal” (*NWEH* 2). She does not automatically accept her role as muse and stand-in for the Blessed Virgin Mary (in 1947, trying to explain why they cannot marry, he writes that she has been, for him, “a B.V.M.”). In fact, she never embraces this role, long hoping for love physically consummated and socially recognized through marriage. Almost immediately (on January 8), Eliot falls into a depression and muses about traveling to the United States without seeing her, a fantasy that actually comes to pass before long. Their initial exchange of letters thus lays out many of the gestures and emotions that will characterize their long epistolary pas de deux: Eliot’s adoration, self-revelation, and feelings of dependence on Hale; her dissatisfaction with the role of idealized virgin; and his periodic withdrawal from her. Repeat.

Their relationship unfolds throughout 1931 and most of 1932, an exposition marked by Eliot’s breathtaking disclosures about himself and

his poetry. He writes to Hale twice a week during these years, typing single-spaced on *Criterion* or Faber stationery, always continuing on at least to a second page, and inscribing a varied repertoire of salutations and valedictions by hand. He marvels in their newfound intimacy, praises her, asks her about her life, begs her for photographs of herself, and responds to her probing questions about the past. One letter (July 24, 1931) describes how he came to fall in love with her at a small party given by the Hinkleys, where he stepped on her feet during a charade. The feeling developed as they rehearsed for a “stunt show,” acting parts in Eleanor’s adaptation of scenes from Jane Austen’s *Emma*.⁷ It was after they attended a performance of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* that he became fully aware of being in love.⁸ (In an earlier letter, January 20, 1931, Eliot writes to her in French that, as for potions, he knows more about them than she does, and she may not remember taking him to *Tristan*, but he does.) For years, he writes, he was constrained by thinking he was unattractive and ineligible and also by the belief that he should not court a woman whom he could not yet support financially. But nonetheless he almost spoke to her of his love one afternoon after a tea party that he had organized expressly for seeing her, and when he thinks of this moment he feels dizzy. This letter provides the autobiographical background of the “Hyacinth girl” scene of *The Waste Land* and its frame of Wagnerian quotations, a passage in which many readers have discerned a personal kernel of experience. It is his *own* silence he refers to in these famous lines:

I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (*Poems* 56)

Eliot did eventually confess his feelings, as Hale recounts in her 1957 narrative, but not to ask the “overwhelming question”: “In 1914 Eliot went to Germany to complete his doctorate study. Before leaving for Europe, he very much embarrassed me by telling me he loved me deeply; no mention of marriage was made, but I heard often from him; on certain anniversaries my favorite flower, sweet peas, always arrived” (*NWEH* 2).

Other letters explain the circumstances of his marriage to Vivien. On August 21, 1931, Eliot tells Hale that he persuaded himself he was in love with Vivien in order to break his ties with America, although he

neither loved nor was even attracted to her. Once betrothed, she made him feel that prolonging their engagement would place an unbearable strain on her, and so they rushed into an ill-considered union based on mutual weakness and vanity. They should have separated after a year of marriage, he continues on August 25, but he blamed himself for the situation, and he had to think of the financial considerations: his father paid their rent, and if they separated, he would have to ask his father to double these payments. Later, Vivien's inability to look after herself weighed on him, and he tried to make a tolerable life for her, if not for himself. He would have been willing to endure divorce proceedings if there had been another man she wished to marry, but then he joined a church that did not recognize divorce.⁹ Despite his belief that he and Vivien can never now be divorced, in another sense he does not feel that they have ever been married. Nonetheless, his marriage poses an insurmountable obstacle to union with Hale, and on this point, Eliot remains consistent until Vivien's death.

The letters proceed on two tracks throughout 1931: the past and the present. Eliot continues to agonize about his failure to marry the right woman, while both he and she mull decisions about what to do next. We learn from his letter of August 28 that she has decided to decline an offered position at Scripps College in California, feeling inadequate to the task; then, on October 27, he reports the offer of the Norton Professorship at Harvard for the academic year 1932–33. He lays out the reasons for taking it, including the income, his homesickness for his native land, the chance for a break from Vivien, and his longing to see Hale. The Harvard invitation would seem to provide the perfect opportunity—and cover—for them to spend time together, as Hale is living in Boston. But he foresees that being in proximity to her will be difficult for him, and he believes it would be best if they did not see each other regularly. By January 12 he has decided that he wants to see her only twice: once when he arrives, and again just before he leaves, while continuing to write frequently in the interim (a strange way for an ardent lover to behave). By February 2 she is inclined to take the Scripps job for Fall 1932. We can't know whether Hale made this choice out of frustration with Eliot or simple lack of funds—a perennial problem for her—or for another reason, but their mutual decision to stay apart also exemplifies their future relationship, in which circumstances and lack of resolve on one side or the other often prevent them from meeting.

Not seeing Hale also supported the literary purpose of the correspondence. Eliot depended on Hale as an interlocutor with whom he could discuss his life: in part a confessor, but much more, for he also treats his letters as a biographical record and a testing ground for words, phrases, and ideas that later appear in letters to other people and his published works. (For this reason, the Hale correspondence will become an essential supplement to the studies of and notes on *The Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday*, "Landscapes," *Four Quartets*, and his plays.) He tells her on February 19, 1932 that his work cannot be understood without the information revealed in his letters to her, suggesting that his unhappy love is a simple key that unlocks the enigmas of his poetry. In addition to supplying the autobiographical context for his existing poetry, he also describes "moments" between them that become the material for future poems and dramatic passages. Even when the material does not directly concern her, she is his sounding board. Some letters read as echo chambers of his published works, but one has to remind oneself that these "echoes" are the source of future writings.

Eliot's dependence on his epistolary relationship with Hale goes even deeper, for the role of unrequited lover seems to unlock his own creative powers. After she decides to take the job at Scripps, he hears little from her in the month of February, and in early March sends her "Lines to a Persian Cat," a *cri de coeur* softened by the presence of animals: "There is no relief but in grief. / O when will the creaking heart cease? / Why does the summer day delay?" (*Poems* 141). Composed while riding the underground (he tells her), Eliot's "Lines" captures a lasting dynamic within his life and their correspondence: writing assuages his feelings of longing and loneliness and, conversely, these emotions are also the spur to poetic creation. After the warm-up of "Lines," Eliot's letters of April 1932 begin developing ideas and language that will appear in "Burnt Norton" and "East Coker." On April 12, 1932, Eliot remarks on the unkindness of April, which revives memories he must subdue. Most of the time he works away as if underground, but sometimes comes to the surface realizing "how intense life can be—or how it was—or how it might have been." In a few sentences he thus links the first lines of *The Waste Land* with what will be the opening of "Burnt Norton": "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present" (179). The possibility of self-transcendence in a larger design motivates his efforts to help other people through small acts, he writes, drifting into language eerily similar to "a lifetime burning in every moment" and "the pattern is new in every moment" ("East Coker," *Poems* 191, 187). This

letter indicates a through-line from *The Waste Land* to *Four Quartets* as he attempts to sublimate his unsatisfied emotional needs—so raw and intractable in the earlier poem—into spiritual transcendence. Writing to Hale constitutes an essential step in this process of converting mere human longing and vulnerability into poetic language. She was not just any correspondent but *the* interlocutor to whom so much of his poetry had been addressed, his chosen spiritual guide.

