

NOTES & REVIEWS

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Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse*, London, Virago Press, 2022, pp. 496, ISBN 9780349012100

Lyndall Gordon's most recent biographical work, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (2022), inevitably calls to mind her previous, notorious attempts at sketching the often contradictory, intricate life of one of the twentieth century's most sphinx-like men of letters: T.S. Eliot. While it could be questioned whether something remains to be said about Eliot, as also witnessed by the recent significant body of biographical investigations into his private life and literary career, Gordon's book deviates from the norm by approaching the life writing of the author of *The Waste Land* through the heretofore untouched archive of correspondence between the poet and Emily Hale.¹ The addressee of a sequence of 1131 letters spanning between 1930 and 1957, at the peak of Eliot's fame, Hale first gravitated around 'young Tom' as a friend of his cousin, Eleanor Hinkley, and only later became a lover, a confidante, a friend, and occasionally a proof-reader – in other words, a 'Hidden Muse'. Freed from the fifty years of embargo imposed on them upon Eliot's pressing request, the materials concerning the relationship with Hale, previously stored at Princeton, were only made available in 2020 and are now accessible to readers thanks to Gordon's vivid portrayal of the decades regarding Eliot and Hale's intense, intimate bond.

In the "Preface" and the first chapter, Gordon clarifies that the content of her biographical exploration is of extraordinary and unprecedented relevance as the letters to Hale "grant a new lens" (p. 2) and "reveal how much he used his life – its particular scenes, the people he encountered and private feeling – to inject poems with jolts of authenticity" (p. 5). Indeed, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* performs a sort of surgical operation in bridging the gulf between the literary, intellectual life of a titanic figure and his secluded, private, and often burdened daily existence. Impracticable though it might seem at first glance – Eliot being a supporter of the notion that art is a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" – Gordon constructs a narrative out of the liminal threads linking the private and public spheres while inviting us to answer the questions posed between the lines: "Does Eliot's relationship with Hale help affect our image of him? And if so, how might this shift our understanding of his life and works?"² Although, in the wake of Poststructural-

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¹ See R. CRAWFORD, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to The Waste Land*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; R. CRAWFORD, *Eliot After The Waste Land*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022; M. HOLLIS, *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem*, London, Faber & Faber, 2022.

² T.S. ELIOT, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in ID., *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. F. KERMODE, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p. 40.

ism, one might be tempted to challenge the outmoded practice of reading literature through the lenses of biographical events, this threat is promptly dispelled by the author's scrupulous remark that it was Eliot himself who confided that his correspondence with Hale would highlight aspects as yet left unexplored. In a letter written at the beginning of their weekly (or even more frequent) exchanges, Eliot indeed stressed his sense of moral affection and reverence towards her more than other people: "I feel, you see, a far greater responsibility towards you than towards anybody in the world, an unlimited responsibility".³ As Dante's journey through Hell and Purgatory is ultimately appeased by the saintly presence of his heavenly guide, Beatrice, Gordon brings to light the role of Hale as a guiding figure in the context of Eliot's life and works.

Amongst the various episodes featured by this comprehensive and well-documented biography, some inevitably stand out more than others. Their first memorable encounter, which occurred on 17 February 1913, is explored through the posthumous recollection of the event as well as the theatrical, literary dimension involved in it. In her meticulous reconstruction, Gordon reminds us how their first meeting at Harvard took place in the context of a stunt show put up by Eliot's cousin along the lines of Jane Austen's *Emma*. If the connection with the world of drama is no coincidence – Hale would later become an actress and a drama teacher – it is also explored here in relation to his invitation to see Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at the Boston Opera House a few days later, an event "momentous enough to provide the earliest scenes for *The Waste Land*" (p. 33). Another episode worth mentioning regards their second encounter in London in 1923, during the most turbulent phase of Eliot's marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood, in the wake of which he sent Hale his collection of poems, *Ara Vos Prec*, as a gift. This detail does not go unnoticed with Gordon, who, echoing Arnaut Daniel's cry for pity, suggests that he began "to look towards beatitude as a counter to the 'hell' he experienced with Vivienne" (p. 111), a beatitude that would draw him near to Hale and religion.

