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# Coming and Going: The Women of T.S. Eliot

Ian Butcher
Independent Scholar, Belgium and Denmark

*There were four influential women in Eliot's life: two wives, two women who believed that one day he would marry them, and a brief affair of which he was deeply ashamed. New evidence of some 1,131 letters sent by Eliot to one of the women, Emily Hale, available to scholars after a fifty-year embargo imposed by Eliot, throws dramatic new light on T.S. Eliot the man, and also major insights into his poetry.*[1] *Eliot destroyed her replies, perhaps in order to protect his reputation. Eliot claimed that poetry should be transformed into an impersonal statement, but his poetry was not as 'impersonal' as he alleged, but replete with personal incidents from his private life with his women. His troubled first wife "nearly was the death of me, but she kept the poet alive". Emily – his first platonic, lifelong love who lived in America – was his poem's "hyacinth girl"; Mary was a friend he frequented in England for drives in the car, domestic dinners and culture. He finally found true happiness, and the ability to write erotic verse, when he married Valerie, thirty-eight years his junior, and with whom he found contentment in his twilight years. He also had a brief affair with Nancy Cunard, of which he was deeply ashamed. The aim of this paper is to show the various major influences these four women had on Eliot's life and work. Focus will mainly be on* Prufrock, The Waste Land, *and* Four Quartets.

**Keywords**
T.S. Eliot; women; inspiration; wives; Vivienne; Hale; Trevelyan

> *"In the room the women come and go*
> *Talking of Michelangelo"*

The quotation above is taken from Thomas Stearns Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* originally subtitled *Prufrock Among the Women,* which is exactly where the poem's timid protagonist finds himself. Eliot seems to have preferred the company of undemanding women, and took much of his inspiration from his interaction – both positive and negative – with them.

## The Man

Born in 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, the youngest of seven children, Eliot grew up surrounded by women, with four older sisters. His childhood was upper-middle class. Eliot was educated at Harvard from 1906 to 1910; an important year in Paris at the Sorbonne; back to Harvard 1911–1914 to work on his doctoral thesis in philosophy; and a Fellowship at Merton College, Oxford, where he pursued his philosophy studies, with the ambition to pursue a career in academia. He travelled – among other destinations – to London and Munich, where he completed *Prufrock*. He once wrote to Conrad Aitken while at Oxford and rather lonely "I am very dependent on women…and feel the deprivation of Oxford" (Rogers 4).

Eliot found fame as a poet, a dramatist, essayist, editor, and literary critic. He received the Order of Merit from King George VI and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 for "his outstanding pioneer contribution to present day poetry" (Nobel Prize). He became hugely famous, once attracting a crowd of more than 12,000 to a stadium in Minnesota to hear him speak on literary criticism. Outstanding works include *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Waste Land, The Hollow Men, Gerontion, Ash Wednesday,* and *Four Quartets*. Dramatic works include *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*. He liked to call himself "Old Possum" – a nickname given to him by his friend and editor, Ezra Pound – and published the whimsical *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* in 1939. These light poems, originally sent to his godson, Tom Faber, were collected together and became the basis for Andrew Lloyd Webber's successful 1981 musical, *Cats*.

Apart from his mother, Charlotte, also an amateur poet, four women deeply influenced T.S. Eliot's life and work. His first wife, Vivienne (Vivien) Haigh-Wood; the American, Emily Hale, who Eliot knew for sixty years and with whom Eliot corresponded for twenty-seven years between 1930 and 1957; the English Mary Trevelyan who Eliot frequented while in England; and finally his second wife, his former secretary, Valerie Fletcher. Initially, none of the women were aware of the existence of the others. Both Mary and Emily firmly assumed that their platonic relationships with Eliot would end in marriage.

New evidence from letters from Eliot to Emily Hale sheds new light on his relationship with Hale, with the other women, and with many of his poems in the making. Arguably, Eliot was less of a prolific poet than a prolific letter-writer. Eliot insisted that the letters should be locked up until fifty years after the death of the survivor. Eliot died in 1965, Hale in 1969, so the letters were

opened to readers at the Princeton Archive in early 2020, causing a suitable stir. Eliot destroyed Hale's correspondence to him, apart from eighteen anodyne letters. They show that Eliot's celebrated claim to "impersonality shielded a poetry which was highly personal, almost spiritual autobiography" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl*, 5). Some "difficult" references – what one of his publishers called "obsessive obscurity" (Crawford 106) – turn out to be taken directly from personal experiences, some from moments lived with one of his women. The letters show that – rather than just the obscurity and erudition of the poems – he was often telling his life through his poems.

