T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale: Visibility and Invisibility
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Sara Fitzgerald, Independent Scholar (www.sarafitzgerald.com)

When the theme of this year’s conference was announced, I mused over how I might address the topic of “invisibility.” Today I’m going to explore it in the relationship of T. S. Eliot and his longtime secret muse Emily Hale. Their attitudes about visibility certainly shaped the course of that relationship—and what we have come to know about them more than fifty years after they died.

At the outset of talks like these, I always note that I come to this topic primarily as a journalist and historian, not a literary scholar. I’m looking more for hidden lives, not hidden meanings.

To briefly recap their story, Eliot first fell in love with Hale in 1913 when he was a graduate student at Harvard. She was an aspiring amateur actress and a good friend of his cousin’s. Eliot left Boston in 1914, planning to study for a year at Oxford. At the end of that year, he made an impetuous marriage to a British woman, Vivien Haigh-Wood. But a year later, he concluded that his marriage had been a mistake, and that he was still in love with Hale.

 Fifteen years later, in 1930, Eliot invited her to tea with his wife. After seeing her again, he began a correspondence that lasted 27 years and totaled more than eleven hundred letters on Eliot’s part. When the letters were finally opened in January 2020, they provided a totally new view of the poet, and confirmed that Hale was the inspiration for several of Eliot’s greatest poems.

 After visiting Hale during the year he spent at Harvard in 1932-33, Eliot finally sought a legal separation from his wife. But he told Hale he could not seek a divorce because it would violate the tenets of his Anglican faith—and, he told her, he was now “the most conspicuous layman in the Church to-day.” (EHL, November 19, 1933). Still he vowed that if he were free to marry her, he would do so.

But when Eliot’s institutionalized wife died suddenly in 1947, he changed his mind, telling Hale he could not bring himself to remarry. Despite that, they managed to remain friends for another decade. But in early 1957, Eliot shocked Hale and his closest confidantes by marrying his much-younger secretary, Valerie Fletcher. Hale never saw him again.

Hale was certainly a visible presence in Eliot’s life, but few people knew the role she had played until years after she died in 1969. Why did she remain invisible?

Well, a key factor was the world into which Hale and Eliot were both born. They came from families steeped in the educational and religious traditions of early New England. Hale was the daughter and niece of prominent Unitarian clergymen. Her great-aunt had served as the highest-ranking woman in that denomination and was the founder of the ground-breaking Boston Cooking School. Another of Hale’s uncles was Boston’s leading music and theater critic in the first half of the twentieth century.

But Hale was also burdened by an invisible relative: from the time she was five, her mother was institutionalized, after she suffered a mental breakdown following the death of her toddler son. Eliot provided a comforting outlet for Hale to share her emotions about visiting her mother, but we don’t know the words she used because Eliot arranged for the bulk of those letters to be destroyed. Still I think that her mother’s “abandonment” undoubtedly led Hale to try to be “a good girl,” a woman who sought the approval of others, and a woman who was willing to have a relationship with Eliot on terms that he largely dictated.

During their early adult years, both Hale and Eliot sought visibility and recognition. Eliot yearned to become a poet, not a professor of philosophy, and with the help of people like Ezra Pound and Virginia Woolf, he achieved international acclaim with the publication of “The Waste Land” as he was turning 35. Hale, meanwhile, was earning positive reviews for her roles in some of Boston’s leading amateur theater companies.

When her father died suddenly when she was 26, she was forced to find a job. Starting off as a dorm matron at Simmons College, she developed herself into a speech and drama instructor at major women’s colleges and private schools. Along the way, she learned public relations skills as she promoted her students’ plays and made as much as she could of her own limited academic credentials. These efforts may have reached their zenith around the time her correspondence with Eliot began. As she tried to pursue a career as a professional lecturer, she prepared her own press releases and publicity brochures. As an author, I can appreciate that Emily Hale also solicited—and received--positive blurbs of her lectures and recitals.

