Richard Ellman: On "The Waste Land"

Pound's criticism of The Waste Land was not of its meaning; he liked its despair and was indulgent of its neo-Christian hope. He dealt instead with its stylistic adequacy and freshness. For example, there was an extended, unsuccessful imitation of The Rape of the Lock at the beginning of "The Fire Sermon." It described the lady Fresca (imported to the waste land from "Gerontion" and one day to be exported to the States for the soft drink trade). Instead of making her toilet like Pope's Belinda, Fresca is going to it, like Joyce's Bloom. Pound warned Eliot that since Pope had done the couplets better, and Joyce the defacation, there was no point in another round. To this shrewd advice we are indebted for the disappearance of such lines as:

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The white-armed Fresca blinks, and yawns, and gapes,
Aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes.
Electric summons of the busy bell
Brings brisk Amanda to destroy the spell
Leaving the bubbling beverage to cool,
Fresca slips softly to the needful stool,
Where the pathetic tale of Richardson
Eases her labour till the deed is done . . .
This ended, to the steaming bath she moves,
Her tresses fanned by little flutt?ring Loves;
Odours, confected by the cunning French,
Disguise the good old hearty female stench.
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The episode of the typist was originally much longer and more laborious:

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A bright kimono wraps her as she sprawls
In nerveless torpor on the window seat;
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A touch of art is given by the false
Japanese print, purchased in Oxford Street.

Pound found the décor difficult to believe: "Not in that lodging house?" The stanza was removed. When he read the later stanza,

--Bestows one final patronising kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit;
And at the corner where the stable is,
Delays only to urinate, and spit,

he warned that the last two lines were "probably over the mark," and Eliot acquiesced by cancelling them.

Pound persuaded Eliot also to omit a number of poems that were for a time intended to be placed between the poem's sections, then at the end of it. One was a renewed thrust at poor Bleistein, drowned now but still haplessly Jewish and luxurious under water:

Full fathom five your Bleistein lies
Under the flatfish and the squids.

Graves' Disease in a dead jew's/man's eyes!
Where the crabs have eat the lids . . .

That is lace that was his nose

Roll him gently side to side,
See the lips unfold unfold
From the teeth, gold in gold....

Pound urged that this, and several other mortuary poems, did not add anything, either to The Waste Land or to Eliot's previous work. He had already written "the longest poem in the English language. Don't try to bust all records by prolonging it three pages further." As a result of this resmithing by il miglior fabbro, the poem gained immensely in concentration. Yet Eliot, feeling too solemnized by it, thought of prefixing some humorous doggerel by Pound about its composition. Later, in a more resolute effort to escape the limits set by The Waste Land, he wrote Fragment of an Agon, and eventually, "somewhere the other side of despair," turned to drama.


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