Eliot himself was a complex man. V.S Pritchett described him as "a company of actors inside one suit, each twitting the other" (Ackroyd 118). He kept his various women and other friends in compartments, making sure that they never met, and information did not pass from one to another. He was inhibited, stiff, ultra-conservative, reserved, "frostily formal of manner" (Ackroyd 59) and spoke very slowly, attempting to cover his American accent with a British one. He adopted English manners and English dress, later with bowler hat and rolled up umbrella. He was not unlike his own protagonist in *Prufrock,* "politic, cautious, and meticulous" (Eliot *Selected Poems* l.116). Given his job for many years in a bank, Aldous Huxley described him as "the most bank-clerky of all bank clerks" (Davis 25). Lady Ottoline Morrell called him "the undertaker", while Virginia Woolf wrote that his voice was "sepulchral" (Ackroyd 177). She wrote to Clive Bell that (when three-piece suits were common) Woolf claimed that she expected him to turn up in a "four-piece suit" (Gordon *Imperfect Life* 140).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Christianity to Eliot, which shaped every facet of his life and work. He was deeply religious, his commitment taking up a great deal of his time, often attending church several times a day, and measuring his life by divine goals. In 1926, he surprised his relatives by falling to his knees before Michelangelo's *Pieta* on a visit to Rome (Ackroyd 159). He was a churchwarden at St. Stephen's Church in London from 1934 to 1959. He gradually moved from his original Unitarian faith to the Anglo-Catholic movement. Importantly, at least two of his women – Emily and Mary – shared his religious zeal. He had "a Puritanical reservation about happiness itself; sainthood, not happiness, should be the ideal of human existence" (Gordon 165). As most of his life he lived alone, his bedroom was spectacularly ascetic: it contained "a single bed, an ebony crucifix, and a bare lightbulb hanging from a chain" (Dirda). Much of his life he was ill at ease or awkward in any sexual situation (he wore a truss for a hernia which

cannot have helped matters) and celibate for much of his later life. He liked the company of women who demanded nothing of him. The characteristic pattern of Eliot's friendships seems to be involvement followed by swift and unexplained withdrawal, for fear that anyone might get too close.

In his seminal essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (Eliot *Selected Prose* 37–45) published in 1919, Eliot famously argues that poetry should essentially be "impersonal", being distinct and separate from the author's personality. Art in its true sense should be divorced from the personal life of the artist. He writes that: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". Indeed, he writes that the progress of an artist is a "continual extinction of personality". In some senses, Eliot's saintly attempt at living a life of "self-sacrifice", and his strenuous attempts to eschew physical involvement, hides the deeply personal nature of much of his poetry. However, passages in his work which initially appear opaque and gnomic are frequently replete with highly personal references shared with one of his women.

## Women's Voices in His Work

*The Waste Land* is a rag-bag of fragments that Eliot had collected over the years. He calls it a "Shakespeherian Rag" or a patchwork of fragments, jazz songs, voices and contrasting styles. Through all his turmoil, he continued writing and collecting "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (Eliot *Collected Poems* 69). The poem is full of women's voices, evidently inspired by the women in his life. The letters to Hale reveal that the character, Marie, in *The Waste Land* was based on Marie von Moritz with whom Eliot had made friends in Munich in 1911. Eliot told Hale that he used Marie's recollections of childhood tobogganing in the mountains "almost word for word" (Rogers) in the poem. There is the near-rape incident of the compliant typist ("Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over"), watched by Tiresias, the blind seer who was transformed into a woman for seven years ; the cockney lady giving her advice to "Lil" in the pub; the lady with the "fiery points" of hair who sits under the image of Philomel – a mythological figure who was raped and had her tongue cut out – and whose "nerves are bad to-night"; Madame Sosostris and the fragments of comic songs (e.g., Mrs Porter) sung by one of the voices.

