

The Waste Land in a handful of dust

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Series of radically experimental works across different media that we will later come to call modernism had its artists feel that the conditions of the modern life needed to start again and give up traditional forms of structure and orderliness and expectations and so forth. Modernist writers were quite uneasy about the modern world; the modern world increasingly democratic and increasingly becoming a mass world; a world of mass communication. Modernist works like *The Waste Land* belonged to that world but also shied away from it. Professor Fran Brearton of Queen's University Belfast is of the opinion that there is huge excitement about progress in media, literary experimentation, and technological development and this is a period of history where change is happening rapidly than in any other periods. *"Consummation of modernity is something like the First World War; the period rests on uncertainty and contradiction; the extreme scale of suffering that comes out of the capacity of human beings to mass-produce and to mass-produce weaponry. If you then come to literary modernism, what it is doing and what these writers are doing is responding to that idea of modernity but they are responding in contradictory ways; they are both looking with great excitement at themselves and are finding new forms of experimentation and literary technique that mimic things they are seeing or happening in a new technological world."* At the same time, there is an enormous amount of fear and uncertainty about fragmentation, loss of a sense of self, and lack of any kind of stability in society. A lot of features we see in modernist writing; the way it would tend to fracture

unities as evident in The Waste Land's multiple voices who in some ways acknowledge things you can't see or understand in the world that has become a much more bewildering place and what the modernist writers are doing is trying to find new ways of articulating such abovementioned contradictions in literary forms. *"The decisive shift in that period, as many people said, began earlier; Virginia Woolf said famously that 1910 was the year where everything altered but when you actually look at where the modernist works began to appear—the very experimental modernist works; 1922 was the year of The Waste Land, Joyce's Ulysses, Woolf's Jacob's Room. So there's a convergence—a sense of things coming to fruition in post-war years (Brearton. Fran)."*

In Eliot's poetry, there's a conscious agenda; Eliot at certain times said he was willfully obscuring his works and at certain times he said he wasn't and therefore the reaction to Eliot's experimental works was something like the reaction to Igor Stravinsky's Rite of Spring as people did not know how to construe it. Professor Lawrence Rainey(University of York) calls The Waste Land a "messy" poem. Do human beings need a certain narrative of coherence? Do they want endings and conclusions? Have they learned to live with a certain amount of mess? The answer to these abovementioned questions is that it may also depend on us culturally as we have become accustomed to those modernist forms which don't have those kinds of coherence that we associate with either the Victorian novels or more generally with realism in the Western tradition. The Waste Land found a new way to express the modern world in all of its bruising and gleaming cacophonies. Eliot himself was accused of wilful obscurantism, misanthropy and of high-minded despair at the paucity of 20th-century living. When Eliot looked out at the world of radio and television; radical art of Joyce or Stravinsky, and universal suffrage, he conceived only the barren and featureless plain. Professor Steve

Connor(Birkbeck, University of London) is of the opinion that the confluence of the history that wasn't quite over in a new world that in Matthew Arnold's words was *powerless to be born*; there was a kind of curious logjam. We have got the political map of Europe being radically redrawn in the abiding chaos of the aftermath of the First World War; rampant inflation in Germany in 1921, the declaration of Ireland as a free state in 1921, the aftermath of the Russian Revolution; the formation of the Soviet Union by the Bolsheviks, the abolishment of monarchy, and termination of the civil war, the upheaval of social conditions, and the emergence of women's suffrage. A lot of sense had after the Second World War that social changes enforced by the war meant somehow that the world could never be simply resumed in the way it had been before and yet at the same time, there was a perpetual sense that everything had been blown away as the situation was like some bomb had gone off and it left everything in static but you suspected that behind the facades there would be nothing. But T.S. Eliot lived in the thick of such things and therefore he took his time off from his job at Lloyds Bank and had his poem composed while convalescing from depression in Margate, Switzerland. T.S. Eliot read Hermann Hesse's *Blick ins Chaos* in German and derived materials from it while composing *The Waste Land* as evident in one of its citations. Hesse's perspective was at least one that was bearing upon Eliot. Ergo, *The Waste Land* is an epic work, specifically a fractured epic as we can't make coherent sense of it; it is experimenting with voice and language constantly. The most destabilizing fact about it is that we have no sense of a single coherent voice that's controlling the narrative. Even its opening few lines we can hear tonal shifts in as we can't identify who's speaking at any point—so it is fractured into multiple voices—it is almost as if it is a play but not actually identifying who the characters are. In the use of language, it takes a very traditional language

