

## **Eliot's Detective and Rowson's *The Waste Land***

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**Abstract:** As someone who made the modern world confront and acknowledge the horror of its existence, T. S. Eliot's influence on the modern psyche is undeniable. Among Eliot's poetic "heap of broken images" (*The Waste Land* 23), *The Waste Land* shines the brightest, colouring the psyche of Eliot's successors with its grandeur. This influence, while shaping the minds and by extension, the words of the later writers, simultaneously restricts the free play of the meaning by acting as a yardstick against which every single literary creation is created and assessed. The paper intends to explore the relationship between Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* and Martin Rowson's graphic novel *The Waste Land* in the context of Harold Bloom's theory of the "Anxiety of Influence" and Eliot's notion of "tradition and individual talent." Rowson's graphic novel, *The Waste Land*, is set in the heart of the detritus of the modern world, a world reminiscent of Eliot's "Unreal City" (*Waste Land* 60). As the precursor poet, Eliot's influence on Rowson's text can be discerned in the graphics, which are heavily influenced by the narrative of *The Waste Land*.

This chapter division corresponds to the five sections of the poem and the frequent appearance of characters such as Sweeney and Prufrock from Eliot's other poems. The graphic novel revolves around Chris Marlowe, who is on a quest to unearth the truth behind his partner's death. As he journeys across London in search of the murderer, one is confronted with the realisation that his quest to find the perpetrator mimics his and, by extension, a reader's journey through the labyrinthian alleyways of Eliot's text. In doing so, Rowson's successor text presents an alternative lens to view Eliot's antecedent poem, thereby exercising an influence at par with Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, influence, detective, antecedent, successor

The Western history of the strife of supremacy between the masculine progenitor and the successor can be traced back to the Sophoclean play *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus, the son, inadvertently kills his father and subsumes him to the extent of assuming his political as well as social roles—a ruler of Thebes and the husband of Jocasta. This anxiety of paternal subjugation engendering a desire for freedom via complete paternal annihilation was set in motion by the twin impact of both the pagan Greek pantheon and the Christian Satan. Eventually, it percolated into the psyche of the Western poet enslaving him into a system dictated by his poetic father, a result of his contradictory emotions of admiration (born out of idealisation) and envy (spawned by unwanted indebtedness).

Condemned, by his belatedness, "To learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*" (Bloom 26), he wishes to supersede the precursor at any cost and to become the untainted original that lies beyond the impact of any psycho-poetic influence. His "anguish of contamination" (Bloom xi), or what Bloom otherwise refers to as "the anxiety of influence," thus, compels him to orient his creative genius more towards overcoming the overwhelming influence of the poetic predecessors than towards artistic creation. This is done through "a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation...[or] 'poetic misprision'" (Bloom xxiii) which allows them "to clear imaginative space for themselves" (Bloom 5).

A *bricoleur* par excellence, Thomas Stearns Eliot sought to free the Western authorial psyche from the angst of literary influence by embracing Tradition as a formative force to be cultivated and subsumed instead of opposed and contested. In his essay titled *Tradition and Individual Talent*, he explains that Tradition is not something that is involuntarily or unconsciously acquired but something that has to be consciously earned and laboured for. Eliot's Tradition demands a greater awareness, a "historical sense" (37), on behalf of the author

regarding his position in literary history in a way that completes his work and exalts him instead of subjugating him. More importantly, he asserts that poetic influence is a bilateral force "The necessity that he [belated poet] shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided..." (Eliot "Tradition" 37). Thus, the belated poet is not entirely a slave to the Tradition, parroting pre-created words and phrases; he has the agency to alter the existing canon of literary Tradition by attaching an added dimension and extra significance to it. His journey towards becoming a greater poet, therefore, involves an implicit submission to the Tradition and a perpetual erasure of the personality till the mind of the poet becomes one with the minds of his powerful poetic forefathers who forged the Tradition: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot "Tradition" 39). In doing so, the poet denies the Tradition of its power of influence by becoming one with precisely the thing that it was being influenced with.

