

Modernist Expression and the Problem of Context

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Abstract

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

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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

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 alternatives¹. 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"². 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 thereof³. 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 consciousness⁴. 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 facts⁵. 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^{ibid}. 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"⁶.
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)⁷. 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"⁸. 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"⁹. 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"^{ibid}. 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 subjectivity¹⁰. 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 paradise¹¹. 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”¹². 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 context¹³.

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 disenchant 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?"¹⁴. 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”¹⁵.

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 motivation¹⁶. 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”) and
269 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*”¹⁷, 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"¹⁸.

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))¹⁹. 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 body²⁰. 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 sphere²¹.
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 land²². 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"²³. 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 thereof²⁴. 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”²⁵.
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 struggle²⁶. 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))²⁷. 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.²⁸ 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 Melanctha'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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Reviews for ‘The “Problem of Context” in modernist expression’
by Luciano Grigera-Naon (STAAR 9 -2019)

Review 1 - Richard Graham – Minor

1. **Is the subject matter of the article suitable for an interdisciplinary audience?:** Yes. The writer draws on a range of philosophical material (Kant, Bergson, William James) to shed light on some questions of literary context.
2. **Does the title reflect the subject matter of the article?:** Yes.
3. **Does the article make a contribution to the discussion in its field?:** Yes.
4. **Is the article clearly written?:** The style is a little dense but the meaning generally comes through.
5. **Is the article well structured?:** Yes. The article considers in turn some works of Stein, Stevens, Eliot, and Auden, and keeps a reasonably tight focus on the main questions at hand.
6. **Are the references relevant and satisfactory?:** The writer draws on a range of relevant primary and secondary material and puts his secondary reading to good use.
7. **Do you feel the article appropriately uses figures, tables and appendices?:** N/A.
8. **What is your recommendation?:** Minor revision

Reviewer's comments to the author (this will be made public on acceptance of the article):

This is an interesting essay that raises various questions about the place of context in some major modernist works. The philosophical background – Bergson and James against Kant – is well observed, and you are right to point to Bergson’s influence on the young Eliot. You make some pertinent remarks on Stevens’ worries about aestheticizing pain and the prospects of a humanist sublime in ‘Esthétique du Mal’, and suggest some interesting contrasts (‘apocalyptic nostalgia’ etc.) with Auden, a very different poet, but one who, as you rightly point out, was also deeply worried about the responsibilities of the poet. I wonder whether in the background you might do a slight disservice to Wordsworth and the Romantics, who after all had their own problems of context to worry about, and whether as a result you might overstress the discontinuities between the modernists and the tradition. That Eliot, for example, looked for ‘novel concepts of selfhood that oppose the Rationalism of the previous centuries’ is probably true, but is probably also a little sweeping. And he in time came around to ‘classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism’. But these are fairly minor quibbles.

Review 2 - Nina Begus – Minor

1. Is the subject matter of the article suitable for an interdisciplinary audience?: Yes, although the topic in itself is strictly literary.

2. Does the title reflect the subject matter of the article?: Yes, the title is excellent. A subtitle could be considered, e.g. "Modernist Expression and the Problem of Context in Stein, Stevens, Eliot, Auden" or "Modernist Expression and the Problem of Context: Stein, Stevens, Eliot, Auden."

3. Does the article make a contribution to the discussion in its field?: Yes.

4. Is the article clearly written?: Yes, apart from the abstract and some minor revisions in the main discussion.

5. Is the article well structured?: Yes, the main discussion is well structured. The abstract needs rewriting.

6. Are the references relevant and satisfactory?: The style of citing is unusual by not giving page numbers in some instances and giving plenty of pages in others. This could be solved with citing singular pages, such as:

1 Miller, J. Hillis. Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966, Chapter IV, pp.150-51.

2 Miller, J. Hillis. P.158-59.

3 Ib. P. 176.

instead of:

Miller, J. Hillis. Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966, Chapter IV, pp.150-51; pp.158-59; p.176.

7. Do you feel the article appropriately uses figures, tables and appendices?: N/A.

8. What is your recommendation?: Minor revision

Reviewer's comments to the author (this will be made public on acceptance of the article): This well-written paper tackles the topic from the heart of Modernism with an excellent close-reading analysis of some major works and skillfully frames the discussion in relation to historical, philosophical, and artistic movements of the time. The argument is laid out clearly and supported with convincing insights from the textual analysis. The weakest part of the paper is the abstract, and I suggest rewriting it completely. In the current state, it lacks the authors and works in focus as well as the main argument, fails to present the gist of the topic, and makes some questionable assumptions. In the main discussion, only minor revisions of certain phrases are needed, along with a few formal edits, mostly in regards to citations.

Review 3 -Lillian Hingley - Minor

1. Is the subject matter of the article suitable for an interdisciplinary audience?: Yes, it would appeal to those interested in literature, modernism in general, war studies, and theory/philosophy (especially aesthetics).

2. Does the title reflect the subject matter of the article?: Yes, it reflects the thesis of the main argument.

3. Does the article make a contribution to the discussion in its field?: This paper offers a nice navigation between the two problematic ways that the individual might be extracted from a wider historical context in modernist studies (see lines 37-41 for thesis). This is an interesting argument, as it avoids the temptation of repeating the stereotypical argument that modernism is necessarily abstract in the sense of being apolitical, non-representational, metaphysical etc.

However, I think that this thesis needs to have a small literature review accompanying it to show where it sits in the wider critical conversation. Then, in turn, it could use this positionality in relation to other critics to explain what its significance is/what the motivation of its particular thesis is. I've explained these points in more detail on my comments on "Lines 53, 56 etc" in the feedback.

