Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (London: Virago, 2022), Cloth, 496pp, 978-0-349-01211-7.

This much-anticipated book is the fruit of Lyndall Gordon's reading of T.S. Eliot's letters to Emily Hale from 1930 onwards, which were embargoed at Princeton until January 2020, with Hale's own papers. These invaluable materials are now publicly available on-line at tseliot.com, thanks to the editorial work of John Haffenden.

The book traces the histories of Eliot and Emily from his childhood through their meeting and early love, through his fraught marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, during which 'Eliot kept Emily in mind as a secret listener' (88), to the high-points of their relationship in the 1930s. Then it explores how Emily's hopes of marriage, suddenly revived by Vivienne's death, were dashed in ways she found it hard to understand, and how the friendship eventually foundered on disputes over the fate of their correspondence, and ended with the surprise of his second marriage. Throughout her account Gordon wants to see Emily Hale as equal partner in the relationship, a skilled actor and teacher, and a person of great qualities, including impressive resilience in the face of repeated problems with her jobs at various American colleges.

The book is presented as a general trade hardback. Slightly disconcertingly there are no end-note numbers to connect quotations and references in the text to the 43 pages of notes. The reader is left to guess whether a particular claim or quotation will be substantiated with a note. That said, there is an excellent bibliography, and an extensive index.

Much of Gordon's argument will be familiar those who have read her earlier studies, gathered and updated as *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* and *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot*.[1] But the letters enrich and develop her analysis in important ways. So for example Gordon's reading of *Ash Wednesday* in terms of Emily Hale as 'Lady' is greatly enhanced by the hugely significant handwritten letter of Oct 3 1930 in which Eliot writes 'there is no need to explain Ash Wednesday to you. No-one else will ever understand it'. But, as so often with Eliot, mystery remains. Why was that poem dedicated (at first at least) to Vivienne Eliot? Gordon herself does not seem to know.

Interestingly, Gordon's championing of Emily Hale does not imply a denigration of Vivienne. Indeed Gordon follows, by implication, Eliot's own assessment in his 'statement', completed in 1963 with instructions that it be opened when the Hale letters were unsealed, that 'Vivienne nearly was the death of *me*, but she kept the poet in me alive'.[2] Gordon is clear that Vivienne committed herself to Eliot for the sake of the poetry, having recognised his genius. So perhaps this dedication in 1930 was some recognition of that, even though the muse of the poem was Hale.

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[1] Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998); *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (London: Virago, 2012).
[2] Italics in original. The statement, and Emily's introduction to the letters, are also available at tseliot.com.

Gordon is enabled, from the side of the correspondence available to us, to flesh out Emily's own journey through the 1930s. As might be expected, the letters provide Gordon with further insights into the biographical events immediately leading up to the composition of 'Burnt Norton'. She chronicles intimate meetings between Eliot and Emily in September-October 1935, and the letters Eliot sends as a result. In the extraordinary letter of Sept 30 1935, for Gordon 'the finest of the love-letters' (209), Eliot shows that he and Emily are already in dialogue about the risk he may idealise her. He writes: 'You cannot say that I see in you the things that you do not see, instead of seeing the real human: because I see them all.' Emily is not idealised, and yet 'one man's life and work has been formed about [her]'. This remarkable letter is one of the many refutations the letters provide of Eliot's (to me deplorable) assertion in his statement that their relationship in the 1930s was based on 'hallucination', and was 'the love of a ghost for a ghost'. His expression of love is both passionate and nuanced, both physical and spiritual.

And yet, paradoxically, this is the time when Eliot is filing away memories in a very intensive way and transmuting them into a poem about the evanescence of moments of inspiration and insight. 'Human kind/cannot bear very much reality' Eliot claims at the end of the first section of *Burnt Norton* (recycling one of his most important lines from *Murder in the Cathedral*). Gordon celebrates, as her closing word on Emily Hale, the third last line of 'Burnt Norton', writing:

> The very movement of [Eliot's] poetry is the glimpse of 'reality' followed by the 'waste sad time' before and after. When his wary character ventures 'among the women' the gift for vision fades. But then Emily enters to quicken the poetic moment. 'Quick now…' He tests it on the pulse, moment by moment, and seals it in words. She has her part to play in the sequence which culminates in faith. His part is to make it his own, to take on the ancestral journey in his own time and renew it for generations to come… 'here, now, always'. (397)

