

The Extraliterary Background of “The Waste Land”

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Abstract

*One of the major poems of Anglo-American modernism, a genuine epitome of this literary trend, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* continues to keep alive the interest of the literary field, given the richness of interpretations it offers readers and researchers alike. Since it reflects both the concerns of an entire generation, but also the poet's own emotional and spiritual turmoil, we consider that an insight into the extraliterary background of the poem could shed light onto some of the main coordinates of the poem. That is why we will look into aspects such as Eliot's personal life at the moment he was writing the poem, but also the major contribution that Pound had at the various stages of the literary creation, certain issues related to the Notes, and the complex story of the poem publication.*

Keywords

identity, background, Eliot, modernism, extraliterarity.

1. Introduction

There are few names in the literary history of Europe and America to have left such an enduring trace as T.S. Eliot did. His work – poetry, criticism, drama – has influenced whole generations and its echoes still reverberate in twenty first century letters. One of the most influential personalities in an entire century of literature, Eliot's reform imposed new alternatives to interpreting and writing poetry. Although reforms might usually imply a break away from past experience, Eliot's poetic revolution relies precisely on the relation between past and present, which are conceived as inextricably linked. In Eliot's frame of mind, the two time coordinates are so intimately related, that past can only be kept alive by the present, which, in turn, can only survive if perfectly aware of its legacy.

Together with James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, *The Waste Land* has been widely acknowledged as one of the masterpieces of modernism. The poem proposes a multitude of meanings refracted from the plethora of poetic voices. They encouraged the reading of the poem in various keys. At the socio-cultural level, the poem reveals the despair which characterised the generation after World War I. Yet, it is also the expression of the poet's personal problems.

The first time Eliot mentioned *The Waste Land* was in November 1919, in a letter he addressed to John Quinn, to whom he confessed: “I hope to be able to write a poem I have in mind”. But his intentions were to materialise only later, because of various external considerations. On the one hand, almost the entire year he was occupied with preparing *The Sacred Wood* for printing. On the other hand,

there was the precarious health of his wife, which represented a serious emotional burden for the poet who, at the time, was also in dire financial straits. Moreover, in June, the couple received the visit of Eliot's mother, whom he had not seen for six years. As the relationships between Vivien and her mother-in-law were not the most cordial and, as a consequence, the atmosphere was rather tense, when his mother went back to America Eliot was in a serious condition of physical and spiritual fatigue.

Since the bank gave him three months' leave, in October, together with Vivien, he set out for Margate, where he resumed work on the poem he had already started. From Margate, in November, he went to a clinic in Lausanne, not before passing through Paris, where he left his wife with the Pounds. He took advantage of his visit to Pound and left him the manuscript of the draft he had managed to write. While in the clinic in Lausanne, he wrote the final part of the poem, "What the Thunder Said".

The publication of the poem was a rather difficult process, which foretold the poem's slow, but long-lasting success. The printing of *The Waste Land* represented a crucial moment not only for the author himself, but also for the emerging artistic movement which counted Eliot among its main spokespersons. The poem imposed modernism as a powerful literary trend in the eyes of the wider public. One of the reasons for such success was the publicity: the attention the media paid to it and even the controversies it raised among critics and readers alike.

It was an event that acquired almost mythical proportions, as the poem witnessed the difficult emergence of modernism and the struggle it had with the critical establishment of the time (Rainey 2005: 72). Pound himself, Eliot's mentor while writing *The Waste Land*, acknowledged the crucial significance it had for the movement: "Eliot's *Waste Land* is I think the justification of the 'movement', of our modern experiment since 1900" (1950: 180).

In 1922, the poem was printed simultaneously in two journals: in England, on October 16, in the *Criterion*, the magazine of which Eliot himself was in charge, and in the United States, around October 20, in the *Dial*. It was published a third time in December, in America, as a book which contained for the first time line numbers and Eliot's own notes. The company that dealt with the publication was Boni and Liveright. In 1923 the poem was published a fourth time, also in book format, with the author's notes, this time in Great Britain, at Hogarth, the publishing house owned by Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

As was the case with the printing of many of Eliot's previous works, in this particular situation it was also Pound who played the role of mediator between the author and the publishing houses interested in printing the poem. He was the impresario not only for Eliot, but for many other artists representing the modernist movement.

