Louis L. Martz: On "The Waste Land"

And yet it was evident, even in 1936, that 'Burnt Norton' was adapting the five-part structure of The Waste Land, for that structure was signalled by the use of a short lyric as part IV of the sequence. But what did it mean, what does it mean, to feel the five-part structure of The Waste Land working within so different a poem? To answer this question it may help to review the process by which The Waste Land gained its peculiar structure, emerging from the hands of Ezra Pound, as Eliot says, reduced to half manuscript length.

First of all, without Pound's editorial intervention, we would not have the short lyric, 'Phlebas the Phoenician', appearing by itself as part IV of The Waste Land, and thus, presumably, we would not have the short lyrics constituting the fourth sections of all the Four Quartets -- the short movement that helps to create analogies with Beethoven's late quartets. Indeed we might not have the Phlebas lyric at all, without Pound's advice, for Eliot, upset by Pound's slashing away at the eighty-two lines preceding this lyric in the manuscript, wrote to Pound, 'Perhaps better omit Phlebas also???' Pound was horrified: Eliot seemed not to understand the central principle of the poem's operation. 'I DO advise keeping Phlebas,' Pound replied. '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.'

What Pound describes in that vehement answer is the sort of organization that Eliot later called musical, in his lecture 'The Music of Poetry', delivered in 1942, just as he was completing Four Quartets: 'The use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music,' Eliot says:

> There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments ['different voices', we might say]; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter.

So, in The Waste Land, after the embers of lust have smouldered in 'The Fire Sermon' -- 'Burning burning burning burning'-- the death of Phlebas by water provides a moment of serenity, quiet, poise, as Phlebas enters the whirlpool in whispers to a death not to be feared, but foreseen and accepted. The lyric acts as the lines about the still point act in the two poems of 'Coriolan', where, first, amid the turmoil of the crowd at the parade, the people think they find their answer in the military leader: 'O hidden under the dove's wing, hidden in the turtle's breast, / Under the palmtree at noon, under the running water / At the still point of the turning world. O hidden.' But then, ironically, it appears in the second poem that the difficulties of a statesman have led him also to seek the still point: 'O hidden under the ... Hidden under the ... Where the dove's foot rested and locked for a moment, / A still moment, repose of noon.' The lyric of Phlebas acts as such a moment of repose, a nodal moment, tying together the strands of the poem, as Pound explained. And the fourth part, the short lyric, in all the Four Quartets, performs a similar function of poise and knotting, as the poem finds a
temporary rest where themes and images and voices merge for a moment.

One voice of great importance speaks at the close of the Phlebas lyric, which is not simply a translation from Eliot's poem in French, Dans le Restaurant, for the closing lines are quite different. The French poem ends in an offhand, conversational tone: "Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sort pénible; / Cependant, ce fut jadis un bel homme, de haut taille." (Imagine then, it was a distressing fate; / Nevertheless, he was once a handsome man, of tall stature). In The Waste Land Eliot has changed the tone from conversational to prophetic by evoking the voice of St Paul addressing 'both Jew and Gentile' in his epistle to the Romans (ch. 2, 3): 'Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.'

A similar effect is created by Pound's critical slashing away of all those weak and in part offensive Popeian couplets at the outset of part III of The Waste Land manuscript. 'Do something different,' Pound advised. So Eliot did: he pencilled on the back of the manuscript page a draft of the new opening passage, 'The river's tent is broken . . .' -- lines that stress the eternal presence of the river within the waste land, culminating in the line that echoes the voice of the psalmist in exile: 'By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept', with its attendant question, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:4).

A similar concentration upon the emergence of the prophetic voice is created by the removal of the monologue that opens The Waste Land manuscript, the monologue of the rowdy Irishman telling of a night on the town in Boston. This was excised by Eliot himself, perhaps under Pound's influence, perhaps because Eliot himself saw that the rowdy vitality of those singing, drinking men who stage a footrace in the dawn's early light does not accord with the voice that follows, the voice of one who is so reluctant to live that April becomes the cruelest month. That excision brings us quickly to the voice of a modern Ezekiel, speaking the famous lines:

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What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images.
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Then these lines of true prophecy play their contrapuntal music against the voice of the false prophet, Madame Sosostris.

But I need to explain what I mean by the prophetic voice. With William Blake, we should discard the notion that the prophet's main function is to foretell the future. If, like Blake, we think of the biblical prophets, we will recall at once that they spend a great deal of time in denouncing the evils of the present, evils that derive from the people's worship of false gods and the pursuit of wealth and worldly pleasures. Prophecies of the future appear, but these are often prophecies of the disasters that will fall upon the people if they do not mend their evil ways. Denunciation of present evil is the primary message of the Hebrew prophet: he is a reformer, his mind is upon the present. But then he also offers the consolation of future good, if the people return to worship of the truth. Thus the voice of the prophet tends to oscillate between denunciation and consolation: he relates visions of evil and good, mingling within the
immense range of his voice the most virulent excoriation and the most exalted lyrics. This, I think, is exactly the sort of oscillation that we find in Pound's Cantos and The Waste Land.


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