David Chinitz: On "The Waste Land"

The Waste Land is a much more complex case—in part because the poem that Eliot wrote and the poem that was published differ considerably. The Waste Land would have openly established popular culture as a major intertext of modernist poetry if Pound had not edited out most of Eliot's popular references. Though Pound, like Eliot, assailed the "very pernicious current idea that a good book must be of necessity a dull one," he did not consider contemporary popular culture seriously as a potential antidote to literary dullness. His work on The Waste Land simply made the poem more Poundian: he collapsed its levels of cultural appeal while leaving its internationalism and historicism intact, recasting the poem as the first major counteroffensive in high culture's last stand. To be sure, almost all Pound's emendations improve the poem, and Eliot acceded to the recommendations of "il miglior fabbro" in virtually every instance. Still, part of Eliot's original impulse in composing The Waste Land was lost in this collaboration precisely because Pound's relation to the cultural divide differed from Eliot's own. Had Eliot improved rather than deleted the passages condemned by Pound, he might have given literary modernism a markedly different spin.

The manuscript of The Waste Land shows Eliot drawing on popular song to a greater extent than he uses the Grail myth in the final version. For the long idiomatic passage that was to have opened the poem he considered several lyrics from popular musicals. "I'm proud of all the Irish blood that's in me / There's not a man can say a word agin me," he quotes from a George M. Cohan show; from two songs in the minstrel tradition he constructs "Meet me in the shadow of the watermelon Vine / Eva Iva Uva Emmaline"; from The Cubanola Glide he takes "Tease, Squeeze lovin & wooin / Say Kid what're y' doin.?" The characters' nocturnal spree then takes them to a bar that Eliot frequented after attending melodramas in Boston:

Blew into the Opera Exchange,

Sopped up some gin, sat in to the cork game,

Mr. Fay was there, singing "The Maid of the Mill."

Pointing out that these lines are "the first examples in the draft of [Eliot's] famous techniques of quotation and juxtaposition," Michael North suggests a direct connection between the miscellaneous format of the minstrel show—or, one might add, the English music hall—and the very form of The Waste Land. But the hints of popular song that survive in the published Waste Land are eclipsed by the more erudite allusions that dominate the poem. Thanks to the deletion of the original opening section, for example, the first line places the poem squarely within the "great tradition" of English poetry. A long poem called The Waste Land that begins, "April is the cruellest month," largely shaped the course of literature and criticism for years to follow. One can only imagine the effect of a long poem called He Do the Police in Different Voices beginning, "First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom's place."

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