Lyndall Gordon: On "The Waste Land"

During the final stages of The Waste Land's composition Eliot put himself, for what was to be the last time, under Pound's direction. On 18 November, on his way to Switzerland, Eliot passed through Paris and left his wife with the Pounds who were then living there. It seems likely that Eliot showed Pound what he had done in Margate. Pound called Eliot's Lausanne draft 'the 19 page version' which implies that he had previously seen another. He marked certain sheets on two occasions: once in pencil, probably on 18 November, once in ink, on Eliot's return from Lausanne early in January. Pound undoubtedly improved particular passages: his excisions of the anti-Semitic portrait of Bleistein and the misogynist portrait of Fresca curtailed Eliot's excessive animus, and his feel for the right word improved odd lines throughout. Pound was proud of his hand in The Waste Land and wrote:

If you must needs enquire

Know diligent Reader

That on each Occasion

Ezra performed the caesarian Operation.

I think that Pound's influence went deeper than his comment during the winter of 1921-2, going back rather to 1918, 1919, and 1920 when he and Eliot were engaged in a common effort to improve their poetry. Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberly(1920) is a covert dialogue with Eliot, a composite biography of two great unappreciated poets whose flaws are frankly aired. Pound criticizes a Prufrock-like poet too given to hesitation, drifting, 'maudlin confession', and aerial fantasy--the phantasmal seasurge and the precipitation of 'insubstantial manna' from heaven. As though in answer, Eliot put aside his most confessional fragments, 'Saint Narcissus' and 'Elegy', and in 1921 overlaid private meditation with documentary sketches of contemporary characters--a pampered literary woman, Fresca (like Pound's Lady Valentine), Venus Anadyomene (another Mauberly character), Cockneys, a typist with dirty camisoles, and a scurfy clerk. The Pound colouring in these sketches did not quite suit Eliot. Where Pound is exuberant in his disgust, Eliot becomes callow or vitriolic--and Pound himself recognized this in his comments on typist and clerk: 'too easy' and 'probably over the mark'. Eliot's characters are not as realistic as Pound's. They are projections of Eliot's haunted consciousness--they could be termed humour. Unlike the satirist, Eliot does not criticize an actual world but creates a unique 'phantasmal' world of lust, cowardice, boredom, and malice on which he gazes in fascinated horror. The Waste Land is about a psychological hell in which someone is quite alone, 'the other figures in it / Merely projections'.