In later life, Eliot felt himself somewhat imprisoned by the success of *The Waste Land* (Ackroyd 128) despite its complex, erudite and allusive form, with its vast array of scholarly references, its "baffling Babel" (Lane). In a 1926 lecture on Dante, Eliot posited that "genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood" (Eliot *Complete Prose* 701). In 1956, he revealed that the scholarly *Notes on The Waste Land* came about as "the poem was inconveniently short…so I set to work to expand the notes in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship that is still on view today" (Lane). Looking back, Eliot referred to *The Waste Land* disarmingly as a "just a piece of rhythmical grumbling" (Von Drehle).

## His Women

### Vivienne Haigh-Wood

Vivienne Haigh-Wood (sometimes Vivien) was his first wife whom he married in 1915 (the year that *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was published in *Poetry* magazine) after a very short flirtation, and which came as a complete surprise to friends and family. There was no big ceremony and few guests. They did it this way as they were afraid that their parents would have forbidden the union had they been given notice. Vivienne told Bertrand Russell that she had married Eliot to stimulate him, but found that she could not (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 52). Eliot, for his part, was a twenty-six-year-old virgin, a poet who was experiencing some success, wished to have sexual experience and escape from America. He wrote to Hale "I had to persuade myself that I was in love with someone here who could not or would not go to America – I had to pretend to myself that I had cut all ties to home" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 48). Vivienne complained to Russell that Eliot had "tricked her imagination" (Ackroyd 63). Eliot grew to dislike Vivienne, then pity her, then finally to loathe her, the marriage their personal waste land. Hence his turning to other women, largely for love and sympathetic understanding without the inconvenience of sexual relations.

The basis of their initial attraction was perhaps that Vivienne was everything that Eliot was not. While he was tall and dour, she was dark and petite, vivacious, artistic, forthright, emancipated, unrestrained, flamboyant of dress, needy, fragile, and she smoked in public. Both of them were "ill at

ease or unenergetic in sexual relations" (Ackroyd 66). She had a history of illnesses, including tuberculosis of the hand, headaches, cramps, eye problems, shortness of breath, shingles, influenza, lethargy, insomnia, regular toothache, colitis, nervous breakdowns, an irregular and over-frequent menstrual cycle, and mental instability. At one point she nearly died of colitis. Doctors had prescribed her a litany of medication which gave her serious dependencies and altered her moods, and had been put on a starvation diet (at one point she weighed barely thirty-six kilos). She had taken chloral hydrate for her nerves since she was fifteen, a potassium bromide sedative and Hoffmann's Anodyne hypnotic, among others. The smell of ether, which she rubbed on her body, or on a handkerchief, hung around her. She made several suicide attempts, calling these her "upsets" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 51), but these, in reality, made her more of a semi-invalid. She spent much time moving from sanitorium to sanitorium and then from asylum to asylum in various countries.

After only a few weeks of marriage, Russell described Eliot's attitude as "exquisite and listless… He is ashamed of his marriage and very grateful if one is kind to her" (Poirier). Eliot put her frequently – usually against her will – into various sanatoria, also so as to be free and unencumbered to write. As much of her illness was lived out in public, she quickly got the reputation of a "deranged wife" (Ackroyd 168) and the marriage was seen as a disastrous public spectacle. When they argued, both had pronounced theatrical temperaments. Ackroyd claims that "her condition was the fundamental fact of his life" (Johnson). Virginia Woolf was less kind when she referred to Vivienne as "This bag of ferrets that Tom wears around his neck" (Johnson) and her diary mocks her as "a mad Ophelia" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 162). Vivienne's affair with Eliot's friend Bertrand Russell in 1917 was a major shock to him, a double betrayal, and did nothing to ameliorate the tenuous relationship of Eliot and Vivienne. His writing grew noticeably darker around this time and *The Waste Land* even echoes the debilitating, intimate conflicts of the disastrous marriage:

> 'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
> 'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
> 'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
> 'I never know what you are thinking. Think' (Eliot *Collected Poems* 57).

Eliot himself mirrored Vivienne's illnesses in other ways in that his own health was somewhat delicate. In 1925 alone, it has been estimated that the

couple spent a third of their income on doctors, medication and sanitoria, a "maladie a deux" (Ackroyd 121). Eliot frequently complained of headaches, had a double hernia, bronchitis, seriously decayed teeth (five were extracted at one visit), insomnia, surgery on his finger, emphysema and exhaustion. He had hypochondria and a number of phobias and was addicted to "pills and potions" (Ackroyd 304). He also smoked a great deal and frequently drank to excess. In 1921 he went to Margate to recover from what his medical records define as a "nervous breakdown" (Ackroyd 114), having been granted three months leave from his work. There he drafted much of Part III of *The Waste Land* and concluded:

> On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing (Eliot *Collected Poems* 64).

