

# 1                   **Modernist Expression and the Problem of Context**

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## 5                   **Abstract**

6     *The problem of context in Modernist expression—more pressingly, perhaps, than in any other*  
7     *literary period—demands definite answers which cannot be given, at least not scientifically and*  
8     *not without risking confusion as regards the very terms with which the problem is posed. Both its*  
9     *urgency and its uncertainty grow from the pressure of having to determine one's initiative as an*  
10    *individual living during times of global war, unjustified evil, and political disorganisation. The*  
11    *risk American and British modernists faced, then, was related to the formulation of the problem in*  
12    *the first place. In other words, the question of how to avoid dissociating the consequences of our*  
13    *personal decisions in the act of portraying our current situation as one that is in dire need of a*  
14    *response. Modern literature, as an enterprise and an ethical responsibility on its own, assumed the*  
15    *artistic task of rendering the individual's situatedness within his context by offering an*  
16    *interpretation of the ever-present moment authors were writing in. It involved, on that count,*  
17    *recognising the implicit dangers of erecting either an aesthetic egoism, which willfully ignores the*  
18    *recalcitrance of one's environment against his personal desires, or of symbolic representations that*  
19    *abstract evil from the domain of human activity altogether. Regardless of the particular approach,*  
20    *both these threats demonstrate the poet's liability to divorce the reciprocal interaction between man*  
21    *and his environment. Or as the problem was initially posed above: the modernist confronted the*  
22    *risk of undermining the very notion of what historical situatedness entails.*

23                   \* \* \*

24                   The 'Modernist' label that is associated with American and British authors from  
25                   the first half of the twentieth century—as a term implying some form of literary

26 innovation—carries with it the connotation of Ezra Pound’s imperative to “make it new”,  
27 but ultimately addresses more than just a self-conscious renovation of style. This aspect  
28 of ‘recentness’ extends to unprecedented ways of assimilating the reciprocal influence  
29 bearing between the individual and his environment. Accordingly, the poetry and  
30 experimental prose of modernists such as Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and  
31 W.H. Auden accommodate novel concepts of selfhood that oppose the Rationalism of  
32 previous centuries, while also searching for faithful portrayals of a decaying interwar  
33 period more generally. Such a renewed consideration of the subject’s integration in the  
34 world also assumed an attitude of disapproval towards its Romantic predecessors:  
35 expressions of a pantheistic unity between mind and nature, like the Wordsworthian  
36 “sense sublime” that fuses the speaker’s emotional interiority with the landscape’s  
37 description in *Tintern Abbey*, became remote and irresponsible alternatives<sup>1</sup>. This paper  
38 aims to show that rather than offering a subjectivity in harmony with its exterior,  
39 modernist writers were confronted with the experience of having their context arise as  
40 an issue for their art; they coped with the temptation of imprudently abstracting the  
41 patent evil of mass death and of political disintegration from their social realities.

42

43 Philosophers and psychologists from the period abandoned the Kantian  
44 conception of a ‘thinking ego’ or ‘soul’, which cannot be detected by the senses but exists  
45 as the intellectual activity in man that grounds the possibility of experience altogether—  
46 or as Hannah Arendt puts it: a ‘noumenal’ (a thing as it is in itself) rather than  
47 phenomenal foundation that is “therefore the ageless, sexless, without qualities, and  
48 without a life story”<sup>2</sup>. Such thinkers as William James and Henri Bergson avowed the  
49 relevance of empirical data and demanded, unlike the Kantian framework, that the  
50 notion of selfhood be defined according to the subject’s changing external relationships

51 to his surroundings, including the multiplicity of sensations apprehended at different  
52 moments thereof<sup>3</sup>. The difficulty of representing an unstable, contingent self mirrors the  
53 poet's struggle for historical involvement within his time: art faced the predicament of  
54 assuming a degree of social realism that engaged the devastation of contemporary  
55 circumstances, without imprudently abstracting into the visionary, as opposed to the  
56 ordinary world. Moreover, a central challenge to Modernism's rendering of catastrophe  
57 lies in the threat of trivialising its urgency by invoking symbolisations that cast evil and  
58 destruction as superhuman forces beyond our control—and therefore our  
59 responsibility—to actively resist danger. As such, these abstract determinations of the  
60 individual's role in history, whether they are manifested as coercive ideological  
61 commitments (e.g. Auden's resistance to Fascism) or consolatory metaphysical ideas (e.g.  
62 Steven's allegory of Satan), are the sources of danger compromising both personal and  
63 artistic agency. Through unique acts of defiance of their own, modernist writers  
64 employed various formal techniques and espoused notably different attitudes to adapt  
65 their language to the enterprise of authentically remaining ingrained in their particular  
66 contexts.

