Positioning the Implied Reader: Using Hypertext to Enhance Students' Reading Experience of *The Waste Land*
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When I include T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* in my American Survey syllabus, colleagues frequently ask whether the poem is too challenging for the students; there are obvious gains from a study of the poem, especially when looking at the Modernist literature of the time and writers such as Stein, Pound, Faulkner and Fitzgerald—but then again if a class plans to discuss how Eliot negotiates the modernist sense of alienation and isolation there are poems students find less unfamiliar in terms of structure and composition, poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Indeed, my own apprehension when I started including *The Waste Land* centered on the possibility students would perceive the poem as the epitome of the esoteric and exclusionary endeavor popular culture paints poetry to be; eventually I decided to use the poem as an opportunity to enhance the necessary contextual study of social, historical, and literary conditions with an exploration of the role of readers in literature—and the tool that offered these opportunities for such multiple examinations was none other than the much-maligned internet. Supplementing the reading of the poem in print form with the hypertext version of it allows students to experience inter-textuality as a series of choices for further meaning rather than a necessary hunt for sources, while it enables students to understand the implied reader position embodied in the poem and for them to accept the possibility of themselves taking that position despite the distance (historical, social, cultural) from the era of the poem's composition.

As a class we first engage in an overview of the era and the works of American Modernism, both in fiction and poetry, which define the literary space between the two World Wars; in their encounters with Modernist poetry students exhibit, with apologies to Coleridge, a willing suspension of intolerance for denseness and allusion. They may lack an initial mode of accessing the text when reading poems from other literary periods as well, but they have accepted as a *de facto* part of the class process that Modernist poems will be inaccessible to them—after all their textbook has informed them that Modernist poetry sought to chart new and sometimes unpopular paths of expression. Regardless of our introductory discussion to Modernism, however, students continue to hold the assumption that they are unsuitable readers for the products of the Modernist period—they have assimilated current cultural distinctions between popular culture and high culture and despite being college students and thus already part of an intellectual upper class they consider that any poem intentionally difficult to access is not one where they are the implied reader, and they instead imagine a historical reader of these poems that, whoever she may have been, welcomed these difficulties and had venues of approaching the texts which they do not possess. The tipping point in their tolerance comes with not simply *The Waste Land*, of course, but with the notes Eliot provides. For the first encounter with the poem, I ask students to read the poem without the additional notes survey anthologies furnish, since Eliot's notes have actually had a multiplying effect in the supplementary materials of editors as well. Even so, students express strong accusations of elitism against Eliot on the basis that he did not expect his contemporary readers would be able to understand the poem without the notes; in reflective writing in class, students express the belief that the poet used allusions meant to limit the audience, and they consider problematic the variety of source material from Biblical, Eastern, and Arthurian myths to name but a few, since all these allusions

presuppose a well-read individual far from the "common reader" as student writing notes.

Conceptions of readers come up frequently in our discussion of Modernism, and reader expectations and how texts meet them or, in the case of much Modernist literature, defy them is a commonplace in post-civil war American literature anthology textbooks. Yet the term reader itself deserves more exploration than the anthologies provide, so before we proceed with a second look into *The Waste Land* I provide students with a summary of Daniel Wilson' *PMLA* article "Readers in Texts" which I also place on reserve in the library. While in-depth reviews of theories of literary criticism are not usually in the class curriculum, the article brings some balance to student notions of poetry as the Romantic and rather Wordsworthian idea of spontaneous overflow of emotion where the poet has no reader in mind. In the article Wilson incorporates various models of reader-response criticism as he collapses many similar terms into the ideas of the real reader and the implied reader (he also identifies the intended reader as "the idea of the reader that forms in the author's mind" but at this point such a detour is beyond the scope of the class and would only confuse students) . We explore what the term implied reader means given the definition of "the behavior, attitudes, and background—presupposed or defined, usually indirectly, in the text itself" (848) and analyze the overlap between Wilson's term of the implied reader and the ideal reader, a formerly more common term in reader-response. We then discuss whether they consider themselves to fit in this category of implied reader (since they automatically have become real readers); again, the notes resurface as an argument on the exclusive nature of the poem, with some students concluding that if Eliot expected a reader whose repertoire of references readily involves works such as *From Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*, then the abstraction of audience encountered in the text form a very small and, in their eyes, rather exclusive group.

