

Marjorie Perloff: On "The Waste Land"

It is against this background that we must reconsider the Eliot-Pound collaboration on *The Waste Land*. For despite all the stylistic changes that Pound brought about in Eliot's long poem, changes that have recently been submitted to careful study--the thematic strains of the original *Waste Land* are not significantly altered in the final version. Indeed, one might argue that Pound's excisions and revisions made Eliot's central themes and symbols more prominent than they would otherwise have been, buried as they were under the weight of such satirical intrusions as "He Do the Police in Different Voices" (Part 1) or the Popean couplets about Fresca at her toilet at the beginning of Part II 1.37

Consider what happens to "Death by Water," which Pound reduced from ninety-two lines to ten. The first section, written in quatrains rhyming abab, introduces a parodic version of Ulysses in the person of a foolish sailor on shore leave, regaling his cronies in the public bars, who are "Staggering, or limping with a comic gonorrhoea," with stories of the "much seen and much endured." In the margin of the manuscript, Pound wrote, "Bad--but cant attack until I get typescript." The second section, written in rather slack Tennysonian blank verse, is the dramatic monologue of the sailor, telling of a fishing expedition from the Dry Salvages north to the Outer Banks of Nova Scotia. Even as the sailor meditates on the significance of a mysterious Sirens' song heard one night on watch (lines 65-72), a song that makes him question the relationship of reality to dream, the ship hits an iceberg and is destroyed. After this ending ("And if Another knows, I know I know not, / Who only knows that there is no more noise now"--) comes the "Phlebas the Phoenician" lyric, which is the only part of the original that remains in the finished poem.

Pound seems to have decided that the long account of the sailor's voyage was an unnecessary digression. But when Eliot wrote from London, "Perhaps better omit Phlebas also???" Pound replied, "I DO advise keeping Phlebas. In fact I more'n advise. Phlebas is an integral part of the poem; the card pack introduces him, the drowned phoen. sailor. And he is needed ABSOLOOTLY where he is. Must stay in." Pound understood, in other words, that "Death by Water" is the essential link between the Madame Sosostriis passage and the following lines near the end of Part V:

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

Phlebas' "death by water" is the necessary prelude to the hints of rebirth contained in these lines, whereas the actual sea voyage, as described in the cancelled narrative portion, is irrelevant to the poem's life-in-death theme. Curiously, then, Pound seems to have understood Eliot's purpose better than did Eliot himself.

In discussing Pound's "operation upon The Waste Land," Eliot notes:

I have sometimes tried to perform the same sort of maieutic task; and I know that one of the temptations against which I have to be on guard, is trying to re-write somebody's poem in the way I should have written it myself if I had wanted to write that poem. Pound never did that: he tried first to understand what one was attempting to do, and then tried to help one do it in one's own way.

This is an important distinction. Pound did not try to transform The Waste Land into the sort of city poem he himself might have written. Rather, he helped Eliot to write it in his own way. "What the Thunder Said," for example, is left virtually untouched by Pound, for here Eliot discovered his quest theme and brought it to a swift and dramatic conclusion.

In assessing Pound's response to The Waste Land, critics invariably cite the famous letter to Eliot (24 December 1921) in which Pound says: "Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions in my own stuff, and never getting an outline. I go into nacre and objets d'art." But the fact is that, despite these self-deprecating words, Pound knew well enough that The Waste Land, like "Gerontion," was not his sort of poem. As Eliot himself observes, after thanking Pound for "helping one to do it in one's own way," "There did come a point, of course, at which difference of outlook and belief became too wide."

From *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

T. S. Eliot [2]

Author:

Marjorie Perloff [3]

Poem:

The Waste Land ^[4]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/marjorie-perloff-waste-land>

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