67

68 As a major proponent of contextualising the self by locating it in subjective  
69 experience rather than in an enduring, extra-sensible faculty or "*actus purus of Thought*",  
70 William James (1842-1910) developed a "phenomenological method" that opposed  
71 theoretical constructions of consciousness<sup>4</sup>. His 'radical empiricism' discarded the  
72 metaphysical dualism that divided experience into objective and subjective categories as  
73 a mere heuristic device, favoring instead an account of "passing mental states" as the  
74 successive relations that form the individual's continuously changing thought process  
75 and thereby serve as its fundamental ontological facts<sup>5</sup>. As Gertrude Stein's professor of

76 psychology at Harvard, James' conception of a "functional identity" based on this  
77 "stream of consciousness", and not on a mediatory process of seeing immaterial images  
78 as they appear to a thinking ego (in the Kantian sense), surfaces in his pupil's emulation  
79 of this penetrating mode of perception in her own writing<sup>ibid</sup>. The discourse of Stein's  
80 *Three Lives* (1909), for example, relies on extended prepositional phrases that elude any  
81 firm markers of both the personality and descent of its protagonist, Melanctha: she is  
82 introduced as the daughter of "always that pleasant, sweet-appearing, pale yellow  
83 woman, mysterious and uncertain and wandering in her ways", and who, as the sentence  
84 runs on, "was close in sympathy and thinking to her big black virile husband"<sup>6</sup>.  
85 Melanctha's status as a mulatto is not delivered in a conventional verbal phrase but is  
86 rather subsumed in an associative onrush of adjectives, which reveals other internally  
87 contrasting, non-physical aspects of her persona clashing against one another. In such  
88 sentences, nouns are subjugated to the insistence of the "transitive parts of the stream of  
89 consciousness", or what James deemed the clauses that emphasise an immediate  
90 continuity of interrelated differences cohering the objects of our mind. Thus, Stein's  
91 exposition of Melanctha is a way of asserting, even of enacting the latter's persona; it is  
92 not, therefore, developing a type-figure which corresponds to any recognisable  
93 psychological temperament. By disclosing an increasingly complex set of relationships,  
94 Stein frustrates any attempt at bringing order to its various elements and of thereby  
95 achieving insight into Melanctha's interiority, which exists only as a partial  
96 representation constantly in process.

97

98 Without a centered subjectivity upon which the reader can ground his sympathy,  
99 language can only indirectly deliver pathos because it does not present some easily  
100 apprehended or identifiable object capable of generating a straightforward emotional

101 response. As is initially suggested by her hereditary ambivalence, Melanctha's sensibility  
102 is constantly presented in flux and is reinforced by the abundant piling of conjunctions  
103 in her descriptions. Conferring attention to the associative aspects of language in this way  
104 further enhances the "feeling of *and*" James attributes to the subject's experience "as  
105 readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold". Similarly, in dislocating any stable  
106 predicate or signifier that could conclusively *define* Melanctha, Stein displaces emphasis  
107 on the discrete divisions laid out by traditional devices of plot (i.e. chronological ordering  
108 of events) and character (i.e. trait attribution)<sup>7</sup>. The ongoing insecurity of Melanctha's  
109 lover goes as far as to attempt at making the relational quality of her personality  
110 provisionally palpable; he is, in his own words, perplexed by a "real beauty" that is as  
111 fleeting as seasonal change and "makes one feel like summer, and then a way to know,  
112 that makes everything . . . certainly seem to be real for the little while its lasting". Flouting  
113 the project of describing Melanctha amounts to lending her a certain degree of autonomy,  
114 since part of redeeming her *nature* involves disavowing the comparative artificiality of  
115 linguistic determinations—those which reduce a multiplicity of spontaneous differences  
116 to rigid classifications.