Eliot openly acknowledged his emotional and poetic dependence on Hale at the time of their correspondence, despite his posthumous statement to the contrary, which has been widely quoted in the press and must be addressed here. After Hale deposited his letters at Princeton University Library in December 1956 and he married Valerie Fletcher in January 1957, he learned that Hale had penned her own narrative to be archived with his letters. In 1960, he wrote a counternarrative to be opened at the same time as his letters. Like the carefully qualified promises he made to Hale about how he would marry her if he ever married anyone, his statement contains half-truths, of which the most serious is: “Emily Hale would have killed the poet in me; Vivienne nearly was the death of *me*, but she kept the poet alive” (Eliot 2020: 2). He clarifies that staying in the United States as a “mediocre teacher of philosophy” would have meant not becoming a poet. Certainly, if he had returned to the United States for a philosophical career, Eliot would not have developed into the poet who wrote *The Waste Land*, an alternate universe that did not depend on marrying Hale. However, the more important truth behind this callous dismissal is that *not* marrying the woman he loved *did* keep the poet alive in him. Unsatisfied longing for Hale motivated and directed his poetic creativity throughout his career. Regret for marrying the wrong woman underlies *The Waste Land* from “April is the cruellest month” to “your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited” (lines 1, 420–21). *Ash-Wednesday* celebrates the purification of his earthly passion for Hale into spiritual love. In *Four Quartets* he continues to braid these two themes together, illuminating his philosophical ruminations with glimpses of the “moments” they spent together at Burnt Norton, Chipping Campden, Woods Hole, on the train between stations, and elsewhere. While posterity cannot restore to Hale any of the satisfactions of which she enjoyed such a meager portion in life—sexual fulfillment, male companionship, intellectual stimulation, social status, economic security—the opening of Eliot’s letters does correct the record about her generative role in his poetic career.

Approaching the Rose Garden (1932–35)

The opening phase of their correspondence establishes a certain asymmetry that persists for years—Eliot longs overtly for Hale, while she wishes to know where it is all going before she commits herself emotionally. However, he shifts his attention more to the present as he prepares to leave England. His departure for the United States at the end of September 1932 marks the end of his cohabitation with Vivien (from whom he legally separates on his return) and increasing intimacy with Hale through infrequent, significant meetings, beginning New Year's 1933 and lasting until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Eliot's letters during this time describe growing ever closer to her, though he also pushes her away from time to time. But his posthumous claim that his relationship with Hale was “the love of a ghost for a ghost” (2020: 3) is also misleading. Even if unconsummated, their love was far more than nostalgic yearning or epistolary flirtation; it played out on physical and social planes, including moments of passion, domesticity, and public displays of affection that delighted them both. Eliot's feelings and motivations remain murky, and probably were so to him, but his correspondence and visits with Hale formed the core of his emotional life during these years. And, more easily discerned, his creativity became intertwined with their meetings and separations. His frequent declarations of dependence on her were genuine, for nothing “compelled [his] imagination” (*Poems* 28) so much as his longing for her.

During his year at Harvard, 1932–33, Eliot sees Hale for only ten days, but in Cambridge he is surrounded with people and places that remind him of their earlier association, and he writes and talks with her on the telephone frequently. He enjoys numerous concerts as an honorary member of the Chamber Music Club, where he hears Beethoven's first Razumovsky Quartet (Opus 59, No. 1), observing that he would like to write that way (November 14). It is clear from other letters that classical music was an interest that they shared, and he takes care to describe the concerts in detail and enclose programs. Readers of Eliot's published letters may have wondered why he seldom refers to music, when the musical allusions of his poetry give the impression of a dedicated listener. The answer may be because it was Hale's taste for classical music that spurred his own engagement, especially in *Four Quartets*. She had a musical background: her uncle, Philip Hale, was a music critic for the *Boston Herald* and author of Boston Symphony

program notes, and his wife Irene was a concert pianist (Fitzgerald 2020). Eliot discusses music far more often and more freely with Hale than with other correspondents—an early indication of how deeply intertwined she is with *Four Quartets*.

Eliot's first visit with Hale since October 1930 takes place at Scripps College over New Year's 1933. He writes afterward that he came as close to happiness as was possible in those ten days.¹⁰ Not long after returning to Cambridge from his cross-country trip, Eliot begins to explore legal separation from his wife, a step that he and Hale discussed in person.¹¹ But it does not lead him to peace of mind. "One of my most constant temptations is to a feeling of exasperation with human beings," he writes to Paul Elmer More on May 18, capturing the tone of many of his letters to Hale in spring 1933 (*Letters* 6:584). The grain of sand in Eliot's shell seems to be the question of divorce. In one of his Norton lectures he writes of "the Boredom, the Horror, and the Glory" (*Prose* 4:656), words that first appear in a letter to Hale, describing what he has received from life. The "Glory" of an earthly love is within reach, but he feels constrained by his religious vows to resist that temptation. Instead, he anticipates a Samsonlike existence of enchained labor when he returns to England (he quotes Milton's "eyeless, in Gaza, at the mill, with slaves"), an identification that crops up again in *Murder in the Cathedral*, whose themes and language echo Eliot's troubled letters of 1933.¹² He begins writing "Landscapes," which he later describes as love poems, sending her "New Hampshire" and "Virginia," with its theme of hopeless waiting (June 17). He awaits the drama of his impending separation from Vivien, but there is also the waiting to which he has consigned himself and Hale as they grow older.

From August 1933, when Eliot tells Hale that he has been invited to write a play, until the May 1934 premier of *The Rock*, his letters contain reflections on drama and the process of writing what he considers his first serious verse since *Ash-Wednesday*. Hale's place in Eliot's dramatic career has been underestimated and awaits a more thorough examination when his letters are published. As early as May 1933, he jokingly asks if he can write a play for her, and he confesses in December 1935 that he began writing plays to impress her. He wishes to create a role for her but only if he can play her opposite (this role will be "Mary" in *The Family Reunion*). Composing plays is an activity that they can collaborate on, and Eliot frequently consults Hale about dramaturgical decisions, seeking her expertise as an actress and director. Disturbed by Vivien's

refusal to accept their separation and anxious about how Hale regards him, Eliot's letters in 1933–34 are muted and downbeat. However, he cheers up considerably when he hears from her that she plans to take a leave of absence from Scripps to travel in England and Europe with Edith and John Perkins and a female friend, Jeanette McPherrin. There is no mention of her taking this step for him, but it seems safe to assume that Hale wanted to spend more time with the elusive poet whom she had seen only once since he declared his love to her in 1930. Her aunt and uncle lease Stamford House in Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, which will be the scene of many meetings from 1934 through 1939, and in “the beautiful garden at the rear of the house, where he and I spent many hours, he proof-read ‘the Family Reunion,’ and worked on a set of Shakespearean lectures,” as Hale recounts (1957: 6).

