

Jean-Michel Rabaté: On "The Waste Land"

The peculiar "obstetrics" to which the manuscript of the poem was subjected has often been discussed. It is generally agreed that Pound's cuts transformed a chaotic mass of poetry into a precise, aggressively modern masterpiece. Koestenbaum contends that the poem was "feminine" in its original form but transformed radically by Pound's assertive masculinity. We might indeed be tempted to see in this productive coediting of a great poem the shift away from a bisexuality that left open many potentialities to masculine values mistakenly identified with the essence of high modernism. Moreover, Eliot's prose poem "Hysteria" already points toward such a feminized pathologia. Koestenbaum writes "Eliot's poem?semiotic, negative, riddled with absences?is ?feminine? not because women always sound like *The Waste Land*, but because, in 1922, its style might have seemed more recognizable a hysterical woman's than a male poet's." He adds curiously "Hysteria is a disturbance in language, and the very word ?hysteria? marks it as a woman's affliction"--which seems to imply that there is no male hysteria! Such an etymological fundamentalism is strange in a critic who wishes to reread modernism from the point of view of gay discourse. Koestenbaum's predilection for the anus starts from an understandable rehabilitation but leads him into absurdities at times (as when he sees the fatefully repressed organ in Eliot's identification with a "broken Coriol-anus" or when he reads a double inscription of "anus" in the way Pound dates a letter "24 Saturnus, An 1"). Whereas I am entirely ready to see the enigma of bisexuality as one of the most intriguing subplots of the *Waste Land*, I think that the attempt to queer Eliot and Pound's collaboration leads to a series of misreadings.

The most crucial case in point is Pound's rather bawdy letter written to celebrate the "birth" of the poem. This well-known piece of male bantering had been expurgated in D. D. Paige's edition of Pound's letters and was only published in full in the first volume of Eliot's *Letters of T.S. Eliot*. In the letter, Pound assumes the function of a midwife or rather "sage homme," a masculinization of the French sage-femme (midwife): "These are the Poems of Eliot / By the Uranian Muse begot, / A Man their mother was, / A Muse their Sire." The letter leaves no doubt as to the role Pound has chosen: he is only the midwife ("Ezra performed the caesarean operation") and not the impregnator of his friend. From the suppressed lines in which Pound speaks of his own masturbatory activity, Koestenbaum finds an argument for his having actually "fathered" the poem. In fact, Pound merely laments his own impotence, or the fact that his masturbatory writing has prevented him from producing really modern creations, such as *Ulysses* or the *Waste Land*:

E. P. hopeless and unhelped

Enthroned in the marmorean skies

His verse omits realities,

Angelic hands with mother of pearl

Retouch the strapping servant girl,

???

Balls and balls and balls again

Can not touch his fellow men.

His foaming and abundant cream

Has coated his world. The coat of a dream;

Or say that the upjut of sperm

Has rendered his sense pachyderm.

The ironic self-portrait is quite in the mode of Mauberly's derision. What is deprecated is Pound's too easy recourse to an ananistic "dangerous supplement"-- which apparently takes "strapping servant girls" as libidinal objects rather than, say, Eliot's anus. This is why I cannot agree with Koestenbaum's conclusion: "Pound, Eliot's male muse, is the sire of The Waste Land." Koestenbaum superimposes two scenes: the scene described in the June 1921 postscript to Pound's translation of *The Natural Philosophy of Love* by Remy de Gourmont, in which Pound sees himself as an overactive phallus fertilizing the passive vulva of London, and the many traces of femininity left in Eliot's Wastle Land. But Koestenbaum forgets that one of the major consequences of Pound's excisions was to make it much more of a London poem than it had been originally. Pound has not deleted the "femininity" of the poem: he has "framed" it, as it were, within a mythical discourse that is less "male" or "phallocratic" than neutral. Such is the effect of the famous beginning of the poem ("April is the cruelest month"), which leaves the voice anonymous, the "we" asexual and floating in the void, until we hear it modulate into Marie Larisch's familiar confidences.

