

The Wire and *The Waste Land*: An Essay

“Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama....”
—Mark Rothko

If T.S. Eliot’s weirdly magisterial poem *The Waste Land* were cast into the form of a television show, what would it look like? Yes, this is an absurd question because *The Waste Land* is a frightfully verbal entity—the stuff of evocations, shouts, whispers, drones, quotations, laments and exclamations. To say that the poem lacks a plot would be an understatement. Yet if its spirit were to be translated into a foreign medium such as television, surely a major part of that translation would lie in addressing the poem’s forthright title. The challenge would be to actualize that daunting metaphor.

It’s a fair surmise that the creators of the HBO series *The Wire*—a title at once literal as it refers to wiretapping and metaphorical as it refers to the thin thread that binds both sides of the law—did not set out to do what they did with T.S. Eliot in mind. Saturated as it is in street smarts, the television show is anything but allusive. Whatever footnotes one might need would have to do with the argot of drug dealers. Yet *The Wire* brings Eliot’s metaphor to life in a way nothing in television ever has done. Indeed, it brings the metaphor to life in a way that few other works of art have done in any format. I will return in this essay to that metaphor but first I want to dwell on *The Wire*.

When HBO ran Tony Kushner’s glowing assessment of *The Wire* as an ad in *The New Yorker*, it was a rare moment when intelligent criticism and commercialism came together. The series, which ran for five years, deserved all the kudos it received. Encompassing as it does dozens of characters from very different strata of American society, *The Wire* was what television has been waiting to do. It created a show that could take advantage of successive episodes (much like the installments of a Victorian novel) to forge a world that was as rich in incident, humor and grief as life itself. It also focused on the nightmare of hard drugs and violence that has plagued the nation for decades and has gone largely unabated despite the enormous amounts of money poured into the “war on drugs.” There is no winning in the world of *The Wire*. As one of the characters reflects when asked who is winning a football game that he is watching on TV, “No one wins. One side loses more slowly.”

To say that this viewpoint does not sit well with the Protestant optimism of pursuing-happiness America would be an understatement. Only because it deals with the largely African-American underclass involved in the movement of drugs on the streets of Baltimore can *The Wire* go to places that in terms of suffering and fate smack of nothing so much as Greek tragedy. The hard knocks are not the handiwork of Olympian gods but reflect the hazards of birth that are played out under the aegis of racism, poverty, the breakdown of the two-parent family, the tangible financial opportunity drug dealing represents, gun- stoked violence, an overwhelmed educational system and the oblivion of addiction. When one watches the show, one marvels that anyone

climbs out from under this weight. Some do and in that regard the show is a testament to human resilience. Many don't.

The show presents an artistic vision of what life is like at the dawn of a new millennium in an American city. It does not purport to be a documentary. It is a drama and thrives on the conflicts that characterize drama. Characters are at cross-purposes with each other in more ways than one can begin to count: drug dealers don't get along; politicians don't get along; cops don't get along. Each professional group (and the drug dealers are ferocious about their professionalism) exists in its own world that has its formal rules and informal codes. Criminality is a fact of life and that includes white-collar crime of which there is plenty in *The Wire*. The degree to which anyone understands anyone else is limited though there are moments of powerful insight. The degree to which the good intentions of the police and the politicians misfire is appalling and profoundly upsetting. All groups make gestures of good will (drug dealers sponsor basketball teams, for instance), however different those gestures are. How much of this is genuine good will and how much of it is arrant cynicism is up to the viewer to decide. Everyone is trapped inside his or her own symbolic actions. When a character tries to flee what he (for typically it is a male) has been taught about manhood or success, he is punished. Everyone needs everyone else in ways that are ghastly and sometimes moving. The strange mix of bare-bones individualism, commercialism and disrespect for any inclusive comity that might characterize the United States has rarely been better expressed. *The Wire* displays the war on the home front, a war that has become so much a fact we barely notice it.