Hale's arrival in England on July 23, 1934 opens an eighteen-month period of close contact between them, including some of their most memorable interactions.¹³ But the path to the rose garden, so to speak, is not straightforward. Not until 1935 do the two spend romantic evenings in the garden at Stamford House, nor pay a visit to nearby Burnt Norton, contrary to the accepted wisdom that they visited the local house in summer 1934.¹⁴ Eliot saw Hale in Chipping Campden in late July and again a month later, in the meantime sending nine letters that do not mention flowers, gardens, or sightseeing. Rather, the two of them seem to be struggling to work out the terms of their relationship, with Hale pressing him to worry less about his religious scruples and suggesting that she would like a more equal exchange of affection. Soon they strike a lighter note and see each other frequently, dining out and attending plays (including *Sweeney Agonistes*) and concerts together in London; at the end of November 1934, he writes that it was the happiest month of his life.

As Hale departs to spend the winter in Italy with McPherrin and her relatives, Eliot begins working on a play to be performed at Canterbury in the summer. His letters to Hale in January through early April 1935 track his composition of *Murder in the Cathedral* and reflect on the conflict between being a saint and being aware of one's saintliness—a paradox raised by the fourth temptation of Thomas à Beckett. Given his flirtation with Hale in fall 1934, Eliot's theme of temptation in *Murder* has a personal resonance. The play is also closely connected with “Burnt Norton,” a poem about (among other things) missed opportunities and doors not opened—another way of thinking about temptations refused.

In response to criticisms by Martin Browne in March, Eliot wrote additional text for the play, not all of it used, including fourteen lines that became the opening of “Burnt Norton” (see Gardner 1978: 16 and *Letters* 7:541), ending,

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. (*Poems* 179)

This rose-garden has always been assumed to be that of Burnt Norton; along with the “drained pool,” roses can still be viewed at the historic home near Ashton Subedge in Gloucestershire. Due to the discovery that Eliot did not visit Burnt Norton in 1934, we now know that the rose garden in these lines derives from his imagination, perhaps inspired by the garden in *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) or Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Secret Garden* (1911), perhaps by the medieval tradition of the *hortus conclusus*, or simply as the image of a desirable place.

During their visit to the grounds of Burnt Norton in late July or early September 1935 (first mentioned on September 10 as one of the “moments” they have enjoyed together), Eliot found himself in a real rose garden that may have provided the connection in his mind to his previously written fourteen lines. Five days later, he mentions that he is preparing his collected poems for a new edition to come out in the spring, and he would like to have a few new ones to add. He and Hale have spent meaningful time together in the garden at Stamford House, whose flowers picked by Hale for his buttonhole form a leitmotif of his summer letters. The stage was prepared for a love poem set in a rose garden; how much of what happened between them in October and November followed the pattern that the existing lines had already suggested?

Life Follows Art

One of the stunning takeaways of his letters to Hale is the consciously autobiographical nature of his poetry. Of course, we have long known of Hale’s significance to “Burnt Norton” and speculated on her presence in other works. But Eliot’s identification of Hale as the Hyacinth girl and “my friend” in *The Waste Land* and the Lady of *Ash-Wednesday* finally puts an end to any lingering plausibility of Eliot’s theory of

“impersonality.” He reveals the biographical identities of other figures in his poems as well, such as “Marie” in *The Waste Land* (Marie von Moritz, a woman who lived in his pension in Munich), “Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians” (Okakura Kakuzo, the venerated Japanese curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts), and “Mr. Silvero, with caressing hands, at Limoges” (MFA assistant director and aesthete Matthew Prichard) in “Gerontion.”¹⁵ These disclosures are made in an offhand way, without any qualification: as far as Eliot is concerned, the poetic names are pseudonyms of real people, or in Marie’s case, simply her real name. In an earlier age of literary criticism, hostile to biography, such identifications might have been considered heretical; even now, Eliot’s straightforward equations between figures in his poems and people he knew will give rise to carefully qualified discussions about the differences between poetry and life. But the letters bear out Randall Jarrell’s now much-quoted prediction of what a future critic would say to us: “But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition, applied to his poetry? Surely you must have seen that he was one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived, the victim and helpless beneficiary of his own inexorable compulsions, obsessions?” (1963: 14). It must be added that Eliot may have benefited poetically from his emotional states without necessarily being helpless, for in these letters, he seems aware and even in control of his confessional process of turning autobiography into poetry.

My first reaction to Eliot’s correspondence with Hale was astonishment at how consciously he used his personal experience as poetic material, while deliberately concealing from the public the *roman à def* nature of his writing. For this reason alone, the opening of these letters feels like a historic drawing back of the curtain. But on reflection, I find something even more remarkable than how his art reflects his life: the way art shaped his life, beyond what his most astute critics have surmised. Eliot idolized Hale from afar for nearly two decades before his epistolary confession of love; she existed almost wholly as an ideal in his imagination, derived from his teenage reading of Dante Alighieri, Shelley, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁶ Eliot’s letters confirm what Gordon and Schuchard proposed: that Eliot viewed Hale as a modern-day Beatrice (Gordon 1988: 12, 154; Schuchard 1999: 180–85). For example, on September 7, 1931, a year into their correspondence, he tells her that he would like to see her play the part of Beatrice on stage.

Delving more deeply, we learn that Eliot's imagination was transfixed by the idea of Hale as a young woman and even as a girl. Her 1957 narrative dates their first meeting to 1911–12 “or a little earlier,” when she was twenty (*NWEH* 5). In a letter of August 18, 1932, however, Eliot writes that he has known her since 1905–6, his year at Milton Academy outside of Boston. Contradicting both Hale's memory and the accounts of his biographers, Eliot's dating of their first meeting is not implausible. A photograph of Hale and Hinkley at the Berkeley Street School in 1904 or before (see note 3) shows that the two girls already knew each other by the time Eliot, only seventeen, was at boarding school nearby and likely to be spending holidays at his aunt's house in Cambridge. In 1905, Hale was fourteen: not as young as Dante's Beatrice (nine), but not yet a woman.¹⁷ Throughout their correspondence, Eliot begs for, receives, and comments on photographs of Hale, and the only ones he completely approves of are those taken when she was a child or a very young woman. Eliot's discussion of the *Vita Nuova* in his 1929 *Dante* is an essential text for understanding his relationship with Hale—as useful as “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), with its theory of impersonality, is useless. In *Dante*, he describes the *Vita Nuova* as a perfectly realistic mixture of biography and allegory, asserting that “the type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine years is by no means impossible or unique” and that “the same experience, described in Freudian terms, would be instantly accepted as fact by the modern public” (*Prose* 3:731–32). Whether Eliot has shaped his memory to fit the Dantean pattern better, or actually began admiring Hale from afar as a teenager, his account of their relationship suggests a parallel in his mind between his own life and Dante's as told in the *Vita Nuova*. In *Eliot's Dark Angel* (1999), Ronald Schuchard explains how Eliot's conversion brought those two narratives—autobiographical and allegorical—closer together, culminating in *Ash-Wednesday*.