The most vivid chapters of the book are, nonetheless, devoted to the central years of their relationship, i.e. 1930-1947, the period when the majority of the correspondence between the two was produced. Gordon heavily relies on the sustained epistolary exchanges of these decades for two main reasons: one is the presence of Hale in Eliot's creative process as well as the lurking of her figure in the poems and plays themselves, and the other rests on the possibility to capture the natural, human processes that led to transformations and divergences in Eliot's character and behaviour, with parallel reverberations on their relationship. As regards the latter, it is worth quoting Eliot's reprimand to Hale for not being a constant correspondent:

Writing to a correspondent who cannot respond tends to become merely a chronicle, or a record of the sort of thing one says to oneself, rather than to another: in either case to become rather self-centred. Besides, we both continue to develop and change; and I can register and examine the changes in myself as well as you much better in regular interchange of letters.⁴

³ T.S. ELIOT, "04/02/1931", in ID., *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. HAFFENDEN, 2022, [tseliot.com, https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/116](https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/116) (last accessed on 2 March 2023).

⁴ T.S. ELIOT, "16/07/1933", in ID., *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. HAFFENDEN, 2022, [tseliot.com, https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/1253](https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/1253) (last accessed on 2 March 2023).

Gordon brilliantly demonstrates such shifts in their relationship, moving from a growing intimacy and depression on Hale's side in 1936 to Eliot recoiling from the possibility of marrying her after Vivienne's death in 1947. Ranging from the letters to the biographical events, including occasional forays into commentaries and speculations, Gordon shows how their tie proved to be "exhausting as well as life-giving" (p. 231), until Hale's presence would fade into a shadow, in concomitance with their mutual decision to reduce the frequency of their exchanges. Juggling the contradictions and the ambiguities of a relationship kept alive by the echoes of affectionate messages, promises, and disclosures, Gordon's narrative is scattered with interrogatives and conjectures. This is an example of a writing praxis in which the hand of the biographer does not force meaning into the events, but compellingly proceeds to lay out gaps and silences for further investigation.

The second reason why one would find *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* a resourceful tool for Eliot Studies is the attention devoted by the author to unexplored patterns in Eliot's poems and plays. Indeed, the title owes its formulation to a line of "The Burial of the Dead" which supposedly draws on a recollection of the meeting with Hale. "To see Emily Hale and Vivienne Eliot in the ur-scenes of *The Waste Land*", as Gordon wishes to clarify, "is not to suggest there is no other way to approach the poem. It speaks to all of the un-lived life, the degradation of promiscuity and the need for spiritual renewal" (p. 92). The complexity of bringing together life and literature has always been a primary concern for Gordon, dating back to her 1988 claim that "[t]he crucial problem is to discern the bonds between life and work in a way that will do justice to the poetry and plays which are, after all, central acts in his life".⁵ For example, she looks at these bonds when mentioning Eliot's confession to Hale that "there is no need to explain 'Ash Wednesday' to you. No one else will understand it" (emphasis in original), positing Hale as the identity behind the "Lady of Silences".⁶

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning how Gordon organises the chapters dedicated to the gestation of "Burnt Norton", the first of the *Four Quartets* and a text sparked by the encounter with Hale at Chipping Campden in 1935, an event that would capture Eliot's poetic imagination and resonate in the poem. Even more interestingly, I would argue, are the sections in which the author delves into Hale's presence in the plays, as is the case with *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). Going beyond the idea of a muse's passive role, Gordon exposes Hale's position as a "consultant", the "first to be shown an incomplete draft [of *The Family Reunion*]" (p. 242). Although only few of Hale's letters to Eliot have survived, scholars can benefit from the clues disseminated in the book and their potential to open future horizons, considering for instance how Hale's professional background as a drama practitioner might have informed Eliot's dramatic production.