Later that year – and feeling "very shaky" (Gold) – he travelled to Lausanne for treatment at Dr. Vittoz's sanatorium to try to rid himself of what he called his "aboulie", or lack of will and control over his own thoughts. In Lausanne, he wrote a great deal of *The Waste Land*, and the treatment seemed to be a qualified success. As Gold writes: "It seems appropriate that *The Waste Land* ...characterised by disjointed narration, fragmented identities, and splintered religious faith, was written by a man in the middle of a nervous breakdown" (519).

Virginia Woolf thought that she had seen green powder on his face and suspected that he painted his lips, making him look "interesting and cadaverous" (Ackroyd 136) and undoubtedly emphasising Eliot's own sense of drama as a romantic, poetic figure. These cycles of dual illnesses where he and Vivienne had to nurse each other exhausted them both in a "mirrored wretchedness" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 112). Vivienne later admitted that "I love Tom in a way that destroys us both" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 122). Eliot wrote to his brother that the marriage was "the most awful nightmare…but at least it is not dull" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 63).

Given Vivienne's considerable medical bills, their lives were blighted by debilitating financial uncertainty until he accepted the five and a half day a week job at Lloyds Bank from 1917 to 1925, which in turn added to his general exhaustion and lack of time to write. In 1927, he accepted the post of editor at Faber & Gwyer, which two years later became Faber & Faber, where he built up a superb poetry list, and for which he was known affectionately as the "Pope

of Russell Square". It was also the year that he became a British citizen. He later wrote that his jobs in banking and publishing actually helped him to become a better poet as trying to work as a full-time poet "would have been a deadening influence on me" (Hall). He also stayed in the job as he believed that Vivienne would benefit from his pension when he died.

All this time, Eliot was trying to write, but his wife's health issues were a major sorrow and distraction. Russell commented that "their troubles were what they enjoyed" (Ackroyd 67). However – on the positive side – Eliot relied on Vivienne to guide him in English ways as Eliot felt "everywhere a foreigner" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 68). Around 1924, Vivienne wrote around twelve contributions of short, witty sketches and pieces for *Criterion* magazine where Eliot was editor, sometimes helping her prepare them, and published under the assumed name, "F.M". She was one of Eliot's first proof-readers and encouraged Eliot's writing, putting comments in the drafts of *The Waste Land* – such as "wonderful" (Rogers). Eliot valued and depended on her reactions to his poems. Importantly, she also made significant contributions to the drunken cockney dialogue in *The Game of Chess* section which takes place in a pub, for example, changing "goodnight" to a drunken "goonight". Now the *Larrick* pub in Marylebone, just across from an apartment where the couple lived, they often left their window open to hear the chatter from the pub; their cockney maid was also an inspiration (Rogers).

Vivienne also insisted on the removal of a line in the *A Game of Chess* section (incidentally, the original title of this section – *In The Cage* – underlined Eliot's feeling of entrapment) "The ivory men make company between us", probably believing that it exposed their desultory domestic life, with chess being the only thing to keep them together (Armitstead). Eliot added it back in a Notebook version he copied thirteen years after Vivienne's death. Vivienne described their evenings together when Eliot would be maddeningly unresponsive and sullen. She once claimed, "As to Tom's *mind*, I am his mind" (Ackroyd 150), and "I provide the motive power. I *do* shove" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 59).

After their legal separation in 1933, Vivienne "stalked" Eliot, sometimes carrying a placard to his theatre plays with "I am the wife he abandoned" written on it. She also turned up at book signings, once in a mock fascist uniform. Eliot did not provide her with an address or telephone number and moved from one friend's house to another. At Faber & Faber he frequently hid in the toilets or left by a back entrance when Vivienne arrived to see him (Poirier).

Vivienne died of heart failure in 1947, more than eight of the final years

of her life being confined to a mental hospital, on her brother's initiative. The couple had lived together only half of the time they were married. Their tortured love seems to have stimulated Eliot. He admitted that his own moodiness had made Vivienne wish to escape (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 99). As Crawford writes "All along, Vivienne had supported Tom's talent. She had stuck with him in his exhaustion, ill temper, and breakdown" (87). In 1960, a reflective Eliot wrote in a public statement, which only came to light in 2020: "Vivienne nearly was the death of me, but she kept the poet alive. In retrospect, the nightmare agony of my seventeen years with Vivienne seems to me preferable to the dull misery of a mediocre teacher of philosophy which would have been the alternative" (Statement 1960).