As any reader of Eliot will tell you, there is more than one pattern in the carpet of his work. The same was true of his life. As long as Hale remained inaccessible, she fit the Beatrician model that Eliot's imagination demanded or craved. But as they came to know each other in the 1930s, despite Eliot's evident pleasure in her company, their intimacy threatened this classic pattern with another: the development of a mature human love. “Burnt Norton” both marks the high point

of their relationship and also reveals Eliot's resolve not to allow it to progress to the next stage of intimacy, which could only mean relinquishing the idea of Hale as a pure spiritual intercessor like Beatrice or the Virgin Mary.¹⁸ In fall 1935, they saw each other frequently in London, attending performances and social events, sightseeing, dining alone, and sometimes spending time in his rooms, where he noted how the scent of perfume or flowers lingered after her departure. In Chipping Campden, they took outings to the Cotswolds countryside, including a trip to the rose garden at Burnt Norton, a "moment" mentioned briefly on September 10 but not reverted to again. On October 3, he writes that using the pronoun "we" has given him "intoxicating pleasure," and he will treasure her gift of a "bit of austere yew, because it is a part of what you picked for 'us.'" This image appears in "Burnt Norton": "Will . . . Chill / Fingers of yew be curled / Down on us?" (*Poems* 183). Eliot likely has the homonym yew/you in mind here: the threat of "us" dissolving back into "you" and "I." He uses the passive voice, "be curled," but the decision to allow "us" to flourish or not lies in his power at this time. Their relationship remains chaste but not platonic: Eliot excitedly describes kisses, embraces, walking arm in arm, tending each other's headaches, and other meaningful physical contact, calling her his "Tall Girl," a name later repurposed for Valerie in "How the Tall Girl and I Play Together" (*Poems* 316).

On November 18, their relations shift to greater intensity, perhaps following Eliot's encounter with Vivien at the *Sunday Times* book exhibition where he was giving a lecture (*Letters* 7:841). On this day, Hale wrote what Eliot later described as her first love letter; it is ambiguous whether Hale decided to reciprocate more fully than before, or he signaled his willingness for her to do so. The final three weeks of her time in England build to a poetic and emotional climax: on December 5, Eliot sends Hale the first seventeen lines of "Burnt Norton," consisting of the fourteen lines he wrote for *Murder* plus three more:

My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know. (*Poems* 179)

His farewell letter to her on December 11, written the morning of her departure to Liverpool and thence by boat to America, describes their

physical intimacy the night before and his feeling of being born anew with her; he signs his letter “The new Emily-Tom.” Yet his professions of union contrast strangely with the new lines that turn the passage from *Murder* into a poem for Hale: is their love “dust on a bowl of rose-leaves”? That doesn’t seem very promising.

Eliot’s feelings for Hale are at their highest pitch throughout December 1935 and January 1936, as he composes “Burnt Norton.” Though they see each other annually through 1939, he will not sound the same notes of passion again. We learn that she has given him a ring, which he says he will never take off and means as much to him as a wedding ring. He tells her that he feels relief from the pain of separation only when writing poetry. On January 13, he writes that “Burnt Norton” is coming along nicely; it is “a new kind of love poem, and it is written for you.” On January 16 he calls it “our poem.” His ardent letters continue through January and the first part of February, when the poem is set in type except for the last few lines, but on February 21, 1936, he abruptly reminds her that they may not have a future to look forward to and ought to act as if they will never be united in marriage. Instead, they should turn their minds to things of the spirit. By the time he sends her the printed version from his new *Collected Poems* at the end of March, his letters reveal the poem’s darker side, as he stiffly points out that he would have to commit adultery or perjury in order to get a divorce and tells Hale, a Unitarian, that he doesn’t consider her a Christian. However “correct” Eliot’s views may have been in terms of doctrine, his tone seems cold, and the letters are painful to read. Eliot’s turn away from Hale follows a pattern already established in their relationship, prefigured as early as “La Figlia Che Piange,” and spelled out by Dante, Shelley, and Rossetti in texts that shaped his attachment to Hale at a very early stage.

Among the letters Eliot wrote during his composition of “Burnt Norton,” that of January 13 particularly reveals how his life was entwined with poetry. It is a prime example of the discoveries in Eliot’s correspondence that extend and change our understanding of his writing. In this letter—which was omitted from the digital scans at Special Collections and nearly escaped my notice—Eliot reveals Shelley’s poem “Epipsychidion” (1821) as an important intertext for “Burnt Norton.” “Epipsychidion,” Eliot tells Hale, was written for a lady named Emilia, and he considered using the following lines from Shelley (1821: 4) as the epigraph to his new poem: “My song, I fear that thou wilt find but few / Who fitly shall conceive thy reasoning, / Of such hard matter dost thou

entertain.” Shelley warns his readers to expect “hard matter” that few will understand. Similarly, Eliot tells Hale, his own poem is fearfully obscure. If asked what his poem means, she can easily claim that she does not understand it, or that she does, depending on what is most convenient. However, he says, to make his poem even more difficult for readers, he has chosen a Greek epigraph from Heraclitus. Eliot’s epigraph switch follows the pattern of *The Waste Land*, which bore an epigraph from the more contemporary *Heart of Darkness* before he replaced it with an untranslated quotation from Petronius. Like “The horror, the horror,” Shelley’s lines from “Epipsychidion” prove too revealing and must be replaced with more enigmatic words.

Shelley’s poem provides a missing link between Eliot’s early and late work and between the literary, spiritual, and autobiographical registers of “Burnt Norton.” Eliot acknowledged the influence of Shelley on his youthful poetic development, admitting in February 1933 that “I was intoxicated by Shelley’s poetry at the age of fifteen” and also that “an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence: for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity” (*Prose* 4:647, 642). This remark suggests that he had long since left Shelley behind, but the truth is more complicated. Eliot referred to “Epipsychidion” in public lectures throughout his life (the 1926 Clark Lectures, the Norton lectures in 1933, and his 1950 talk “What Dante Means to Me”). Shelley’s quasi-autobiographical poem, whose title means “soul out of my soul,” is addressed to a beautiful Italian woman whose parents had confined her to a convent—“Emilia” is a pseudonym. Eliot’s early infatuation with Shelley preceded his first meeting with Hale by only a few years. For a shy teenager whose inner life consisted primarily of reading poetry, the suggestive coincidence of Emilia/Emily may have helped seal his powerful attachment to her.