as there are moments in this work which could almost be lifted from Shakespeare's the very famous opening of section 2 which draws on Antony and Cleopatra and then it will completely disrupt that with a little bit of popular songs or nursery rhymes or with some kind of demotic speech. He will throw in other languages without providing translations. So there's an obvious surface-difficulty to it in that sense that some of it is not comprehensible to the readers. For instance, in lines 5—6 of section 1,

"Winter kept us warm, covering

Earth in forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers.

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee"

There's an "us" in line 5, but in line 8, there is another "us". Is that first "us" in line 5 seems to be everyone who has ever been alive or dead on the planet? Or it is quite the same as the "us" in line 8 which seems to refer to two people in a specific time; in a specific place—so that kind of confusion goes all the way through the poem. Professor Rainey is of the opinion that the "us" turns out to refer to two quite different entities. Eliot was a great "*aficionado of music halls*" and thought it was one of the most marvelous of contemporary forms, and indeed even though he was ill in the whole course of 1921 when he was writing the poem, he took time out to write one essay and that was an essay lamenting the death of Marie Lloyd. It was published in Eliot's monthly London Letter in The Dial magazine on November 1922. Eliot was extremely aware of contemporary developments and as a full-time banker at Lloyds, he also became a supporter of Maynard Keynes' caustic reprimands on the Treaty of Versailles which had been signed in 1921. The poem, therefore, has all sorts of

laments beginning part 3 in which you have all these sentences about how the nymphs are deported and how the heirs of city directors and their friends are departing. This city of vast, empty, desolate wasteland is emptied out by financial catastrophes and somehow that seems to be connected to a strange form of sexuality. Ergo *"different kinds of economy flow all through the poem; linguistics, sexual, and financial(Rainey.Lawrence)."* On breaking up with the established forms, Eliot had Joyce's Ulysses, specifically the so-called *Circe* episode or episode 15 of Ulysses on the back of his head. It led him to write a passage of about 50 lines which we no longer have in the poem. Those 50 lines were the original beginning to part 1 and it described a group of young men who were having a rowdy night in Boston and had been out drinking too much. So originally the poem might have begun in such a way as to suggest that all the many voices that came subsequently were overheard in the course of a rowdy night at the town. Those first 50 lines were taken out by Ezra Pound. When Eliot brought the poem to Pound in January 1922, Pound stripped out the kinds of big narrative beginnings that would give you handles to reading the poem as a whole and ergo Joyce was kind of a big influence on Eliot at that time and it gave him a sense of freedom that you could do almost anything with everything. Since the 1970s when manuscripts were made available, we could see how much of The Waste Land we have lost. Much of it as Professor Fran Brearton says *"we are happy to lose as well"* as some of it is very interesting and there are very problematic ideas about women. For example, in the original, unedited manuscript, there are slightly derogatory comments on intellectual women being rather dull which perhaps we wouldn't want to see now. On the other hand, the changes, in the beginning, are hugely significant as evident in the line *"April is the cruelest month"* which takes us back to Chaucer but Chaucer associates spring with its healing and regenerative

properties. The opening lines which Pound put there really is the first line of the poem that set the entire sense of a destabilized tradition as Eliot is doing something to shock the audience and he turns around saying what we have traditionally thought of spring as healing and regenerating is no longer working—spring-like events have become moments of atrocity in the First World War where “*spring is the Spring Offensive*(*Brearton.Fran*).” Professor Rainey is of the opinion that *The Waste Land is a city poem* as all the locations mentioned are distinctly within the city. At most, you get Queen Victoria Street just slightly to the west of the city but otherwise, it's restricted to the *financial district* of London. For example in