But *Burnt Norton* does not end with that 'always' but with these two lines: 'Ridiculous the waste sad time/Stretching before and after.' There is a disjunction between the experience of closeness evinced in the letters of this time and the poem that results. Gordon accounts for the turn to the solitary and impersonal in Sections II-V of *Burnt Norton* in terms of 'Eliot's sense of wrong in relation to his wife' (226). Gordon goes on to quote the letter of Jan 13 1936, in which Eliot tells Emily that *Burnt Norton* 'is I think a new kind of love poem, and it is written for you, and it is fearfully obscure'. Yet the opening section of the poem, drawing as everyone now agrees on Eliot and Emily's visit to the garden at Burnt Norton (now dated to early September 1935), is already a wistful account of lost opportunity, of 'the door we did not open/Into the rose-garden'. A curious kind of love poem indeed.

Incidentally Gordon reads the 'they' that move with the 'we' 'in a formal pattern' later in that section as the former selves of the protagonists (226). The 'they' of this section is very enigmatic, and this is an attractive reading. But it is perhaps worth observing that Helen Gardner reads 'they' as referring to parental figures who

oversee the ‘first world’ of childhood,[3] and other interpretations are also available..

I found convincing Gordon’s list of some of the issues that separated Eliot and Emily – ‘strict versus lenient faith; the permanence of marriage versus divorce; and Eliot’s belief in the superiority of the ‘unnatural’ over the natural’ (339). And Gordon shows how Emily’s eminently plausible, but (as it turned out) disastrously timed approach to the preservation of their letters during late 1956 served as a pretext for the further distancing Eliot effected while preparing to propose to Valerie Fletcher.

On strict versus lenient faith, most contemporary Anglican readers would I think side with Emily’s ‘My whole nature cries out against limiting attendance at the communion table’ (quoted on 287). Gordon calls this, tellingly, an outburst ‘like lava forcing its way through layers of habitual restraint’ (287). The contrast with Eliot’s stiff, dry exposition of the formal Anglican rulings of the time, in his letter of Sept 26 1946, is very marked. It is as though he requires Emily to remain exactly in place, keeping all the rules Eliot has decided to observe for himself, just as in a different way Mary Trevelyan (from whom he kept the secret of Emily for many years) had to remain in a particular and limited role in his life. (Gordon’s treatment of Mary echoes, on a narrower canvas, the fine work done by Erica Wagner in her study *Mary and Mr Eliot.*[4])

Gordon’s work continues to divide critics. A reviewer of *Eliot’s Early Life* complained that the book was subject to ‘the psychological and biographical distortions of much recent criticism’.[5] Well, that boat has surely sailed. Sufficient has emerged about Eliot’s biography, for all his own concealments and the tigerish protectiveness of his second wife, to make clear that details of his life do illuminate the work. Nor can anyone sustain the view promoted by Valerie Eliot that ‘this theory of Tom’s great love for [Emily] was all rubbish’.[6] Hale was ignored in the biographies by Ackroyd and Raine.[7] But Lyndall Gordon has done an invaluable job of bringing to prominence the centrality of the relationship.

Eliot’s own insistence on impersonality, the detachment of poems from their biographical context, was embraced by the post-war literary establishment. As Frank Kermode notes, the early essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ remained influential, and suited the New Criticism well.’ However as Kermode contended,

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[3] Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 83.
[4] Erica Wagner, *Mary and Mr Eliot: a sort of love story* (London: Faber and Faber, 2022).
[5] Gary T. Davenport, ‘Review of *Eliot’s Early Years*’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77(2) (1978): 256-7, at 257.
[6] Interviewed by Blake Morrison for *The Independent on Sunday*, April 24, 1994.
[7] Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Abacus, 1985); Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

> we have moved on from there, not just because we like gossip better than professorial personality purges, but because many people have come to think that the impersonality business was nonsense anyway.[8]

So biography is readmitted to the apparatus of literary criticism. But it is Gordon's very intimate array of personal inferences, and her highly coloured prose style, that have so irritated some critics. Alan Jenkins, in best *TLS* style, responded to *Eliot's New Life* with this: 'Gordon's researches have uncovered some mildly interesting material, but it is brought to bear far too directly to be really illuminating.'[9]

And Kermode continued his review:

> Even if we may doubt that Hale was his Urania or his Beatrice it seems clear that they were rather close. But I'm bound to say that there is something disturbing about Gordon's handling of all this. Her religiose attitude to the facts, a sort of muckraking sublimity, affects her prose as well as her argument, and the whole pseudo-allegorical and hagiographical enterprise is vaguely disgusting, though I ought to add that it might seem just right to readers of different disposition.[10]

Kathleen Verduin identifies in this 'a residual desire to protect the master' in the older generation of critics. But for her, 'Gordon's contribution… lies precisely in her compassionate acceptance of the man behind the mask.'[11]

I have always greatly valued Gordon's work, especially her handling of the Hale story and of Eliot's spiritual search. At the same time I draw back from her implication that what the later Eliot aspired to was sainthood. That would show a lack of spiritual awareness and self-examination that would be most implausible in someone so diligent in his Christian observance. Indeed in that great passage in Section V of *The Dry Salvages* he seems to distance himself explicitly from 'the occupation of a saint'. Rather the authorial voice of *Four Quartets* seems to me to be that of wisdom teacher, much in dialogue with that most idiosyncratic and acerbic voice in the biblical wisdom tradition, that of the author of Ecclesiastes.

At the heart of the controversy over Gordon's work on Eliot is the question – do we interrogate the artist's life to shed light on the artist's work, or does the work act as a catalyst for interrogating, prying into, the life? The worst case, it seems to me, is where a theory developed about the life from preliminary analysis of the evidence available comes to form a paradigm that restricts subsequent ability to allow the work

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[8] Frank Kermode, 'Feast of St Thomas', *London Review of Books* 10 (17) 1988: 3f.
[9] Alan Jenkins, 'The uses of suffering', *Times Literary Supplement* 23 September 1988, 5-6, at 6.
[10] Kermode, 'Feast'.
[11] Kathleen Verduin, Review of *Eliot's New Life*, *Religion and Literature* 21 (2) (Summer 1989): 91-99.

to perturb and enlarge our understanding. We need, therefore, the agnosticism so wisely articulated by Denis Donoghue in reviewing *Eliot's New Life*:

> It is a consequence of her risky method that [Gordon] identifies the historical T. S. Eliot with the imagined J. Alfred Prufrock and concludes that "Prufrock finds no woman in the Boston of 1911 in whom he can confide." The poem mentions neither Boston nor 1911. Similarly, there is no reason to identify Eliot with the described and imagined state of being which in a certain poem is called Gerontion. Nor is Emily Hale Eliot's Marina in the gorgeous poem of that name, or the fictive woman someone leaves in "La Figlia Che Piange."
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> Poems are made of words: why those rather than other words, and why in that sequence, there is no secure way of knowing. What Lyndall Gordon's emphasized concern with pattern helps us to see, however, is that Eliot's greatest poetry is provoked by a sense of the extreme reaches of experience, abysmal or sublime. He is not especially good with the middling ways of life.[12]

My own impression, much as I value Gordon's approach, is that its relentlessly biographical method can be in danger of underestimating the power of the process of making poetry in itself. So to return to 'Burnt Norton', that extraordinary poem was written quickly, in a matter of weeks. The very momentum of its writing, I suggest, carries Eliot to places he may not have expected to go. The poem itself is a character in the biographical story, to a greater extent than Gordon's method allows.

Armed with the Hale letters, we can take issue with Donoghue's guess of thirty-five years ago that 'If Eliot was ever in love with Emily Hale, it was in some ethereal and spectral sense, a love beyond desire.'[13] And armed with the letters, Gordon has been able to refine and nuance her analysis of Emily as the Beatrice-figure, used by Eliot as part of his search for a *Vita Nuova*. It has also become clear the extent to which he used, and then discarded, Mary Trevelyan and John Hayward.

But Gordon says something very striking in her Epilogue: 'There is, though, one indisputable fact: Emily Hale chose to stay with Eliot. She would not want our pity' (396). Perhaps Emily did come to value her association with greatness more than she valued Eliot's poems themselves (another of Eliot's charges in his statement), but she had given of herself with great and sacrificial generosity, and has a lasting place in our understanding of 20th Century poetry, a place that Lyndall Gordon fought to assert, and which this book celebrates in a very rewarding way.

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[12] Denis Donoghue, 'The Temptation of St Tom', *New York Times Book Review* 16 October 1988, 1.

[13] Donoghue, 'The Temptation', 1.