Multiple threads connect “Epipsychidion” with Eliot’s correspondence, poetry, and life. Eliot refers to Hale as “Emilia” and as a bird, dove, nightingale, and mocking-bird, echoing Shelley’s address to Emilia as “poor captive bird” and “my adored Nightingale” (lines 5, 10).²⁰ Shelley declares “I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*” (line 52), similar to Eliot’s declaration in his December 11 letter that they are each a part of the other. Eliot also may have found the narrative of “Epipsychidion” particularly apt to his own history. This poem narrates the poet’s youthful adoration of an ideal, “the loadstar of my

one desire” toward which he “flitted, like a dizzy moth” (lines 190–91, 219–20)—like the moth in Eliot’s 1914 “The Burnt Dancer.”²⁰ However, as he went out into “the wintry forest of our life,” he came under the spell of “One, whose voice was venomed melody . . . from [whose] living cheeks and bosom flew / A killing air” (lines 249, 256, 261–62). After falling into a hopeless depression, “At length, into the obscure Forest came / The Vision I had sought through grief and shame. . . . I knew it was the Vision veiled from me / So many years—that it was Emily” (lines 321–22, 343–44). In its rough outlines, this narrative matches Eliot’s own love of Emily in youth, his drifting away from her to a woman whose “touch was as electric poison” (lines 259) and then her return in a Beatrice-like vision. To judge from Eliot’s private allusions to “Epipsychidion” in his letters, he may have long harbored the desire to write his own love poem to an Emily whose life was confined in the modern-day equivalent of a convent: girls’ schools and women’s colleges. Finally, in addition to providing its shadow epigraph, “Epipsychidion” is clearly a source for “Burnt Norton.” For example, Shelley compares his poem to faded rose petals: “This song shall be thy rose: its petals pale / Are dead, indeed. . . . But soft and fragrant is the faded blossom, / And it has no thorn left to wound thy bosom” (lines 5–12), an image not far from Eliot’s “dust on a bowl of rose-leaves” in “Burnt Norton.”

Shelley’s appeal went even deeper for Eliot, who viewed the Romantic poet as Dante’s greatest heir in English. “His mind is inspired to some of the greatest and most Dantesque lines in English,” Eliot acknowledges in “What Dante Means to Me,” an essay that suggests his own aspiration to that honor.²¹ In a prefatory “Advertisement” printed with “Epipsychidion,” Shelley compares his poem to the *Vita Nuova*. In fact, as Eliot well knew, the three lines that he quoted in his letter to Hale were not written by Shelley but *translated* by him from Dante’s canzone *Voi, che ‘ntendendo il terzo ciel movete* (You, whose intellect the third sphere moves), for use as the epigraph to “Epipsychidion.”²² Shelley leads us back to Eliot’s Dantean obsession. In toying with Shelley’s epigraph, Eliot likens himself to the Romantic poet as a follower of Dante and lover of Emilia.

The parallel between Eliot and Shelley comes to a telling end, however. In his Norton lecture of February 1933, Eliot speaks of Shelley with “distaste” (*Prose* 4:642) and of the “repellent” (647) philosophy of “Epipsychidion,” namely, that of free love.²³ Writing his lecture

on Shelley at the very time that he had begun proceedings to separate from Vivien, Eliot was struggling to explain to himself and Hale why there was no worldly union in their future. In winter 1935–36, when Hale tempted him more than ever, he still viewed the Shelleyan solution of adultery as an impossibility. Calling Hale “Emilia” and specifically tying “Burnt Norton” to “Epipsychidion” may suggest his continuing temptation but, again, it certainly does not bode well for their relationship. Even as his letters overflow with passionate expressions, he seems conscious of how he will complete the pattern. Whether Eliot follows Shelley or Dante, the outcome is the same: Shelley praised Emilia to the skies, but as soon as he finished the poem, she faded from his life. More significantly, Dante’s canzone marks his turning away from Beatrice—who has died—to another love, the allegorical Lady Philosophy. In *Voi, che ‘ntendendo*, “Dante the allegorist of philosophy has replaced Dante the historian of Beatrice,” explains Robert Hollander (2001: 79). Similarly, the muse of *Four Quartets*—not yet conceived as such in Eliot’s mind—resembles Lady Philosophy more than any human woman.

If Hale could have read between the lines, Eliot’s cheerful letter on January 13 might have struck her as ominous; as it was, she only had to wait until February 21 to hear the bad news. In the end, she seems never to have grasped “Burnt Norton” very well, and who can blame her? Despite Eliot’s assurances of love during its composition, the poem looks only briefly backward to “our first world” and then grimly forward “into the world of perpetual solitude,” concluding, “Ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after” (*Poems* 184).²⁴ In 1941, Hale apparently asks Eliot why he never wrote a Cotswolds poem, and he responds with surprise: what about Burnt Norton? Perhaps you forgot about it, he muses. Their brief visit to the gardens must not have been very memorable or significant at the time, but it became a “pretext” for the lines he had already written and the conclusion he already knew would transpire (May 11, 1936). While Eliot’s letters reveal much about the composition and meaning of “Burnt Norton”—including his remarkably clear explanations of “Garlic and sapphires in the mud” and “The crying shadow in the funeral dance”—they also underscore what most readers probably already grasped, which is that it is not a love poem in any “normal” sense.²⁵

Unattached Devotion (1936–47)

At the end of 1935, Eliot's letters seem to promise that he and Hale will find a way to be together, to be happy, in the kind of denouement that readers might wish for. From 1936 to 1939, this possibility remains alive, through annual visits and reaffirmations of love. In summer 1936, Eliot travels to the United States and they spend time together in several locations, including Woods Hole on Cape Cod, at the home of her friend Dorothy Elsmith. Afterward (on October 17, 1936), Eliot recalls the long beaches, the sea-gulls, the pine trees, the room where they sat, and the tolling bell-buoy that will appear in "The Dry Salvages":

The tolling bell
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future . . . (*Poems* 194)

Eliot may have had the fishermen's widows of Gloucester in mind here, but learning that he heard this memorable sound with Hale, one wonders whether she is one of the "anxious worried women," growing "older" and "calculating" her ever diminishing resources as time slips away. His concerned responses to her during summer 1936 suggest that she experienced an emotional crisis in July and August, perhaps connected to his repeated refusals to consider divorcing Vivien. Eliot also joins her in Northampton as she moves to her new job teaching speech at Smith College, enjoying what he calls a perfect birthday celebration with her. He writes that such moments of union are lasting, no matter what the future brings.