117

118 As a member of the 'Lost Generation', a term used to coin both a group of  
119 expatriate American writers (including T.S. Eliot) and a common recognition of  
120 aimlessness among the First World War's survivors, Stein would come to formulate her  
121 cohort's ethos in a later lecture as the product of alterations in their shared circumstances:  
122 "we inside us do not change but our emphasis and the moment in which we live  
123 changes"<sup>8</sup>. This extemporaneous responsiveness to their environment directly marks the  
124 opposition between 'wandering' and 'wondering' in *Three Lives*—that is, as two  
125 incompatible modes of loving, and of assimilating one's partner in love. The former

126 serves as both a euphemism for Melanctha's sexual promiscuity and a metaphor for her  
127 thoughtless impulse or "power of mood" in the act of loving, while the latter ironically  
128 applies to her beloved, Jeff Campbell, and his obsessive loyalty to preordained moral and  
129 intellectual frameworks that cannot yield, via untiring analysis, an *understanding* of  
130 individuality as founded on feelings. This incompatibility surfaces in the lovers'  
131 interaction when Jeff complains: "with your never remembering anything only what you  
132 just then are feeling in you", which verbalises a tendency to define Melanctha's love for  
133 him according to his standards. In this way, Jeff is imposing a historical record upon his  
134 lover's perpetual self-actualisation, since she lives by the present moment of her  
135 experience, not her past actions. To rebel against such an oppressive demand, Melanctha  
136 rejects memory—Jeff's insistence on "remembering right"—as justification for her  
137 sincerity and revises her lover's stoic exhortation for narrative transparency: "it's because  
138 I am always knowing what it is I am wanting when I want it". By dialogically setting up  
139 both lovers' attitudes as mutually dependent reactions of one another, Stein reveals the  
140 juxtaposition of two interdependent styles of speaking rather than a collision between  
141 totally differentiable characters.

142

143 This mutual play between Melanctha's emancipatory disruptions and Jeff's  
144 determinate expectations parallels, on a more local level, Stein's view about history's  
145 adaptability to prevailing social attitudes throughout time, as she states in a lecture titled  
146 *Composition as Explanation*: "each period of living differs not in the way life is but in the  
147 way life is conducted and *that* authentically speaking is composition"<sup>9</sup>. Stein clarifies that  
148 by composition she means the way a given state of affairs or situation is perceived at any  
149 given point, or in her words: "what those who describe it make of it," in turn, "makes a  
150 composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is

151 seen as it is seen"<sup>ibid</sup>. In this light, Jeff's self-reprimanding remark about being a "slow-  
152 minded kind of fellow, (...) never sure about what you mean by all that you are always  
153 saying to me", informs the tension between his epistemic uncertainty—which aspires  
154 towards an impression of his lover as vivid as a "real religion"—and Melanctha's  
155 indiscernibility, that is, her moment-to-moment emphasis of particular emotions. Jeff  
156 unsuccessfully projects sequential progression onto an object whose representation *is* the  
157 simultaneity of her relations and so, too, betrays his wishful illusion of her existence  
158 within an identifiable, rational space. Such an impression of coherence is sustained, in  
159 part, by Jeff's insistence on transcendental signifiers external to the amorous relationship;  
160 he provides a set of references (e.g. his formulaic "always living good and being regular")  
161 in relation to which Melanctha insubordinately "plays out" her subjectivity<sup>10</sup>. Exposing  
162 the recalcitrance of Melanctha's performativity against the pressures of rationalists like  
163 Jeff is itself an artistic gesture. It allows Stein to exert her own agency over language by  
164 staging Melanctha's relational determination within a constraining—but all the while  
165 material—social environment.

166

167 A similar mental act of revision, devising momentary stays against idealistic  
168 claims about reality more broadly, is manifested in the ephemerality of any absolute  
169 symbol of death in Wallace Stevens' (1879-1955) *Sunday Morning*. This poem debuted in  
170 *Poetry* magazine in 1915, the same year as Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, but  
171 expresses an ambiguous disillusionment altogether different from that of the latter. Critic  
172 T.E. Hulme described its secular spirituality as delivering a "spilt religion", one which  
173 invokes the earthly naturalism of the Romantics while at the same time retaining a  
174 paganism that tempers its expressions of paradise<sup>11</sup>. The deterministic force of prophecy  
175 takes on the appearance of fiction in this poem, and remains excessively distant from the

