

Research

The “Problem of Context” in modernist expression: myths of continuity and aesthetic individualism in Stein, Stevens, Eliot, and Auden

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Abstract. Although the concepts of “(historical or cultural) continuity” and “individualism”, just like the adjacent pair of terms “wholeness” and “particularity”, appear to oppose one another, both present attractions that potentially separate the individual from his environment and therefore from the consequences of his own actions. Such is the “problem of context” referred to in this paper’s treatment of modernist writing, which seeks to capture how navigating two discrete attitudes towards aesthetic and moral concerns—the “humanist” and the “religious” as critic T.E. Hulme put it—can serve as a framework for understanding some of the technical novelties employed during this literary period. That authors like Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden—a selection among which are included expatriates, skeptics towards liberal democracy, and members of the self-proclaimed “Lost Generation”—all pursued some degree of “objectivity” within their work, ironically, exposes the superficiality of analysing that task by a singular standard. Whether it be as a rebellion against abstract symbols of perfection, stability, and apocalyptic nostalgia in war-time, or as the representation of superhuman agencies that can justify both an impersonal mythical order and, contrarily, the individual need for moral awareness, these authors’ techniques offer radically different ways of assimilating their circumstances. It is precisely by attuning to their specific approaches that one can analyse how they reinvisioned the role, or the futility of the individual as a participant in his historical situation and thereby the stakes of this “problem”.

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The ‘modernist’ label that is associated with American and British authors from the first half of the twentieth century—as a term implying some form of literary innovation—carries with it the connotation of Ezra Pound’s imperative to “make it new”, but ultimately addresses more than just a self-conscious renovation of style. This aspect of ‘recentness’ extends to unprecedented ways of assimilating the reciprocal influence bearing between the individual and his environment. Accordingly, the poetry and experimental prose of modernists such as Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden accommodate novel formulations of selfhood that destabilise the Rationalism of previous centuries, while also searching for faithful portrayals of a decaying interwar period more generally. Such a renewed consideration of the subject’s integration in the world often steered away from the aesthetic cultivation of self prominent in Romantic predecessors, and towards cultural pessimism: expressions of pantheistic unity between mind and nature, like the Wordsworthian “sense sublime” that fuses the speaker’s emotional interiority with the landscape’s description in *Tintern Abbey*,

became misplaced and ineffectual alternatives.¹ This paper aims to show that rather than offering a subjectivity in harmony with its exterior, modernist writers were confronted with the experience of having their context arise as an issue for their art; just as they coped with the temptation of imprudently abstracting the patent evil of mass death and of political disintegration from their social realities.

This discontent towards Romanticism, albeit a local concern about excessive emotional inwardness, is traceable to the skepticism of pre-modernists like John Ruskin, who, as Edward Lobb remarks, attributed clarity of vision to the act of “establishing the connection between *aesthesis* and *theoria*” in art—between perception of the outer world’s observable qualities and the apprehension of some moral content which is embodied within them.² The attempt to reconcile both of these elements may be seen, from another angle, as implying an adjacent disjunction relevant to modernist expression. One which—later inherited by proponents of the Marxist-materialist interpretive tradition like György Lukács—transposes the failure of objectivity into a denunciation of innovative formal techniques. Accordingly, novelty of style replaces subjectivity as the locus of blame for impairing the poet’s representation of actuality, including its socioeconomic and political themes, as *distinct* from his state of mind. So, if modernism’s subversion of “sentimental” poetry is both a conscious initiative to assimilate the situation of the age without disfiguring it, and, at the same time, answerable for the eccentricity of its performances, the question remains as to how such a form of engagement avoids contradiction.