A broader examination of *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* also allows readers to appreciate the presence of other female figures throughout his life, women

⁵ L. GORDON, *Eliot's New Life*, Oxford, OUP, 1989, p. 7.

⁶ T.S. ELIOT, "03/10/1930", in *Id.*, *The Eliot-Hale Letters*, ed. J. Haffenden, 2022, tseliot.com, <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/12> (last accessed on 2 March 2023)..

who “came closer and saw him in ways men did not” (p. 1). Gordon’s biography sets out to compare different, competing models of womanhood, but only as far as such models emerge as crucial for a detailed portrait of Eliot’s private life. She of course recalls Vivienne Haigh-Wood’s troubled marriage with Eliot, her nervous breakdowns and later committal before her death, mentioning Eliot’s recognition of the ‘years of agony’ which, nonetheless, kept his poetic vein alive. Then, at the time when Hale’s presence was slowly vanishing, Mary Trevelyan came to the fore by virtue of her spiritual affiliation with Eliot, assuming a role of guardianship over her *protégé*. The author also mentions Valerie Fletcher, Eliot’s second wife, remembering her passionate efforts to honour the life and works of her husband. But many others are the women surrounding Eliot’s literary life whom Gordon touches upon, chapter by chapter – such as Virginia Woolf, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Mary Hutchinson, and Nancy Cunard – carrying out a nuanced examination of their relationship with the poet that shows how “[e]ach of the women in Eliot’s life brought out a facet of the enigma he presented” (p. 321).

Of additional value to this edition are the featured illustrations that visually inspire the reader’s imagination and help piece together the episodes recounted throughout the book. Alongside Hale’s numerous portraits, ranging from childhood to mature age, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse* includes little gems such as Hale’s portrait with Boerre, the elkhound Eliot gifted her in 1938 to keep her company, or a 1935 picture Eliot himself took at Stamford House, in Chipping Campden. Gently kneeling with her snow white dress, a cigarette in her left hand and a tin can full of flowers on her side, Emily has a beatific smile and, differently from other occasions, faces the photographer with an admiring gaze. There, in that instant, not far from the sacred garden where the roots of “Burnt Norton” would sprout, one may catch a sense of the roses that “[h]ad the look of flowers that are looked at”, Emily being the rose the poet gazes at, fixes in his memory, and makes immortal through his verse and the vest pocket Kodak he had bought years before.⁷ Along more academic lines, a substantial body of notes follows the epilogue and provides textual references to navigate the frequent citations Gordon offers to readers. The notes, as well as a remarkable and up-to-date bibliography and a comprehensive index, constitute an excellent tool for those who wish to further investigate the role of Eliot’s private connections in steering his public and literary output. What is nonetheless missing, and would have been much appreciated, is a chronological timeline of both Eliot and Hale’s lives and works to keep at hand so as to help experts and non-experts move freely across the chapters.

The opening of the Hale letters in 2020, and the publication of their digital versions under John Haffenden’s editorship on *tseliot.com*, represent the beginning of a unique phase for Eliot Studies. Many are the truths and the aspects still to be uncovered and delved into in Eliot’s life and works. Gordon had prophetically foreseen this in her *Eliot’s New Life*, where she claimed that “[w]ithout [Hale’s] letters to Eliot, and perhaps even with them, the whole truth can never be known, for there is no end

⁷ T.S. ELIOT, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, eds C. RICKS and J. McCUE, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. 180.

to the nuances of a relationship”.⁸ More than providing final answers, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse* proves thus a suitable starting point and valuable companion to interpret the entangled connections between Eliot and Hale, Eliot and other women, and a superb example of how archival research still holds immense prospects for Modernist literature.

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⁸ L. GORDON, *Eliot’s New Life*, Oxford, OUP, 1989, p. 147.