176 immediacy of mortality as it is paled by the observable permanence of nature: "Neither  
177 the golden underground, nor isle / Melodious, where spirits gat them home . . . has  
178 endured / As April's green endures"<sup>12</sup>. In stanza VI, this worldly relocation of immortal  
179 domains is subsequently checked by a devalued promise for eternity; which,  
180 alternatively, is devoid of the spiritual remoteness of blessed abodes like the subterranean  
181 Elysium or the divinely bestowed Elysian fields listed before: "Or do the boughs / Hang  
182 always heavy in that perfect sky, / Unchanging, yet so like our perishing Earth?". It  
183 doubts the metonymic representation of nature's sensuality in the previous stanza—in  
184 which the impendingness of death propels "boys [to] . . . pile pears and plums" at girls'  
185 feet—as an untenable sign for peaceful perfection. Stevens is hereby invoking a paradigm  
186 of revocable myths with a self-awareness in the use of metaphor as a necessary  
187 falsification of faith, one which transforms the "heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish  
188 and of summer morn" into a statement about mechanical death in wartime. The catalogue  
189 of imaginary afterlives, even as a pastoral hope for eternity in nature, is insufficient  
190 replacement for the universal prospect of physically expiring in combat.

191

192 Yet, a compromise is arrived at through the questionably optimistic refrain:  
193 "Death is the mother of beauty", and suggests that the imminence of destruction itself  
194 enriches the experience of life more immediately. This sobering bathos, or anti-climatic  
195 transition into the trivial concreteness of the world, is allegorised into a philosophy in the  
196 final stanza of the poem; it couples the metaphysical weight of abstract generalisations  
197 (e.g. "We live in an old chaos of the sun") with their ominously natural instantiations (e.g.  
198 "casual flocks of pigeons make / ambiguous undulations as they sink"). The descent into  
199 a 'diminished aesthetic' addressing mundane humanity ironises the poem's final  
200 affirmations, since comforting naturalisms, regardless of whether they idealise the earth

201 or a heaven beyond, falsely tame death. In this way, Stevens' poetic concern with the  
202 opposition between imagination and reality also voices a conflict lying within language:  
203 the Modern preoccupation with symbols which are assigned the status of fate and render  
204 superfluous the renewal of metaphors—those capable of temporarily attuning to the  
205 nuances of a changing context<sup>13</sup>.

206

207 It is telling that Stevens handles this threat of 'romantic subjectivism' using a  
208 mock-heroic idiom in *Comedian as the letter C* (1923)—a title which itself derides symbolic  
209 transformations—since irony, unlike straightforward signifiers, transmits meaning  
210 obliquely, or in a way that is not directly deducible from the words used to express it, but  
211 only from inference. The poem adopts different epithets to address a classical quest-  
212 figure, Crispin, whose scope of vision undergoes a dramatic enlargement. His enhanced  
213 perspective is expressed in the shift from his initial description as a "lutanist of fleas", or  
214 examiner of the minute, to his transformation into "a skinny sailor peering in the sea-  
215 glass", a hyperbole for the impression of a world so expanded that it only exists for the  
216 mind of a solipsist or "introspective voyager" who denies empirical detail apart from his  
217 capacity as spectator (i.e. the "ruses that were shattered by the large"). The impotence of  
218 the isolated subject imagining his own private, rarefied world stems from Crispin's  
219 grandiose ambition, "the thing that makes him envious in phrase" and drives his desire  
220 for achieving authorship of what he encounters as an instance of the sublime: "the  
221 quintessential fact, the note / of Vulcan, that a valet seeks to own". Crispin's mythological  
222 association of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire with destructive and fertilising powers,  
223 underlies his aesthetic ambition to appropriate the divinity's terrestrial counterpart  
224 ("Gesticulating lightning, mystical") as *his* own creative act, as the possession "for *his*  
225 quill to catechize" (emphasis mine). Yet, even the promise of art as a medium for self-

226 aggrandisement is eventually checked by Crispin's realisation that debased terrestrial  
227 objects outlive the distortive artifice of their observers' abstractions: "The plum survives  
228 its poems / . . . colored by ground / Obliquities of those who pass beneath". Interpreting  
229 this as a comic parable for poetic frustration, however, does not license the elevation of  
230 earthly particulars into "fictive flourishes that preordained / His passion's permit". Such  
231 a reading rather reinforces Crispin's self-awareness of his own process of mental  
232 decreation, which occurs in line with his abandonment of metaphors according as they  
233 become obsolete representations of their object. This acquired commitment to the  
234 concrete leads Crispin to reevaluate his assimilation of the external world,  
235 acknowledging that language should record "the surviving form, / For him, of shall or  
236 ought to be in is", instead of rendering fixed mediate signs.

