How to Read 'The Waste Land' So It Alters Your Soul

By MARY KARR

The boundary between 20th-century verse in English and its 19th-century predecessors -- Romantic poetry and the genteel Victorian stuff after it -- didn't simply dissolve. It came down with an axe swoop, and the blade was T. S. Eliot's "Waste Land." William Carlos Williams said the poem "wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it." Its publication in 1922 killed off the last limping, rickets-ridden vestiges of the old era and raised the flag of Modernism, under whose flapping shadow we still live.

By this, I mean that the poem exists as a kind of seminal instant for the aesthetic (and, in some circles, moral) values we espouse. The techniques it teaches are reference and irony, self-mockery and obliquity. These are the same ones championed today in art and culture at all levels -- be it David Letterman's hipper-than-thou sarcasm or the erotic self-mockery of Cindy Sherman's photographs. Quentin Tarantino's nonlinear jumps between scenes in *Pulp Fiction* partly derive from it, as does the oracular, disaffected voice of Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* or the dreamy surface of Toni Morrison's *Beloved.*

This essay, abridged from the introduction to a new Modern Library edition, was intended to pry open the door to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" for the non-aficionado in two ways: by locating the poem in historical context and by lowering the typical fear of foreign language and reference that the poem inspires.

-- Mary Karr

It's also the gold standard for difficulty in modern poetry, the measured point on the this-is-hard chart literary specialists still tend to laser-point to. A recent issue of the literary mag *Parnassus* held no fewer than four references to Eliot -- his titanic status and religiosity, and how infamously murky "Waste Land" is while being "encrusted with learning." I've been as guilty as any critic or academic of invoking the poem in essays and lectures as a voodoo mojo to vanquish the lesser spirits of my own intellectual insecurity.

It can have similarly totemic powers for creative writers, who tend to wave its name as a kind of passport into the infernal regions of artistic

obscurity. It's the historical document that permits a young poet to say, *Well, my work isn't nearly this impenetrable, so stop telling me to rewrite for clarity when you're just being small-minded and lazy.* A frustrated reader can also gesture to the poem's impenetrability to justify why he or she avoids poetry at all, saying, *If this is poetry, then I'm heading for the nearest channel changer.*

So for good or ill, the poem is one of the literary instants we're still either evolving or devolving from (depending on your viewpoint) as a people.

Yet people don't read it anymore. Whole flocks of college students who've come under my tutelage at Syracuse University recently profess to not having *heard* of it -- along with much else written before Elvis. A search on the Web under "The Waste Land" hooks you up with a TV show.

That said: Not to read it is to pretend that we of this 21st century have drawn ourselves whole (M. C. Escherlike) from our own heads. It's to ignore history, taking on faith that what now seems beautiful or important or right in terms of reading or listening or watching has no source other than this time, this place.

Isn't that equally true, you might say, of Homer or Milton? Of course, but I don't see students trying to pass off 20-line Homeric similes digressing from epic battle narratives as experimental form. Which is precisely what happens with Eliot.

For "The Waste Land" 's techniques continue to define what we think of as avant-garde even among those who eschew actually reading Eliot because he's a dead white guy who represents the *old* guard.

Last spring, for instance, I found myself explaining to a young writer that the creative prose he'd turned in shifted voices and scenes in a dislocating way -- a kind way of saying it made no sense. I was then painstakingly told that this was part of an edgy new trend in fiction -- nonlinear narrative that uses shifting multiple voices peppered with hermetic references. So he was, he went on, *intentionally* doling out the names of TV shows I hadn't watched and bands I hadn't heard. If you substitute his references to *Brady Bunch* reruns for Eliot's Dante,

you're in "Waste Land"-ville. This student was smart and a great reader who had been penned into a theory-based curriculum that kept him from much actual literature. Once I recounted the long tradition of his allegedly radical method, he blanched and went on to the hard work of rewriting that students often balk at. (His bravura approach is not unusual: At his age I also subscribed to that formula made popular by its breathtaking ease: *first word = best word.*)

Let's say you're one of the few who has read "The Waste Land": Why reread it? Once you've absorbed its historical consequences, why not leave it back there with dusty documents like the Declaration of Independence?

Because it's beautiful, though intricate and spiritually desolate in the angst and squalor it sails me through. I read it to hear a noise that tells me about certain states of mind so horrible I live much of my life trying to deny their existence though they swarm at the periphery of my eyes during late-night startles. These states are indescribable if you live through them and all but unknowable if you don't, except, perhaps, through the aegis of this particular poem.