### Nancy Cunard

In the interests of completeness, Eliot had a brief affair in 1922 with the heiress Nancy Cunard. Cunard was a poet, publisher, journalist, socialite, and human-rights activist. She was living apart from her husband and had a rather louche reputation. She fell in love with Eliot after she had read *Prufrock*. He told Emily Hale of his deep regret and shame years later in 1930, "It was over almost before it begun…and it left a taste of ashes which I can never forget" (Hollis 382). Eliot portrayed Cunard as Fresca in early drafts of *The Waste Land,* but later delete the passages. She wrote a long anti-war poem called *Parallax* in 1925 which Virginia and Leonard Woolf published. In it she directly challenged the world view that *The Waste Land* presented of the world gone barren following the First World War, in which human sexuality had been perverted from its normal course. It is perhaps an example of a "reverse influence", where Eliot's writing stimulated her, rather than the other way around with his other female friendships.

### Emily Hale

Eliot and Emily Hale – a friend of Eliot's cousin Eleanor – met in 1905 when Eliot was seventeen and Emily had just turned fourteen; both were of the Unitarian faith. Their paths crossed later when she was in her early twenties and both got involved with amateur dramatics, Emily being a gifted amateur actress. They performed comic scenes together on the stage in 1913. Eliot later confessed that "when I fell in love with you…I wanted dreadfully to see you again" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 32). Less romantically, he claimed that she

reminded him of his mother (Rogers). Much later he admitted "[y]ou should know that my only goal and ambition in life was that I might ask you to marry me" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 35), although Emily remained rather sceptical about his wishes. His marriage to Vivienne came as a complete surprise to Emily. Neither she, his parents or his friends were warned.

Nevertheless, Eliot sent 1,131 letters to Emily from when he was twenty-four to his late sixties, more than any he sent to any other person. One can surmise that she must have written a similar number to him. Sometimes Eliot wrote twice a week, and Emily frequently felt burdened by this frequency and his eager insistence on her replies. He is frequently very affectionate: "My own Emily, my perfect love", "Dearest my Love", "Sweetest Love", "my darling", from "her Tom".

He always had his eye on his literary legacy and what the scholars would make of the letters, and so insisted on an embargo of fifty years from the death of the survivor. Eliot died in January 1965, and Hale in October 1969, so it was not until January 2020 that the letters saw the light of day from their place in the archives of Princeton University. Only a few people knew about Emily's donation. To read the letters is to have an insight into the relationships with the women in his life, the poems that Eliot was contemplating, and that the letters were somewhat of a testing ground for ideas he was working on.

Emily was the complete antithesis of Vivienne; prim, strait-laced and conventional. She taught speech and drama in a college and may have nudged Eliot to the eventual writing of plays. It was perhaps convenient that Emily lived largely in America while Eliot had taken England as his home. He wanted to love her "in a medieval manner", platonically, courtly, treating her at a distance, safely remote, almost as a saint. He was in love with the idea of being in love, Beatrice to his Dante. He kept his friendship with Emily a secret. Typically, when Emily suggested many times that they should meet in person, Eliot deflected, explaining that to meet would be unlikely; he saw few women and never alone. However, they did meet occasionally on his trips to the US and Emily's infrequent trips to England. On one trip, in 1935, she even gave him a ring. Eliot thanked her with "[t]his ring means to me all that a wedding ring can mean" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 125, 148 and 222).

The letters were frequently chastely erotic. On December 11, 1935, he wrote: "When I go to bed I shall imagine you kissing me: and when you take off your stockings you must imagine me kissing your dear dear feet and striving to approach your beautiful saintly soul". He told Emily that she inspired his poetry and that she was the "hyacinth girl" in the *The Waste Land*. He wanted

to ask Emily to marry him if she could only wait, but somehow could not find the courage, and always regretted it:

> Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth Garden,
> Your arms full, and your hair wet, 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 (Eliot *Collected Poems* 54).