T.E. Hulme’s critical writings gathered in *Speculations*, propose two alternative brands arising from this period’s standard of transparency towards the world, the “humanist” and “religious” attitudes, which provide a framework for understanding precisely how authors fused personal imagination with their surrounding contexts.³ Respectively, these assert either a relativism “lacking the sense of values as absolute” and celebrating, as is the tendency in Stein and Stevens, the vitality of elemental experiences, or on the other hand, an apologetics of Original Sin, which is variously manifested in the poetry of Eliot and Auden as the limitation that “man can never himself *be* perfect”.⁴ That modernists’ distinctive ways of mediating their integration in an exterior can be judged both as essentially occurring *within* the sphere of immediate human interactions and, conflictingly, as revealing a necessary continuity *beyond* the finite individual, suggests that analysing the stakes of their involvement renders any singular “ideal of objectivity” (and its enthronement) superfluous. Instead, in a less straightforward manner, looking at how such criteria as “clarity” and “perfection” are negotiated against particular mental traps ranging from seductive fatalisms to the estranging effects of social apathy, may provide more beautifully “definite” answers.

As a precursive influence to what Hulme identifies as the “humanist” strain in modern thought, the twentieth century saw philosophers and psychologists abandon the idealist conception of a “thinking I” or “soul”, which, independent from sense perception, exists as the intellectual activity in man grounding the possibility of experience altogether—or as Hannah Arendt puts it: the supremacy of

¹ Cf. Wu (2012), pp. xxxii–xlv

² Lobb (1981), p. 83

³ Hulme (1936), p. 47

⁴ *Ibid.*

a “noumenal” (a thing as it is in-itself) rather than a phenomenal foundation of reality that is “therefore the ageless, sexless, without qualities, and without a life story”.⁵ Such thinkers as William James and Henri Bergson avowed the relevance of empirical data and demanded, unlike the Kantian framework, that the notion of selfhood be defined according to the subject’s changing external relationships to his surroundings, including the multiplicity of sensations apprehended at different moments thereof.⁶ The difficulty of representing an unstable, contingent self mirrors the poet’s struggle for historical involvement within his time: art faced the predicament of assuming a degree of social realism that engaged the devastation of contemporary circumstances, without imprudently abstracting into the visionary, as opposed to the ordinary world. Moreover, a central challenge to modernism’s rendering of catastrophe lies in the threat of trivialising its urgency by invoking symbolisations that cast evil and destruction as superhuman forces beyond our control—and therefore our responsibility—to actively resist danger. As such, these abstract determinations of the individual’s role in history, whether they are manifested as coercive ideological commitments (e.g. Auden’s resistance to Fascism) or consolatory metaphysical ideas (e.g. Steven’s allegory of Satan), are the sources of danger compromising both personal and artistic agency. Through unique acts of defiance of their own, modernist writers employed various formal techniques and espoused notably different attitudes to adapt their language to the enterprise of authentically remaining ingrained in their particular contexts.

As a major proponent of contextualising the self by locating it in subjective experience rather than in an enduring, extra-sensible faculty or “*actus purus* of Thought”, William James (1842-1910) developed a “phenomenological method” that opposed theoretical constructions of consciousness.⁷ In this sense, his ‘radical empiricism’ discarded the metaphysical dualism that divided experience into objective and subjective categories as a mere heuristic device, favoring instead an account of “passing mental states” as the successive relations that form the individual’s continuously changing thought process and thereby serve as its fundamental ontological facts. James’ conception of a “functional identity” based on this “stream of consciousness”, and on a direct connection with the empirical world rather than an immaterial locus of subjectivity (in the Kantian sense), surfaces in one of his foremost pupil’s emulation of this penetrating mode of perception in her own writing.⁸ Gertrude Stein’s experimental prose, in its continuous rupture and reordering of semantic coherence, depicts human personality as a manifestation of this indefinite internal fluidity.

In particular, Stein’s discourse in *Three Lives* (1909) attests to the influence of her psychology professor at Harvard, relying on extended prepositional phrases that elude any firm markers of both the personality and descent of its protagonist, Melanctha. The subject of this eponymous narrative—and of the second “life” featured in the collection—is introduced as the daughter of “always that pleasant, sweet-appearing, pale yellow woman, mysterious and uncertain and wandering in her ways”, and who, as the sentence runs on, “was close in sympathy and thinking to her big black virile husband”. Melanctha’s status as a mulatto is not delivered in a conventional verbal phrase but is rather subsumed in an associative onrush of