The complaints I have heard about the series focus on two issues. One is that people don't speak like the characters on the show. The imagination and pithiness of the language used by police officers, politicians and drug dealers offend some people's sense of verisimilitude. To this I would answer that anyone who underestimates the terrible pungency of the American vernacular—be it black or white—is ignoring a crucial part of this nation's genius. To say that people don't speak this way is to condescend to the prescient shrewdness that has nowhere to go but into figurative language. To say that people don't speak this way is to dismiss poetry as something that is reserved for the pages of books.

The other complaint is that the show is too bleak. Character after character is ground down. Many are killed. Mayhem is a way of life. So is frustration—bureaucracy thrives but people don't. The answer to this is to pick up a copy of the beleaguered daily newspaper of Baltimore and see what is happening. The count for the current year—a year in which the murder-rate is down—is twenty-four juvenile homicides. Each one is a very young life snuffed out. And then there is the number of heroin addicts—an issue the show addresses forthrightly in its third season where a weary police official cordons off a section of the city and declares it a drug trafficking zone. The question that *The Wire* implicitly asks about the murders and the drugs is “What kind of society countenances this?”

Of course the society doesn't publicly countenance this. On the contrary, there are endless attempts (“initiatives”) to undo this misery. The success of these is demonstrated by statistics,

which are the target of much unhappy mirth on the part of the police on *The Wire*. The larger issues—why, for instance, our American energies go to things rather than spirit or why art plays such a tiny role in the life of the average citizen—go unexamined. Larger issues tend to be like that, however. Beneath practicality lies the swamp of myth. Only poets have time for those legends that motivate each blessed and unblessed day.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a poem that is based on a book about a legend—"Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*" (to quote from Eliot's notes). The theme of *The Wire* is the same as the theme of *The Waste Land*—death in life, that rote that turns us all into zombies. "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many," wrote Eliot. (In one episode of *The Wire* a group of boys considers whether the corpses being stashed in abandoned houses are indeed zombies. It is a commentary at once mordant and fanciful.) One of the reasons for the extraordinary resonance of Eliot's poem is that it identified the crucial theme of the twentieth century, a theme that is not leaving us anytime in the near future. It is the theme that underlies modern life, the great cities humanity has created, the fabled progress of technology and of the art—*Guernica*, *Survival at Auschwitz*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—that has sought to elucidate the massive scale of modern violence, to say nothing of the smaller murders. It is the theme that speaks the unspeakable—that we are undone by our brilliant, futile doing.

In his later poetry Eliot grants us the margin of prayer. Though it is relentlessly profane, *The Wire* acknowledges the presence of religion. The strength of the African-American church can not be gainsaid. Yet spirit must play itself out in the context of deal making. The disabused ministers of black Baltimore try to get from the politicians what they can get for their congregations. The ministers know first-hand what Christ knew, money trumps spirit. How much it trumps spirit is the crucial question. The various captains of drug dealing in *The Wire* do not have any use for what they cannot buy and sell. Though they make a show of solidarity, they are more than willing to sell one another out. They aren't the only ones who live according to a brutal bottom line, hence the feeling for drama—spirit's struggle—and the cry of tragedy. Though the ministers believe in the active presence of God, they know that prayers are as much for someone about to be murdered as for church.

The Waste Land is a vision as much as what is presented in *The Wire* is a vision. Baltimore has many other dimensions than what is purveyed on the TV series (see Barry Levinson's movies for instance) but that doesn't matter. What matters is the coherence of the vision that is presented. What matters is how genuine that vision feels, since coherence can be manufactured as readily as any entity. (Every four years, the two American political parties manufacture a national coherence whose genuineness is dubious.) One of the initial charges against *The Waste Land* was that it made no sense; it was incoherent. It was a jumble of voices and fragments. Even the author admitted as much at the end of the poem when he wrote "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." One can argue that the aesthetic of modern times is incoherence. The rejection by many of modern art's difficulty ("the difficulties of the poem" in Eliot's own note) is the rejection of incoherence. "What is this?" more than one student has said to me after trying to

read *The Waste Land*. And more pointedly, they have asked, “What is this to me? Why should I care about this?”

