

‘I am very dependent upon women’, TS Eliot told his Harvard friend and fellow poet, Conrad Aiken, in 1914. His life was shaped by four women who became part of his work. Vivienne Haigh-Wood, his first wife, Mary Trevelyan, a companion, and Valerie Fletcher, his secretary at Faber & Faber, who became his second wife, are all well known, but there was another woman who came first, named Emily Hale.

For decades, this was a relationship “under wraps”, as Eliot’s Faber colleague, Peter du Sautoy, put it. In the course of their correspondence, from the late 1920s until 1957, Eliot wrote Hale some 1,133 letters – of these 1,131, many more than he wrote to any other person, have never been seen. In 1963, less than two years before his death, Eliot gave du Sautoy a large cash box packed tightly with Hale’s letters to him. He was asked to burn them. Du Sautoy said it had been a point of honour not to read the letters before destroying them.

On his own letters to Hale, Eliot imposed the longest embargo. Hale delivered the letters to Princeton’s Librarian, Mr Dix, in November 1956, and the following month the letters were sealed in 12 boxes in the archives of Firestone Library. Valerie Eliot, the poet’s second wife, asked to see them, but the terms of the bequest, forbidding all eyes, did not allow this. They were not to be opened until 50 years after the death of the survivor of the correspondence.

Eliot died in January 4 1965; Hale nearly five years later, on 12 October 1969, 50 years ago today. Next week, the steel security bands will be cut, and this treasure will be unsealed. The curator Don Skemer will take two to three months to sort the letters, and then release them to readers in January 2020. “Their opening will finally resolve over a half century of speculation,” he says. I will be there at the unsealing to fulfil my belief that Eliot’s secret attachment to Miss Hale is central to understanding him.

Eliot and Hale met in about 1912 through her friend, Eleanor Hinkley, who

was Eliot's cousin, and lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her home was a short walk from Harvard, where Eliot was then a philosophy student. All three were keen on drama. In February 1913, Eliot and Hale performed together in a scene from Jane Austen's *Emma*, dramatised by Hinkley, with Hale playing the snob, Mrs Elton, and Eliot the hypochondriac, Mr Woodhouse.

He later affirmed (according to Valerie) that he been in love with this woman. She had not reciprocated his feelings, he thought. In 1914, he left Boston for England. Soon after that, he sent a postal order for \$4, asking for red or pink roses to be delivered to Hale for a Saturday performance on stage. Six months later, he married an Englishwoman whom he barely knew.

Eliot's disastrous first marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood coincided with 12 years of separation from Hale. She became an accomplished speech and drama teacher, and director of plays, and drama remained a bond with Eliot. In 1930, three years after they had resumed sporadic contact, Hale advised him on early drafts of his most confessional play, *The Family Reunion* (1939), where she herself figures as a home-body whom the hero might marry but has to set aside. She is also the source for rejected lovers in two other of Eliot's plays, *The Cocktail Party* (1949) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

But even before they renewed their attachment, Hale had played an elevating role in Eliot's poetic imagination. She was vital to what he called "the sequence that culminates in faith". In *The Waste Land* (1922), there is the memory of a "hyacinth girl" who lifts love beyond desire into sublimity, "looking into the heart of light, the silence"; in "Ash Wednesday" (1927-30), she is the guiding "Lady of silences", a Beatrice figure out of Dante.

Eliot's poetry repeatedly calls up a woman who is screened from sight: nameless, faceless, a ghost of "memory and desire", hovering in the purview of a wasted life. "I that was near your heart... have lost my passion". Who is the imagined listener to this intimate lament? "What might have been and what has been" reflects on a revived bond between a man and a woman whose one-time love comes back in a garden haunted by the voices of unborn

children “hidden excitedly, containing laughter”.

Only when hints and clues come together is it clear that, at source, the listener to these confessions must be Emily Hale. In 1973, Helen Gardner discovered, while editing the drafts of *Four Quartets* for Faber, that in the summer of 1934 Emily Hale had accompanied Eliot to the garden of a country house, Burnt Norton in Gloucestershire, the setting for the first of the *Four Quartets* (1935). Here again, the poet sees the “heart of light” – the same phrase for the experience brought on by the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*. Another clue is that Eliot made various visits during the Thirties to the nearly Cotswold village of Chipping Campden where Emily stayed each summer with a Boston uncle and aunt. What appears a disembodied figment of imagination in his poetry did have a face and name. I want to take this particular woman out of the shadows.

Photographs show that she held herself erect, slim and graceful with dark, curly hair and a round, gently smiling face. She had the poise of an actor and the confidence of her old Boston Brahmin background, much like Eliot’s. His poetry positions her with flowers, and one photograph taken in Chipping Campden in about 1935, where she crouches beside a tub of flowers in her aunt’s garden, Eliot called “a masterpiece”. In a comic verse about a country walk, Eliot caricatures his nervousness of cows in contrast to Miss E— H— pressing on unafraid in her sensible shoes.”

Unlike many who found Eliot’s formality intimidating, Hale was sufficiently at ease at the time that she handed over his letters to Princeton to assure “my man” that she knew him; what she detected, in her kindly matter-of-fact manner, was Eliot’s fear – not only his wish for privacy but his fear of revelation. I long to know from his letters how he reacted to her understanding of his character.