⁵ Arendt (1978), p. 43

⁶ Schwartz (1985), pp. 20–49

⁷ Scott (1977), pp. 183–191

⁸ James (1892), p. 202

adjectives, which reveals other internally contrasting, non-physical aspects of her persona clashing against one another. In such sentences, nouns are subjugated to the insistence of the “transitive parts of the stream of consciousness”, or what James deemed the clauses that emphasise an immediate progression of interrelated differences cohering the objects of our mind. Thus, Stein’s exposition of Melanctha is a way of asserting, even of enacting the latter’s persona; it is not, therefore, developing a type-figure which corresponds to any recognisable psychological temperament. By disclosing an increasingly complex set of relationships, Stein frustrates any attempt at bringing order to its various elements and of thereby achieving insight into Melanctha’s interiority, which exists only as a partial representation constantly in process.

Without a centered subjectivity upon which the reader can ground his sympathy, Stein’s prose ceases to point towards an easily identifiable object and so often suspends the communication of pathos. As is initially suggested by her hereditary ambivalence, Melanctha’s sensibility is constantly presented in flux and is reinforced by the abundant piling of conjunctions in her descriptions. Conferring attention to the associative aspects of language in this way further enhances the “feeling of *and*” James attributes to the subject’s experience “as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold”.⁹ Similarly, in dislocating any stable predicate or signifier that could conclusively *define* Melanctha, Stein displaces the emphasis on discrete divisions laid out by traditional devices of plot (i.e. chronological ordering of events) and character (i.e. trait attribution).¹⁰ The ongoing insecurity of Melanctha’s lover goes as far as to attempt at stabilising the relational quality of her unpremeditated personality; he is, in his own words, perplexed by a “real beauty” that is as fleeting as seasonal change and “makes one feel like summer, and then a way to know, that makes everything . . . certainly seem to be real for the little while its lasting”. Flouting the project of describing Melanctha amounts to lending her a certain degree of autonomy, since part of redeeming her *nature* involves disavowing the comparative artificiality of linguistic determinations—those which reduce a multiplicity of spontaneous differences to rigid classifications.

As a member of the ‘Lost Generation’, a term Stein herself coined for the group of expatriate American writers (including T.S. Eliot) and that addressed a common recognition of aimlessness among the First World War’s survivors, she would come to formulate her cohort’s ethos in a later lecture as the product of alterations in their shared circumstances: “we inside us do not change but our emphasis and the moment in which we live changes”.¹¹ This extemporaneous responsiveness to their environment directly marks the opposition between ‘wandering’ and ‘wondering’ in *Three Lives*—two incompatible modes of loving, and of assimilating one’s partner in love. The former serves as both a euphemism for Melanctha’s sexual promiscuity and a metaphor for her thoughtless impulse or “power of mood” in the act of loving. Whereas, at times, even in explicit dissent, the latter ironically applies to her beloved Jeff Campbell, and his obsessive loyalty to preordained moral frameworks that cannot yield, via untiring analysis, an *understanding* of individuality as founded on feelings. This incompatibility surfaces in the lovers’ interaction when Jeff complains: “with your never remembering anything only what you just then are feeling in you”, which verbalises a tendency to define Melanctha’s love for him according to

⁹ Ibid., p. 162

¹⁰ Cf. Nicholls (2011), pp. 622–638

¹¹ Cf. Stein (1935), pp. 287–312

his standards. In this way, Jeff is imposing a historical record upon his lover’s perpetual self-actualisation, since she lives by the present moment of her experience, not her past actions. To rebel against such an oppressive demand, Melanctha rejects memory—Jeff’s insistence on “remembering right”—as justification for her sincerity and revises her lover’s stoic exhortation for narrative transparency: “it’s because I am always knowing what it is I am wanting when I want it”. By dialogically setting up both lovers’ attitudes as mutually dependent reactions of one another, Stein reveals the juxtaposition of two interdependent styles of speaking rather than a collision between totally differentiable characters.

