

REVIEWS

THE WASTE LAND IN SPANISH: PALIMPSEST, REVISIONS AND INSCRIPTIONS. Viorica Patea, ed. *La tierra baldía*. T.S. Eliot. Trans. José Luis Palomares. Madrid: Cátedra, 2005.

“[T]he great catastrophe of our letters —the appearance of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.” We find this rather emphatic unsympathetic statement in William Carlos Williams’ *Autobiography* (1951). Though belonging to Eliot’s generation Williams functions as a bridge between Modernist American poetry and its postmodern trends (Black Mountaineers, Confessionals, New York School, Beatniks, San Francisco Renaissance, Deep Imagists...). Some critics (cf. James E. Miller, Jr. *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction*) regard his epic poem *Paterson* as a chapter in the American Epic tradition founded by Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

Modernist poems as Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, Wallace Stevens’ *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* and Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, and postmodern ones as Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Fall of America*, all summon, follow and recreate Whitman’s epic demand in “Song of Myself” section 51: “Who wishes to walk with me?” Between these two moments, between these two generations stands Williams’ epic agenda, *Paterson*.

Williams recognized in Whitman’s poetic idiom a vitality that he thought would mirror America’s vitality. Instead Eliot declined Whitman’s invitation. In his 1953 essay “American Literature and American Language” Eliot chose

the author of *Leaves of Grass* along with Poe and Twain as representative of American literary identity. While choosing Whitman Eliot was actually stressing his own distance towards him, meaning towards a certain American ethos. This different approach subliminally echoes the basic distinction between both modernist writers, Williams and Eliot. While the former felt himself part of a poetic tradition, the later felt estranged to it. While the former felt America as the soil of the new, the later felt that America lacked a strong and deep cultural memory. These distances led Eliot to search elsewhere the intellectual affiliations that would provide him a legacy, a sense of belonging, a meaning in what he felt to be a decaying present.

By the time Eliot started his own search in European soil, American expatriates already were a powerful tradition. As Ernest Penney Earnest has shown (*Expatriates and Patriots: American Artists, Scholars, and Writers in Europe*, 1968), the contact abroad allowed earlier writers (Irving, Cooper), scholars (Ticknor, Bancroft, Cogswell), artists (Allston, Morse, Greenough, Powers, Story), mid-19th century transcendentalists (Hawthorne, Fuller, Melville), and later writers (James, Wharton) to build specific insights which would eventually lend them to a reevaluation of their own artistic and cultural identities. In early 20th century Pound, Steiner, Hemingway, Eliot *et al* would welcome the radical revision that was taking place in European art, music, literature.

The concept of “mimesis” analysed by Auerbach stands at the core of this revision. This concept would change radically since mid-19th cen-

tury demanding a new dialogue between art and its beholder, between text and its reader, between music and its audience. One cannot fully understand Eliot's impact in 20th-century poetry without being aware of this revolution. Although elliptically one must remind several ruptures that took place at the time: Cézanne's sabotage of perspective as it was conceived since the Renaissance, and his subsequent notion of composition and balance among colours, densities, planes, lines (eventually leading to cubism); Charles Ives' creation of several (cultural, musical) textures in *Three Places of New England*; Arnold Schoenberg's method of composition (the twelve-note system); Faulkner's Freudian stream of consciousness; Joyce's mythic narrative. Besides the consecration of photography as an autonomous art form, one should add the emergence of cinema, and Eisenstein's editing as a narrative (dramatic) method and strategy. Poetry would be part of this revolution, and among (at the centre of) its main actors stands Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

The Waste Land is somehow foreshadowed in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917). Here Eliot builds a new poetic method of approaching the atmosphere subliminal to the first major 20th-century catastrophe, World War I. If we read a poem dealing with this war, as, for instance, Siegfried Sassoon's "The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still", we find a conventional representation of the horror underlying it. Sassoon tries to revive his haunting personal experience in the battlefield ("The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still,/ And I remember things I'd best forget.") mainly by direct explicit description (close to Rimbaud's "Le dormeur du val"). Instead in Eliot's "Prufrock" it's "by indirections [that we] find directions out". Eliot felt that a mere personal approach wasn't able to cope with the emotional impact underlying this shift of paradigm. Since the poet deals with (builds) verbal experiences, it is in language, in poetic language, in poetic tradition, in poetic memory, that s/he may find previous verbalizations of intense suffering. This is one of the reasons why Dante's *Inferno* stands apart in Western literary tradition and as a powerful presence in *Prufrock*.

By the time Eliot brought to light his first poems, Freud already had revealed human fragmentary identity (in Eliot's words man had become a "heap of broken images") and the suffocating symbolic presence of the past. In Eliot's poetry the fragment finds a rhetorical analogue in ellipsis, while the past, the literary and the cultural past, finds a prosodic analogue in either explicit or implicit quotation; hence the so-called "difficulty" of his poetry. Pound's revision of *The Waste Land* stresses these dimensions. The most appropriate word for his impact in Eliot's text actually comes from an emerging art form, the cinema: "montage," "editing." Valerie Eliot's 1971 *T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land. A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, reveals how radical Pound's editing was, how editing really changed a tradition of poetic sensibility. While stressing the metonymic trope (cf. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*, 1987), the fragment (correlative) unfolds a connection with the past, a sense of continuity and tradition. The reader thus becomes a kind of archaeologist deciphering and connecting fragments, literary allusions, eventually penetrating successive (deeper) layers of meaning.

For the ordinary reader the main difficulty of *The Waste Land* may reside in a lack acquaintance with American poetic tradition and in the incapacity to unveil the fragments (the literary allusions, the masks) mentioned above. When we surpass these barriers, the poem becomes transparent and intense in its emotional speculation. Viorica Patea's remarkable work of scholarship provides the necessary keys to those barriers.

Patea's work has two moments, "Introduction" and "Notes". I don't think that the word "Introduction" reveals the real scope of those 163 pages. If the reader is led to expect it to be a brief survey of Eliot's life and poetics, s/he is fortunately deceived, since this "Introduction" turns out to be an extensive essay (should one say "book?") covering all aspects of Eliot's life and work, of his estrangement from American identity, of his coming of age as a poet in Europe (as European poet?), of the radical dialogue between his poetry and his criticism, of his hospitality towards both literary tradition(s) and

contemporary anxieties. This essay approaches every single aspect of his identity. The critic apparatus is updated (a difficult task when one reminds the broad scope of Eliot's scholarship), comprising both Anglo-American and Spanish bibliography. Anyone who wants to be aware of Eliot's controversial innovation in Western poetry (namely university students) will find here an excellent "introduction".

While the "Introduction" delineates the poem context, the footnotes decode its different moments. The "notes" are a necessary instrument for reading *The Waste Land* (cf. B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems*

of T.S. Eliot, 1968), as Eliot himself stressed when he inserted his own. Modernist poetics revealed the individual (and the text) as a palimpsest, a soil of cultural revisions and inscriptions. Patea's extensive footnotes unveil the different inscriptions, layers, of this palimpsest thus allowing the reader to connect its successive moments, its diachronic logic.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a (the?) major 20th-century poem, and this edition provides the Spanish reader with an indispensable and comprehensive approach to this poem.

MÁRIO AVELAR