### ***The Waste Land and Eliot's Tradition***

Eliot's theory of Tradition is, perhaps, best typified by his modernist collage of epic proportions, *The Waste Land*, where Eliot channels his individual talent through the framing network of allusions to multiple works by his empyrean precursors: "...we shall often find that not only the best but the most individual parts of his [poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Eliot "Tradition" 37). These allusions, despite their density and complexity, guide the readers through the labyrinthian alleyways of Eliot's poetry and simultaneously bestow it with a touch of universality and timelessness: "I gave the references in my notes, in order to make the reader who recognised the allusion, know that I meant him to recognise it, and know that he would have missed the point if he did not recognise it" (Eliot, Dante 128).

Moreover, they act as Eliot's coping mechanism against "the anxiety of influence" by establishing a connection between the canonised precursors and his poem and making him partake in their greatness without replicating them entirely. His allusions, he believes, elevate him from the stature of a mere imitator to an independent poet worthy of canonisation since his reliance on Tradition makes him akin to "the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations" (Ulysses 130).

It is, therefore, somewhat ironic that the works of T. S. Eliot, who seeks to be an alleviator of influence anxiety, should colour the psyche of his successors with their grandeur—shaping their minds and, by extension, their words and restricting the free play of their meaning by acting as a yardstick against which every single literary creation is created and assessed. In this context, it would be interesting to assess the influence Eliot exerts over an artist like Martin Rowson, who willingly (much like Eliot) embraces the influence of Tradition in his graphic novel entitled *The Waste Land*, "a deliberately unsettled mixture of parody, homage, and travesty" (Williams and Brunner 180); and how Rowson manoeuvres through the poetic-path peppered with artistic influence.

### **Clinamen and Rowson's Swerve**

Rowson's graphic novel, *The Waste Land*, is set in the heart of the detritus of the modern world, a world reminiscent of Eliot's "Unreal City" (Waste Land 60). It revolves around Christopher Marlowe, a West Coast private investigator who is on a quest to unearth the truth behind his partner's murder. As he journeys from Los Angeles to London, and eventually through its rat-infested alleyways, to avenge his partner's murder, he becomes increasingly entwined in a whirlpool of events evocative of hard-boiled detective fiction. Rowson's detective story gradually segues into a quest for the mythical Holy Grail as multiple murders, and disappointing deceptions give way to an uncomprehending crusade through the criminal underbelly leading Marlowe to the Holy Grail. While the criminal context of Rowson's text

seduces one away from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Marlowe's seemingly aimless crusade through London brings one right back to it.

Rowson's text, thus, is not a simplistic adaptation of Eliot's *The Waste Land* that merely highlights, elucidates, explains and comments upon its significant aspects (McHale 34); it does more than transpose Eliot's poem into the graphic medium (Tabachnik 2, 8). It is his means of coping with the anxiety born out of his inability to reach the intended meaning of Eliot's poem, which is rendered further ungraspable by its fragmentary and polyvocal nature. In fact, Marlowe's search for the meaning of his partner's death through the bread-crumbs trails of digressing and distracting evidence is symbolic of Rowson's search for the meaning of Eliot's text on the basis of textual evidence.

As he distils Eliot's text through the filter of detective fiction, he adjusts his trajectory marginally instead of blindly following his footsteps and clears up a little bit of space for himself amidst the literary stalwarts. Consequently, his creative revisionism of Eliot's antecedent text as a detective fiction swerves away from the powerful original in such a way that he is partially freed from the imposing shadow of Eliot's tremendous legacy and, at the same time, celebrates it. Rowson's swerve has a striking resemblance to Bloom's first revisionary ratio called *Clinamen or swerves*, where the ephebe tries to fade the continuum between his poetic present and past by swerving away from the original trajectory of the precursor text in order to heighten its significance in the greater matrix of the literary canon: "This [*Clinamen*] appears as a corrective movement in his poem, which implies that the precursor went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction that the new poem swerves" (Bloom 14, 42).