The publicity Pound carried out around Eliot's poem initiated a real competition among editors as to its publishing. In his negotiations with *The Dial* and Liveright, Pound's ambitions went beyond the publication of a single work. His intention was to gather under the same editorial roof the main representatives of the modernist movement – Eliot, Joyce, himself, even Yeats – in an attempt to

impose the perception of modernism as a collective voice, easily identifiable and distinctive in the literary landscape of the time. Based on Pound's appreciations of the poem, editors realised that in buying *The Waste Land*, they purchased not necessarily a particular poem, but the product of a trend: a trend which promised to acquire a prominent position on the literary scene, with the obvious consequence of attracting media attention and increased credit for the said publishing establishment.

The story behind *The Waste Land* was to have a complicated unfolding even years after it was launched for the general public, particularly with regard to its manuscript. In October, that same year of the poem's publication, Eliot sent the manuscript to John Quinn as a token of gratitude for the continuous support Eliot had received from him. Quinn was a real Maecenas of modern artists, who took active part in the diffusion of their works. He had a significant role in the publication of *The Waste Land* on the American shore of the Atlantic. The manuscript was thought to be lost when, in 1924, after Quinn's death, it was nowhere to be found and no mention appeared in his will either. The manuscript showed up again only in 1968, as part of the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. During his lifetime, Eliot had ignored what had happened to the manuscript, as he had had no intention of publishing it. In 1972, six years after the poet's death, his wife, Valerie Eliot, published it in facsimile, with notes, transcripts and an introduction written by her.

What Eliot sent Quinn was a collection of manuscript first drafts, together with the author's observations, Pound's annotations and certain comments of Vivien Eliot, but without the poem's notes. It contained as well drafts of unpublished poems dating from before the creation of *The Waste Land* which he had intended to publish as a sort of appendix.³⁰

The facsimile Valerie Eliot published revealed new insights into the making of the poem. The drafts of the first four parts indicate that, even if in the notes Eliot claimed that "the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism" were influenced by Jessie Weston's book on the Holy Grail and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the original intention and development of the poem contained little, if any, mythical references (Kenner 1973: 43). What appears obvious from the manuscript is that the intention of imbuing the poem with a mythical tone became clear while Eliot was writing the last part.

As in the first drafts of the poem the presence of Augustan poets is visible not only in the content, but also in the literary forms and genres adopted, and Virgil, mediated by John Dryden's translation, populates the poem with his

³⁰ The poems Eliot created with a view to representing an appendix to *The Waste Land* were "Song for the Ophion", "Exequy" and "Elegy", but Pound advised him against it. Other poems included in the manuscript collection of documents had been written during his Harvard period – "The Death of Saint Narcissus", "After the turning", "Come in under the shadows", "The Death of the Duchess", "I am the Resurrection", "So through the evening" and "Those are the pearls" – which revolved around Eliot's fascination with mysticism and thus announced the mystic note dominant in the last part of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said".

characters, Kenner advances the idea that Eliot's initial intention was to create a modern *Aeneid*, with

the hero crossing seas to pursue his destiny, detained by one woman and prophesied by another, and encountering visions of the past and future, all culminated in a city both founded and yet to be founded, unreal and oppressively real, the Rome through whose past Dryden saw London's future.
(40)

2. Pound's Contribution

Pound had imposed himself as one of the main figures of modernism and the creator of new poetic strategies. Until the publication of *The Waste Land* manuscript, there were critical voices that implied that the poem's fragmented nature was largely due to Pound's interference. But the facsimile revealed that it was Eliot's intention to write a poem defined by a structural juxtaposition of styles, with an intricate set of allusions and quotations, with episodes following one after another with a discontinuous narrative thread.

The part Pound played in Eliot's life went beyond professional borders. During the entire period Eliot was writing the various parts of *The Waste Land*, he was going through moments of deep despair and exhaustion. They were basically due to the poor condition of his health and to the strain of trying to fulfil his professional and domestic obligations. Vivien's dependency on him from all points of view represented a factor of stress that added to his already weakened state of mind. In such moments, the support and encouragement he received from his friend gave him the strength to continue his creative activity and Pound's enthusiastic belief in his poetic genius represented enough of a stimulus not to abandon his ambitious project.