This mutual play between Melanctha’s emancipatory disruptions and Jeff’s determinate expectations parallels, on a more local level, Stein’s view about history’s adaptability to prevailing social attitudes throughout time, as she states in a lecture titled “Composition as Explanation”: “each period of living differs not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and *that* authentically speaking is composition”.¹² Stein clarifies that by composition she means the way a given state of affairs or situation is perceived at any determinate point, or in her words: “what those who describe it make of it,” in turn, “makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen”.¹³ In this light, Jeff’s self-reprimanding remark about being a “slow-minded kind of fellow, (...) never sure about what you mean by all that you are always saying to me”, informs the tension afflicting his epistemic uncertainty. He aspires towards an impression of his lover as vivid as a “real religion” despite Melanctha’s indiscernibility, her moment-to-moment emphasis of particular emotions. Jeff unsuccessfully projects sequential progression onto an object whose representation *is* the simultaneity of her relations and so, too, betrays his wishful illusion of containing her existence within an identifiable, rational space. Such an impression of coherence is sustained, in part, by Jeff’s insistence on a stable center of meaning external to the amorous relationship; he provides a set of references (e.g. his formulaic “always living good and being regular”) in relation to which Melanctha insubordinately “plays out” her subjectivity.¹⁴ Exposing the recalcitrance of Melanctha’s performativity against the pressures of rationalists like Jeff is itself an artistic gesture. It allows Stein to exert her own agency over language by denying “logocentrism” and by staging Melanctha’s relational determination within a constraining—all the while material—social environment.¹⁵

A similar mental act of revision, devising momentary stays against idealistic claims about reality at large, is manifested in the ephemerality of any totalising symbol of death in Wallace Stevens’ (1879-1955) “Sunday Morning”. This poem debuted in *Poetry* magazine in 1915, the same year as Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, but expresses an ambiguous disillusionment altogether different from that of the latter. Hulme described its secular spirituality as delivering a “spilt religion”, one which invokes the earthly naturalism of the Romantics while at the

¹² Cf. Stein (1926), pp. 493-504

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. Ford (2002), pp. 26–7, 38

¹⁵ As used by Jacques Derrida, this term addresses concepts that fix structures of meaning and are invested with absolute authority, including examples such as Plato’s “form” or Kant’s intelligible domain; it is precisely this desire for “immobility” that Melanctha destabilises and emancipates herself from in her interactions with Jeff Campbell.

same time retaining a paganism that tempers its expressions of paradise.¹⁶ The deterministic force of prophecy takes on the appearance of fiction in this poem, and remains excessively distant from the immediacy of mortality as it is paled by the observable permanence of nature: “Neither the golden underground, nor isle / Melodious, where spirits gat them home . . . has endured / As April’s green endures”. In stanza VI, this worldly relocation of immortal domains is subsequently checked by a devalued promise for eternity; which, alternatively, is devoid of the spiritual remoteness of blessed abodes like the subterranean Elysium or the divinely bestowed Elysian fields listed before: “Or do the boughs / Hang always heavy in that perfect sky, / Unchanging, yet so like our perishing Earth?”. It doubts the metonymic representation of nature’s sensuality in the previous stanza—in which the impendingness of death propels “boys [to] . . . pile pears and plums” at girls’ feet—as an untenable sign for peaceful perfection. Stevens is hereby invoking a paradigm of revocable myths with a self-awareness in the use of metaphor as a necessary falsification of faith, one which transforms the “heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish and of summer morn” into a statement about mechanical death in wartime. The catalogue of imaginary afterlives, even as a pastoral hope for eternity in nature, is insufficient replacement for the human liability to dying in combat.

Yet, a compromise is arrived at through the questionably optimistic refrain: “Death is the mother of beauty”, and suggests that the imminence of destruction itself invigorates the experience of life. This sobering bathos, or anti-climactic transition into the trivial concreteness of the world, is allegorised by the last stanza’s philosophy; it couples the metaphysical weight of abstract generalisations (e.g. “We live in an old chaos of the sun”) with their ominously natural instantiations (e.g. “casual flocks of pigeons make / ambiguous undulations as they sink”). The descent into a ‘diminished aesthetic’ addressing mundane humanity ironises the poem’s final affirmations, since comforting naturalisms, regardless of whether they idealise the earth or a heaven beyond, falsely tame death. In this way, Stevens’ poetic concern with the opposition between imagination and reality also voices a conflict lying within language: the modernist preoccupation with symbols which are assigned the status of fate and render superfluous the renewal of metaphors. This, in turn, represents the loss of those expressive vehicles capable of temporarily attuning to the nuances of a changing context.¹⁷