Yet from the available evidence, it seems that Hale never sought Eliot’s help to promote her lectures, find academic posts or win roles in his plays or professional theater companies. Eliot occasionally offered to pick up the cost of a train ticket when Hale traveled to London from the Cotswolds, and he bought her gifts of clothes and jewelry. But while he was aware of her financial difficulties, including periods of unemployment, he did little to address them. Both of them were scrupulous about doing anything that might suggest that Hale was a “kept woman.” While Hale described their relationship as “abnormal,” she wrote late in life that she and Eliot had kept it “on as honorable, to be respected plane, as we could” (EHL, Emily Hale Statement). And they did—even in a world where Eliot’s old friends in the Bloomsbury set were openly having affairs, when many of their friends *had* divorced and when no less than the King of England abdicated his throne to spend his life with the divorcee he loved.

In the early days of their correspondence, Eliot worried that he would not be able to hide his feelings for Hale if they were in the company of others. As he began planning his first trip to the United States in 16 years in 1931, he feared he might “break down and blubber” when he saw Hale again. He added, “. . .as you say, we both know how to play parts” (EHL, November 20, 1931).

Eliot and Hale had acted together in their youth. And Eliot *was* good at it. Although he wrote Hale in early 1932 that he disliked doing anything that was “secretive or clandestine,” he managed to keep both of his early-morning weddings secret from his closest friends and family members (EHL, February 16, 1932). After separating from Vivien in 1933, he was able to structure his life to avoid running into her for several years.

Eliot seemed more concerned than Hale did about whether someone might uncover the true nature of their relationship. Of course, he was a famous person and she was not. This seemed to be a bigger concern for him in Boston and the States than it was for him in London. As he considered visiting Hale during his year in America, he wrote, that “even a humble ‘foreign visitor’ like myself might unexpectedly be a news item, and my goings and comings made into news items” (EHL, February 16, 1932) Four years later, he mused: “Just how conspicuous shall we feel, I wonder, in Boston, compared to the blessed anonymity of London?” (February 13, 1936)

 But days after they had shared an intensely romantic time in London, he didn’t care what people thought. He fantasized about meeting her ship when she returned to England, and holding each other’s hands on the train “whether the compartment is full of tourists or not” (EHL, December 13, 1935).

Eliot’s fears of being spotted in the States were borne out when he ran into an old Harvard colleague when Hale was seeing him off on the train platform at Smith College. He had told Hale that when he came to the States, he would prefer to be with her “in the country or by the sea, if there are any unfrequented enough places” (EHL, February 13, 1936) That wish was realized when Hale’s friend, Dorothy Elsmith, provided her seaside home in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, as a place where they could meet privately. The setting also inspired some of the imagery of Eliot’s poem “The Dry Salvages.”

It appears that Eliot told very few people about his feelings for Hale. A few months after the correspondence began, he told Hale he had confided in Father Underhill, the priest who heard his confessions. But he assured her he had not used her name, and Underhill did not know her anyway. After Hale returned to the States in late 1935, she asked Eliot to designate someone who would reach out to her if something happened to him. It appears Eliot asked his colleague, Frank Morley, to play that role. (Twenty years later that was no longer a problem when Eliot’s health crises were treated as international news.)

Hale remained discreet, but she still needed a few confidantes. In the early days of their relationship, she apparently did not tell Eleanor Hinkley, Eliot’s cousin and her childhood friend who might have been a natural choice since she may have introduced them. But within a few years, she did. Eliot responded that he had no objection “to the whole world knowing about me!” But, in the case of the Hinkleys, “it was probably high time.” Eliot added, “I feel flattered that you should have discussed me at all openly” (EHL, July 24, 1934). I actually don’t think Eliot would have approved if Hale *had* talked openly about their relationship.

During his year at Harvard, Eliot got to know Hale’s aunt and uncle, Edith and John Perkins. But he told Hale he was careful when talking about her because he was not sure what they knew. Hale responded that they *did* know. The Perkinses would soon begin providing a home in the Cotswolds where Hale and Eliot *could* meet privately during her summers in England.
 The literary scholar Margaret Farrand Thorp had been friends with Hale since they were five, and the women maintained a twice-monthly correspondence for the rest of their lives. (Unfortunately for all of us, these discreet women agreed to destroyed most of those letters.) Hale confided in Margaret, and she and her husband, Princeton scholar Willard Thorp, became friends with Eliot. While Eliot maintained a cordial relationship with the Thorps, his letters to Hale reflect that he was suspicious of their motives as ambitious literary scholars.