*“Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.”*

It's interpreted as being the commuters in there; kind of in a dead existence going to and from work undone by urban life. In part 1 we have the line “*Unreal City,*

Under the brown fog of a winter”,

In part 3, we have “*Unreal City*

Under the brown fog of a winter noon”,

Now, according to Professor Rainey, any competent reader will know what comes next (supposedly, something like “unreal city under the brown fog of a winter evening or twilight) but you get “*Jerusalem Athens Alexandria*

Vienna London

Unreal”

So what Eliot is doing is he is disrupting the coherence. According to Professor Rainey, the original epitaph had *Joseph Conrad's “the horror! the horror” from Heart of Darkness* but instead you get *Petronius*. In other words, revisions tend to work outward in time to ripple backward and forward. Carrying this idea,

Professor Brearton says he is playing with time as well as with place. So he is going back to Rome, Athens, and then through to London; he is encapsulating a decline in human history over thousands of years. There are little images that matter to the people at that time; so the crowd marching past the Cenotaph represent the ones who survived are also the ones who are dead. In other words, it was a very strong visual image for the people particularly from 1919 through to the early 20s but again the idea of the automaton in the poem is interpreted as people becoming machines—they are becoming themselves a mass production. Regarding the usage of myths in the poem, Professor Connor is of the opinion that modern writers inherited their obsession with myths from the Victorians. They were not so much obsessed with the content of myths because myths were as in Professor Connor's words, "*translations without originals*". When Eliot in January of 1922, brought the incomplete work to Pound in Paris, he happened to come at a very special moment because **Horace Liveright**, head of the **Modern Library and Boni and Liveright Publishers**, was interested to buy new works by exciting writers. When Pound brought the manuscript of *The Waste Land* to Liveright, he was disappointed in the length of the poem being short and therefore asked Eliot to add anything. So the notes that were added by Eliot to the poem were intended to pad out the poem. Also, the notes are very unimportant as it was simply added on to add up some pages to give it kind of a "*bogus scholarship*(**Rainey.Lawrence**).". Therefore he did not take as much from **Jesse Weston's From Ritual to Romance** as he mentioned in citations and notes. Eliot did the same thing as Joyce did when publishers asked him to soup it up. Professor Brearton, regarding the obscurantism of the poem, says that there's something deceptive about the poem so that if you go through 12 volumes of **Frazer's The Golden Bough** thinking here is the key, you won't find it. The same is true if

you read the whole of the Western literature because all you would be doing is adding an enormous number of footnotes to the text that still remains in some respects as inaccessible as it was. The notes are playing tricks on you as Wendy Cope in *The Waste Land: Five Limericks* famously says “*I hope you will make sense of the notes.*” The notes therefore just proliferate into other texts and whether the poem is freestanding in that sense or whether you don’t need anything is much more controversial unless you have as Professor Brearton says “*Eliot’s particular Harvard Western education*”. When the poem was first published in the periodical form, it appeared without the notes and it later appeared in book form. When I, particularly read the poem without the notes, the poem fills me with terror especially in part 1, the line “*HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME*”, disseminates a sense of an apocalypse culminating in the end of all civilization and not just some pub owner telling it’s closing time.

Philosopher William James said two things that seem to apply absolutely to *The Waste Land*; one is that reality comes to us as though fired at us from a revolver and the other thing he said that the world is like a mosaic hangs together by its edges. Eliot referred to his poem as a “*rhythmical grumbling*” and said there are only 30 good lines. He also said myth is a way of ordering and controlling, and shaping history. Professor Brearton rejected Eliot’s self-criticism on *The Waste Land* by saying that nothing of it gives a very satisfactory explanation. As modernism itself, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was what it was.