It is telling that Stevens handles this threat of ‘romantic subjectivism’ using a mock-heroic idiom in “Comedian as the letter C” (1923)—a title which itself derides symbolic transformations—since irony, unlike straightforward signifiers, transmits meaning obliquely, or in a way that is not directly deducible from the words used to express it, but only from inference. The poem adopts different epithets to address a classical quest-figure, Crispin, whose scope of vision undergoes a dramatic enlargement. His enhanced perspective is expressed in the shift from his initial description as a “lutanist of fleas”, or examiner of the minute, to his transformation into “a skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass”, a hyperbole for the impression of a world so expanded that it only exists for the mind of a solipsist or “introspective voyager”, who, contrarily, denies empirical detail apart from his capacity as spectator (i.e. the “ruses that were shattered by the large”). The impotence of the isolated subject imagining his own private, rarefied world stems from Crispin’s grandiose ambition, “the thing that makes him envious in phrase” and drives his

¹⁶ Allen (2015), p. 2

¹⁷ Cf. Ford (2002), pp. 103–04

desire for achieving authorship of what he encounters as an instance of the sublime: “the quintessential fact, the note / of Vulcan, that a valet seeks to own”. Crispin’s mythological association of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire with destructive and fertilising powers, underlies his aesthetic ambition to appropriate the divinity’s terrestrial counterpart (“Gesticulating lightning, mystical”) as *his* own creative act, as the possession “for *his* quill to catechize” (emphasis added). Yet, even the promise of art as a medium for self-aggrandisement is eventually checked by Crispin’s realisation that debased terrestrial objects outlive the distortive artifice of their observers’ abstractions: “The plum survives its poems / . . . colored by ground / Obliquities of those who pass beneath”. Interpreting this as a comic parable for poetic frustration, however, does not license the elevation of earthly particulars into “fictive flourishes that preordained / His passion’s permit”. Such a reading rather reinforces Crispin’s self-awareness of his own process of mental decreation, which occurs in line with his abandonment of metaphors according as they become obsolete representations of their object. This acquired commitment to the concrete leads Crispin to reevaluate his assimilation of the external world, acknowledging that language should record “the surviving form, / For him, of shall or ought to be in is”, instead of rendering fixed mediate signs.

Although Crispin’s disciplined realism restrains his visionary formulations and thereby disenchant his surroundings, it prevents him from extrapolating his personal sense of futility to his environment: “Was he to company vastest things defunct / With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?”.¹⁸ The traveler’s conclusive “return to social nature”, which represents his settlement within both a quotidian and familial setting (“The world . . . daubed out / Of its ancient purple . . . / Came reproduced in purple / family font”), offers an implicit answer by portraying the final stanza as an affirmation of historical *continuity*. Therefore, by integrating himself within a community, Crispin ridicules the apocalyptic fantasy put forward by his previous rhetorical question and demonstrates the poet’s ability to inflate the vanity of personal endeavour into “an instance of all fate”, or into a claim about his entire generation’s catastrophe. This infringement of the private upon the public sphere motivates a rejection of historical teleology, especially as a narrative that inexorably tends towards cultural decline as its end point. Instead, by demonstrating how pressures of context interrupt introversion and compel the poet to situate himself within his time, Crispin demonstrates the imperative of “confronting, therefore, a set of events, not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in the mind, . . . [but] that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real”.¹⁹

Alternatively, T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” propels the unconsolidated relationship between its eponymous speaker and an anonymous lover by transplanting the purported subject of experience altogether. Personified objects reflecting Prufrock’s mental state throughout the poem become the locus of his unfulfilled desire and thereby confirm his insular subjectivity. Already in the opening lines, social failure infects the very impulse to courtship between “you and I” and initiates the transfer of Prufrock’s numbness to his atmosphere: “When the evening is spread out against the sky / like a patient etherized upon a table”. The simile dislocates the speaker from himself—as is dramatised by attributing the dissociated pronoun “you” to Prufrock’s identity—and enforces a lack of integrity