### **Tessera and the Narrative Gaps**

Beyond the title, which is a major giveaway, Eliot's influence on Rowson's text can be discerned in the graphics, which are heavily influenced by the narrative of *The Waste Land* as

well as other poems of Eliot; the depiction of urban life as a suffocating, alienating and disintegrating reality; a narrative whose structuration is heavily reliant on the myth of the Holy Grail as a means of making sense of an unintelligible present via an intelligible past; the chapter division corresponding the five sections of the poem; a style that frequently alludes to the whole gamut of *Western literary Tradition*; the frequent appearance of characters such as Sweeny and Prufrock from Eliot's other poems; and more. Despite the overwhelming similarities, what distinguishes Rowson's text from that of Eliot's is his decision to use his position as an epebe to his advantage; he uses his belatedness as a strength: "the difference between the present and the past is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (Eliot, *Tradition* 38). As if the swerve was not enough, Rowson takes a step ahead and engages with the narrative gaps in Eliot's text to complete them in order to concretise his originality or, at least, his individuality.

The fragmentary nature of *The Waste Land* has been highlighted by many:

- Eliot refers to it as a "heap of broken images" (23).
- McHale characterises it as a "quasi-narrative poem" (34).
- Kinney calls it a "poetic anti-narrative" (180).

In fact, its fragmentation was a deliberate choice made by Eliot's "*il miglior fabbro*" (Eliot *Waste Land* 3), Ezra Pound, who inserted narrative fissure into a connected, continuous, cohesive and coherent narrative by eliminating enormous narrative chunks of the poem. Rowson utilises his belated insight into the narrative gaps in the poem and, as Brian McHale observes, "narrativises *The Waste Land*. In other words, Rowson takes a text that...is only sporadically, obliquely and problematically narrative, and supplies the missing or "lost" narrative elements" (34). Rowson does so through the persona of Christopher Marlow, who is sent on a wild goose chase for a lost object. Marlowe's journey becomes symbolic of Rowson's pursuit of the "lost" segments of Eliot's poem as the undefined lost object in the graphic novel

is revealed to be the mythical Holy Grail—the source of the very myth which is used as an organising principle of *The Waste Land* by Eliot. As Eliot confessed in his "Notes" on *The Waste Land*, "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the *Grail legend: From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge)" (21). By embedding the Grail legend, which is the key to deciphering Eliot's poem into the plot of his text, Rowson *supplements* Eliot's text and, by extension, completes it. However, the restored story may not be the same as the one intended by Eliot (McHale 46).

Rowson's defragmentation of Eliot's poem may be categorised as Tessera or link, Bloom's second revisionary ratio where "[a] poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 14). In doing so, Rowson manages to capture, however fleetingly, the elusive meaning of Eliot's *piece de résistance*, which attaches a sense of eminence to his multimodal adaptation of Eliot. However, since the meaning that he attaches to Eliot's poem may not be the same as the one intended by Eliot, Eliot's antecedent text must accommodate the additional signification. To quote William and Brunner, "Every panel...negotiates a place for itself in Eliot's original poem" (180). As a text capable of influencing Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Rowson's *The Waste Land*, therefore, assumes a grander stature and manages to establish itself as a strong successor text.

### **Citations, Repetitions and Kenosis**

An adaptation of Eliot's *The Waste Land* must borrow its erudite and esoteric nature. However, what really individualises Rowson's graphic novel is the nature of the allusions he relies on. As previously established, Rowson's text is no ordinary adaptation of Eliot's poem, and the distinction between the two is further enhanced by Rowson's treatment of the materials he derives and borrows from Eliot. While the American edition closely follows the text of Eliot's

poem, including the verbatim reproduction of several sections of the poem as well as the names of some of its characters, the British edition had to do away with any quotation or reference that established a connection between Eliot's poem and Rowson's text in order to accommodate the rigorous British copyright laws. What followed was erasing textual references, renaming of characters, and replacing citations present in Eliot's poem with newer ones (Williams and Brunner 179-180). For instance, Mike the Minoan assumed the identity of Phlebas the Phoenician, Mr. Eugenides was rechristened Mr. Eumenides, and Idaho Ez replaced Stetson. Similarly, Eliot's Latin epigraph with Greek interpolation was replaced by a thematically similar, alternative Latin text with Greek words wherein Sibyl's pitiful whisper, "I want to die," became Chiron's powerful cry, "I don't want to be immortal!" (McHale 195). As taxing as the whole endeavour might have been for Rowson, the adjustments allow him to retain some autonomy and agency as an ephebe doomed to create replicas.

