

Making a Waste Land: Ezra Pound, Fragmentation, and the Politics of Cultural Order

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Law, Letters, and Ideas

August 2026

Few editorial interventions in modern literature have been more consequential than Ezra Pound's work on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot acknowledged the debt with his dedication to Pound as *il miglior fabbro*, "the better craftsman." The surviving drafts, published by Valerie Eliot in 1971, make the reason visible. Pound cut ruthlessly, deleting whole passages, challenging particular lines and helping transform a much longer and more discursive poem into the compressed work published in 1922.

The usual verdict has been favourable. Pound cut the waste out of *The Waste Land*. Certainly much that disappeared was inferior to what survived. Yet the manuscripts invite another question. Pound did not merely shorten Eliot's poem. His excisions also intensified one of its most celebrated characteristics: fragmentation. Narrative connections became harder to discern; speakers appeared with less introduction; cultural allusions collided more abruptly; the reader was increasingly required to construct relations among apparently disconnected things.

This matters because fragmentation came to signify more than an aesthetic technique. *The Waste Land* became perhaps the supreme poetic representation of a civilization understood to be fragmented: spiritually exhausted, culturally discontinuous, incapable of integrating its inheritance into a coherent present. Pound himself immediately recognized the poem's larger significance, describing it shortly after publication as a "justification" of the modern experimental movement.

There is a potential circularity here. If Pound's editorial practice helped *produce* the aesthetic experience of fragmentation, to what extent can the resulting poem also be understood as confirming a diagnosis of cultural fragmentation? Put differently: did modernist technique merely represent a civilization that had become fragmented, or did it help teach its readers to experience that civilization as fragmented?

The question becomes more consequential in light of Pound's subsequent politics. During the following decade he became increasingly convinced that Western economic and cultural disorder required radical correction, eventually embracing Mussolini's Fascism as an integrating political force. It would be historically irresponsible to suggest that Pound edited *The Waste Land* in 1921–22 in order to make an argument for Fascism. His mature political commitments came

later. But it is legitimate to ask whether there is a continuity of intellectual habit: a tendency first to perceive multiplicity as disorder, and then to seek an unusually forceful ordering intelligence capable of mastering it.

The distinction between multiplicity and fragmentation is therefore crucial.

Before the Waste Land

Eliot's original title was not *The Waste Land*. It was *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, a phrase borrowed from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. Betty Higden praises Sloppy's newspaper reading because he performs its reports in different voices. Eliot's title consequently directs attention not initially to ruins or fragments but to voices.

The distinction is easily overlooked. Different voices need not imply a disintegrated whole. A play contains different voices. So does a liturgy, an orchestra, a city, even a civilization. Polyphony is plurality organized—or at least capable of being organized—within a larger form.

Jennifer Sorensen Emery-Peck has emphasized the importance of the Dickensian title for understanding the poem's interest in voice, narrative and readerly performance. Eliot's manuscript was already radically heterogeneous before Pound touched it. It shifted among speakers and registers, mixed literary culture with popular speech, and moved between contemporary life and inherited myth. Fragmentation cannot simply be attributed to Pound.

Nevertheless, the manuscripts demonstrate that Pound's intervention altered the degree and character of that heterogeneity. As A. David Moody has cautioned, Valerie Eliot's facsimile does not permit us to reconstruct every stage of the poem's evolution with certainty; Eliot himself made important deletions, and not every alteration can simply be assigned to Pound. But the surviving pages permit us to observe enough of Pound's editorial practice to establish something more precise than the general proposition that he made the poem shorter.

Three interventions are particularly revealing.

I. The Lost Beginning

The most dramatic difference confronts us before the published poem has properly begun.

The Waste Land famously opens with April breeding lilacs from the dead land. *He Do the Police in Different Voices* did not. Before that passage Eliot had written a substantial narrative opening in a colloquial voice, beginning with men drinking at "Tom's place" and proceeding through a recognizably social world.

The importance of Pound's recommendation that this material disappear is not merely quantitative. It changes the reader's point of entry.

Had the original beginning remained, we would enter the poem through a speaker, a social situation and something resembling narrative. We might not know precisely where the poem was going, but we would know that somebody was telling us something that happened.

After the deletion, we instead enter *The Waste Land* through a pronouncement:

“April is the cruellest month.”

The difference is profound. A situated voice has yielded to an apparently disembodied declaration. Narrative orientation has been replaced by interpretive uncertainty. The reader must discover where he is, who is speaking and what relation the ensuing images bear to one another.

Pound has not created Eliot’s plurality of voices. But by removing the frame within which one of those voices had been situated, his editing makes plurality feel more discontinuous.