In 1925, Eliot provided the poem with a dedication addressed to Pound, borrowing from Dante the words he employed to honour one of the leading figures of troubadour poetry, Daniel Arnaut. Thus, if Arnaut was deemed the best craftsman of the medieval period, Pound was given the rank of *ilmigliorfabbro* of modern times. Eliot's intention was to express his gratitude for the active role Pound played in the development of *The Waste Land* and "to honour the technical mastery and critical ability manifest in his own work, which had also done so much to turn *The Waste Land* from a jumble of good and bad passages into a poem" (Eliot quoted in Gardner 1973: 77). In all modesty, Pound only mentioned his contribution in two letters he sent to Eliot, in which he called himself the *sage-homme* who assisted the birth of the poem:

These are the poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptials thus doubly difficult?
If you must ends enquire

Know diligent Reader
That on each occasion
Ezra performed the caesarean Operation.
(1950, 170)

It was not the only time he referred to the modifications he performed in medical terms, as his basic contributions consisted in cuts, and not additions. The only words he suggested were “demotic” and “demobbed”. His objections were never directed at the content proper of the poem, but rather at issues related to structure, rhythm or the right word choice (in which case he always left Eliot the decision of ignoring or adopting his suggestions). As a result, he made his presence visible mainly in suppressing lines which he considered shallow or not sufficiently expressive or parts he saw as incompatible with the overall plan of the poem.

One of Eliot’s favourite literary techniques was parody and he made extensive use of it in the first drafts of the poem. Therefore, there were parodies of Pope and eighteenth century narrative poems, of Jacobean dramatists and nineteenth century blank verse. But Pound realised that they did not fit the general tone of the poem, which was too serious to match such passages charged with irony, and so he advised the author as to their deletion (Gardner 1973, 93).

In the first stage, Eliot thought of using his previously published “Gerontion” as preface to *The Waste Land*. As Pound advised him against it, he resorted to an epigraph taken from Conrad, but again he met with resistance from his friend, who believed that Conrad was not “weighty enough”. As a result, the author chose Petronius over Conrad, with an episode dealing with the Sybil’s death (Pâtea2005: 68).

Furthermore, in the letters Pound addressed to Eliot in January 1921, he was extremely vehement as to the deletion of the poems the latter intended to insert as an appendix to *The Waste Land*, “Song”, “Dirge” and “Exequy”, which Pound placed in the category of “superfluities” of which he wanted to clear the poem. His suggestion was that even if Eliot would “cut ’em altogether”, “the poem would run from ‘April...’ to ‘shantih’ without a break”.

The main modifications carried out by Pound affected basically the parts entitled “Death by Water” and “The Fire Sermon”. In the former, by suppressing lines which he considered incompatible with the remainder of the poem, Pound preserved only the episode of “Phlebas”. He also cut fifty lines from “The Burial of the Dead”.

Eliot was known for the habit of submitting his works to friends for criticism. But this situation of a poet who submitted his poems to a fellow poet and who accepted without any scepticism and reserve the comments and suggestions he received is not very common in literary history. This was also possible due to the fact that the two artists shared the same opinion that poetry is a craft that could not be properly performed without order, discipline and hard work. Furthermore, the collaboration between the two poets and the result of their collective judgment is a telling example of the critical principle advocated by Eliot, according to which the creative mind needs to be doubled by critical spirit: “the larger part of the labour of

an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing” (“The Function of Criticism” 1950: 18). In his code of critical reasoning, the highest expression of criticism is its blending with the creative activity.

3. The Notes

The poem appeared with notes in the first edition as a book published by Boni and Liveright (1922). The notes have given rise to many controversies, since they are extremely evasive and provoke many questions regarding Eliot’s decision to explain certain references and omit others. Other debates focus on the genesis and objective of the notes, because the author himself provided various accounts at various moments, his attitude towards the entire set of references and sources being quite ambiguous.

In the essay “The Frontiers of Criticism” he claimed that he chose to attach these notes in order to eliminate any potential for the charges of plagiarism that critics had directed against him with respect to some of his earlier poems. He also stated that another reason was to enlarge the number of pages, because, without the notes, the poem was too short to be printed in book format. As the result was “an exposition of bogus scholarship” which tended to drive away attention from the poetic reality towards the notes, he considered the alternative of removing them, but they had already become a component part of the poem and had even “had almost greater popularity than the poem itself”. Therefore, his regret was that the notes might have given birth to a “wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail”, encouraging thus a real competition for studying the bibliographical sources and the literary influences of *The Waste Land* to the detriment of the poetic matter itself.

Right from the beginning, Eliot reveals which the sources of inspiration for the poem were:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). [...] To another book of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*.

The notes reveal certain bibliographical references while omitting others. Some only mention the author alluded to in the poem, others display extensive quotations, all in the original, or hint at further readings. Like the poem itself, they are a collage of languages, which require readers to put to practice their linguistic knowledge. Some notes are informative, while others are jocular and even ironic. The overall plan of inserting and omitting such references may suggest a challenge he devised for the readers to interpret them as they deem fit for the general context of the poem.

The context in which they were launched for the wide public and the innovative techniques they employed granted them the status of documents of paramount importance for the emerging artistic trend.

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