237

238         Although Crispin's disciplined realism restrains his visionary formulations and  
239 thereby disenchants his surroundings, it prevents him from extrapolating his personal  
240 sense of futility to his environment: "Was he to company vastest things defunct / With a  
241 blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?"<sup>14</sup>. The traveler's conclusive "return to social  
242 nature", which represents his settlement within both a quotidian and familial setting  
243 ("The world . . . daubed out / Of its ancient purple . . . / Came reproduced in purple /  
244 family font"), offers an implicit answer by portraying the final stanza as an affirmation of  
245 historical *continuity*. Therefore, by integrating himself within a community, Crispin  
246 ridicules the apocalyptic fantasy put forward by his previous rhetorical question and  
247 demonstrates the poet's ability to inflate the vanity of personal endeavour into "an  
248 instance of all fate", or into a claim about his entire generation's catastrophe. This  
249 infringement of the private upon the public sphere motivates a rejection of historical  
250 teleology, especially as a narrative that inexorably tends towards cultural decline as its

251 end point. Instead, by demonstrating how pressures of context interrupt introversion and  
252 compel the poet to situate himself within his time, Crispin demonstrates the imperative  
253 of "confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them  
254 in the mind, . . . [but] that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real"<sup>15</sup>.

255

256 Alternatively, T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* propels the  
257 unconsolidated relationship between its eponymous speaker and an anonymous lover by  
258 transplanting the purported subject of experience altogether. Personified objects  
259 reflecting Prufrock's mental state throughout the poem become the locus of his  
260 unfulfilled desire, and thereby confirm his insular subjectivity. Already in the opening  
261 lines, social failure infects the very impulse to courtship between "you and I" and initiates  
262 the transfer of Prufrock's numbness to his atmosphere "When the evening is spread out  
263 against the sky / like a patient etherized upon a table". The simile dislocates the speaker  
264 from himself—as is dramatised by attributing the dissociated pronoun "you" to  
265 Prufrock's identity—and enforces a lack of integrity that blocks the possibility for action  
266 as does, in this case, the anaesthetic conditioning the agent's motivation<sup>16</sup>. Accordingly,  
267 the deferral of love is staged by Prufrock's own rhetoric as he segments himself into  
268 synecdochic bits ("How his hair is growing thin!"; "But how his arms and legs are thin")  
269 and similarly partitions time in a reiterated act of self-revision: "The eyes that fix you in  
270 a formulated phrase / (...) Then how should I begin? / (...) And should I then presume?"  
271 Stasis is metaphorically brought on by the spatialisation of time in language, the "temps  
272 symbolique" Henri Bergson puts forward in his concept of the "*moi sociale*"<sup>17</sup>, precisely  
273 because any mode of *representation*—as occurs in everyday dialogue or communication—  
274 clogs the flow of consciousness with words. Bergson, unlike James, sees the flux of  
275 experience, or what he deems the movement of "*les durées*" in real time, as the grounding

276 of personal identity; which, in its turn, is disrupted by linguistic symbols that paralyse  
277 the fluid movement of thought by dividing it into discrete parts. Therefore, Prufrock's  
278 diminished state is not discovered, like Crispin's, by a sojourn in a sobering material  
279 world but is rather a self-inflicted consequence of his metonymic discourse, since it  
280 fragments his identity and precludes meaningful engagement with anything external to  
281 it. The self is discontinuous with its public figure on account of its anticipated  
282 disembodiment: "there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet".  
283 In *Prufrock*, just as the perpetually diverted lyrical voice cannot affirm the unaddressed  
284 speaker's self-possession ("I have heard the mermaids singing each to each"),  
285 consummation always remains provocatively exteriorised and interposed: "the  
286 afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully / Smoothed by long fingers, / (...) beside you  
287 and me"<sup>18</sup>.

