

Revisiting "The Waste Land." By Lawrence Rainey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xiv + 205pp. \$35.00 cloth.

Think of your favorite unanswerable question—What is truth? Do I have free will? Is there a God?—and imagine somebody coming along, before you die in ignorance, not only to tell you the answer but to support it with reams of incontrovertible evidence. This is what Lawrence Rainey has done for those of us who are hopelessly fascinated by *The Waste Land*. No, his *Revisiting "The Waste Land"* does not profess to settle at long last what the poem means. On the contrary, it leaves the poem more satisfyingly and profoundly obscure than ever. Even jaded readers of T. S. Eliot will find that Rainey refreshes *The Waste Land* for them precisely by making them

see that they have not, after all, understood it. At the same time, Rainey does reveal a great deal about how *The Waste Land* was written, solving a number of seemingly intractable mysteries along the way. Anyone who can appreciate brilliant detective work, or an inspired line of argument, or even just determined scholarship, will find *Revisiting "The Waste Land"* a stunning accomplishment.

Rainey compares his task to that of a sleuth confronted with a corpse, and this Eliotic analogy is apt. He has, in essence, cracked a "cold case" on which no progress had been made or even attempted in twenty years. Eliot's widow, Valerie, published her facsimile edition of the *Waste Land* drafts, revealing numerous revisions, deleted sections, hitherto-unknown ancillary poems, and Ezra Pound's editorial interventions, in 1971. Although this material drew a good deal of attention over the next decade, critical reassessment of the poem foundered on a still-unsolved problem: the parts of the *Waste Land* manuscript were almost entirely undated. In consequence, it seemed impossible to know, for example, which sections formed the primary substrate of the poem and which were added later. Eliot's intentions regarding the discarded pendant poems was still frustratingly unclear; how to reconcile his use of three different typewriters with his 1921–22 peregrinations posed a puzzle; the extent to which *The Waste Land* incorporated early poetic fragments composed in America remained uncertain. Although several biographers and scholars speculated on these problems in the 1970s and early 1980s, none of their accounts was even nearly adequate. Ultimately, the discussion trailed off for want of any new information, leaving the poem's readers still with no satisfactory account, as Rainey puts it, "of how *The Waste Land* was composed, of the choices and impasses that Eliot faced as he wrote, and of the solutions that he adopted to address them" (x). Through a prodigious effort of research, Rainey settles all these long-standing problems and then some.

Rainey has examined the originals of 638 of Eliot's letters, plus another 300 leaves of Eliot's other writing, measuring the dimensions of the paper used, minutely examining its physical characteristics—its thickness (measured in hundredths of a millimeter), its chainlines and watermarks—and observing the type impressed upon it by the typewriter. If the forensic labor sounds tedious, its results are exhilarating. By comparing in detail the paper on which Eliot typed the various parts of *The Waste Land* to the paper on which he typed his dated letters, Rainey has been able to assign dates to every scrap of the poem, and so to reconstruct, for the first time, Eliot's compositional process. His efforts were aided by Eliot's hitherto unnoticed habit of purchasing paper in small quantities. The resulting frequent changes in paper made it possible for Rainey to identify pages that were typed around the same time.¹ Such evidence, especially when combined with biographical data and with the occasional comments on

the progress of the poem in Eliot's letters, is very powerful. The outcome of this research is summed up in a table on pages 34–36 of the book—a table that dates, to within a few days at best, a few weeks at worst, each bit of the *Waste Land* manuscripts.

Although Eliot enthusiasts will find this table alone worth the price of the book, Rainey has much more to offer. Putting his findings to immediate use, he undertakes to alter our comprehension of *The Waste Land* in a second and quite different way: by exhuming the poem's original strangeness and indeterminacy, and restoring thereby a measure of the shocking effect that it had for its first readers and that has been attenuated, perhaps unavoidably, by the literary criticism and pedagogy of the past eight decades. For Rainey, the poem is best characterized in such terms as “lacerating,” “uncanny,” “histrionic,” and “haunting”; it is marked by a “mordant ferocity” and by “intransigent opacity”; it has the power to “startle and disturb.” And he does not merely gesture at those qualities of the poem or lament their loss; he actually helps his readers rediscover them.