Hale travels to England in the summers of 1937, 1938, and 1939, meeting Eliot in London and at Chipping Campden in the company of her aunt and uncle. He describes these visits as occasions on which they grow ever closer. In Hale's 1965 account:

My relatives knew the circumstances of T. S. E.'s life, and perhaps regretted that he and I became so close to each other under conditions so abnormal, for I found by now that I had in turn grown very fond of him. We were congenial in so many of our interests, our reactions, and emotionally responsive to each other's needs; the happiness, the quiet deep bonds between

us made our lives very rich, and the more because we kept the relationship on as honorable, to be respected plane, as we could. Only a few—a very few—of his friends and family, and my circle of friends knew of our love for each other; and marriage—if and when his wife died—could not help but become a desired, right fulfilment. To the general public and our friends in England and America, I was only “his very good friend.” (NWEH 2)

Eliot's letters from these years register happy visits, to be sure, but also Hale's struggles with employment, lodging, finances, and his resistance to imagining a life together. In a letter of March 19, 1938 to E. Martin Browne about *The Family Reunion* (1939), Eliot explains Harry's disturbed and “desexed” state in terms that seem highly autobiographical, especially given what we now know about Eliot's compositional process. The letter describes Harry's “horror of women as of unclean creatures” and “the conflict inside him between this repulsion for Mary as a woman, and the attraction which the *normal* part of him that is still left, feels towards her personally *for the first time*” (Letters 8:845). The ominous resolution of this play does not seem to have bothered Hale in the way that she was troubled by the character of Celia in *The Cocktail Party* (1950); Eliot writes freely to her about the composition and staging of *The Family Reunion*. The emotional high point of 1939 occurs, ironically, in the days following the outbreak of the war that will separate them for six years, when they work feverishly together at Stamford House to prepare for blackout and her departure with her relatives (September 4, 1939).

After the war puts an end to their visits, Eliot still writes devotedly, if sometimes drearily, preoccupied by the difficulties of living and working under conditions of aerial bombardment, wartime anxiety, temporary lodging, and material scarcity. Knowing that censors may read whatever he writes, Eliot avoids reference to bombs, food, fuel, and other sensitive topics, but nonetheless his letters from these years will be of interest to historians and scholars of late modernism for the chronicle of his activities and reactions to political events. Perhaps the most arresting episode concerns the death of Virginia Woolf, whom he mentions frequently to Hale throughout the correspondence, sometimes enclosing the author's notes to him. On April 7, 1941, Eliot somberly writes that he had planned to visit Virginia and Leonard at Rodmell on the very weekend that she drowned, but he postponed for health

reasons. One wonders how history might have played out differently if he had come through. Eliot expresses devotion to Woolf personally but confesses that he had not read her novels. His wartime letters have little to do with Hale herself, who struggled with her own financial and professional difficulties. There are important clues to be gleaned about the composition of the other *Quartets*, though nothing as revealing as the letters on “Burnt Norton.”

The archive also includes a unique letter from Hale to Eliot that sheds light on the state of their relationship as the war drew to a close. On April 26, 1945, Hale wrote to Eliot asking to “re-align relations between us once again, after now nearly six years separation” (1). She kept a copy of her letter, one of just a few by her hand in the collection (the others are to her friend Margaret Thorp). This excerpt gives a sense of her forthright but also generous manner:

since your letters are usually so very undemonstrative and impersonal, it is hard for me to tell from them just *what* you consider yourself to me, or myself to you. As the possibility of a cessation of war in Europe draws closer—*not* a return to normal—such cessation would bring changes of all sorts into the open, so to speak. Do you still feel that if you *were* free you wish to marry me? That you would love me as you have these many years. I do not doubt, but that love is so far a part from other great facts and truths of life, that in these five or six years, I have no way of knowing whether you are as you were or not. I now wish to say that if you do wish to marry me ever, I shall keep myself always waiting and ready for you. But I would rather the truth from you, in case you feel differently, and I should understand, and still want to try to be what I could, to you—to try to carry the unusual, very complimentary, rather grave responsibility you have placed upon me—and which I have always consented to accept—since 1934—where we came together in those thrilling London days.

A month later (May 28, 1945), Eliot replies that he could only marry Hale if Vivien died, which is both unlikely and sinful to wish for. She should decide what to do without regard for him, and it pains him to think that he may have interfered with her happiness. Although he would have preferred to marry her, the special relationship they had—not understood by the world—remains uncontaminated. He reiterates that she is the only woman he would want to marry, if he could.

After much delay and expectation, they meet again in Concord, Massachusetts, in summer 1946. He describes the exaltation of seeing her and the agony of returning to England, renewing his vows of love and begging for reassurance of hers. Yet the moment is swiftly approaching when even a superficial sense of increasing closeness cannot coexist with Eliot's pattern of renunciation going back to his departure from the States in 1914 and documented in his imagination as early as "La Figlia Che Piange." His marriage has held the two narratives in a brittle balance, by erecting a seemingly absolute obstacle to marrying Hale. When Vivien suddenly dies in January 1947, Eliot must choose "the way up" or "the way down" (*Poems* 197).

Into the World of Perpetual Solitude (1947–57)

In a series of devastating letters following Vivien's death, Eliot attempts to explain his sudden realization that he does not wish to marry Hale, or anyone. Even the thought of sex is revolting to him (February 3, 1947). He compares himself to an Egyptian mummy, opened after four thousand years, which crumbles to dust in the air (February 14, 1947). On March 1, preparing to come to the States to see his dying brother, Eliot acknowledges that he must face a division in himself that dates back at least to when he married Vivien in 1915. On March 20, he repeats that he has not been whole and has failed other people through egotism and self-deception. He warns her that she cannot say which of his two selves is the real one: they are both real. He tells her that a part of himself is always solitary and must remain so. In a long letter dated Easter 1947 (April 6), Eliot elaborates the point that he is not fit for married life and cannot bear the company of any one person for an extended time, including his housemate, John Hayward. He tells her that most women want a husband but some men desire a surrogate Virgin Mary, which he has had. Eliot continues to try to explain his decision throughout the year, but as Hale writes in 1965, it never made sense to her:

Instead of the anticipated life together which could now be rightfully ours, something too personal, too obscurely emotional for me to understand, decided T. S. E. against his marrying again. This was both a shock and a sorrow, though, looking back on the story, perhaps I could not have been the companion in marriage I hoped to be, perhaps the decision saved us both from great unhappiness I cannot ever know.
(*NWEH* 2)

The words of “Burnt Norton” are fulfilled: “descend only / Into the world of perpetual solitude” (*Poems* 182). In a tortured letter of November 30, 1947, Eliot writes that he could never marry anyone but her; he is entirely monogamous, but he isn’t fit for married life.

In the last decade of their correspondence, Eliot writes Hale 180 letters—a small percentage of the total collection—while continuing to use terms of endearment in his salutations and valedictions. He mentions that her letters are few and far between, and she asks him to write less frequently (February 8, 1948). However, in Hale’s narration, when Eliot came to the States “for personal or professional reasons . . . he always came to see me, was gentle, and still shared with me what was happening to him, or took generous interest in speaking at the school where I then taught” (*NWEH* 1965: 2). His letters from 1949 contain discussions of *The Cocktail Party*, including a response to Hale’s distress at finding similarities between herself and the character of Celia, a likeness he denies (August 31). On October 25 of that year he mentions that he has hired a new secretary who is “very willing and efficient.”

A correspondence that begins as a literary testament to his love, to be preserved for posterity, ends with a squabble about the terms on which his letters will be given to Princeton. During fall 1956, Eliot worries about her decision to repose his letters at Princeton University. He is concerned that in cataloguing his letters, the librarian will begin reading them, and that his secrets will leak out: he is especially ashamed of his moments of vanity, boastfulness, and mistaken judgments of other people. A bar on publication is no use if scholars can see what the letters contain before the stipulated fifty-year embargo has elapsed (as he writes on October 27, 1956). Also, still unbeknownst to Hale, he is secretly planning to wed Valerie Fletcher, who, thirty-eight years his junior, could have lived to see their opening. However, he never contradicts his statement of July 6, 1932: “As for my letters, they are your property, and their fate must be decided by you.”