288

289 In *The Waste Land* (1922), the suppressed voice migrates across multiple and  
290 strikingly undifferentiated personas, blurring the chronological or physical boundaries  
291 which establish individuality and instate separateness, especially as is exhibited by the  
292 vicarious prophet's self-portrait: "I Tiresias, . . . / Old man with wrinkled female sex . . .  
293 / Perceived the scene and foretold the rest". "Like a taxi throbbing waiting", Tiresias'  
294 mythical reenactment is realised by the poem's mechanical sexual encounters; it dates  
295 back to antiquity but cannot be relegated to the past as it asserts itself in the exchange  
296 between stock-figures of modern times ("Exploring hands encounter no defence; / His  
297 vanity requires no response, / (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all))<sup>19</sup>. In other words,  
298 Tiresias serves a structural purpose in the poem by carrying over this paradigm of  
299 automaticity, which Eliot explicitly assigns to "the most important personage in the  
300 poem, uniting all the rest"—including the sterility of both sexes as they combine in one

301 hermaphrodite body<sup>20</sup>. Thus, the meaninglessness of conforming to a detached social  
302 continuum does not merely victimise the anonymity and involuntary determinism of  
303 erotic behaviour, but also generates a parallelism which upholds the cyclical sterility of  
304 the waste land. A generalised apocalyptic context is sustained by the impossibility of  
305 communicating personal emotions and the deinternalisation of the quest romance  
306 converges with the eradication of historical change, revealing a dormant moral  
307 conscience that extends unvaryingly throughout time. Just as Prufrock's self-  
308 mortification is contemplated in the pervasive frivolity of his *milieu* ("And would it have  
309 been worth it . . . / After the novels, after the teacups . . ."), *The Waste Land* represents the  
310 urgency of arriving at a private morality to redeem the decadence of the public sphere<sup>21</sup>.  
311 The mythical backdrop of the Holy Grail legend in the poem tells about the archetypal  
312 search for a cure to the sterility of the Fisher King, which binds the cursed land<sup>22</sup>. Yet, this  
313 implicit hope is continuously frustrated: Philomel's failure to articulate her violation (as  
314 a nightingale, her "inviolable voice" ironically transmits an unintelligible "Twit twit twit  
315 / Jug jug jug jug jug") and Lil's uncorroborated abortion ("its them pills I took, to bring  
316 it off") episodically repeat the same quiescent infertility.

317

318 By transposing myth to realism, Eliot concentrates the apathy of his generation  
319 into a corporate identity and develops within *The Waste Land* a method of abstract  
320 organisation, or "of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the  
321 immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"<sup>23</sup>. The  
322 comprehensive collapse of communication is not particular to any subject because it  
323 permeates the landscape, in which even silence is disturbed by "dry sterile thunder  
324 without rain". There is thus no exterior that escapes the poem's fragmented bricolage nor  
325 its violation of syntactical order. Accordingly, the quasi-elegiac tone of the speaker's

326 declaration that “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” mourns the final  
327 stanza’s spatial diffusion. It solicits coherence, instead, via the retrieval of a traditional  
328 form that both integrates antiquity and can be reconciled with actuality. It is in this way  
329 that Eliot’s concept of the “objective correlative” substitutes the ineffectiveness of  
330 dialogue, since it proposes both to evoke “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events  
331 [that] shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” and to orchestrate an alliance with  
332 his historical position thereof<sup>24</sup>. Taking seriously this appeal for a universal background  
333 against which the poet’s private agonies find their place involves prioritising their  
334 incorporation within the past predating the poem, in which they can, as it were, assume  
335 a contemporaneity of their own. The enterprise of curing the barrenness of the waste land,  
336 therefore, endorses an approach remarkably different from either Stein’s rejection of  
337 historical perspicuity in *Three Lives* or Stevens’ denial of fatalistic signifiers of misery that  
338 replace their concrete instances. It can be interpreted as a type of *séance* in its own right,  
339 one by which the self-effacement of the author’s personality does *not* imply a resignation  
340 of artistic agency because his own extinction comes to stand for a purging of waste matter,  
341 or of anything that interferes with the assembled expression of the dead voices that  
342 preceded him. Therefore, by means of an impersonal aesthetic can the poet, quite literally,  
343 conjure up an admonition for both the cultural catastrophe in which he lives and the  
344 menacing presence of its precedents—“That corpse you planted last year in your garden  
345 / . . . Will it bloom this year?”.  
346

347 Precisely because it lies in a common interpretation of life to which all of the  
348 poem’s disheartening scenes subscribe, the communicative power of *The Waste Land*  
349 upholds an ordering principle that is liable to contention. In Stevens’ *Esthétique du Mal*,  
350 for example, specific settings of devastation are magnified into an aesthetic form, and