Rainey's research reveals that the composition of *The Waste Land* was even more fragmented than we had known, with an estimated 48–55 discontinuous segments averaging 12–14 lines gradually coming together to form the whole. The pressure Eliot felt to make these fragments cohere was in constant tension with, on the one hand, a “countervailing tendency” toward further fragmentation and, on the other hand, a “discernible worry” that connections imposed *ex post facto* will be “too obvious” (40–41). The interaction of these conflicting concerns underlies Rainey's virtuosic readings of several passages of the poem. For example, Rainey is able to trace the artistic logic through which the draft fragment beginning “O City, City, I have heard and hear” evolved into the corresponding published passage, or through which Eliot inserted the first lines of “The Fire Sermon” (“The river's tent is broken”), which turn out—in an exact reversal of earlier theories—to be the last-composed part of *The Waste Land*. But he can also explain how the famous opening passage of the poem, despite its “surfeit of lexical, syntactic, and thematic gestures toward pattern and cohesion,” evades pattern and cohesion. Thanks to this demonstration, the lines beginning “April is the cruellest month,” which we thought we had fathomed years ago, become suddenly rich and strange again. Rainey pulls off this difficult trick at least as well as any critic before him, and he does it in an entirely new way. Through close reading of the poem's evolution, he shows that the coherence or “order” of *The Waste Land* is not “achieved as the realization of a plan or program”; rather, “what *The Waste Land* achieves are always relative and incremental orders of coherence that are local, contingent, and retrospective in nature” (43). He argues thus that critics who try to locate a master plot and a central “protagonist” in the poem are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp through a swamp of “nonrelationship.” Rather

than “plot or narrative coherence,” *The Waste Land* has only “the likeness of a plot” which “instantly dissolve[s] into illusion” (49). The brilliance of his reading lies especially in the unique link it forges between the poem’s irreducible uncanniness and the process of its composition.

After imparting these revelations in only its first 50 pages, *Revisiting “The Waste Land”* next moves on to an extended reading of a single passage: the sexual encounter of the typist and the “young man carbuncular.” Following out another intriguing line of research, Rainey situates Eliot’s lines in historical context amidst the “new office culture” of the early 1900s, which the poet *qua* banker knew intimately, and in which female clerical workers, and typists in particular, played an increasingly large role. He then extends this context to include the popular novels of the period in which typists appear as protagonists. Eliot’s typist episode, it turns out, shares a good deal with those novels, adapting the “topoi of contemporary journalism and realistic fiction which treated typists”—“a single room with cramped conditions, poor food, a bed that doubles as a couch or divan, references to female garments and undergarments” (60)—to its own purposes. Packed into eight lines of his poem, these elements draw us into a condensed typist novel, and it hardly requires the foresight of a Tiresias to predict how the scene will play out (61). In its departures from the topoi of typist fiction, however, and particularly in the silence and automatism with which Eliot’s typist responds to her own seduction—as opposed to the “disgust, shock, horror, bitter humiliation, terror, dread,” etc. voiced by her novelized sisters—*The Waste Land* reveals the source of its uncanniness in a kind of modern sublime. Underlying the poem, Rainey argues, is “a profound pity at the lacerating horrors of modernity and an unspeakable sorrow that there is no language... adequate to the terror which the poem wishes to account for” (70). The “substance” of *The Waste Land*, for Rainey, is “a wild pathos at once unutterable and irredeemable, over the conditions that have governed its production” (70).

After his opening chapter on the production of *The Waste Land*, Rainey moves on to discuss the poem’s transmission and reception. The second chapter is an updated version of Rainey’s influential essay “The Price of Modernism,” which revealingly explores the poem’s publication history.² The final chapter focuses on the reactions of *The Waste Land*’s earliest readers. Through careful attention to the responses of those readers, uninformed (or uncorrupted) by decades of exegesis, Rainey is able to explain, with remarkable success, why *The Waste Land* generated such frisson in its original audience, and how their excitement and agitation were sometimes sooner, sometimes later palliated by the anodyne of explanation and intellectual understanding. For today’s readers, Rainey’s approach offers (qualified) possibilities of recovery:

We cannot, of course, return to an imaginary state of pristine in-

nocence in which the critical history of the last eighty years has been miraculously effaced.... But if the free play of action that we ideally bring to the reading of any work is genuinely to retain its freedom, it will do so not by denying but by probing the intangible pressures exerted by a highly distinctive critical tradition.... Doing so, we can remain open to the pleasure of amazement and the sense of wonder that a reading of *The Waste Land* inevitably brings, attentive to the poem's vertiginous twists and turns of language, responsive to its richly varied ironic and climactic moments, receptive to its lacerating wildness and stubborn refusal to accommodate our expectations. (127–28)

The triumph of *Revisiting "The Waste Land"* is to restore such receptivity to its readers while presenting at the same time what may well be the greatest achievement in literary forensic science we will see in our lifetimes.

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¹Nearly 50 pages of tables and appendices at the end of *Revisiting "The Waste Land"* document Rainey's research in enough detail to satisfy either a laboratory scientist or a textual critic.

²This article was first published in 1989 and later incorporated into *Institutions of Modernism* (Yale UP, 1998).