Read incorrectly, "The Waste Land" makes the average reader feel dumb. That was true upon its publication 79 years ago and remains so. By "incorrectly," I don't mean to red-pencil an X across anybody's approach to poetry in general or to these pages specifically. Just the opposite. In this country, literature from the past mostly gets taught to aggravate a reader's insecurity.

In fact, any potential reader should banish all naysaying voices, or at least crank down the volume on them. Then amble good-naturedly up to these allegedly daunting pages with simian curiosity. Presume there's something gorgeous and life-altering about this poem, then set out to find it. In fact, 95 percent of its splendor exists on the surface and can be gleaned minus a comparative-literature degree.

In terms of shape, the poem is a collage, somewhat disparate pieces assembled to create in readers the kind of despair that infected much of Western Europe after the Great War. England and America (among other countries) had fed hordes of its young men into that conflict, which wasn't unusual for a war. But the First World War also

delivered the blindest, most efficient machine for carnage to date. Airplanes could fly over and dismantle troops where they stood. Mustard gas could creep across the fields into trenches to scorch lung tissue and other soft membranes. Such slaughter could also now be captured effectively on film and shipped home. (The first box camera from George Eastman, in 1888, had seen myriad improvements by 1914.) Wireless communication also made accurate reportage of distant campaigns transmittable.

With that war, the glory of dying for one's country as expressed by Horace in the line *"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"* became a darkly ironic notion when Wilfred Owen used the Latin sentence as the title for a seminal antiwar poem shortly before being killed in action. By World War II, Eliot's poetic influence was being felt in poems that were exponentially more bitter and graphic. It's Eliot who permits Randall Jarrell to step over Horace's mournful sense of honor by rawly rendering the Second World War's grotesqueries. The last line of Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" reads: "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose."

This wholesale motorized murder was part and parcel of the increasingly mechanized world that had been assembling since the first cotton gins and mills marked the Industrial Revolution. The notion of technological progress heaped lifestyle changes on the Western world more radical, perhaps, than written history ever recorded. Lightbulbs banished night, and instruments of velocity like steamships and airplanes were shrinking the earth's distances.

The first subways opened in London in 1890 to whisk human beings through underground chasms in herds. As cars began to replace buggies, cities ceased to be designed around human traffic and began to be built to accommodate vehicles, often eradicating pedestrian traffic in the process. Buildings ceased to approach human scale and scraped the heavens. You need only compare modern-day Los Angeles with Paris to grasp how those looming, boxlike structures combined with newfound bustle and clanking whatnots to isolate and estrange various urban citizenries.

So expect a text fragmented as a clattering, bouncy ride through London or New York must've been; a text disorienting as modern

battle was to the soldiers of the Great War. The poem's made of bits and overlays, snatches of speech and songs -- various dictions and noises and tones. Just as cities were.

Much of poetry's game in the past two centuries has been seeing what a writer can shoehorn into verse. Prior to the 19th century, subject and character, form and even diction were sorely circumscribed -- what you could write about and how. Eliot's partly responsible for opening those gates. "The Waste Land" gets a lot in. You'll hit a sibyl pronouncing in Greek her longing to die. There's an Australian drinking song. Dante's language is there, and so is chitchat overheard in a pub. There's Homer's blind seer Tiresias, the "old man with wrinkled dugs" and a wacky clairvoyant with a bogus tarot pack.

But "The Waste Land" jacks up the difficulty quotient even higher in three specific ways. 1) The author's notes, written in a somewhat dodgy and sometimes coy tone, tend to confuse rather than illuminate the poem's references, its quotes and quirks. 2) The untranslated languages make sense only to a polyglot. 3) Add to those difficulties the fact that Eliot borrowed heavily from the poetic techniques of the French Symbolists, whose poems sported mysterious surfaces and private symbologies rather than inherited myths and the familiar rhetorical poses that were part of agreed-upon cultural norms.

The author's notes drew critical interest from the get-go and went on to generate the antlike industry of Ph.D. candidates for generations. Perhaps some foresight of Eliot's about the ascendancy of academic criticism caused him to drop these notes as bread crumbs to entice or intimidate critics. Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot claims that the first reviews in England were "variously baffled and respectful" -- partly because of the notes and references, which left some critics mystified enough that they *couldn't* come out and say they didn't like the poem, for fear their ignorance of his learned and sophisticated methods would be discovered. (Poets and prosers alike have been packaging incomprehensibility as brilliant experiment ever since.)