What *this* is is a lyric drama of the soul. It is one poet’s soul at one juncture in that poet’s life but it is the souls of many. What is at stake is whether we are alive in this world in any meaningful sense or whether we are amiable or not-so-amiable automatons flowing across London Bridge or doing our various jobs in Baltimore. Characters in *The Wire* speak of “the game” often. It is the code by which they live. They take it very seriously in certain ways (snitches are punished ruthlessly, for instance) and yet in other ways they dismiss it as the price of doing business. Souls are at stake in *The Wire* but not in the sense of salvation. They are at stake in regards to their humanity, how much they let themselves feel about what is occurring around them and to them. When a frustrated street level drug dealer kicks out the windows of a car in angry response to the endless murders perpetrated by a drug gang, it is his humanity that is surfacing. The irony is brutal because eventually he is seen talking with a police officer and for that reason murdered by that drug gang. His show of feeling earns him his death.

The word “humanity” is not a word anyone in the show would use. It is a precious word—the great voice that dwells in our being human—but it has no place amid the routine inhumanity of crime. In that context it can only be a learned word, a pointless word, a well-meaning word. It is what everyone would seem to have forfeited. Even the police, who are the putative good guys, would be the first to say that they are not very good. That is not their job. And it is a word that for all its meaningfulness Eliot would have dismissed as being so much secular palaver. The aridity—at once matter of fact and terrible—that afflicts the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* is not going to be fixed by any sort of progress or program or uplift. The “unreal” cities evoked in section V of the poem are the destroyers of souls. No one in east Baltimore would argue with that.

The drama in *The Wire* is the standard issue drama of different human beings who want very different things and who, for all their fidelity to Baltimore, come from very different places. It is the drama of democracy and there are numerous parodies of cooperation on both sides of the law-and-order fence. (The drug dealers organize a co-op; the police argue about whether a body floating in the harbor is the responsibility of the city or the county.) There are numerous machinations, also, as members jockey for position in the drug hierarchy and in the police hierarchy. These are office politics of a sort but the stakes can be life and death.

In *The Waste Land* the drama is inferred. There exists a sort of pressure throughout the poem that lends even its lyric moments a foreboding chill. Because we never know where exactly we are in the poem’s constantly shuttling, evocative geography, we are forced to orient ourselves according to a series of mere voices. They possess authority as they make various assertions but we don’t know whose authority. These points of view mesh with one another as they are presented within the inclusive context of a poem but they don’t mesh with one another in regards to their attitudes. It is a long way from the suppliant voice in section V of the poem (“Here is no

water but only rock”) to the voice bidding “Goonight. Goonight” at the end of section II. The tonal range is startling. It is part of what has made my students throw up their exasperated hands.

As it shifts from one character and scene to another, the poem is a series of soft collisions. It keeps moving and has no compunctions about shifting viewpoints. On the contrary, it revels in such shifts. Eliot, the lyric dramatist, has no interest in resolution. People go on doing what they do, whether dire or mild. He may invoke an Upanishad but “Hieronymo’s mad againe.” The enormous power of the first-person lyric, that belief in the powers of the subsuming, creative “I”—a power that fuels most of the poems one reads these days—is not the power Eliot employs. He purposefully eschews it. The power of drama resides in the power of conflict not in the power of an identified narrator.

The conflicts in *The Wire* range from simple—certain drugs are against the law—to devious—raising money to support a certified union by illegal means. The numerous shifts of scenes and characters that occur within an hour’s viewing display the scope of the conflicts and how they play out. It is the language of the cinema (a scene may last less than a minute) but one that can use successive episodes to build a stunning tableau. Imagine a play that takes sixty hours with a thousand scenes and you have one sense of what *The Wire* accomplishes.

Eliot was aiming for something similar in *The Waste Land*. The pages constitute the stage. Space is created by the poem’s voices. This space is, as the poem’s title indicates, actual and metaphorical. Duration is the time that lapses as one reads the poem. The drama is spiritual, at once pointed and subdued. The sprawl of characters seems off-hand, the various stuff of the modern city—merchants, typists, clerks, fortune tellers, people in pubs. How much anyone influences anyone else is part of the evocative mystery of the whole. The vision is of a broken choir but a choir nonetheless. The voices are themselves; they do not represent anything more than themselves. Yet they are the voices of the city and of other moments and texts that the poet sees fit to access. The whole poem is a very careful dissolution but what certitude was there in the first place to dissolve? The Grail with which the poem concerns itself doesn’t exist. The search for it is noble and absurd.