351 commit what Friedrich Nietzsche originally termed as the “anthropomorphic error”<sup>25</sup>.  
352 This poem highlights the pernicious use of language for domesticating the reality of war,  
353 particularly through allegories that encompass the whole ‘human condition’ and  
354 hypostatise the latter into “A too, too human god, self-pity’s kin”. As otherwise stated in  
355 canto VIII, “The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination” because it denied  
356 the possibility of formulating a theoretical sense of evil, which, in virtue of remaining  
357 abstracted from personal agency, could serve as a source of validation for the ethical  
358 collapse and suffering of the here-and-now. Nonetheless, war remains present as a  
359 “capital / Negation” more robust than Satan in the fact of mass death, which overrides  
360 any autonomous forces of destruction. For poets like W.H. Auden (1907-1973) writing  
361 during the Spanish Civil War, such a reality arose suspicion towards a political  
362 reductionism as well. Ideological discourses had acquired the potential of explaining the  
363 contingency of political events and of justifying violence without reference to personal  
364 choice.

365

366 In *Spain 1937*, however, apocalyptic nostalgia, or the desire for expressions of  
367 despair that alienate our responsibility for historical outcomes, is not neutralised by  
368 seeking out a *humanistic* sublime in the humdrum realm “of what one sees and hears”  
369 like it is in *Esthétique du Mal*. Although the two poems share a fear of experiencing war-  
370 time destruction as an aesthetic consolation, Auden dismisses ideological dogmatism by  
371 exposing how rhetorical constructions determine both individual fate and historical  
372 struggle<sup>26</sup>. He sees the directedness of history as greatly influenced by individual  
373 personality, which is manifested in the complex of discourses deriving from the  
374 preoccupations of social beings and their limited versions of destiny within the poem.  
375 Simultaneously, the poet pleads his identification with nature in a Romantic apostrophe:

376 "O my vision, O send me the luck of the sailor" (stanza VII); the scientist loses touch with  
377 his *milieu* by investigating the "inhuman provinces" of the germ and the planet,  
378 exhibiting self-sufficient systems in themselves (stanza VIII); the poor are economically  
379 restrained to conceive of time as dominated by necessity ("Our time is our loss" (stanza  
380 IX))<sup>27</sup>. This universal predicament is modulated in how it is lived by each person; it  
381 produces a multiplicity of crises that heighten the community's responsibility for  
382 interpreting the ever-present moment of choice in a shared context. "Life, if it answers at  
383 all" remains disengaged with ethical obligations as *it* merely occurs and does not  
384 distinguish between the "Just City" or the "suicide pact, the Romantic death". As  
385 potential outcomes, these radically opposed propositions for a social organisation are  
386 merely nominal.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, they tacitly indicate the stakes of personal choice as the  
387 efficient cause behind avoiding both the threat of facile traditionalism and the lure of  
388 egoism.

389

390 The question facing the modernist, then, is not whether or not there is a  
391 responsibility for addressing his or her context and the external determining forces  
392 bearing on the individual, but of *how* to interpret that question in the first place. Both  
393 Stein and Stevens, whether retroactively through Jeff's stipulation of prescribed norms  
394 for assessing Melanchta's behavior, or proleptically through pessimistic (and conversely,  
395 edenic) judgements about the character of the world's destiny, identify ways of  
396 disengaging with one's immediate context and of neglecting the ever-present moment of  
397 decision. Moreover, the modes of inaction which derive from this inability of situating  
398 oneself as an active participant within his setting take on diverging forms in the poetry  
399 of Eliot and Auden. On the one hand, the paradigmatic senselessness of culture  
400 precipitates a separation between the individual and his sensibility, while casting this

401 kind of detachment as a shared condition in both the private and public domains. On the  
402 other hand, passivity is posed as the fallacy, rather than the confirmation of  
403 nonintervention; it involves a grave misinterpretation of history as a self-fulfilling course  
404 of events by ignoring the critical role of collective deliberation in political affairs. On all  
405 counts, however, the issue of expression concerns not the aesthetic task of internalising  
406 the subject's environment, as it did for the Romantics, but of conveying the direness of its  
407 impingement on and correlation with the individual's actions so as to generate some type  
408 of response.

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