It's a little-recognized fact that the controversial notes were an afterthought Eliot later considered cutting because they so distracted readers from the poem. In fact, he'd tacked them on only because the 19-page poem alone didn't seem long enough to constitute a book.

Even knowing the randomness of the notes' insertion, you still can't ignore them wholesale. There they squat in the text. But once you stop cowering in their shadow, you can decipher them as whimsical rather than smug. Read that way, the notes change tone, and the gates of the poem may start to widen. Till then, they can leave a timid reader feeling both boneheaded and teased -- facing a string of intentionally vague *nyah nyah's* at what you don't know. The notes are capricious and shifting in both purpose and attitude.

For one thing, there just isn't much constancy to what gets a note and what doesn't. Often (but not always) it's a reference in another tongue. The first German snippet you hit (line 12) doesn't warrant a source, maybe because it's conversation and not from a specific text. Then 20 lines later, you stumble on a four-line swatch of Wagner libretto. The endnote for that reads *"V. Tristan und Isolde,* I, verses 5-8." Which tells contemporary readers -- including those who don't know Wagner and those who do -- virtually nothing. Grad students trained to track down the sources tend to bound after the origin of such references with the automatic energy of dogs loping after any thrown Frisbee. But such trackings down don't yield much relative to the poem. Even if you listen to the Wagner, the note and reference don't bring much to the proverbial interpretive party. Some argue that the notes contribute absolutely nil.

The fact that he's always guessing stuff just augments the breezy tone. He doesn't know where one drinking song comes from; can't remember which Antarctic expedition "stimulated" some writing -- "I think one of Shackleton's. ..." Or here's Eliot's wise-assed note on an early scene: "I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards, from which I have obviously departed to suit my own convenience." Today, I interpret Eliot's pose here not as pompous but as a self-mocking signal, a bold admission that the notes *are* trivial. I also wonder whether plagiarism laws of his age required such notations. Or Eliot's manner may be construed as scorn for that requirement or of the academy's notions of truth in general.

But why use foreign languages and highbrow references in the first place? During Eliot's day, the intelligentsia thought of itself as keeper of some cultural flame that was threatening to snuff out. They were

partly right. Only a small percentage of the populace went to college in Eliot's day, compared with today.

Eliot was born in 1888, when bombastic Victorian poems were flooding magazines in English alongside the self-conscious, long-winded twaddle of poets like Swinburne, who fancied themselves decadent, sometimes even submitting poems on mauve paper. Tennyson had been the last great poet in English, mastering the sweeping albeit empty rhetorical gesture that "The Waste Land" stands in opposition to: "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean ..." Tennyson's lengthy *In Memoriam* includes (among other things) convoluted arguments about how the existence of God isn't provable by the universe's design -- an ideology commonly used then to reconcile faith with reason. The poem ultimately says it's how you *feel* that proves God's presence. In other words, the poem can be summarized fairly easily in prose. That poetry would be generated in service of such a prosaic enterprise seems ludicrous today.

But that's mostly what poetry was doing in those days -- batting cleanup for prose and sermons. While novelists like Conrad and Hardy and James were cranking out novels that represented aspects of contemporary life in a fresh way, poets were fancifying old sermon topics with a kind of Matthew Arnold solemnity.

Walt Whitman's song from the 19th century was also reverberating across the country in this ghastly faux-rustic form. "Lyrical effortless effusion" was high praise. Poetry was written for ship launches and fair openings, the cutting of library ribbons. The Harvard critic David Perkins says, "The 1890's seemed to have happened for the sole purpose of having Eliot decimate them." His two-volume history of Modern poetry drums up some of the best examples of what Eliot was trying to counter. There were schools of handyman poets, including one guy whose wife submitted his poems to *Scribner's* (then a popular magazine). Her note reads: "My husband has always been a successful blacksmith. Now he's old and his mind is slowly weakening, so he has taken to writing poems, several of which I enclose herewith." Imagine writing in a time when armies of poets seemed intent on ignoring poetry's rich history from other cultures and languages in order to scribble the kind of automatic blather that filled popular magazines. Maybe then you'll comprehend Eliot's

peppering of the poem with ancient references. I try to comprehend Eliot's need to put the notes in without being tyrannized by them.