¹⁸ Cf. Longenbach (1991), pp. 92, 190, 201–04

¹⁹ Stevens (1960), p. 22

that blocks the possibility for action as does, in this case, the anaesthetic conditioning the agent's motivation.²⁰ Accordingly, the deferral of love is staged by Prufrock's own rhetoric as he segments himself into synecdochic bits ("How his hair is growing thin!"; "But how his arms and legs are thin") and similarly partitions time in a reiterated act of self-revision: "The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase / (...) Then how should I begin? / (...) And should I then presume?" Stasis is metaphorically brought on by the spatialisation of time in language, the "temps symbolique" Henri Bergson puts forward in his concept of the "*moi sociale*", precisely because any mode of *representation*—as occurs in everyday dialogue or communication—locks the flow of consciousness with words.²¹

Bergson, unlike James, sees the flux of experience, or what he deems the movement of "*les durées*" in real time, as the grounding of personal identity; which, in its turn, is disrupted by linguistic symbols that paralyse the fluid movement of thought by dividing it into discrete parts. Therefore, Prufrock's diminished state is not discovered, like Crispin's, by a sojourn in a sobering material world but is rather a self-inflicted consequence of his metonymic discourse, since it fragments his identity and precludes meaningful engagement with anything external to it. The self is discontinuous with its public figure on account of its anticipated disembodiment: "there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet". In "Prufrock", just as the perpetually diverted lyrical voice cannot affirm the unaddressed speaker's self-possession ("I have heard the mermaids singing each to each"), consummation always remains provocatively exteriorised and interposed: "the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully / Smoothed by long fingers, / (...) beside you and me".²² Prufrock's disengagement with his environment is therefore made literal by the transfiguration of his yearning, which is evoked by his own symbolic disintegration.

In Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), the impossibility for intimacy is encountered as a generalised condition beyond any personal plight. The suppressed voice migrates across multiple and strikingly undifferentiated personas, blurring the chronological or physical boundaries which establish individuality and instate separateness, especially as is exhibited by the vicarious prophet's self-portrait: "I Tiresias, . . . / Old man with wrinkled female breasts . . . / Perceived the scene and foretold the rest". "Like a taxi throbbing waiting", Tiresias' mythical reenactment is realised by the poem's mechanical sexual encounters; it dates back to antiquity but cannot be relegated to the past as it asserts itself in the exchange between stock-figures of modern times ("Exploring hands encounter no defence; / His vanity requires no response, / (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all)).²³ In other words, Tiresias serves a structural purpose in the poem by carrying over this paradigm of automaticity, which Eliot explicitly assigns to "the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest"—including the sterility of both sexes as they combine in one hermaphrodite body.²⁴ Thus, the meaninglessness of conforming to a detached social continuum does not merely carry over the anonymity and involuntary determinism of erotic behaviour, but it also upholds the cyclical sterility of the waste land. A generalised apocalyptic context is sustained by the impossibility of

²⁰ Cf. North (1991), pp. 74–80

²¹ Bergson (1955), p. 108

²² Ellmann (2013), p. 79

²³ De Man (1996), p. 96

²⁴ Eliot (2005), note to line (IV.218)

communicating personal emotions and the deinternalisation of the quest romance converges with the eradication of historical change, revealing a dormant moral conscience that endures unvaryingly throughout time. Just as Prufrock’s self-mortification is contemplated in the pervasive frivolity of his milieu (“And would it have been worth it . . . / After the novels, after the teacups . . .”), *The Waste Land* represents the urgency of arriving at a private morality to redeem the decadence of the public sphere.²⁵ The mythical backdrop of the Holy Grail legend in the poem tells about the archetypal search for a cure to the sterility of the Fisher King, which binds the cursed land.²⁶ Yet, this implicit hope is continuously frustrated: Philomel’s failure to articulate her violation (as a nightingale, her “inviolable voice” ironically transmits an unintelligible “Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug”) and Lil’s backhandedly articulated abortion (“its them pills I took, to bring it off”) episodically repeat the same quiescent infertility.