Forty-five years of friendship come to an abrupt end shortly after Eliot weds Valerie Fletcher on January 10, 1957:

The second marriage in 1957 I believe took everyone by surprise. He wrote of it to two persons in this country, his sister Marian, and me. I replied to this letter, also writing to Valerie. I never saw T. S. E. nor ever met her after this marriage, although they came to Cambridge two or three times to be with his family and friends, as well as to deliver lectures or give readings. (*NWEH* 1965: 3)

However Hale may have suffered from this blow, it was not in her nature to complain, and she ends her story on a positive note: “The memory of the years when we were most together and so happy are mine always and I am grateful that this period brought some of his best writing, and an assured charming personality which perhaps I helped to stabilize.” She modestly does not claim what seems evident from the epistolary record: not just Eliot’s writing from the years they were together, but all his major works from “La Figlia” through *Four Quartets* show her magnetic pull on his imagination.



Keepsake photo of Emily Hale, ca. 1957

The ironically contrasting beginning and end—the conflicting arcs of increasing closeness and implacable renunciation—his astonishing confessions and decades of stonewalling and self-deception—his passionate expressions of love and dependence combined with his apparent obliviousness to her isolation and poverty: contradictions abound in this correspondence. Eliot was a puzzle to the people who knew him, and despite all that his newly opened letters reveal about him, he remains a paradox. As Eliot admitted to Hale in 1947, he was a divided man, and his divisions are on display in these letters. The personal revelations humanize him but also exhibit his flaws more than ever. His authoritative glosses on his own words will change how we read his poetry and drama, but we still will not agree on what he means. Varying from lyric prose, to searching self-analysis, to tedious diarizing, his letters are literature, worthy of attention and a source of delight, and they are also life—messy, painful, inconclusive. Eliot planned to have the final word on himself, but in the closely typed pages of his 1,131 letters to Hale, there are many Eliots, “Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (*Poems* 187).



Frances Dickey teaches modernism and American literature at the University of Missouri and writes about modern poetry and poets. Her books include *The Modernist Portrait Poem from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound* (2012) and two coedited volumes, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 3 (2015), and *The Edinburgh Companion to T. S. Eliot and the Arts* (2016). Her articles have appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Twentieth-Century Literature* (Kappel Prize winner, 2006), *Contemporary Literature*, and other venues. Dickey led the International T. S. Eliot Society from 2016–18 and her “Reports from the Emily Hale Archive” have been widely followed. Her next book explores T. S. Eliot’s sensory experiences in turn-of-the-century St. Louis.

Acknowledgments

This article would not have been possible without good fortune, including a research grant from the University of Missouri that supported my time at Special Collections in Princeton, and kind friends and fellow researchers who discussed these letters with me and helped me shape the narrative I tell here, including Lyndall Gordon, Anthony Cuda, Sara Fitzgerald, Katerina Stergiopoulou, Timothy Materer, and John Whittier-Ferguson. Thanks also to Daniel Linke and the staff at Princeton Library’s Special Collections for their dedicated and knowledgeable assistance. Photo credits: thanks to Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University for use of the portrait of Emily Hale as a child, and to Hale’s friend Marjon B. Ornstein for the 1957 keepsake photo.

Notes

1. Hale wrote at least two narratives (she may have destroyed an earlier version) to accompany her gift of letters to Princeton University Library: one handwritten in 1957, and a later one in 1965, of which a handwritten and several typed versions are preserved. The 1957 narrative is numbered only on the front side of each page; I have consecutively numbered them for the purpose of this article. Quotations from the 1965 narrative are taken from the final typescript. Although both narratives are cited as *NWEH* (Narrative Written by Emily Hale), I distinguish them by date within my text.

2. In 1960, Eliot prepared a document to be opened at the same time as his letters to Hale, amending it in 1963 and at that time or later adding in pen at the bottom of the last page: “The letters to me from Emily Hale have been

destroyed by a colleague at my request” (2020: 3). His document was opened at Houghton Library, Harvard, on January 2, 2020 and published on the Houghton Library Blog as “The Love of a Ghost for a Ghost: T. S. Eliot on his Letters to Emily Hale.”

3. The Records of the Berkeley Street School Association held at Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe, include a school photo with Hale and Hinkley together; dated 1904, it may have been taken earlier, based on Hale’s childish appearance (“Group portrait of Emily Sibley and her classmates and teachers from the Berkeley Street School, c. 1904”). Thanks to Sara Fitzgerald for drawing my attention to this evidence of Hale’s early association with Hinkley. The photo also contradicts the common assertion that Hale was raised by her aunt and uncle, Edith and John Carroll Perkins; at the time that she attended the Berkeley School, they lived in Maine. The date of Hale’s graduation from Miss Porter’s School is not known, nor how many years she attended.

4. On August 17, 1934, Eliot refers to a point in Hale’s life after which she was not in contact with men at all, presumably when she went to work at Milwaukee-Downer College in 1921.

5. See Eliot’s remark to Geoffrey Faber: “I remember also minor pleasures of drunkenness and adultery” (*Letters* 1:712).

6. He doesn’t specify a date in this letter, but in his letter of September 18, 1931, he writes that this meeting took place six years before the beginning of their correspondence (which would be 1924). In her narrative, Hale dates the Eccleston square meeting to 1922. However, she was in London in 1923 with her aunt and uncle, afterward receiving an inscribed copy of *Ara Vos Prec* and a subscription to the *Criterion* from Eliot in September 1923. So, 1923 seems to be the most likely year, in between the dates given by each of them.

7. The stunt show took place on February 17, 1913 (Fitzgerald 2020) and is described in Gordon 1999: 78.

8. Eliot’s biographers have speculated about when he might have attended *Tristan*. The Boston Opera premiered Wagner’s work on November 29, 1913 (reviewed in the *Boston Globe* on November 30), and it is likely that Hale’s uncle Philip, music critic for the *Boston Herald*, procured tickets for Hale and several friends, including Margaret Farrand (Thorp) as well as Eliot, for one of these performances.

9. Eliot repeatedly returns to the reasons why he must remain married to Vivien, presumably in response to Hale’s inquiries. He tells her that the only basis for divorce in England is adultery, and the injured party must be the one to sue. Vivien would never demand a divorce from him based on

The Correspondence of T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale

his adultery, whether the isolated incident of the past or a new liaison. Eliot never mentions Vivien's affair with Bertrand Russell, which would make him the injured party; either he did not know of her betrayal (which seems improbable), or it was too painful to confess, or he didn't want to let Hale know that he had grounds to sue Vivien for divorce. His contention that the Church of England does not recognize divorce was true in the sense that a divorced person whose ex-spouse was still alive could not remarry in the Church (this held until 2002). However, Eliot was not technically married in the Church of England; he wed Vivien in a registry office. On November 19, 1933, Eliot less plausibly contends that even if he were able to secure a divorce from Vivien, he would be "excommunicate" from the Church and, as the most prominent Anglican layman of the day, his defection would hand a victory to the enemies of Christianity.