This arcane agony is far away from the police sirens and automatic weapons of *The Wire*—and yet what animates the television show is a vision of suffering that is not far removed from *The Waste Land*. The stature of the poem, above and beyond its remarkable language, rests in the passionate engagement on the part of the poet with a world of suffering. The poem is close up as it presents characters and scenes—“I said, / What you get married for if you don’t want children?”—yet oracular—“O Lord Thou pluckest me out.” The tenor varies radically; Eliot was steeped in Jacobean drama with its quick changes of mood. The quiet agonies—“I can connect / Nothing with nothing”—remain. The poem embraces the impossibility of how much we may feel as human beings and puts that impossibility into one poem. Those who don’t consider Eliot to be a truly American poet might ponder the scope of *The Waste Land*. Its spaciousness echoes Whitman but it is a dark spaciousness. The misgivings that Whitman increasingly felt in the decades after the Civil War have come home to roost in ways that the “adhesive” Whitman

barely could have imagined. The imaginative breadth of Eliot's poem is intoxicating and close to unbearable.

It is precisely this dark spaciousness that distinguishes *The Wire* from anything ever done on television. We are given the sense of a whole experience that is panoramic yet gritty in the extreme. The major irony at work is that virtually everyone suffers from a sense of being caught in scripts that are not of their device: this includes those in charge, be it a drug lord or a mayor. When characters seek to make the scripts their own—taking an investigation personally or deciding they can be straight businessmen rather than gangsters—they cause more grief not less. Yet the elemental drama of free will never ceases to play itself out. A man can admit he has been a “dope fiend” his whole life. An incarcerated father can admit that his son has opportunities that never came his way and that his son deserves those opportunities. These are, however, rare moments. As in Greek tragedy, the forces that grind up people are relentless. The characters in *The Wire* (*pace* Rothko's remark) are being mocked by gods who do not exist.

Societies that cannot admit suffering are doomed to shallowness at best and vengefulness at worst. In the former case, they must pretend that suffering is a passing fact, not a permanent one. They must put a good face on what does not want a good face. In *The Wire* what the policemen see in their line of work is what often messes up their home lives. They cannot dismiss what they know too well. In the case of vengefulness—and here one can choose from a panoply of nations and wars—the suffering is transfigured into a myth that demands blood. One of the most quietly harrowing moments in *The Wire* occurs when a prison inmate in a literature discussion group talks at some length about that crucible of suffering, *The Great Gatsby*, and what an individual in the United States is up against. It is a moment of real insight and empathy and one that is clearly insupportable in the world in which the prisoner lives. As he starts to separate himself from his criminal cohorts in jail, he marks himself as unreliable. For that he is murdered.

The violence that *The Waste Land* engages is spiritual. It is the violence of denial and lack of sustenance. It is the violence of tawdriness and thoughtlessness—what one might call the underlying violence of human life, the texture of our days on earth with one another. Eliot renders this texture brilliantly as he invents the mindless likes of Madame Sosostriis and the “young man carbuncular.” The drama he is pursuing is much quieter than that of *The Wire* yet in its way even more devastating. There is the joy of the chase that both the cops and criminals in the television show relish. For better and mostly for worse it makes them feel alive. It banishes the death in life. Omar, the character who robs drug dealers, is many things but he is not dreary. In Eliot, however, the death in life has an awful primacy and cannot be dislodged. What seems disconnected is terribly concatenated. There is not so much a field of force as a field of anomie. It is very strong: “each in his prison / Thinking of his key.” In *The Wire* the prison is actual; in *The Waste Land* the prison is metaphorical but no less actual.