Eliot had a romantic epiphany with Hale in the rose garden at Burnt Norton, a manor house in England. He told Emily that the poem *Burnt Norton* was "a new kind of love poem, and it is written for you, and is fearfully obscure…it is our poem…with a good deal that you and no one else will identify" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 226). Apart from the remembrance of a few kisses, the poem – part of *The Four Quartets* – talks of the failure of action:

> The passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> In the rose-garden (Eliot *Collected Poems* 177).

Eliot attributes the *Datta* passages in *What the Thunder Said* to Emily, and called her the "Lady of Silences…Rose of Memory" in *Ash Wednesday* (Eliot *Collected Poems* 87). In a letter of November 3, 1930, he wrote that "I shall always write primarily for you".

Illustrating his swinging emotions, in 1930 when he resumed their tie, he wrote that "I felt obscurely that I would never write in America; and so I suppose I persuaded myself gradually that I did not love you after all" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 42). Yet in 1934, while married to Vivienne, Eliot wrote "I would literally give my eyesight to marry you…If I ever am free I shall ask you to marry me" (Meyers). Yet inscriptions in books he sent her were formal and impersonal.

Emily frequently baulked at the one-way relationship Eliot imposed upon her. In a letter of January 7, 1931, she admits her struggles, "he and I became so close to each other under conditions so abnormal". She had already suggested some five times that Eliot divorce Vivienne, but Eliot asks her to accept his love without the expectation of any physical union or worldly recognition. While Eliot was becoming increasingly successful – which he vaunted in his letters – her career and finances were becoming increasingly precarious.

She was truly making sacrifices to his creativity, while he was emotionally dependent on her. On October 3, 1930, Eliot wrote a self-avowed "love letter" that her love "has given me the very best I have had in my life".

The relationship was not entirely at a distance. Emily visited Eliot in England in 1934-35, having taken extended leave from her work. Friends report that he took her everywhere with him. She was not universally liked by Eliot's friends. Her efficiency caused Ottoline Morrell to call her "that awful American woman…a Sergeant Major quite intolerable…" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 214). She stayed a little too long away and returned to no job. In 1936, Eliot travelled to the US in some ways to comfort her on the loss.

When Vivienne died, and after years of waiting, Emily believed that her time had come and that Eliot would propose to her. Predictably, Eliot recoils and backs away. On February 3, 1947, he writes to her, bizarrely, that he has a bad conscience about her expectations of marriage and that this brings on "an intense dislike of sex in any form". Soon after, on May 1, 1947, "I recoiled violently from the prospect of marriage, when I came to realise it as possible". Further in the same letter, that he "cannot, cannot, start life again, and adapt myself (which means not merely one moment, but a perpetual adaptation for the rest of life) to any other person".

Emily tried to probe Eliot for the reasons for his change of heart. This insistence annoyed Eliot, and he wrote to his brother stating that if Emily did not give up, he would have to commit suicide (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 292). However, their exchanges continued for many years afterwards with Emily half hoping that Eliot would change his mind, but knowing that this was unlikely.

Justifying himself many years later in his public Statement of 1960, Eliot wrote a cruel posthumous disavowal – perhaps for the benefit of his second wife, and in anger that Emily had bequeathed their letters to Princeton:

> Emily Hale would have killed the poet in me…I suddenly realised that I was not in love with Emily Hale. Gradually I came to see that I had been in love only with a memory, with the memory of having been in love with her in my youth…I might mention at this point that I never at any time had any sexual relations with Emily Hale (Statement 1960).

He continues rather churlishly in the same statement about how little they had in common and how he disliked her "insensitivity and bad taste" and that "my love for Emily was the love of a ghost for a ghost". Mary was undoubtedly Eliot's tragic muse. Eliot wrote that "[u]nsatisfied desires can

play a most important part in keeping the soul alive and urging one higher" (Cooperman). Eliot was emotionally needy and Emily provided the creative impulse of deferred desire. She gave him sympathy and understanding, largely from afar, where Eliot preferred her to be.

### Mary Trevelyan

Mary Trevelyan was born in 1897 into a distinguished English Anglican family of vicars. She was devout, and an assiduous keeper of diaries. They met in 1934 when she invited Eliot to come and read his poems to the students of Student Movement House (SCM) in London where she was warden. The SCM (Student Christian Movement) had its origins in missionary organisations, and later she was to voyage abroad extensively for the movement, and later with UNESCO. Unmarried, energetic and "tough" (her word) (Gordon 318), just as she looked after the foreign students at the House, she was the practical partner in her friendship with Eliot. She once asked Eliot "[m]ay I arrange your life for you?", to which he replied "[t]hat is exactly what I want you to do" (Trevelyan/Wagner 2). Eliot and Mary also wrote letters to each other – she preserved some 170 of them – though they saw each other and telephoned so frequently that it was hardly necessary to write.