10. The letters clarify that his visit to Scripps was their only meeting in the United States during Eliot's sojourn at Harvard, correcting Gordon's source, Dorothy Elsmith, who believed Hale joined Eliot and his family for a week in New Hampshire in June and at the Milton Academy graduation (Gordon 1988: 21).

11. Eliot refers back to this discussion a year later, in November 1933, saying that he believed he had made himself clear about the impossibility of divorce.

12. See Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1899: 292, line 41). In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Thomas compares himself to "Samson in Gaza" as he turns down the third Tempter (CPP 190), and Eliot quotes Milton again in *East Coker*: "O dark dark dark" (*Poems* 188). Samson, a man of superpowers brought down by a woman's treachery, asks "what if all foretold / Had been fulfill'd but through mine own default, / Whom have I to complain of but my self?" (Milton 1899: 292, lines 44–46). Throughout 1932–33, Eliot also complains of hair loss, perhaps affording another imaginative link with Samson.

13. According to the passenger list in the UK National Archives, Emily arrived in Liverpool on July 23, on board the White Star liner *Georgic*. Thanks to Jonathan Morse for this information.

14. Ricks quotes Hayward's statement that "the poet visited [Burnt Norton] as a stranger in the summer of 1934 during a holiday in Campden" (*Poems* 903). It is possible, of course, that Eliot visited the house more than once, but the only reference appears in his letter of September 10, 1935 and implies a recent visit.

15. Identification of Marie: March 2, 1931; Hakagawa: December 29, 1931; Mr. Silvero: March 24, 1931 (*Poems* 55, 32, 31).

16. In 1917, Eliot included Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" in the reading list for his Extension course (*Prose* 1:590); in 1919, he wrote that "The mind of a boy of fourteen . . . may burst into life on collision with Omar or the Blessed Damozel" (*Prose* 2:63); in 1929, "Rossetti's 'Blessed Damozel,' first by my rapture and next by my revolt, held up my appreciation of Beatrice by many years" (*Prose* 3:722). It is likely that he first encountered the *Vita Nuova* in Rossetti's translation in *Early Italian Poets* (1861), which he cites in his 1917 syllabus (*Prose* 1:755). Rossetti, one of the most popular English poets at the turn of the century, may well have been Eliot's gateway to Dante (see Dickey 2012, chap. 3).

17. Eliot's dating of his first encounter with Hale means that anything he wrote as an undergraduate or in his Paris year could be tinged by his acquaintance with her, even if he was not yet in love. "La Figlia Che Piange" (1912) certainly falls within the time frame of their early relationship, and if it reflects his emerging feelings for Hale, the strategy of abandonment it contemplates disturbingly maps out his future treatment of her.

18. Gordon (1999: 239) writes: "To consummate such a love might tarnish the dream that made the art or, more accurately, art's climax. So Emily Hale was set to play the roles of Virgin and Beatrice. Hard, of course, on Emily Hale for, as no real woman fits Eliot's reductive image of rank temptress, so no real woman could approximate his dream of purity."

19. Eliot calls Hale "Emilia" on December 29, 1931 and July 13, 1933, and possibly others; he echoes Shelley's "adored Nightingale" on September 30, 1935, "veiled glory" on February 10, 1931, and both on August 11, 1935. These are just examples, as I did not note every form of address while reading through the letters.

20. Ricks adduces these lines of "Epipsychidion" as a source of "The Burnt Dancer" (*Poems* 1132).

21. *Prose* 7:486. A few pages later, Eliot quotes the same three lines as appear in his letter to Hale (*Prose* 7:488)

22. Dante's canzone appeared first in *Il Convivio*, a work of prose and verse intended to follow the *Vita Nuova*, and then by self-citation in *Paradiso* VIII, the heaven of Venus.

23. In his lecture, Eliot also writes that he is "thoroughly graveled" (annoyed) by the following lines from "Epipsychidion": "I never was attached to that great sect, / Whose doctrine is, that each one should select / Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend, / And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend / To cold oblivion..." (*Prose* 4:644–45).

The Correspondence of T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale

24. On July 7, 1943, Eliot refers to the “waste sad time” (a quotation from “Burnt Norton”) of his separation from Hale.

25. On March 19, 1936, Eliot explains that “Garlic and sapphires in the mud” attempts to capture a personal feeling that he cannot rationally explain, that of “two beings together in an almost disembodied state in which the world appears as a pattern in sunlight full of beauty,” despite the presence of abominations, signified by the lines, “the boarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before” (*Poems* 181). The “funeral dance” is a primitive funeral ritual in which a hooded and robed figure performs a “loud lament”; the “disconsolate chimera” is drawn from Flaubert’s *Temptation of St. Anthony*, and the passage pertains to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and the temptation of despair.

Works Cited

- Dickey, Frances. 2012. *The Modern Portrait Poem from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 1930–56. Letters from T. S. Eliot to Emily Hale. Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot, C0686, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- Eliot, T. S. 1971. *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Eliot, T. S. 2011–19. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*. Edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. 8 vols. London: Faber and Faber.
- Eliot, T. S. 2014–19. *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*. Edited by Ronald Schuchard. 8 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 2015. *Collected and Uncollected Poems*. Vol. 1 of *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*. Edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 2020. “The Love of a Ghost for a Ghost: T. S. Eliot on His Letters to Emily Hale.” Houghton Library Blog, Harvard University. [/blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/the-love-of-a-ghost-for-a-ghost-t-s-eliot-on-his-letters-to-emily-hale/](https://blogs.harvard.edu/houghton/the-love-of-a-ghost-for-a-ghost-t-s-eliot-on-his-letters-to-emily-hale/).
- Fitzgerald, Sara. 2020. “Reconsidering Emily Hale.” In *Journal of the T. S. Eliot Society* 2020: 45–58.
- Gardner, Helen. 1978. *The Composition of Four Quartets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gordon, Lyndall. 1988. *Eliot’s New Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Frances Dickey

- Gordon, Lyndall. 1999. *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. New York: Norton.
- Hale, Emily. 1945. "Letter to T. S. Eliot, April 26." Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot, C0686, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- Hale, Emily. 1957, 1965. Narrative Written by Emily Hale. Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot. C0686, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library. findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C0686/c96.
- Hollander, Robert. 2001. *Dante: A Life in Works*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jarrell, Randall. 1963. "Fifty Years of American Poetry." *Prairie Schooner* 37, no. 1: 1–27.
- Milton, John. 1899. *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Schuchard, Ronald. 1999. *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 1821. *Epipsychidion: Verses Addressed to the Noble and Unfortunate Lady Emilia V—— Now Imprisoned in the Convent of ——*. London: C. and J. Ollier.