By transposing myth to realism, Eliot turns a specific type of social behavior into the norm; he diffuses the apathy of his generation—itself conforming to a unified, transhistorical identity—and so develops within *The Waste Land* a method of abstract organisation, or “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history”.²⁷ The comprehensive collapse of communication is not particular to any subject because it permeates the landscape, in which even silence is disturbed by “dry sterile thunder without rain”. There is thus no exterior that escapes the poem’s broken bricolage nor *its* violation of syntactical order. Accordingly, the quasi-elegiac tone of the speaker’s declaration that “these fragments I have shored against my ruins” mourns the final stanza’s spatial dispersal. It solicits coherence, instead, via the retrieval of a traditional form that both integrates antiquity and can be reconciled with actuality. It is in this way that Eliot’s concept of the “objective correlative” functions as a substitute for the ineffectiveness of dialogue, since it proposes both to evoke “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events [that] shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” and to orchestrate an alliance with his historical position thereof.²⁸

Taking seriously this appeal for a universal background against which the poet’s private agonies find their place involves prioritising their incorporation within the past predating the poem, in which they can, as it were, assume a contemporaneity of their own. The enterprise of curing the barrenness of the waste land, therefore, endorses an approach remarkably different from either Stein’s rejection of historical perspicuity in *Three Lives* or Steven’s denial of fatalistic signifiers of misery that replace their concrete instances. It can be interpreted as a type of *séance* in its own right, one by which the self-effacement of the author’s personality does *not* imply a resignation of artistic agency because his own extinction comes to stand for a purging of waste matter, or of anything that interferes with the assembled expression of the dead voices that preceded him. Therefore, by means of an impersonal aesthetic can the poet, quite literally, conjure up an admonition for both the cultural catastrophe in which he lives and the menacing *presence* of its precedents—“That corpse you planted last year in your garden / . . . Will it bloom this year?”.

²⁵ Mendelson (2016), p. 2

²⁶ Ackerley (2007), p. 23

²⁷ Kermode (1988), p. 177

²⁸ Cf. Miller (1966), pp. 150–51, 158–59, 176

Manifesting itself in a common interpretation of life to which all of the poem's disheartening scenes subscribe, the communicative power of *The Waste Land* upholds a sweeping ordering principle that is liable to contention. In Stevens' poem *Esthétique du Mal*, for example, specific settings of devastation are magnified into an aesthetic form, and commit what Friedrich Nietzsche originally termed as the "anthropomorphic error".²⁹ Multiple episodes risk domesticating the reality of war, particularly through allegories that encompass the whole 'human condition' and hypostatise it into "A too, too human god, self-pity's kin". As otherwise stated in canto VIII, "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" because it denies the possibility of formulating a theoretical sense of evil, which, in virtue of remaining abstracted from personal agency, could serve as a source of validation for the ethical collapse and suffering of the here-and-now. Nonetheless, war remains present as a "capital / Negation" more robust than Satan in the fact of mass death, which overrides any autonomous forces of destruction. For poets like W.H. Auden (1907-1973) writing during the Spanish Civil War, such a reality transposed itself into a related suspicion of political reductionism. Ideological discourses had acquired the potential for "explaining" the contingency of political events and for justifying violence without reference to personal choice.