After Eliot left Harvard, he moved to England and fell under the spell of Ezra Pound, who was perhaps even more lingo-crazed than his equally provincial but somewhat neurasthenic charge. Pound also shared Eliot's commitment to save the culture from boneheads. His *Cantos* contain 21 languages (including five dead ones), and in *ABC of Reading* he recommends (a mild word for what he does) that any poet worth her salt should master Old French to read Arnaut Daniel, enough Latin to plow through Catullus, enough Greek for Homer and Sappho.

Pound savored Eliot's music as perhaps no one had before. And his method for reading certainly mirrored "The Waste Land" 's:

> The way to study Shakespeare's language is to study it side by side with something different and of equal extent. The proper antagonist is Dante, who is of equal size and DIFFERENT. To study Shakespeare's language merely in comparison with the DECADENCE of the same thing doesn't give one's mind any leverage.

Pound would later write, "Relations between things are more important than the things themselves." Or, as some soul singer says, "It ain't the meat; it's the motion."

Which might well have been the French Symbolist manifesto, if those poets hadn't so loathed ideology as to scorn manifestoes. They were so iconoclastic that talking about them as a school at all is somewhat contrived. Still, it's fair enough to say that some French poets between about 1860 and 1885 -- Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Valéry -- seemed to have evolved the slippery modus operandi Eliot made use of in "The Waste Land." The Symbolists summoned poems from the ethereal. Scholarly or didactic readers desperately seeking "meaning" in such poems may impatiently wave away all the sea mist and opium haze, thus missing the heady aromas intended as the central poetic experience.

Again, seen in the context of history, such smoke-and-mirrors

methods make exquisite sense. Late-19th-century poets in English seemed to be writing almost devoid of musical or aesthetic concerns, both of which were so central to Symbolism. It was more common to reflect moral ideals of the most philistine nature -- a soldier's honor, a mother's love, the virtue of hard work, etc. -- in standardized packages.

Take up a card with a kitten on it at your local drugstore, and you'll know what I mean here. The terms of such poems are presumed to be agreed upon by the culture at large, so that from the first line you can easily predict the last and most moves in between. Sentimentalism is simply emotion that hasn't been argued for or proven to a reader, only gestured to. Such hackneyed moves signal the writer's flagging interest in his subject and usually prompt the reader's eyes to lose focus. You know that soporific instant in a poem or novel when your head starts saying *blah blah blah* and your eyes start swiftly swimming to the page bottom?

Eliot meant above all to keep the reader riveted to the text and concentratedly alive. So each word might have heft, so the reader wouldn't be lulled or dulled into glazing over words once the poem's argument was absorbed. A constantly shifting surface without argued transitions forces you into alertness if you're to keep up with the poem's changing terms.

"The Waste Land" 's meaning is also inexorably entwined with the music, the variety of noises and how they jam together, often sans transition, to create a mood. But obscurity in poetry also comes into English through this poem. The still dominant notion of I-wrote-it-for-myself-and-don't-care-who-likes-it-so-there pose characterizing the true *artiste* was brought over from Eliot's imitating the French.

Eliot was far too conventional in his personal life to pose as a sulfur-breathing, absinthe-drinking Symbolist, but "The Waste Land" incorporates their fiercely nonmethodical methods -- sordid characters and venues, lush music that aims for mood rather than meaning, a constantly shifting surface, free rein of private mythologies. I contend that if the writer is freed by Symbolist methods, so should the reader be. That means yielding to the poem in some way. Let it spray in your face, then wash over you.

I fell in love with the poem in a small Texas town as a girl whose chief literary mark was her unabashed ignorance. In grad school, I learned to ape French and German and Latin pronunciations (the Greek's still Greek to me), and this adventure in music yielded up more than the scholarly rooting around I did whose artifacts were promptly forgotten. When I teach the poem, I have to look up many of the references every time. This amnesia of mine for the work's minuscule facts speaks volumes either to the doggedness of my aforementioned ignorance or to the trivial nature of said references. If you want to do background work, learning to pronounce the handful of foreign words would better tap the poem's symphonic force, which is arguably its chief virtue.