Friends and pupils stressed how skillful Hale was in her chosen sphere of the spoken word. All were of a type: warm, unstuffy and naturally kind, and this is how they saw her too. As a teacher, she had her special girls, rather like Miss Jean Brodie, and one of them, Fanny Tomaino, at Concord Academy,

took the lead in Hale's 1944 production of *Quality Street* by JM Barrie. Tomaino remembered "how she costumed me in her own Empire-cut, satin peignoir. How after the performance, when the material was hopelessly stained with perspiration, she said 'of course it can never be worn again'." Then, seeing Tomaino's anxiety, she smiled in a way that said, "never mind, it is worth it to *both* of us."

Tomaino once shared a seat with Hale on a train from Concord to Boston, and noticed that Miss Hale was more dressed up than usual, in a blouse with a ruffle. "She said, 'I am going to the zoo with Tom.' ... And there as the train pulled into the platform, stood 'Tom' himself, in his dark clothes, leaning on an umbrella. The train passed him before it stopped and I heard Miss Hale's voice calling 'Taum, Taum' down the platform."

I suspect it mattered to Eliot's exiled self that Hale embodied their shared roots in old New England. Late in life, in an unusually open *Paris Review* interview, he said: "My poetry in its sources, in its emotional springs, comes from America." His poem, *Marina* (1930), written soon after he took British citizenship, recreates the 17th-century voyage of an ancestor in a frail vessel, sailing across the ocean – a soul's fraught journey to a promised land. As it approaches the New England shore, a figure of loving purity awaits the traveller. This poem was written around the time Eliot renewed contact with Hale.

She seems to have provided an ideal of pure love, sustained over many years, at first in memory, then in person. Though not ethereal herself, she did not jar the image of purity that Eliot's imagination had conferred on her. The book I am now writing, *Eliot Among the Women*, makes me wonder how far Hale complied with an almost medieval love in her role as Beatrice, her own compassion transforming her into the person Eliot needed her to be. This is a question I will look to the sealed letters to answer.

In 1928, Eliot had taken a vow of chastity, perhaps initiating his release from his unhappy marriage. But it was not until 1932-33, when he was on his own in Harvard, that he resolved not to return to Vivien. Though Hale complied

with Eliot's wish for secrecy – a reasonable strategy for a public figure whose wife refused to sign a legal separation – inevitably some people saw them together: Hale's agog students and colleagues at Scripps, a women's college in California, who guessed that Eliot had crossed the continent to see her over New Year 1933; Mrs Elsmith at Woods Hole, who provided privacy when Emily Hale crossed the continent in turn to be with Eliot in June 1933; and back in London the Woolfs whom they visited for tea in Tavistock Square. Virginia Woolf remarked crossly that "Tom" took Miss Hale about with him "everywhere". Lady Ottoline Morrell too was jealous of this poised woman at Eliot's side in 1934-35, when Hale took leave from her Scripps post to be at hand in England.

There is circumstantial evidence of a commitment in the form of a ring. But then, late in 1935, Hale returned to Boston. Having risked and lost her post, she was low. Eliot, worried about her, returned to New England in the late summer of 1936, hoping to support her as she began a new post at Smith College. Ten years later, in 1946, Eliot spoke of "four very happy days" with "Emily" in Vermont. She was performing in the Noel Coward comedy *Blithe Spirit* with a summer theatre company called the Dorset Players. A rare photo of them together shows Hale relaxed, with hands in her pockets under the softly spreading trees, and Eliot upstanding in a dark suit which looks out of place, like someone who has come from another world.

In 1947, after Vivienne's death, Hale told her friend Lorraine Havens of the shock she had felt when Eliot decided not to marry her. "I am going to tell you, dear friend, that what I confided to you long ago of a mutual affection he and I have had for each other has come to a strange impasse... Tom's wife died last winter very suddenly. I supposed he would then feel free to marry me as I believed he always intended to do. But such proves not to be the case. We met privately two or three times to try to sift the situation as thoroughly as possible – he loves me – I believe that wholly – but apparently not in the way usual to men less gifted i.e. with complete love thro' a married relationship."

She donated Eliot's letters to Princeton through her friends, Willard Thorp, a professor there, and his wife Margaret, trusting them to know what was right

for a woman in possession of a trove of papers by a great poet. Eliot was furious that she should take such initiative. "My God!" he wrote on 27 November 1956, "does this mean that a complete stranger, a professional librarian, is already reading letters which were composed for your eye alone? I seem to have heard of dying travelers in a desert, with the vultures starting to dismember them before the end. I feel somewhat like that."

She denied that the letters would be read, and asked Eliot twice to shorten the embargo. She found it, she admitted on 12 September 1963, "difficult to break the silence which has existed between us for the last several years", and wondered if he was "still preserving" her letters to him, "which long ago you planned to place in the Bodleian at Oxford". As we now know, he had them burnt that same year. There was no reply to this final letter, she told Thorp sadly.

Back in 1970, when I began to write on Eliot, no one spoke of Hale. It was A. Walton Litz, who was editing Eliot in His Time, a collection of essays on The Waste Land manuscript, who told me of a huge collection of Eliot letters in his university library, not to be opened till the next century. Such was the natural dignity of Litz that I was surprised to hear his lawless fantasy, as we strolled towards the library: if he knew he was dying, he said, it would be his life's last pleasure to steal into the archives and read, in secret, the Eliot-Hale letters.

Then and there I vowed to myself to live to this day when the letters, in Hale's words, would "burst upon the world".