Thus, Rowson, in the British edition, seemingly empties himself of any discernible influence of Eliot by repeatedly re-enacting Eliot's method of poetic creation—citations from arcane sources and the usage of Tradition as a catalyst for his evolving individual talent—with a difference. This allows Rowson to present his text in a way that the reader might mistake some of the citations by him as those from Eliot's text—"His stance *appears* to be that of his precursor...but the meaning of the stance is undone" (Bloom 90), and he is mistaken to be his own precursor. To elucidate, for a reader without knowledge of Latin and Greek, Eliot's epigraph and Rowson's prologue might seem woefully similar, especially since the sentiments their translations reflect border congruence. One might even mistake the two to be the same, thereby, allowing Rowson's quote to displace that of Eliot and by extension bestowing upon him the honour of partial authorship of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This act of Rowson follows the third revisionary ratio of Bloom or *Kenosis*, whereby he forces a

discontinuity between Eliot, the precursor, and himself. By isolating himself from Eliot, he is undoing his influence and, consequently, his godhood (Bloom Anxiety 88, 90).

### **Demonization and Rowson's Counter-Sublime**

Any adaptation of Eliot's *The Waste Land* is incomplete without including his notorious "Notes." Rowson's adaptation condenses Eliot's multi-page "Notes" into a single-page illustration depicting a cryptic conversation between Eliot and Marlowe. "The Notes" section opens with a "Snip Snip" sound which leads one to a figure resembling Eliot, who is shown to be snipping away excerpts from the books that Eliot has alluded to in *The Waste Land*—a visual representation of Eliot's poetic montage. The subsequent panels present a frustrated Marlowe barging into Eliot's dominion, demanding an insight into the mystery he has been confronting surrounding the murder of his partner, the quest for the mythical Holy Grail, and the meaning of Eliot's text: "So tell me about the dead chauffeur. How's the figure? And what's the big beef about London and the goddam river? And Eugenides, and the kid with the Hyacinths... How's all that hang together?" (Rowson 60).

Rowson, through the persona of Marlowe, interrogates Eliot and, through this very interrogation, disempowers him. Eliot's evasive response in a foreign tongue which is just as abstruse as his poem, is promptly resisted by Rowson—"Quit the wiseguy stuff! Give me the juice on the grail!" (60). Instead of letting Eliot's influence stifle his art, Rowson makes a conscious decision to investigate the mystery underlying the core of Eliot's poetry in order to understand it, and in the process, creates a Counter-Sublime to Eliot's Sublime. Bloom characterises this move as daemonization or "a movement towards a personalised Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime" (Bloom 15). When Eliot insists on the immortality and unchangeable nature of his work through the borrowed lines of Ovid (Rowson 60), Rowson highlights the ephemeral quality of Eliot's words and depicts those "words

becoming undone as their context is shifted about; no author is powerful enough to withstand questioning" (Williams and Brunner 189).

As an epebe, he may not be strong enough to solve the mystery at the heart of Eliot's poem, but his attempt to do so brings him one step closer. Relishing his newfound strength, he lands one last blow and ends his adaptation with a cheeky "Thantih Thantih Thantih, thuckers!!" (Rowson 60). The distorted omen of peace that he concludes with, only serves to create a sense of unease as the reader confronts Eliot's failure to provide the peace ("Shantih") it promises. Thus, Rowson, like a daemonized epebe, questions the untouchable stature of Eliot as a precursor by launching a two-pronged attack that both highlights the weakness of Eliot's poetry to humanize him (Bloom 100) and heightens the strength of Rowson's text and in the process strengthens him—"Daemonization or the Counter Sublime is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins" (Bloom 101).