The distinction matters for the cultural argument. The published opening seems almost inevitably to announce a world in which inherited associations have been reversed: spring is cruel, winter protective, regeneration painful. Yet this apparent inevitability is partly an editorial achievement. The manuscript reminds us that Eliot could—and initially did—approach his modern world through a more continuous narrative form.

Fragmentation here is not simply found. It is intensified by subtraction.

II. Fresca and the Disappearance of Satire

A second instructive deletion occurs in the material associated with “The Fire Sermon.” Eliot originally included an extended episode concerning Fresca, a fashionable woman whose morning routine is described in an elaborate mock-heroic manner. Pound marked the passage for deletion.

Few readers would wish it restored on purely aesthetic grounds. The passage is heavily indebted to Pope and Byron, and Pound evidently thought Eliot was writing too much in voices already perfected by others. The cut improves the poem.

But again, improvement has formal consequences.

Fresca belongs to a recognizable satirical tradition. Her world can be located socially, and the literary method by which Eliot treats it can be identified historically. The reader understands the governing convention: modern behaviour is being subjected to mock-heroic satire.

Remove Fresca and the published “Fire Sermon” becomes stranger and less securely mediated. The Thames, the typist and clerk, Tiresias, Elizabeth and Leicester, popular song and religious invocation approach one another through juxtaposition rather than through an extended satirical frame.

The cut therefore does two things simultaneously. It removes derivative material and strengthens the poem aesthetically; but it also removes a recognizable principle of organization.

This is precisely why the manuscript evidence complicates the familiar equation between modernist fragmentation and historical fragmentation. Pound's intervention can be aesthetically justified without treating its resulting discontinuity as sociological evidence.

The better poem is not necessarily the more accurate cultural diagnosis.

III. Death by Water

A third example is still more revealing. "Death by Water," the shortest section of the published poem, consists of the haunting episode of Phlebas the Phoenician. In the drafts, however, the sea material was substantially more extensive. Pound advocated severe compression.

Again his editorial judgment was formidable. What survives has the force of an emblem: individual history collapses into mortality, commerce into bodily dissolution, and the reader is abruptly addressed across the distinction between Gentile and Jew.

Yet compression also changes how the section functions structurally. An extended maritime episode becomes a brief shard between "The Fire Sermon" and "What the Thunder Said." The sea voyage ceases to operate substantially as narrative and becomes instead an image whose connections with the surrounding poem must be supplied by the reader.

The pattern across these examples is striking. The colloquial opening loses its narrative situation. Fresca's extended satire disappears. The maritime material contracts into an emblematic fragment.

The point is not that Pound followed a programme of destroying continuity. His motives differed from passage to passage, and in each instance there were compelling aesthetic reasons for his recommendations. Nor should Eliot's agency disappear behind the mythology of Pound's blue pencil: Eliot accepted, rejected and made alterations himself.

The narrower claim is enough. The editorial process repeatedly removes material that provides narrative extension, generic orientation or connective explanation.

What remains is more concentrated, more difficult—and more fragmentary.

Constructing the Evidence

Consider the familiar account of *The Waste Land*. Europe has undergone catastrophe: industrialization, mechanized warfare, the First World War, religious uncertainty and the weakening of inherited cultural authority have left modern humanity alienated from its past and from itself. Eliot therefore writes a fragmented poem because fragmentation is the appropriate form for a fragmented civilization.

There is considerable truth in this. Eliot was not inventing the Great War, modern urban anonymity or the crisis of European confidence. Nor was Pound.

But an artwork is not a sociological survey. Its form does not simply record reality. It constructs an experience of reality.

This is where Pound's editorial role becomes significant. By removing transitions, narrative extension and explanatory material, the editorial process helped create a poem in which the reader experiences discontinuity directly. Voices arrive without secure identification. Literary traditions survive as quotations displaced from their original settings. High and popular culture jostle against one another. Languages change. Places change. Historical periods collapse together. The reader must perform the work of integration that the poem itself conspicuously withholds.

The result is extraordinarily powerful. It is also potentially circular if the aesthetic effect is subsequently treated as evidence for the cultural diagnosis that informed it.

The reasoning can be stated simply:

Modern culture is fragmented. A poem adequate to modern culture should therefore be fragmented. The poem is deliberately made more fragmented. The resulting poem powerfully makes us experience modern culture as fragmented. That experience then appears to confirm the proposition with which we began: modern culture is fragmented.

This is not "begging the question" in the strict logical sense. Poems are not syllogisms. It is better described as **confirmation through aesthetic construction**. A representation produced according to a diagnosis acquires such cultural authority that the representation itself begins to validate the diagnosis.

