Time Present

The Newsletter of the International T. S. Eliot Society

Number 101 Summer 2020

CONTENTS

The Eliot-Hale Archive: First Readings II

Eliot's Ghost Story, by Jewel Spears Brooker 1

Unbuttoned and Unimportant, by Anthony Cuda 2

Love's Errors and Effacements, by Gabrielle McIntire 6

Program of the 41st Annual Meeting of the International T. S. Eliot Society 3

Reviews

Faber & Faber: The Untold Story, by Toby Faber Rev. by David Chinitz 5

Christian Modernism in an Age of Totalitarianism, by Jonas Kurlberg, Rev. by Elena Valli 7

Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature, by Elizabeth Outka, Rev. by Mena Mitrano 8

Public Sightings By David Chinitz 9

Election Outcome 13

Eliot News & Society Notes 14

Abstracts 18

T. S. Eliot Bibliography 2019 By Josh Richards 22

The Eliot - Hale Archive: First Readings II

Our readers will recall that in the Spring issue of Time Present (No. 100), *we published a set of six first-response pieces to the letters T. S. Eliot wrote to Emily Hale from the 1930s to the 1950s. In this number of our newsletter, we follow that collection of responses with three more offerings from those readers fortunate enough to visit Princeton's Firestone Library before the coronavirus necessitated the closing of the library and the shutting of this newly opened archive. We are grateful to this issue's contributors—Jewel Spears Brooker, Anthony Cuda, and Gabrielle McIntire—for sharing their early responses. We look forward to the day when Firestone and its archives are open to us all; we trust that these responses will illuminate aspects of this important, extensive, extraordinarily complex correspondence.*

Eliot's Ghost Story: Reflections on his Letters to Emily Hale

Jewel Spears Brooker
Eckerd College

I feel like the ghost of youth
At the undertakers' ball.

"Opera," Nov. 1909

In a memorial essay on Eliot, Stravinsky recalled that he first met the poet on a December afternoon in 1956 in London. Eliot's famed reticence, a barrier at first, dissolved when Stravinsky tapped into his "Wagner nostalgia." Eliot's comments led the composer to believe that "*Tristan* must have been one of the most passionate experiences of his life" (Stravinsky, "Memories of T. S. Eliot," *Esquire*, August 1, 1965, 92). Stravinsky's impression, newly illuminated by Eliot's letters to Emily Hale, points back nearly half a century, to October 1909, when Eliot, barely twenty-one years old and a senior at Harvard, attended a performance (or heard an orchestral arrangement) of *Tristan und Isolde* in Boston. In the following days, he commemorated the evening by inscribing a poem—"Opera"—into his notebook (*Poems* 1:1078). Paroxysms of passion in the violins are challenged by fatalism in the horns as desire tortures itself into "emotional experiences," no sooner achieved than derided as "no good at all" by a drained narrator: "I feel like the ghost of youth / At the undertakers' ball" (*Poems* 1:236).

continued on p. 10

Published by the T. S. Eliot Society, a tax-exempt, nonprofit 501(c)(3) literary organization

Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature, by Elizabeth Outka

Columbia University Press, 2019.
xii + 26 pages.

Reviewed by Mena Mitrano
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

On 7 July 1918, T. S. Eliot writes to his mother describing certain changes in his daily life because of a "curious malady": emptier offices, scarce food, and a waning appetite for life. A curtain of dryness hems Londoners in, both a sign of the season and the correlative abridgment of a shared condition extending well beyond the confines of the British city to "this generation":

> My dearest Mother,
>
> We have been living on quietly and trying to escape the "Spanish influenza" so called. A good many men—and women—have been away from the office lately, with that curious malady, and as a result I have had more to do, helping out. The season has been very dry—whether that has anything to do with it I don't know—and out here in the country everything is done to a crisp. The flowers seem to stand it better than the vegetables, and just now we are very grateful for fresh vegetables—peas and beans and salads. The weather has been very hot, and appropriate to the 4th July, which was celebrated in London. I say "celebrated" in quotation marks because it was taken so solemnly, more as a very serious act of international courtesy, something of gravity, than the hilarious 4th of boyhood. I think that the appetite for the noisier sort of fireworks should have died out for this generation. (*Letters* 1:270-1)