### **Ubiquity of Influence and Askesis**

In the final section of Rowson's *The Waste Land*, the character of Eliot remarks upon his position as an epebe to the classical poets. The impact of the anxiety of influence upon him is so strong that he can only articulate using borrowed phrases from his predecessors:

et me fecere poetam

Pierides, sunt et mihi carmina, me quoque dicunt

vatem pastores; sed non ego credulus illis.

nam neque adhuc Vario videor nec dicere Cinna

digna, sed argutos inter strepere anser olores. (Virgil qtd. in Rowson 60)

He, like Virgil's *Lycidas*, is lamenting how his songs or poems are inferior compared to his dazzling classical predecessors represented by Cinna and Varius. Eliot's lament is also a confession of his dependence on other poets, note Williams and Brunner—"he had borrowed the best parts of his poem" (189). Here Rowson, much like Eliot, foregrounds the collaborative

nature of literature and shows how not even an influential poet like Eliot can evade the all-pervasive influence of literary Tradition. This leads one to the fifth revisionary ratio *Askesis* where the belated poet "yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment...and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an askesis too; the precursor's endowment is also truncated" (Bloom 15).

Rowson's story, like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, begins with a homage to the opening lines of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: "It was April. April with its showers sweet, as the poet said. Well, nuts to that..." (2). Here the poet is Chaucer and the line it refers to is, "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote" (41). From the very outset Rowson wants us to feel the looming presence of powerful precursors which truncates his poetic talent. Once we have unearthed the presence of Chaucer, we are redirected to Eliot's *The Waste Land* whose opening lines, "April is the cruellest month" (5), boast a similar influence, thereby truncating Eliot's endowment through association. As a poet suffering from the pangs of anxiety of influence, Rowson seeks to establish a camaraderie with Eliot as if to assert how he too, like Eliot, is a strong poet despite the evidence supporting the ubiquitous presence of influence, and in doing so assumes a greater significance at the cost of "curtailment, a sacrifice of some part of himself whose absence will individuate him more, as a poet" (Bloom 121).

### ***Apophrades and the Re-fragmentation of The Waste Land***

Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a poem comprising multiple segments. Its five major sections accommodate multiple sub-sections with different contexts, narrators and characters. While, Rowson tries to weave them together in his graphic novel, in the process he also ends up incorporating a different form of segmentation in the form of gutters and the narrative gaps characteristic of detective fiction. His defragmentation of Eliot's poem constitutes a re-fragmentation of the same, and much like Eliot's *The Waste Land* one has to fill in the narrative gaps as one traverses from one panel to the next.

For example, if we consider the first 18 lines of Eliot's poem, they give us an impression of continuity which a closer examination dismantles. Lines 1-4 have a prophetic tinge to them, followed by lines 5-7 which are spoken by a suffering collective. The narrative then suddenly shifts to accommodate the reminiscing voice of a woman named "Marie" across lines 8-18. Rowson illustrates this section of Eliot's poem in the first page of the first chapter of his graphic novel, "The Burial of the Dead." He gives names and faces to the multiplicity of voices that one encounters in Eliot's text, and soliloquies and monologues become dialogues. While making us aware of these hidden segments in Eliot's text, Rowson's graphic novel simultaneously re-fragments the same across three asymmetrical panels, and once more, the reader is compelled to use his imagination to fill in the narrative gaps. As Brian McHales points out, "Rowson often segments his version in different places than Eliot does; he re-segments *The Waste Land*, filling in where Eliot left gaps, and opening gaps where Eliot's text was continuous and unsegmented" (44-45). The visualization of Eliot's narrative, the re-framing of the poetic text as dialogues, the usage of flashbacks and spatial displacements to create as well as undo poetic discontinuities make us read and interpret Eliot's poem differently. This propensity of Rowson's text of influencing Eliot's poem finally subverts the idea of poetic influence to the extent that the reader often left to wonder whether their misprision of Eliot is inherent to the text or is influenced by Rowson's graphic novel. Rowson finally achieves the final step, that is, Apophrades or "a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being imitated by their ancestors" (Bloom 141). In doing so, Rowson throws a belated shadow of influence on Eliot's text to the extent that the readers of Eliot's poem might look into Rowson's graphic novel for insightful clues, as they do with Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.

Through his misreading or misprision of Eliot in the form of a visual representation of the history of intra-poetic relationships embedded in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Rowson finally manages to come to terms with his position as an epebe and the incumbent anxiety of influence. Simultaneously, he also manages to truncate the poetic prowess of Eliot, however fleetingly, by making Eliot seem like the author of Rowson's text and vice versa. Thereby creating an occasional illusion of Marlowe being Eliot's detective and Rowson authoring Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

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