They began seeing each other for lunch or dinner out, Eliot intrigued by her confident Englishness, and she probably somewhat amused by Eliot's incongruous too-small bowler hat, tail-coat and over-large galoshes. In the early stages, Eliot would sometimes "disappear" for months at a time after they had had a particularly nice time. He once asked her to agree not to meet more than once every couple of weeks, as to see more of anyone would get on his nerves (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 331).

The relationship gradually developed into frequent evenings at Mary's apartment where she would cook dinner and then they would listen to classical music. It was even said that she looked somewhat like Emily Hale. They would also go to church together and prayed for each other daily. It was this domestic intimacy and frequency of meeting that led Mary to believe that marriage must be on the cards, even though there had been no sexual intimacy. Even though Eliot occasionally sent her passages of work in progress for her comments, Mary was not a critic, nor was she part of his literary circle. To Eliot, it was an uncomplicated, straightforward friendship, which was exactly what he found refreshing about her.

By the end of 1942 she admitted to herself that she was in love with Eliot

(Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 321). They would also go for long drives in Mary's battered old car: these drives were so important that Eliot helped her to buy a newer one. By 1949 they were meeting so often that she wanted to have some kind of understanding of a working relationship. Before leaving for a holiday in France and Switzerland, she wrote to Eliot that "I could no longer go on with our increasing intimacy without the assurance that he knew my feelings" (Trevelyan/Wagner 94). She received no reply while abroad, but a letter was waiting on her return, claiming that Vivienne's death had left him too burnt out to contemplate marriage. The typical Eliot shutdown whenever a woman started to make demands on him. The friendship continued as before with an effort not to mention or discuss Mary's letter. When Mary sent a second proposal in 1950, he told her "I read it through…then tore it into strips, then burnt it". However, it did provoke a sort of confession that he had never been in love with any but this one woman [Emily], "and still am" though he no longer wished to marry or see her as he felt guilty when he did. He did not mention Emily's name (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 327-329).

There is little evidence that Mary directly influenced his literary work, except perhaps as a "guardian" in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party,* providing instead a valuable friendship and a stable type of home life which Eliot badly needed. In 1958 she put together a memoir based on Eliot's letters, and a rough diary that she had kept since 1949 about their conversations. It mapped the highs and lows of their friendship, a sort of romance or platonic marriage. She entitled it *The Pope of Russell Square* (Trevelyan/Wagner 1). When Eliot married Valerie Fletcher, he left Mary in the dark. He brusquely ended their relationship, like many others. Mary found this hard to accept and wrote to him suggesting that they could still be friends, Eliot replied ferociously:

> your letter…seems to me not only superfluous but a very gross breach of good manners. There should have been no need for me to remind you that I cannot accept your profession of friendship which ignores my wife and the fact that I am married (Trevelyan/Wagner 256).

### Valerie Fletcher

Valerie Fletcher became Eliot's second wife. She claimed that she had loved Eliot's work from the age of fourteen when she had heard a recording of *Journey of the Magi* read by John Gielgud. By the time she met him she said that she felt that she knew him. Later, when she heard Eliot read at the Albert

Hall, she wrote that she "had to get to Tom, to work with him" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 354). When a job as secretary to Eliot came up at Faber in 1949 when she was twenty-two, she jumped at the chance. For many years – despite her obvious adoration – they were very formal with each other – Mr Eliot and Miss Fletcher. But when Eliot was ill with the flu, she came to his home to look after him. In 1956, he proposed to her – in typical Eliot fashion – by letter, slipped into a batch of letters he gave her for typing. She accepted, but had to hide the large emerald engagement ring from the other secretaries under a finger stall.