Our dramas, as they give voice to our conflicts, compromises, decisions and hopes, are our dignity as human beings. They demonstrate what can't be talked away. One of the delusions of modern times, brought about by the model of progressive market capitalism and the

psychological, therapeutic outlook that goes with it—goods and people both getting newer and better—is that we somehow are beyond the ministrations of drama. The talking self—be it on a radio show, in a therapist’s office or on the page—replaces the dramatic sense. Although the situation the talking self engages is typically mundane—a memory, an anecdote, a joke, an opinion—it is vivifying since it indulges the self’s viewpoint. It is comforting in that it seems to free us from the arbitrary, interfering hands of the gods. In this regard, the genius of democracy is sincerity. Yet, because it puts great weight on the mere individual, the talking self is burdensome. The individual is ever explaining—not for the purposes of salvation but definition. For some that explanatory weight is borne up by the advantages—wealth and skin color, to name two—their society bequeaths them. For others the weight is insupportable. The need for those drugs being sold in Baltimore is genuine.

This situation would seem to banish the tragic sense of life that both *The Wire* and *The Waste Land* pursue. The tragic is the cold and unavoidable (Eliot’s eye is a famously austere one) yet it is fraught with enormous human feeling. We can point to a chain of causes in *Oedipus Rex* or *Lear* but tragedy remains. The facticity of the chain defies the rational mind and savages our sense of self-importance. For his part, Eliot had to look no further than World War I for that savaging. The shadow of the “Great War” stalks his poem—“He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time.” How true. “A good time” is the equivalent of our American “fun”—that all-purpose enjoyment that banishes suffering, to say nothing of the tragic.

Neither work argues with our need to cheer ourselves up; both feature scenes in pubs. The issue is whether we are trading one oblivion for another. That may be our fate—to use an uncomfortable, non-modern word. Neither work has any belief in progress as anything more than a notion that motivates many of us to get up in the morning. Having been emancipated from the malicious caprices of the monsters and gods, we enact our cheerful duty. We play at gods and we play at monsters and we succeed in ways that are appalling and occasionally beautiful—“Looking into the heart of light, the silence,” as Eliot so aptly put it.

No one quotes poetry in *The Wire* but why would they? It would be an affectation on the part of the creators and the created. In a world that has disavowed the primacy of imagination, poetry continues to believe in the primacy of imagination. As someone who consciously abjured romanticism, Eliot smiled at this poetic faith. He was scrupulously careful to distinguish where poetry ended and religion began. Poetry was not a ticket to heaven or a creed. It trafficked in the mysteries but never rose up above its medium—mere language. In the wastelands of Baltimore the words of Eliot are just that—words. That is as it should be. The connection that poetry seeks—to fuse imagination and life in ways that make both more supportable, to create a context for the inherent magic of language—is quixotic by any standards.

The nightmare of violence that *The Wire* portrays has gone on for decades. It didn’t have to play out the way it played out but the attitudes—making drug taking a crime—and the economics—enormous sums of money—have been paramount. Like an unwanted visitor, history, as every African-American well knows, lingers and lingers with all its prejudices, confusions and

animosities. As it influences the medium of our moments—whether we go to town by foot, on a mule or in a car— history is where we live yet it is where we cannot live because it is the huge fumbling past not the narrow concise present. Its powerful voice is ever muted.

The nightmare that Eliot portrays is the one that underlies *The Wire*—the extinguishing of compassion. Not the least of this is lack of compassion for our selves that turns us into instruments of wrath and folly. *The Wire* brims with these instruments; *The Waste Land* alludes to them. Still, the characters in the poem or in the TV series are not immune to compassion. However the police in *The Wire* may scoff at it, they acknowledge, as they seek to help the citizens of Baltimore, its importance. Compassion is, however, endangered—to put it mildly. Compassion commands little respect; society wants results not good intentions. Even the schools are in thrall to test results rather than aiding some very beleaguered young people. To put compassion at the head of the list, ahead of wealth, knowledge, power and pleasure is a high and impractical aim.

Perhaps what moves me the most about the two works is that aspiration. They exemplify the vise of fate but as art they refute it. Without such art we are little more than our dubious achievements. The image of ourselves that we find in the television series and in the poem is a dark one but a true one. Amid the home boy banter and the voices raised in the pub, amid Lanvale Street and King William Street, amid the bedrooms and classrooms, we are “burning burning burning.”