In Auden's poem *Spain 1937*, however, apocalyptic nostalgia, or the desire for expressions of despair that alienate our responsibility for historical outcomes, is not neutralised by seeking out a *humanistic* sublime in the humdrum realm "of what one sees and hears" like it is in *Esthétique du Mal*. Although the two poems share a fear of experiencing war-time destruction as an aesthetic consolation, Auden dismisses ideological dogmatism by exposing how rhetorical constructions determine both individual fate and historical struggle.³⁰ He sees the directedness of history as greatly influenced by individual personality, which is manifested in the complex of discourses deriving from the preoccupations of social beings and their limited versions of destiny within the poem. Simultaneously, the poet pleads his identification with nature in a Romantic apostrophe: "O my vision, O send me the luck of the sailor" (stanza VII); the scientist loses touch with his milieu by investigating the "inhuman provinces" of the germ and the planet, exhibiting self-sufficient systems in themselves (stanza VIII); and the poor are economically restrained to conceive of time as dominated by necessity ("Our time is our loss" (stanza IX)).³¹ This universal predicament is modulated in how it is lived by each person; it produces a multiplicity of crises that heighten the community's responsibility for interpreting the ever-present moment of choice in a shared context. "Life, if it answers at all" remains disengaged with ethical obligations as *it* merely occurs and does not distinguish between the "Just City" or the "suicide pact, the Romantic death". As potential outcomes, these radically opposed propositions for a social organisation are merely nominal. Nonetheless, they tacitly indicate the stakes of personal choice as the efficient cause behind avoiding both the threat of facile traditionalism and the lure of egoism.

Thus, unlike Eliot's technique of symbolic displacement, myth and its ritualistic historical pattern are not *functional* for Auden, or as Kenneth Asher puts it, they neither construe the decadent universality of human nature nor, as a result,

²⁹ Cf. Kaufmann (1974), section 109

³⁰ Rainer (2000), p. 106

³¹ Fuller (1998), p. 284

guarantee civic order without probing into the individual conscience.³² Instead, the impulse behind such a style of insight matches Rosetta’s artificial explanatory narratives in Auden’s longer poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, and her despair over the indemonstrability of an all-knowing deity upon which to ascribe “a total character of the world”.³³ Auden’s satire on Rosetta’s sentimental picture of continuity, however, points towards more than just a demand for creative renovation or a disruptive jab at the cynical stance of the poet, which, at times, practically serve as aesthetic premises in Stevens’ poetry. Here, the caricature “Of gloom and glaciers (...) / Preserved disasters, in the solid ice / Of frowning fjords” repurposes the rejection of symbolic proxies in favor of an external moral agent lying above the human sphere. By the poem’s last section this distrust of Utopia comes to manifest itself as a kind of higher-order journalism, one that presents the God-relationship as radical humility before an unfaltering spectator—“That Always-Opposite which is the whole subject / Of our Not-Knowing”. Religious faith, in coming to acknowledge the material reality of a fallen world, no longer focuses on “Original Sin” as a property inhering in man or as part of some supernatural spirituality. It rather points towards a “Truth [that] makes our theories historical sins” and so, too, rejects the projection of any collective archetype used to evade the anxiety of making concrete decisions as an involved individual. In their final dramatic monologues, Malin and Rosetta reclaim subjectivity by *personally* identifying with their own respective creeds, even, in the former case, with a historical individual in the Incarnated figure of Christ: “It is where we are wounded that is when He speaks / Our creaturely cry”.

The question facing the modernist, then, is not merely an aesthetic scruple about “objectivity” but, in some form or other, indissociably entails a context—an adaptation of the individual not just as historically situated but as a personal agent. Both Stein and Stevens, whether retroactively through Jeff’s stipulation of prescribed norms for assessing Melanctha’s behavior, or proleptically through pessimistic (and conversely, Edenic) judgements about the character of the world’s destiny, identify ways of disengaging with one’s immediate context and of neglecting the ever-present moment of decision. Moreover, the modes of inaction which derive from this inability of situating oneself as an active participant within his setting take on diverging forms in the poetry of Eliot and Auden. On the one hand, the paradigmatic senselessness of culture precipitates a separation between the individual and his sensibility, while casting this kind of detachment as a shared condition in both the private and public domains. On the other hand, passivity is posed as the fallacy, rather than the confirmation of nonintervention; it involves a grave misinterpretation of history as a self-fulfilling course of events by ignoring the critical role of separate persons in determining the fate of a collective. On all counts, however, the issue of expression concerns conveying the direness of an environment that impinges on and correlates with the individual’s actions so as to generate some sort of *response*.

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³² Asher (1995), p. 44

³³ Cf. Kaufmann (1974), section 109

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