In view of these complex issues, I would emphasize instead the disjunctive nature of Eliot and Pound's collaboration and stress that the blind spots in their joint parturition left what I again would like to call textual ghosts. It is true that Pound drastically modified the draft given to him. He reduced it by half, deleted the long opening describing a night out in Boston ("He Do the Police in Different Voices"), suppressed the hesitations, the autobiographical tone, and some of the pastiches of classical genres, and hence changed the polyphonic texture or tessitura of the poem. Pound also tried to eliminate all the reminiscences of "Prufrock," as Koestenbaum aptly notes: "Eliot's wobbliness was made flesh in Prufrock, echoes of which Pound sought to cut," but while he was impatient with Tiresias as a central figure (Pound originally felt the same misguided distaste for Leopold Bloom who, according to him, unduly supplanted Stephen Dedalus), going so far as to write "make up / yr mind / you Tiresias / if you know / know damn well / or / else you / dont" [sic] in the margin, he never persuaded Eliot to change anything substantially in the characterization of the blind and bisexual seer.

Strangely enough, what annoys Pound also annoys Koestenbaum, who would prefer to see Eliot "come out," as it were, rather than hide in ambiguities and ambivalences. Yet it is precisely these hesitations (as later *Finnegans Wake* will be written in a systematically undecidable language) that make up the irreducible force of its modernist poetry. This corresponds to the fact that modernism as such, despite Hugh Kenner's insistence, cannot

be reduced so easily and univocally to a phallogocentric stance. In a way, this would lead us to admit that high modernism, too, is "softer" than we thought and also closer to Verlaine than to Rimbaud.

If Tiresias is the most important figure of the poem, as Eliot's central note clearly states, is it not because he embodies a hysterical bisexuality of which Eliot was dreaming at the time? This fantasy cannot be reduced to the clear-cut opposites suggested by Koestenbaum: "Through Tiresias, Eliot describes (from the inside) an epoch we might call The Age of Inversion, when heterosexuality was in the process of being undermined and traduced by its eerie opposite." If indeed the Tiresias paradigm provides Eliot with another "epoch," it is less a dream of inversion than of ecstatic fusion, a dream expressed in the deleted poem, "The Death of Saint Narcissus":

First he was sure that he had been a tree

Twisting its branches among each other

And tangling its roots among each other

Then he knew that he had been a fish

With slippery white belly held tight in his own fingers

Writhing in his own clutch, his ancient beauty

Caught fast in the pink tips of his new beauty.

Then he had been a young girl

Caught in the woods by a drunken old man

Knowing at the end the taste of her own whiteness

The horror of her own smoothness,

And he felt drunken and old.

Here, Eliot rewrites Nietzsche's praise of dancers in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* through a myth of metempsychosis that borrows from Empedocles' famous distich according to which the Greek philosopher had once been "a boy and a girl, a bush, a bird and a fish," and from Buddha's own transformations: these ascetic "rapes" were to lead him to the way of absolute compassion. The rape of a passive girl by an old man whose taste lingers in bitterly in the speaker's memories, the Buddhist acquiescence to universal metamorphosis, the Keatsian rapture at selflessness? all this sums up what Pound intensely dislikes. This compendium of Eastern mysticism and Western "negative capability" has remained to this date a textual ghost (now and then added to Eliot's collected works as a curious appendix), outside of the canon constituted by Pound. This shows a different Eliot, closer to Flaubert when he could identify

utterly with Emma Bovary and the setting of her love scenes.

The joint attempt by Pound and Eliot to provide a justification for the "modern movement" by publishing at last a modernist masterpiece derives from the very high claims they had made for themselves. All this looks a little like a wholesale takeover bid, a tender offer on European culture, seen as a whole from two conflicting and half-imaginary opposites: Eastern mysticism on the one hand (Pound rewrites Eliot's more metaphysical drift in his Chinese idiom) and the American pseudo-wilderness on the other. In a letter to his British friend, Mary Hutchinson, Eliot makes a revealing admission, just as he announces his essay on "Tradition" as forthcoming. He concludes a discussion of the different meanings of "culture" and "civilization" on a more personal note: "But remember that I am a metic—a foreigner, and that I want to understand you, and all the background and tradition of you. I shall try to be frank—because the attempt is so very much worthwhile with you ? it is very difficult with me ?both by inheritance and because of my suspicious and cowardly disposition. But I may simply prove to be a savage." In this wildly flirtatious tone, Eliot conflates images of barbarism and strong moral values inherited from his family, thus discovering the best word to introduce himself (in every sense): a metic, that is, an alien who has been admitted into the city (as in Athens), who has been granted certain rights and pays taxes but cannot have full citizenship or access to the most intimate mysteries.

