Hugh Kenner: On "The Waste Land"

So it would have been about mid-January 1922, in London, that The Waste Land received its final form, and likely its title too. The state of the manuscripts Eliot had unpacked after his return from the continent may be readily summarized. "The Burial of the Dead" had lost its Cambridge opening but was otherwise lightly annotated. "A Game of Chess" had had its opening heavily worked over by Pound, to tighten the meter, and Vivien Eliot had supplied a few suggestions for improving the pub dialogue. "The Fire Sermon" was a shambles; it needed much work. "Death by Water" had been cut back to ten lines. "What the Thunder Said" was "OK."

Pondering these materials, Eliot perceived where the poem's center of gravity now lay. Its center was no longer the urban panorama refracted through Augustan styles. That had gone with the dismemberment of Part III. Its center had become the urban apocalypse, the great City dissolved into a desert where voices sang from exhausted wells, and the Journey that had been implicit from the moment he opened the poem in Cambridge and made its course swing via Munich to London had become journey through the Waste Land. Reworking Part III, and retyping the other parts with revisions of detail, he achieved the visionary unity that has fascinated two generations of readers. He then went to bed with the flu, "excessively depressed." (Pound Letters, appendix to No. 181.)

He was anxious. He thought of deleting Phlebas, and was told that the poem needed Phlebas "ABsolutely." "The card pack introduces him, the drowned phoen. sailor." He thought of using "Gerontion" as a prelude, and was told not to. "One don't miss it at all as the thing now stands." (Pound Letters, No. 182.) What seems to have bothered him was the loss of a schema. "Gerontion" would have made up for that lack by turning the whole thing into "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season." Later the long note about Tiresias attempted the same strategy: "What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem." The lost schema, if we have guessed about it correctly, had originated in a preoccupation with Dryden as the poem grew outward from "The Fire Sermon." If Vergil had once sponsored the protagonist's journey as Homer sponsors the wanderings of Leopold Bloom, Vergil was pertinent to a poem prompted by Vergil's major English translator, John Dryden. Ovid, who supplied Tiresias and Philomel, and told the story of the Sibyl's terribly longevity which may underlie the line about fear in a handful of dust, was a favorite of Dryden's, and (on Mark Van Doren's showing) pertinent to Dryden's London and Eliot's. Wren's churches, notably Magnus martyr, were built after the fire Anns Mirabilis celebrates, which is one reason Eliot works Magnus Martyr into his Fire Sermon. And in disposing ornate diction across the grid of a very tame pentameter, Eliot's original draft of the opening of Part II had rewritten in the manner of French decadence a Shakespearean passage (" . . . like a burnished throne") that Dryden had rewritten before him in a diction schooled by his own time's French decorum. No classroom exercise is more ritualized than the comparison of Antony and Cleopatra and All for Love.

But the center from which such details radiate had been removed from the poem. What survived was a form with no form, and a genre with no name. Years later, on the principle that a form is anything done twice, Eliot reproduced the structural contours of The Waste Land exactly, though more briefly, in Burnt Norton, and later still three more times, to make the
Quartets, the title of which points to a decision that such a form might have analogies with music. That was post facto. In 1922, deciding somewhat reluctantly that the poem called The Waste Land was finished, he was assenting to a critical judgment, Pound's and his own, concerning which parts were alive in a sheaf of pages he had written. Two years afterward, in "The Function of Criticism," he averted to "the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself," and suggested that "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." He called it "this frightful toil," and distinguished it from obedience to the Inner Voice. "The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist." (Selected Essays, "The Function of Criticism," IV.)

For it does no discredit to The Waste Land to learn that it was not striving from the first to become the poem it became: that it was not conceived as we have it before it was written, but reconceived from the wreckage of a different conception. Eliot saw its possibilities in London, in January 1922, with the mangled drafts before him: that was a great feat of creative insight.

In Paris he and Pound had worked on the poem page by page, piecemeal, not trying to salvage a structure but to reclaim the authentic lines and passages from the contrived. Contrivance had been guided by various neoclassic formalities, which tended to dispose the verse in single lines whose sense could survive the deletion of their neighbors.

When they had finished, and Eliot had rewritten the central section, the poem ran, in Pound's words, "from 'April . . .' to 'shantih' without a break." This is true if your criterion for absence of breaks is Symbolist, not neoclassical. Working over the text as they did, shaking out ashes from amid the glowing coals, leaving the luminous bits to discover their own unexpected affinities, they nearly recapitulated the history of Symbolism, a poetic that systematized the mutual affinities of details neoclassic canons had guided.


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