But even as a girl, I found many of the poem's foreign quotes decipherable without knowing the language at hand. The Baudelaire line he steals is almost entirely lucid: "hypocrite lecteur! -- mon semblable, -- mon frère!" I first read this as someone's accusing a lecturer of being a hypocrite -- one of my favorite high school activities. I knew what *frère* meant from "Frère Jacques" and could also see the Latin root related to *similarity* buried in *semblable* -- an intuition that lasted me for years before I took the initiative and a French dictionary to find it translated as *twin,* and *lecteur* translated as *reader.* Only then did I twig to the irony of my being called a hypocrite who *resembles* to the point of replication the writer. Of course, the line means something different in actual rather than intuitive translation. But in some ways, the scornful tone of my misreading is not wholly inconsistent with the poet's. Also, the musical effect of the tone switch and the introduction of French come through even with my lunkheaded distortion. So while scholarly work might clarify, it often yields only a subtle change in flavor rather than a radically altered interpretation.

Lines 60 to 63 are just the sort that draw the microscopic attentions of people zeroing in for scholarly dissection:

> 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.

Does it aid or alter the *meaning* of these lines to know that "Unreal City" is derived from Baudelaire's poem "The Seven Old Men?" Or that Dante's *Inferno* depicts crowds of dead flowing in just such a manner? I don't think so. In fact, to construct a bulky apparatus of scholarship over the poem can actually obscure it, throw its language out of balance.

For music is the message. What you need to know is interwoven with the poem's melodies and dissonances. On the surface, the poem tells you everything. Take just one line: *"Under the brown fog of a winter dawn."* You can grasp that the fog's oppression makes the wintry scene bleaker without saying to yourself, *The fog's* above *the people, where Heaven should be. At the turn of the century people were abandoning traditional notions of Heaven.* ... The noise of the lines is innately mournful. The image of people flowing over a bridge is further suggestive of faceless automatons, a mindlessly moving horde. When they abruptly become the dead (*"I had not thought death had undone so many"*), it's an apocryphal instant. You suddenly know that the realistic world you were observing is, in fact, a vision. The speaker's calm restraint in describing this awful scene is innately ironic, so that he embodies in a way the horror of alienation and emotional detachment. The imagery derives as much from the First War as from Dante. But again, neither reference gives you anything you wouldn't automatically get from the surface.

Just take the references and other aspects of the poem on blind faith. Read it first for joy. Shut up your head's claptrap and open yourself to fall in love with it. Treat it like a first date, which should begin with ignorance but also with hope. Only if you fall in love do you make a study of the beloved, for only passion lets us inquire into other people's mysteries with the vitality born of conviction. With enough ardor, your date's off-putting manner of dismantling chicken becomes an adorable nuance. So it is with "The Waste Land."

The blossoming mind-states it induces are perhaps available only if you can turn off your analytical machinery long enough to embark on the poem's journey. Otherwise, you're like some passenger strapped into the shotgun seat nervously calculating mileage and trying to map the exact cant of the last hairpin turn while the caverns of hell whiz past and unnoticed flames lap against the glass.

But why read something so darkly despairing? And repeatedly? I mentioned its beauty before. But the poem also acts for me as a sort of vaccine against the horror it describes by injecting a nonlethal dosage of it. One can't get the same immunity by abstractly, willfully constructing a theory about the world and one's place in it. Theories are fine, but unfueled by feeling they remain gaseously theoretical. Few human beings can run very long on the fumes of an ideal. I begin each morning fairly intent on seizing the day and often abandon that wisdom with the first snapped shoelace. "The Waste Land" delivers a dose of feeling that enters you with a hard jolt. It changes you, for perhaps only passion can lend conviction to such a change.

If you're no stranger to such soul-paralyzing mind-states as the poem creates, it may also serve as balm to the loneliness such states evoke by speaking out to your own hybrid species of spiritual pain.

In this way, it can work like the miracle of communion -- you take the Eucharist of the writer's words into the rough meat of your body in order to be transformed by someone else's mysterious passion. It brings you into a community of like sufferers. There's healing in that, I think, despite the old Dale Carnegie wisdom that reading such stuff is a depressing wallow in the mud of one's own misery. I disagree. Having once kept an apartment in similarly barren regions to those in this poem, I return there now through art -- or memory or premenstrual syndrome, or by intensely loving friends still stranded there. Reading the poem gives me the conviction to live my life, not with the despair and angst rendered, but with the alertness the poem demands. People spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in therapy for the same sense of presence in one's life, the same fusion of inner self and outer experience. The mere exercise of attention -- eyes wide, ears pricked, heart open -- is not a bad way to move through the world.

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