They married secretly at 6.30 am on January 10, 1957, and left immediately afterwards for a honeymoon on the French Riviera, to avoid the press. Eliot was 68 and she 30. He had informed Mary Trevelyan the day before, and she was very shaken at the final rejection. She reasoned that "Tom is a man whose strong sexual impulses have been deliberately frustrated for many years…Tom has always been a great 'runner away' – he is extremely deceitful when it suits him" (Gordon *Hyacinth Girl* 365). This also came as a shock to such good friends as John Hayward, his erstwhile flatmate, who had been informed only two days before the nuptials; and Emily Hale, who received a letter. Eliot severed all ties with his old friends, claiming that it would not be seemly to carry on as he was now a married man. It seems that he had to invalidate what had happened in the past in order to confirm Valerie as his life's love.

Valerie became indispensable to him. She looked after an ailing Eliot in their eight years together, kept control of his estate, and was the keeper of his legacy after his death at 76 in 1965. He was besotted with his bride, and she him, loving him unconditionally. Apart from their occasional travels to warmer climes for Eliot's health, their evenings were spent in domestic simplicity. As Valerie revealed, "[w]e used to stay at home and drink Drambuie and eat cheese and play Scrabble" (Begley). The two became utterly devoted, physically affectionate and inseparable. From the previous buttoned-up, chaste aesthete, afraid of physical sex, his happiness and creativity spilled over into erotic poetry. He called her "the tall girl" (she was 1.7 m). At least three previously unpublished poems have been found in notebooks handwritten for Valerie. They celebrate the "miracle of sleeping together". One poem, *How The Tall Girl and I Play Together,* reads:

I love a tall girl. When she sits on my knee
With nothing on, and I with nothing on

I can just take her nipple in my lips
And stroke it with my tongue. Because she's a tall girl…(Armitstead)

He wrote of "lovers whose bodies smell of each other". Later, when questioned about why Eliot's first marriage failed, with the implication that Eliot had struggled with sex and might have been impotent, Valerie famously and rather tetchily responded "[t]here was nothing wrong with Tom, if that's your implication" (Armitstead). In 1958, Eliot gave his wife a First Edition of *The Waste Land,* inscribing it "[t]his book belongs to Valerie and so does Thomas Stearns Eliot, her husband…She has made his land blossom and birds to sing there" (Lane).

Valerie died in in 2012 at the age of 86. She was responsible, among others, for editing his Notebooks, where many treasures were found, three major volumes of his letters, a collection of unpublished verse, and, in 1974, transcripts of original drafts of *The Waste Land*. She was a real keeper of Eliot's flame.

## Conclusion

Eliot's life and letters to his various women demonstrate clearly that his poetry is not impersonal, but a "primal scream" (Von Drehle), full of love gone wrong and confessional incidents from his private life. Clearly his work drew more deeply from his life than he was actually prepared to admit. His life-long suffering, and his ascetic denial to make a love of over sixty years complete, kept his work alive. The newly available letters help to "examine the human anguish still buried under the exegesis…the poet himself wanted that anguish, and the sources of it, to remain forever hidden. This concealment was monumentally important to him, and he laboured ferociously at it throughout his life" (Davis 24–27).

Eliot's women had various influences on his life and work. It was they who contributed so much to his success, and who suffered high personal prices for it. They all overlapped, while being largely unaware of the existence of each other. Some passages of verse cannot be fully understood without knowing to which personal experience it alludes. The turmoil of life with Vivienne "brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*" (Poirier). Emily was undoubtedly his muse, the poignant memory of a long-lost love, best kept at a distance, but a direct inspiration of a number of passages and characters

in his poetry. Mary provided companionship and spiritual support when he most needed it. Valerie gave Eliot the happy, unconditional contentment in marriage that he had always sought, and a new-found erotic love late in his life.

By explicitly linking his poems to his experiences, we are encouraged to reinterpret and re-examine much of Eliot's work, to seek out the confessional core under the erudition, the intensely personal under the "impersonal", and to read the poems differently and with new insights.

**Endnotes**

1. The letters to Emily Hale quoted throughout this article are taken from www.tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters. html. The dates of the letters are provided. [Accessed 3 May 2024].

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**IAN BUTCHER** is an independent scholar with dual UK/Belgian citizenship. He has degrees from the University of Kent, University of York, and The Open University in the UK. He worked as a *lecteur d'anglais* at the Université de Nice in France. He has published a number of academic articles, including on T.S. Eliot, Annie Ernaux, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter. His career includes spells of teaching at the school and university level, and at various institutions of the EU. He was Senior Vice President in an international management consulting company. He lives in Belgium and Denmark with his Danish wife, Marianne.
***ian.butcher@hotmail.com***