After 1932, many of Hale’s colleagues and students knew that she and Eliot were friends because he accepted her invitations to speak at their campuses. But most acknowledged that they had not known the true nature of that relationship.

The Princeton archives itself provided more evidence of Hale’s discretion. Before she died, she donated most of her personal papers to Smith College. In those papers, there are few hints that she even knew Eliot. One exception are the letters she exchanged with the poet Marianne Moore, two years after Eliot’s remarriage. On this occasion, Hale did drop Eliot’s name when asking if Moore would donate her own papers to the Smith Library. Moore responded that she felt she already knew Hale because of the things she had heard from Eliot and his family members (Emily Hale Papers, Correspondence Folder).

But Hale relied on Princeton to guard key letters from friends who knew about their relationship. One was written by Eliot’s closest sibling, Ada Eliot Sheffield, who took pains to explain why she thought her brother would never agree to a divorce. Although earlier Eliot biographies said Hale had traveled and vacationed with Eliot’s family, his letters revealed that was not the case. In 1936, he told Hale that if they could visit alone with Ada and her husband, it might be different. But “the presence of so many more of my relatives—including two whom you have never met—and the necessity of giving everybody a certain amount of attention. . . would rather rob the occasion of delight” (EHL, June 12, 1936). When Ada died during World War II, Hale lost the most sympathetic of Eliot’s siblings and in-laws, and the only one who may have known of the love he had expressed to her. The Eliot relatives who interacted with Valerie Eliot after her husband’s death certainly contributed to Hale’s invisibility because they didn’t know, or didn’t understand, the true nature of Eliot’s relationship with Hale.

Even back in England, Eliot controlled Hale’s visibility. Their most intensely romantic time in London in the mid-1930s was, as Lyndall Gordon described it, as “an interlude of visibility in their otherwise secret attachment.” (Gordon, Hyacinth Girl, 318) Hale *was* visible, but not accurately introduced. Mary Trevelyan recalled that Eliot showed up to speak to her student group, accompanied by “a mysterious woman.” Friends like John Hayward were led to believe that Hale was just one of Eliot’s many cousins. Eliot had occasions to introduce Hale to Virginia Woolf and Ottoline Morrell, but kept them in the dark about the role she was playing in his life. They didn’t like Hale; she was an American, after all, and a bossy one at that. Their opinions, made public in their own journals and letters, helped shape Hale’s reputation for the half century when Eliot’s correspondence remained under wraps.

When Hale visited England in the late 1930s, Eliot was reluctant to travel with her--if he was willing to do it at all. He never invited Hale to join him on trips he took with his relatives (people she actually knew) or to join him during his regular summer vacations with Geoffrey and Enid Faber. Either way, his actions must have contributed to Hale’s sense of invisibility, particularly since she had traveled so far to see Eliot and their time together would be so short. When Mary Trevelyan began managing Eliot’s life in the 1950s, he never introduced her to Hale-- even when they both attended the premiere of *The Confidential Clerk* at the 1953 Edinburgh Festival. When Hale told Eliot she had considered flying to London on the spur-of-the-moment for an event honoring her aunt, Eliot warned her never to do that. He argued that he needed time to find her a hotel room. But one suspects he was nervous that Hale and Trevelyan might meet.

Considering that Eliot wrote Hale more than one million words, it’s notable how little he mentions her in his published letters to others—even letters sent to their mutual friends. In the mid-1930s, Eliot got to know Jeanette McPherrin, a younger friend of Hale’s from their days at Scripps College. In letters to McPherrin, Eliot described Hale as if she were a child who needed straightening out, rather than the woman he loved. Was Eliot trying to send up a smokescreen to hide his true emotions? In later letters to Valerie Eliot, McPherrin acknowledged that the letters *she* received from Eliot “contained no revelations” about his relationship with Hale. She also observed that Hale could put on an act. Her “dramatic gifts” McPherrin wrote, “made it possible for her to project scenes from [her] inner drama into the stage of her outward life” (Eliot Letters: Volume 7, 414-15n).