Valerie Eliot's facsimile makes the problem unusually visible. We possess, as it were, something approaching the before-and-after evidence. We can see passages crossed out. We can compare a narrated beginning with the published beginning, an extended satire with its absence, an extended sea passage with an emblematic remnant.

The Waste Land is not merely discovered. To some extent, it is **made**.

From Plurality to Ruin

The original title raises an even more fundamental possibility. What if some of what modernism calls fragmentation is actually **plurality**?

Eliot's poem contains Dante and popular song, Shakespeare and pub conversation, Wagner and the Upanishads, ancient myth and contemporary London. One interpretation sees these materials as fragments of a civilization that can no longer hold itself together.

But another interpretation is possible. Their simultaneous presence demonstrates the remarkable persistence of cultural memory. Dante remains available to a twentieth-century American living in London. Sanskrit scripture can speak within a European poem. Shakespeare and music-hall

language inhabit the same imaginative field. The voices are different, but difference does not by itself establish disintegration.

Indeed, Eliot's abandoned Dickensian title may imply precisely the opposite. The remarkable quality of Sloppy's reading is that **one reader can give voice to many voices**.

The distinction between polyphony and fragmentation therefore precedes any proposed solution to cultural crisis. If plurality is diagnosed as fragmentation, the need for some principle of reintegration becomes almost self-evident. But if plurality can possess an internal or organic coherence, the demand for an externally imposed unity becomes less compelling.

Here Pound's later intellectual development becomes relevant.

The Hunger for Order

Any attempt to connect Pound's 1921–22 editorial work directly to his later Fascism must confront chronology. Mussolini became prime minister only in October 1922, the same month in which *The Waste Land* appeared in *The Criterion*. Pound's enthusiastic identification with the Italian regime developed subsequently and became particularly pronounced in the 1930s. He met Mussolini in 1933; *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* appeared in 1935.

It would therefore be anachronistic to imagine Pound editing Eliot's manuscript as a covert Fascist project.

The more defensible question is whether his aesthetics and politics reveal a **continuity of disposition**.

Pound's career repeatedly combines extraordinary receptiveness to heterogeneous cultural material with an equally extraordinary desire to organize it. His poetry reaches across Provençal literature, Confucius, classical antiquity, Chinese poetry, Renaissance Italy, American history, economics and contemporary politics. *The Cantos* are themselves a monument to multiplicity.

Yet Pound was not content simply to celebrate multiplicity. He searched relentlessly for principles by which the apparent chaos of history might be judged and ordered. His economic theories, his fascination with Confucian social order, his historical exemplars and eventually his enthusiasm for Mussolini all belong, however differently, to this search for coherence.

David Barnes, examining Pound's cultural activity in Fascist Italy, has argued that distinctions between Pound's aesthetic and political engagements became increasingly blurred during the 1930s. Paul Morrison has more broadly insisted that the relation between modernist poetics and the authoritarian politics into which important modernists were drawn deserves serious attention. Such scholarship rightly cautions against treating Pound the brilliant poet and Pound the Fascist as wholly unrelated persons.

But continuity need not mean causation. The editing of *The Waste Land* did not cause Pound's Fascism. Nor does literary fragmentation contain some hidden Fascist essence.

The claim is narrower: **Pound repeatedly confronted multiplicity by searching for an ordering intelligence capable of imposing meaningful form upon it.**

In the manuscript of *The Waste Land*, that intelligence was the editor.

In his later political imagination, the stakes became considerably higher.

The Editor and the Strong Hand

There is an irony here. Pound makes *The Waste Land* more fragmentary by exercising unusually strong editorial control over it.

The finished poem therefore combines two apparently opposite qualities: **fragmentation in the object and authority in its construction.**

The reader encounters broken voices, dislocated traditions and abrupt transitions. Behind them stands Pound's pencil, striking through passages and recommending what remains and what disappears. Disorder is not simply allowed to proliferate; its presentation is meticulously controlled.

This paradox suggests a more precise way of relating Pound's aesthetic and political imaginations. His attraction may not have been to fragmentation *per se*. It may have been to the relationship between **apparent disorder and decisive form.**

That formulation also explains why calling Pound merely an apostle of fragmentation is inadequate. His modernism did not require the destruction of the past. Pound obsessively recovered the past. What mattered was selection, arrangement, renewal—the intervention of discriminating intelligence upon inherited material.

The danger arises when an aesthetic model migrates into political thought. A poem can benefit from ruthless editing. A civilization consists of persons who cannot legitimately be treated as lines in a manuscript.