The metic, both inside and outside, is thus defined from within the polis, which also accounts for the thematic centrality of the city as metropolis in the Waste Land: Oedipus's Thebes, Augustine's Carthage, and Baudelaire's Paris are superimposed upon a London where the city provides a fulcrum for international capitalism. Indeed, the suppressed passage beginning with "He Do the Police in Different Voices" looks back to Dickens's London with the subtle allusion to Betty Higden's praise of Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend*: Sloppy manages to recreate different policemen's voices when he reads to her, thanks to his wonderful mimetic abilities. Here, "police" rhymes ironically with polis, while metic leads to a "mimetic" who remains well hidden in the "world's metropolis" (as Mr. Podsnap says). The ending of the Waste Land finally releases all the voices that had been kept more or less separate and creates a bewildering vortex of hysterical polyphony. This is also a dominant feature in Pound's Cantos: we keep hearing individual voices whose interaction creates an epic through counterpoint. However, this similarity should not blind us to a crucial divergence—which shall oblige me to examine a last "uncoupling."

If Pound and Eliot agree that "tradition" supposes an "historical sense" that sees the presence of the past as well as its pastness (since "It is dawn at Jerusalem while midnight hovers above the Pillars of Hercules. All ages are contemporaneous," as the preface to the *Spirit of Romance* momentarily states), then they would not translate the Greek concept of polis in exactly the same way. Though both are indeed metics in the British Empire, they opt for different strategies of assimilation and adaptation. Pound always sees the polis in its original Greek meaning, as a religious and political context determined by local polytheism and the domination of a few brilliant minds. Eliot, on the other hand, follows the conclusions of his investigation into European roots and therefore revives linguistic energies dormant in Virgil, Augustine, and Dante. He translates the polis into the "City" (of God or men), that is, into Augustine's *civitas*. As Emile Benveniste has shown, polis cannot be translated into *civitas* without some distortion. In the Greek mind, polis is a concept that predetermines the definition of the citizen as *polites*. One is a citizen because one partakes of the abstract concept of the polis, a linguistic radical divided between sameness and otherness, belonging and rejection. In the Latin mentality, the adjective *civis* comes first, the radical is anterior to the derivation of

civitas (meaning "city" in the sense of a group of people living together, and not Urbs, reserved for Rome, the "capital"). In the Latin model, actual people as citizens help derive the concept: thus, civitas refers to a community understood as a mutuality, a collection of mutual obligations.

Eliot's choice of a quote from *Our Mutual Friend* to highlight the polyphonic nature of urban discourse out of which contemporary civility must emerge is hardly accidental. Nor was Pound's erasure of the same motif random. Pound's historical point of departure is the American Revolution, seen as the birth of the modern idea of the just state and "volitionist" politics; Eliot consistently returns to the English Revolution as the main "catastrophe" of the modern world. According to Eliot, the introduction of the new parliamentary democracy triggered all its attendant negative side effects: the loss of centralized values and the "dissociation of sensibility," which had weakened British culture since the seventeenth century. Thus, Pound is ready to acclaim the "Tovarishes" of the Soviet Revolution in his first cantos, while Eliot condemns the uprising as chaotic, atheistic and "drunken" (through a German quotation taken from Hesse) in the notes to the *Waste Land*.

Pound's specific mode of hysterization leads him to play the eccentric, to leave the confines of the Empire, and to embrace Mussolini as a symbolic father, out of sheer ignorance of his regime's true nature—all the while insisting that he was fighting against ignorance! Eliot, who knew better, and maybe knew too much, chose the opposite strategy, becoming more British than the British after 1927 and his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism and devising a new and quite personal game of hide-and-seek with high culture.

The literary "ghost" produced by such a disjunction must be found in the way Eliot's success in British and American culture served to acclimatize modernism as a purely intellectual adventure—a "betrayal" that was deeply lamented by William Carlos Williams. The "monsters" Eliot was led to suppress indeed concerned sexuality as well as politics, as Koestenbaum suggests, but his attitude led to dissimilar enabling or disabling strategies if we compare him with Pound who, at least, never really tried to hide his peculiar monsters. These finally brought about the sublimation of modernism into academic enshrining, while at the same time Eliot himself had embraced the values of a revisited classicism. The real ghost generated by the coupling/uncoupling collaboration between Pound and Eliot was in fact just a word: the term "modernism," which could then be thrown as a sop to the academics of the entire world.

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