At this point I do ask students to consider how they define access and education, and whether they themselves already have moved to a more exclusive level of reading than others; I share with them the experience I had in teaching *The Waste Land* in a junior college in Georgia, where I had the opportunity to teach it as part of one-semester survey of British literature; I explain how in that class most of the students who started the course with Chaucer and were familiar with his line about April and his sweet showers were able to make a connection to the line's opening line that "April is the cruelest month" without them being part of Eliot's implied audience in the sense (exclusive and limiting) they had defined it, since they were fellow college students. I then introduce the class to the hypertext available at <http://eliotsWaste Land.tripod.com>.

The website offers a side by side presentation of the text and all notes, both Eliot's and others' such as the ones in the Norton anthology as well as additional notes the website's creators have incorporated, and the ease of having notes and text visually together relieves some of the anxiety about the text. Of course it would be possible for students to have access to these notes and source material in print form, yet the benefits of using a hypertext version go beyond the mere availability of the material since, as Ute Kraidy explains, "[h]ypertextuality suggests the simultaneous presence of additional texts, hence creating a notion of an endless space: a virtual place " (99). The very medium of hypertext has embedded the idea of inter-textuality in a form familiar to students, where each text and the links it contains are but one level of a multiplicity of layers of meaning with near-infinite inter-connections. Thus the familiar to students form of inter-textuality present in hypertext can act as a bridge for the unfamiliar inter-textuality of Eliot's poem. Quickly students discover and become very excited at the availability of Eliot's literary references, from Whitman to *Tristan and Isolde*, at a touch of a button. An area of the website lead to some unexpected reactions as well: The link offering help and guidance in

how to use the website presents the links to other texts as websites which "will probably contain the text where Eliot stole the phrase from" (Hypertext). Students asked me if that meant T.S. Eliot had committed plagiarism; I saw the question as an invitation for the class to explore the degrees of inter-textuality in *The Waste Land*, and the differences between parts influenced by other works, parts with references or allusions to other works, and to use perspectives on hypertext to explain the relationship of Eliot's poem to its connected texts.

As students explore the hypertext links in a computer lab, I ask them to describe the effect of reading the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" and then being able to click and be transported to Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the reading before using hypertext, the common answer from those students who became aware of references was that such references were instances of T.S. Eliot's showmanship, a demonstration of his extensive studies and education. Yet once students themselves instantly have access to these texts, and because internet has made obsolete the idea that to be able to include such a reference shows extensive studies and education (anyone can google them, after all), the emphasis in class then turns to how much of *The Tempest* are we supposed to bring into the reading of the poem as readers—how much are we supposed to stay at that next level of hypertext accessed through the link . The responses run the gamut from the opinion that the line is Eliot's homage to his own idea in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," a nod to a master playwright, to those who believe the allusion to be one of the fragments the poet speaks of, one fragment no more individually important than the other. I then invite students to explore the idea of inter-textuality in the internet and its equivalent in Eliot's poem by asking them to consider any given Wikipedia article: how much of it can be understood on its first level and what does further exploration of the links/references yield? Do the links deepen, enhance, or maybe even complicate

understanding of the first level of the hypertext? Are they necessary in order to understand the main text? Since students are familiar with how hypertext works, they are able to transfer their knowledge to the analogy with *The Waste Land* proper and its notes, and for them to accept that the poem can stand independent of its notes. In class we then explore what readers the poem can reach in its original form, and what is lost if the references are not perceived. We then return to the question of the implied reader.