Two years later, in 1920, the memory of earlier aggressive attacks of virus H1N1 still lingers (*Letters* 1:436), and the motif of dryness is reprised in his "London Letter: July, 1921," published in the August issue of *The Dial*: "A new form of influenza has been discovered, which leaves extreme dryness and a bitter taste in the mouth" (*Prose* 2:362). If, in the letters home, Eliot toned down his reports, Vivien was more explicit. On 15 December 1918, during the second wave of the "Spanish flu," she informs Mrs. Eliot that her son "has been worrying himself about his mind not acting as it used to do, and a feeling that his writing was falling off" (*Letters* 1:309). Altering public life, the epidemic required collective resistance. In his July 1918 letter to his mother, Eliot joins a plural and public "we" taking action: "living on quietly and trying to escape" the epidemic. Vivien, however, lets us in on the more personal effects of the epidemic: human experience disintegrates, and the distinct sense sets in that Eliot's own capacity for thought might never be the same again. Ottoline Morrell admired Eliot's intellectual creativity, his gift for connecting and fitting ideas together: "his mind is so accurate and dissecting and fits in every idea like a Chinese puzzle," she wrote (*Letters* 1:436n1). Eliot had primed his mind as a painter primes his canvas, but during the flu pandemic that raged in Europe in 1918-1919, he feared that the support for his writing would disintegrate—a fear made evident in Vivien's plan to protect her husband with a three-month intellectual lockdown: "So after a good deal of argument I have got him to sign a contract with me, saying that he will do no writing of any kind, except what is necessary for the one lecture a week which he has to give, and no reading, except poetry and novels and such reading as is necessary for the lectures, for three months from now" (*Letters* 1:309).

In her timely, revelatory book, *Viral Modernism*, Elizabeth Outka argues that the wide-ranging, frightening effects of the pandemic described in these vivid letters to Eliot's mother also shaped *The Waste Land* in ways that have been neglected. Our consequential failures to measure the effects of the pandemic on the moderns has also marred our readings of other classics of high modernism, including the novels of Virginia Woolf, since, as Outka demonstrates, for modernist critics and modernist writers alike, "the war overshadowed, blocked, and incorporated the viral tragedy" (45). Through readings of interwar texts by Eliot, Woolf, Willa Cather, Katharine Ann Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and William Maxwell, as well as incisive analyses of popular cultural narratives (e.g., Arthur Conan Doyle), which convey the "difficulties of representing the pandemic's particular costs amid the war's more public presence" (43), Outka convincingly establishes a "literary pandemic paradigm" that helps uncover the "coded references" to the pandemic's "absent presence" in a great many canonical and noncanonical texts of the period. In the final chapter of *Viral Modernism*, she extends her discussion of the pandemic to popular culture (particularly Doyle and H. P. Lovecraft). "Doyle

continued on p. 17

Review of *Viral Modernism*

continued from p. 8

had long been interested in spiritualism," she notes, "but became its most enthusiastic public promoter in the aftermath of 1918" (200). She calls our attention to Doyle's "fascinating 1926 novel *The Land of Mist*, a work that highlights the unique pressures the pandemic losses could produce" (206). Outka's study fills a gap in critical accounts that associate modernism with a climate of apprehension and a diseased atmosphere (Paul Saint-Amour) or stress its transnational dimension (Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz).

In her fifth chapter, "A Waste Land of Influence: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*," Outka shows Eliot's masterpiece to be a literary representation of the pandemic's "miasmic" atmosphere, "paradoxically captured in gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, and hidden bodies" (2). Iconic features of the poem, like the "sense of enervation, fragmentation, and vulnerable bodies" (143), take on new meaning as Outka traces the writer's attempt, in the aftermath of the viral outbreak, at "channeling a set of experiences and fragments that were haunting the culture but were difficult to represent" (144). Outka's pandemic perspective illuminates frequently quoted but still enigmatic moments like, for example, the fragment at the close of "The Burial of the Dead," where the speaker addresses an acquaintance named Stetson, asking him about the burial of a corpse in his garden. For Outka, this is a reference to the post-pandemic moment, after the first wave, when, "[w]ith coffins scarce and gravediggers overwhelmed, bodies were in fact buried in backyards" (156). More broadly, the bodies of the poem evoke the pandemic, with people not knowing where to inter their dead (153). To give another example, the author reads the references to "the drowned Phoenician Sailor" in Madame Sosostris's tarot cards, as well as in "Death by Water," as a depiction, "amid hallucinatory thirst," of "an opposite state that paradoxically accompanied the dryness and dehydration of the pandemic" (149). Beyond such moments, the salient contribution of the book is to show how the pandemic perspective can alter our idea of modernist form. *The Waste Land*'s well-known fragmentation, its polyphonic texture, and its erratic lines "embody the experiential reality of a delirium brought on by a high fever, a bodily experience that would have been painfully familiar to contemporary readers" (146).

Mrs. Dalloway provides another example of the mutual relation between the pandemic and modernist form. Some of the techniques in that novel— for example "tracing how the body's sensations slide into words and perceptions, how emotions shift the body's responses"—are recognizable features of modernist prose and create "the aesthetic superstructure the moment demanded, one capable of registering the subterranean interplay of illness and the body and of capturing a historical event so pervasive that it disappeared even as it continued to shape perception, alter time, and change the very terrain of the city" (124). Outka also turns our attention to Katharine Ann Porter's novella, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, published in 1939 but set in November 1918. Porter renders the effects of the pandemic on the protagonist, Miranda, a pandemic survivor who suffers from survivor-guilt, by means of "linguistic destruction": "by carefully detailing the unmaking of language that Miranda's pain produces—a pain experienced by millions of others—Porter creates a way to remake the language, transferring the pain into the physical form of the novella" (67).