Eliot also disguised Hale’s close involvement in his theatrical productions. In early 1936, plans to produce *Murder in the Cathedral* in the United States fell apart, and the Eliot-Hale letters reveal that it was Hale who cabled that news to Eliot. But in a subsequent letter to the American publisher Donald Brace, Eliot said he had heard it from an unidentified “correspondent.” Eliot credited Hale for all the help she gave him, but only, it seemed, in the private letters he sent her.

Still Hale herself bore some responsibility for her invisibility in this context. In the 1930s she became friends with Eliot’s longtime director, E. Martin Browne. When Browne was writing his memoir, *The Making of T. S. Eliot’s Plays* after Eliot’s death*,* he discovered that Hale’s suggestions for *The Family Reunion* could be reviewed at the Harvard Library. But Hale told Browne she did not want to be mentioned in his book. As Eleanor Hinkley observed to Valerie Eliot, Hale now had “a real fear of what the literary hounds would do if they caught the scent!” (EHL, Hinkley to Valerie Eliot, November 6, 1966).

Browne responded to Hale: “I entirely understand that you would want to remain in the background, without personal mention, in my account, in all the circumstances” (Browne to Hale, November 11, 1966, T. S. Eliot Correspondence, Houghton Library). After Hale died, Browne wrote a second, less well known memoir, which acknowledged their friendship and recalled the times they had worked on plays with Eliot.

The Eliot-Hale letters reveal that at the outset of their relationship, it was Eliot who was keen to preserve the correspondence as a monument to Hale. Hale recognized that his letters had literary significance but was nervous about sharing their most intimate sentiments with the public. Nevertheless, she preserved Eliot’s letters for nearly thirty years, through multiple moves between temporary homes. After their relationship cooled when Eliot decided he did not want to marry her, she still hung on to the letters.

By 1956, she was ready to find a permanent home for them. Perhaps she yearned for more visibility—even if she would not achieve it until after she had died. With the encouragement of the Thorps, she gave the correspondence to Princeton, experiencing the satisfaction of making her gift at a time when she could still feel appreciated. Her timing, however, made Eliot very angry. And by then, he was secretly planning to remarry.

After Eliot’s remarriage, Hale may have yearned for an acknowledgement that she had never received. Acquaintances later told Eliot’s biographer T. S. Matthews that she began dropping hints that she had been engaged to Eliot. One woman, a cattier acquaintance than some, wrote, “I do know that almost everyone who knew her and heard her talk about herself had the feeling that she was *trying very hard* to create the impression that she was engaged to him—and all of this, of course, after he was famous” (Elizabeth Duvall to T. S. Matthews, June 7, 1972, Matthews Correspondence, Princeton Library). But many of these women were surprised when they learned the number of letters that Eliot had, in fact, written Hale.

After Eliot died, Hale chose to become invisible again, this time out of sympathy for his widow and, I believe, her Brahmin sense of decorum. She wrote three memoirs about their relationship to accompany her gift to Princeton, but retrieved the most detailed one after Eliot’s death and arranged for it to be destroyed. She told the Thorps, “I shrink from the intimacy of the personal disclosure. . . .” Two weeks later she added: “There are other elements in life which I think equally as important as the objective literary professional point of view you both have” (EHL, Hale to Willard Thorp, January 31, 1965).

When Eliot’s first biographer, T. S. Matthews, tracked down Dorothy Elsmith, she was initially reluctant to share what she knew. She wrote Matthews that Hale believed her relationship with Eliot “comprised a book the pages of which she wished to keep closed” (Elsmith to Matthews, January 17, 1973, Matthews Correspondence).

But despite her own reticence, despite the letters to close friends that she *did* destroy, Hale seemed to know that a half-century later, the letters she had received from Eliot would finally make her visible. She wrote in one of the short memoirs that accompanied the correspondence, “. . . at least “the biographers of the future will not see through ‘a glass darkly’—but like all of life ‘face to face’ ” (EHL, Hale Statement, 1965)

NOTE: Short citations have been included for some quotations. Persons wanting more information are encouraged to contact the presenter at [www.sarafitzgerald.com](http://www.sarafitzgerald.com).