Since students now have access to all these references, we analyze whether the encyclopedic knowledge of them is the boundary limit of the circle of readers the text defines, per their previous elitism argument. Are they now Eliot's implied reader? The more students do not consider access to Eliot's sources to be connected to exclusive educational status, the less they consider both them and the notes that point to them to be defining the experience of reading *The Waste Land*. Then we discuss the difference between clicking on the link, reading the linked text, and understanding the linked text. Class discussion comes to the conclusion that having the complete source available does not provide any cryptographic key to the poem as they had initially imagined. We revisit notes on the poem from the *Norton Anthology* which the website provides, such as the one which explained that "Eliot derived most of the ideas in this passage from *My Past* by the Countess Marie Larisch" and examine whether such notes offer a privileged view of the poem or they are merely information which, as in any other kind of hypertext, if left un-clicked would not have hindered the understanding of the first level of the text, here the poem.

Of course we have to face the first note we get from Eliot, since he makes mention of a possible need to "elucidate the difficulties" (in that case using Weston's book). Again the question returns as to how much we needed to know, and this time I introduce the possibility that some of

Eliot's audience at the time may also have had an encyclopedic knowledge of these kinds of references rather than an extensive knowledge, being themselves equivalent to those who would click on a link and recognize the reference but not read it. The link and note which students eventually focus upon to counter the perceived essential nature of these notes is Eliot's note on the "wicked pack of cards" which takes students to an on-line course on learning the tarot deck while Eliot's own note reads: "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." At this point, Eliot undermines the obsessive need to know all the sources, as when it comes to the Tarot cards he states that knowing the meaning of the cards will not help the reader of the poem understand how the cards function in the poem—he demonstrates for the students that his notes are a different layer of text, same as in the hypertext analogy. The confusion which this remark creates is amplified when I bring to students Eliot's "The Frontiers of Criticism" and point out his assertion that he led critics into temptation, as he calls it, by the inclusion of his notes. Students ask if the story Eliot gives, that the notes were merely his own to use as ammunition against charges of plagiarism and they were included only when the poem turned out too short, is true. While there are some critics who claim that notes were included from the early stages (though the *Facsimile* edition of the early manuscript does not show that to be the case), I suggest to students that instead of turning the matter into a question of whether Eliot is a trustworthy critic of his own work to look at whether Eliot's critical beliefs on poetry are consistent in his criticism and poetry.

Louis Menand ("Problems") expresses the belief that *The Waste Land* must have been difficult to write because "it was the promised major work of a writer who, in his criticism, had exposed the delusiveness of virtually every conventional prescription for poetical newness" (110). We

cannot recreate the effect the notes have had on the poem's contemporary readers but we can examine the effect the notes and the literary references as linked texts have on current readers. In hypertext click-ability reaches a critical mass past which it affects readability. So as an experiment we try to read the poem by clicking on every link which connects either to another text or to Eliot's original notes (but not to any supplementary notes). By the time we reach The Fire Sermon and we have clicked on the reference from Spencer's *Prothalamion*, students have a first-hand experience of how many clicks a reader of *The Waste Land* hypertext will consider helpful versus obstructive, impediments to the act of reading the poem. I ask students whether it would have been equally obstructive for the original audience of the poem to be reading the printed notes and also to be asked to make these mental connections to the references and allusions the poem makes. I suggest that while they had assumed that an ideal reader of the poem would be able to easily turn the poem into a coherent whole through her vast recollection and understanding of these references, the opposite would in fact be true and the notes, as well as the links in our case, do not elucidate the poem and do not act as part of the meaning-producing mechanism of the poem, but instead students understand that the mechanism the notes, references, and allusions serve is a disruptive, fragmentation-producing one, an unconventional mode of poetical newness. Yet for the students to arrive at such an interpretation, the unfamiliarity of the text and references first had to become accessible and familiar through the hypertext approach.

We conclude the discussion by focusing on the original title of the poem, the Dickens-inspired "He Do the Police in Different Voices" and by examining certain interpretations of the poems (including some from published student companions to the poem as well as those provided by free websites) which see a unity through the various fragments, whether that unity be in the form of Tiresias or the four elements presented in the

first four segments or what else. Given their experience with the hypertext and their newfound acceptance of themselves as possible implied readers, students have difficulty reconciling their experience as readers disrupted by the references with the imposed unifying vision offered, and instead tend to accept the fragmentation and disruptive nature of the encounter as defining qualities of *The Waste Land*.

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