Outka's research encourages new readings of other important texts of that period. An example is "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Although she focuses on *The Waste Land* rather than this famous essay in her Eliot chapter, the poet's awareness of what his wife called "a terrible illness" (*Letters* 1:336) might explain the mysterious opening simile: "criticism is as inevitable as breathing." The word "breathing" is a muted evocation of the pneumonic complications and breathing difficulties that were the manifest symptoms of the virus infection. In the winter of 1919, on 27 February, Eliot wrote to his brother Henry about the persistence of "a great deal of pneumonic influenza about" and the need to be hospitalized if one caught it (*Letters* 1:323; Outka 143). In the spring of the same year, the poet and his wife had intimate experience with such complications when their domestic help, Ellen Kellond, fell ill. In a letter to Charlotte Eliot, dated 7 April 1919, Vivien reports having had to nurse her in their apartment, where she lay on the sofa for five days: "it was in the midst of the influenza epidemic, and even the doctor didn't come in regularly" (*Letters* 1:336). At last, she was taken to the hospital in an ambulance: "I disinfected the whole flat, and the marvel is that neither of us caught it" (Letters 1:336; Outka 142). The image framing "Tradition and the Individual Talent" manifests and conceals all the anxieties about the life of the mind, with "criticism" naming the newly endangered activity of thinking.

During our own months of lockdown, breathing has been at the center of our hopes and fears, much as it was for Eliot. Like him, we fear that we may not be able to think and theorize with the same instruments. As we register the "bodily sensations" and "affective shifts"

and the "literally microscopic" threat of the virus, these threats well up in words that we do not yet have, and we continue not to have as we keep daily company with the images of Bergamo, New York, São Paulo and so on: the rows of the fallen, the unclaimed corpses, the mass graves (2). Like Eliot and his contemporaries, we remain mired in what Outka describes as a web of illness, pain, suffering, fear, and denial. For us, as for them, the pandemic is structured by silence because it abandons us before the gate of the question: How to grieve? The question looms larger because, as Outka argues in her new work on the *M/m* Print Plus digital platform, "Grievability, COVID-19, and the Modernists' Pandemic," the pandemic has made more visible than ever old inequalities, old indifferences, old blind-spots (21 May 2020).

Modernism meets the scholar in lockdown as a powerful repository of transgenerational silence. Eliot expresses the fears that underlie his time—fears that we have found in our own lives, our hearts, and minds these days too. When we read Eliot now, we discover the fruits of his intellectual and aesthetic resilience, and we can wonder what our harvest is going to be.

ABSTRACTS

40th Annual Meeting of the International T. S. Eliot Society

St. Louis, September 2019

Responses to the opening of the Emily Hale / TSE archive at Princeton, as well as the extensive interview with Hale's friend Sally Foss, took precedence (and a good many column inches) in the spring 2020 issue of Time Present. *We return, in this summer issue, to a selection of abstracts from the annual meeting last September in St. Louis.*

Taking the Air: Eliot and the Smoke of St. Louis

The St. Louis of Eliot's youth was a notoriously smoky place. Starting in 1893, repeated smoke abatement campaigns attempted to pass and enforce laws that would reduce the air pollution from the city's coal-burning industries. Activists protested that smoke was injurious to the health of St. Louisians, made personal and household cleanliness nearly impossible, darkened the streets at midday, and killed the city's trees. The battle against smoke began in the 19th century, went all the way to the Supreme Court, and has been described as a series of "futile gestures" that accomplished nothing until the middle of the 20th century. Members of the Wednesday Club, of which Charlotte Eliot was a founder, mobilized the women of St. Louis to battle against the smoke menace that threatened their families and burdened their lives as housekeepers. Despite Charlotte's investment in the smoke abatement movement through her club, the Eliot family's relationship to "the smoke evil" was ambiguous, for brick kilns were one of the city's main polluters. The Hydraulic Press Brick Company's yards lay near the Central West End, contributing to the clouds of soot that blighted the expensive homes of city leaders, including Henry Ware and Charlotte Eliot themselves after 1905, in what had promised to be a clean, healthy suburb far from the center of industry. Eliot's family profited indirectly from the smoke evil while also suffering from and actively working against it. This historical context (drawn from the archives of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Wednesday Club, and Houghton Library) reveals conflicting personal investments and loyalties underlying the poet's representation of smoky afternoons and "evenings yellow and rose" colored by the sulfurous fumes of St. Louis smokestacks. Smoke contributes an important element of obscurity to the atmosphere of Eliot's early verse. My presentation explores what the smoke abatement movement and the moral complexity of smoke for the Eliots reveal about his smoke-darkened cityscapes. Once a symbol of progress and prosperity but increasingly viewed at the turn of the century as wasteful and harmful—an "evil"—smoke is aestheticized in his early verse, yet it also adds to the sense of separation and degradation that his speakers experience. In a reversal of the usual reading that sees setting as an "objective correlative" of psychic drama, I suggest that the moral ambiguity of the smoke-filled scenes in "Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Preludes," and other early poems reflects the historical reality of smoke itself.

Frances Dickey
U Missouri