The analogy should therefore not be pushed too far. Yet Pound himself increasingly blurred the boundaries among art, economics, culture and government. His later writings make clear that he regarded cultural renewal as inseparable from political and economic reorganization.

Once a society is understood primarily as incoherent, decadent or disintegrating, the figure capable of restoring coherence acquires enormous appeal. The diagnosis prepares imaginative space for the cure.

And this returns us to *The Waste Land*.

Did the Waste Land Need Saving?

Pound's editorial achievement may inadvertently illuminate one of the recurrent temptations of cultural pessimism. The pessimist begins by identifying real disorder. He then organizes selected evidence into a compelling account of decline. The coherence of the account can make the decline appear more comprehensive than the evidence warrants. Finally, the severity of the diagnosis makes increasingly radical remedies appear necessary.

In Pound's case, the pattern deserves scrutiny because the aesthetic and political histories eventually converge so disastrously.

Yet Eliot himself complicates the story. His own subsequent search for integration led not to Pound's Fascist economics but toward Christianity, tradition and religious authority. Hart Crane, meanwhile, resisted what he took to be the cultural pessimism represented by Eliot while retaining the technical achievements of modernism. Crane sought forms capable of discovering continuity within modern experience rather than merely recording its apparent disintegration.

These different responses remind us that the diagnosis never dictates the cure.

They also suggest that the decisive question may come earlier: **was the West as culturally fragmented as the modernists sometimes taught us to experience it?**

The Waste Land remains powerful precisely because no simple answer is possible. Its fragments really do communicate alienation. Yet they also communicate with one another. Dante speaks to London; antiquity speaks to modernity; Eastern scripture speaks into Western poetry. Even the act of quotation contradicts complete cultural rupture, because quotation requires transmission. A fragment can only be recognized as a fragment because something of the whole survives.

The poem's celebrated concluding act of gathering fragments against ruin can therefore be read in two ways. It can testify to civilization's disintegration. But the gathering itself is already an act of preservation.

The deeper question raised by Pound's intervention is therefore not whether Fascism somehow lies hidden inside *The Waste Land*. It plainly does not. It is whether a cultural diagnosis can partly manufacture the evidence by which it persuades us of its truth.

Pound helped make a fragmented masterpiece out of Eliot's many voices. The masterpiece then became one of the twentieth century's most persuasive images of a fragmented civilization.

But this leads to a further and more unsettling implication. If the experience of fragmentation is, at least in part, an effect of editorial and formal construction rather than a transparent reflection of historical reality, then the evidential force of that fragmentation is weakened. The case for cultural disintegration may be less secure than *The Waste Land*'s authority as a modernist monument has encouraged us to believe.

This does not mean that modernity was not marked by genuine rupture, violence or discontinuity. It clearly was. The issue is not whether fragmentation is real, but how literary form mediates its perception.

The Waste Land's enormously influential vision of cultural fragmentation should therefore be treated not as an established fact but as a constructed interpretive experience—one capable of amplifying discontinuities while underrepresenting continuities, survivals and forms of latent coherence.

Fragmentation, in other words, may be less a condition of modernity than a dominant modernist mode of seeing modernity.

If that is so, *The Waste Land* does not only diagnose cultural breakdown; it participates in shaping the terms in which breakdown becomes thinkable. Its authority rests not on the inevitability of its vision but on the extraordinary persuasive force of its form.

This opens a different critical horizon. Rather than taking fragmentation as the final word on modern Western culture, we might recover the possibility of a plural continuity: overlapping traditions, competing voices and resilient structures of meaning that persist without requiring either an imagined return to cultural homogeneity or the imposition of a single ordering authority.

And perhaps Eliot's discarded title understood something important. *He Do the Police in Different Voices* describes not silence after cultural catastrophe but the persistence of many voices—and the mysterious ability of a single consciousness to hear them.

Pound's editing helped turn those voices into the fragments through which generations learned to imagine modernity. His later politics sought an increasingly powerful means of imposing coherence upon the cultural and economic disorder he perceived around him. We should not collapse those two historical moments into a single intention. But neither should we assume they have nothing to say to each other.

Before accepting fragmentation as fate, we might therefore return once more to the manuscript.

The question is not whether the West was fragmented, but why fragmentation became the form in which it learned to recognize itself. For if in the West the proposition can be successfully challenged that fragmentation is an essential, rather than accidental, feature of our condition, then the thesis might be put forward that the unification of diverse voices around a common architecture and creed is not only possible, but desirable, and that doing so can be mandate and self-conception of poetry in our time and place.

Sources

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