

A Text Is a Puzzle

I am sixteen years old, lying face down on the door-room carpet. Like many sixteen-year-olds, I feel alone in my emotional life and inferior to others in most things recognized by school, sports, and organized extracurriculars. And like many sixteen-year-olds who feel alone in their emotional lives and inferior to others, I am reading poetry.

I am reading TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), reproduced in a Xeroxed packet and bound to a black plastic spiral.

I did not sign up for this experience. Not exactly. What led me here—summer 2006, a university an hour from my home—was an invitation to a ubiquitous “gifted youth program,” an “enrichment experience” for those with decent PSAT scores that not-so-subtly suggests a competitive advantage in future college admissions. Having become increasingly attached to the idea of a new social experience (see: feelings of aloneness and inferiority) and taken a liking to AP US History, I apply, receive admission, and enroll in the seminar “Globalism and 20th-Century Politics.”

This turns out to be a misnomer. The seminar invokes globalism and politics, but it does so exclusively by way of modernist poetry.

Most, in this course, not anticipating days spent with Eliot, Ginsberg, Bishop, and O'Hara, feel misled.

I—face down on the dorm-room carpet, Eliot's fragmented vision of Europe after WWI before me—am experiencing something different.

I am performing “interpretation,” and it is thrilling.

Or I *think* that I am performing interpretation, because in truth I do not know what interpretation is.

But I have an idea what it *looks* like.

It looks, to me, like accumulation. It is not writing of any kind, but writing *on* a text. Physically. Interpretation takes the text as canvas and pools upon it. Interpretation is painted by pen in distinct colors. It is red/blue/green and expansive upon white space. It is annotative (marginal notes), it is geometric (underlines), it is hieroglyphic (stars, brackets, asterixis). A bilderatlas in miniature. Interpretation is as visual as it is epistemic.¹

But interpretation does not accumulate indiscriminately. It is a force of weight and emphasis; it redistributes attention. So I also must *notice*. I must select the elements of the text prime for annotation. The text is a canvas, but not all of the text is a canvas. Or not all of the text can be a canvas at once, for interpretation makes possible conjunctions of elements otherwise separated by vast distances.

I know this, but I do not know how I know this (were there movies or tv shows about academics I had watched? Had I ever really *seen* interpretation happening?).

And so I am reading to select and mark. I am alert for suggestive lines and stanzas; patterns and inconsistencies; moments that beckon consideration, whether in shouts or whispers.

That's not quite right, though. I am alert for moments suggestive, important, or peculiar, but I also know that the text will not announce those moments as such. I am not *suspicious*² of *The Waste Land*, but I know that there are things it will not say on its own. Or that it will not tell me how to think about. Or tell me to consider in the first place. That, I suspect, is the role of interpretation. (Oscar Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" [1981]: "the highest Criticism, being the

¹ It's still funny to me that I had this impression, because I am not at all a visual thinker. In fact, I have real problems with spatial visualization. As a child, I spent more than one afternoon in tears because I could not conceptualize the rabbit ears that would hold together my shoelaces. I was the kid way too old for Velcro. It was only when my sister, three years younger than me, nonchalantly tied together her own laces that I decided it was finally time for me to master the knot.

² See Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (2015).

purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation.”) Interpretation makes transparent *where* a text might speak also.

As I turn a black and white text black, white, and blue, there is a recurrent punctuation: the question mark. I am not writing assertions; I am not saying for the text what the text says but does not say. Instead, I am *interested*; I am finding things *interesting*. And I want to think about those things in multiple and different ways, through unfamiliar patterns, passages, and contexts. I want to mark *how* and *why* I might ask or be asked to think differently. This, too, requires asking very, very good questions, I know—the sorts of questions that make you realize just how much iceberg is beneath the surface.

When I ask “What if?,” I don’t have much interest in the answer.

I want a question that itself could change everything. That you know could change everything on asking.

A text is a puzzle. For Eliot and his elevated sense of difficulty, this is doubly true (I seem vaguely to realize). But if a text is a puzzle, then there are puzzles within puzzles, always.

And that’s the start of it all. From that moment on, I read with a new sensibility: not to illuminate meaning, but to light up the innumerable routes one can take in the pursuit of meaning. I am not abandoning reading for enjoyment. I’m finding a new kind of joy.

I have never had much of an interest in puzzles, but in discovering just how many puzzles a poem contains, I find something of my own. A practice I can keep like a secret—and that requires no external validation.

Poetry did not make me feel any less alone. But it gave me a habit that helped me to feel more like myself. That wasn’t tied to anything but the text and my own mind. No coach to disappoint, no teammates more talented, no reason, however absurd, to beat myself up.

Something contained, sacred, mine.