4. Is the article clearly written?: The article contains sophisticated, complex language that demonstrates a deep engagement with the scholarship and with equally complex philosophical concepts, themes and ideas. However, this sometimes leads to the language being convoluted/less clear in many different places (especially when philosophical terms are being used but not necessarily explained - footnotes that define such terms would help readers more versed in modernist literature but not necessarily versed in philosophical theory to follow your argument). This would be addressed by being more precise with defining the main terms in here (for example, the word "context" - I know what that word means, and the abstract demonstrates the different ways in which you're using the term, but this word is multifaceted: when you first invoke it in the body of the text, it leaves the reader wondering if you're talking about the 'context' of the period, the immediate 'context' of a piece of art, the artist's personal life, views etc. and whether you mean all of these at once, or one of the denotations in particular). Therefore, as "context" is such a big part of your thesis, which from your writing seems to be about a historical situatedness which is both personal and societal (or, perhaps more accurately, mediating about the individual's connection to the material world around them), it may just be worth having a sentence/footnote defining the term(s) more clearly.

Secondly, I feel that the writing nearer the end of the essay (around the end of the Eliot bit, but especially the Auden discussion) could be a little bit more clearly explained. But, as I say elsewhere in my feedback, if the Auden section was a little less quickly glossed over and a little bit more fleshed out, this would help clear this up.

Lastly, I would recommend just going over the essay and considering how the wording could be explained in more clear language where the general thesis is being discussed/where

you're zooming out of your case studies (i.e. the beginning, near the end, and the conclusion). But the close readings of Stein, Stevens and Eliot are largely nicely set out and I could follow the general mechanics of the argument, so it just goes to show that this kind of clear explication is the way to go with the metanarrative of the essay (i.e. where it is explaining what it is doing/what it has done).

5. Is the article well structured?: Yes, the different case studies help structure it very effectively. I was also happy to see a clear place for a thesis and a conclusion that actually addresses and ties up what took place in the body of the argument. The only thing I would say in this regard is that I think the Auden section could be a bit longer/more elaborated upon.

6. Are the references relevant and satisfactory?: Yes, the references are both relevant and satisfactory.

7. Do you feel the article appropriately uses figures, tables and appendices?: N/A

8. What is your recommendation?: Minor revision

Reviewer's comments to the author (this will be made public on acceptance of the article): This is an ambitious mediation on modernism - specifically, the stakes of dealing with the subject and their position in their wider environment. The strength of this piece is definitely in its close readings; the Stein and Stevens readings were especially a delight to read, and pieces of writing to definitely draw upon. I also applaud the navigation of several different, distinct threads of arguments about such large figures of modernism with an obvious knowledge of philosophy to boot. Lovely.

Ironically, what I'd recommend most is more contextualisation of this paper. Primarily there needs to be: 1) Better contextualisation of where your thesis sits in the field, especially in relation to other critics and it needs to stake its significance (i.e. WHY as a reader should I agree that 'context' is problematic for modernists? Have other scholars of modernism been naive of this point? Or are there critics who have dealt with the problem of context in modernist literature that you could quote and springboard off?). 2) Clearer definition of terms, especially the philosophical terms. 3) Clearer explication/explanation of your argument where you are reflecting on it (i.e. in the introduction, near the end of the essay and in the conclusion). This might demand trying to make your sentences a little clearer, perhaps explaining/expanding upon the philosophical terms, shaving off any unnecessary lingo and, in particular, fleshing out the relatively short section on Auden.

But I want to emphasise that the very core of this paper is the makings of a brilliant argument indeed - if you just spend time making lots of small changes, thinking about the stakes of your argument, and revising the rhetoric so it's clearer to an interdisciplinary audience, you'll make what's already a strong paper even stronger.

Here are my specific recommendations/comments:

Lines 26-34 – I would be careful about opposing the modernists from the romantics so

easily; there has been ample literature written on how the 19th century and early 20th centuries were not necessarily distinct periods fragmented from one another, but that the 20th century clearly came out of discussions that were already happening in the 19th century. And there is the point that figures such as Eliot despised the word “modernism”, so not all modernists necessarily trashed the past, but, indeed, valorised it in some way (see, for example, the frequent use of Homer’s *Odyssey* in modernist writing). Perhaps use more hedged language, or at least don’t present ‘modernism’ as directly and totally opposed to what was happening in the late 18th/19th centuries.

Line 31 – This is a stylistic choice, but some writers not capitalise movements such as “rationalism” or “modernism”.

Line 39 – This is where the word “context” is used for the first time in the body of the essay (note, I’m not including the abstract here). I think it would help to more explicitly define your major term “context” here, even if it was an explanatory footnote.

Line 40 – I’d rephrase this as “just as they coped”, otherwise it’s difficult to see whether you’re saying they submitted to the temptation or not.

Line 43 – This is a good explanation of how subjectivity was being reformulated in philosophy, but it may be worth explaining a little bit at the beginning of the paragraph in more plain terms so it doesn’t feel like you’re just jumping into the notion of the “ego”. I.e. just make it clear you’re talking about a subjectivity that is not based in the ‘material world’ beyond the individual, and then this concept is challenged by James, who holds that one is connected to the empirical world.

Line 54 – Nice, nuanced discussion of realism here.

Lines 53, 56 etc - I noticed that you keep mentioning words like “predicament”, “challenge”, “problem” etc. This is most prominent in the so-called “problem of context”. Are you referring to a particular debate? Why is context necessarily seen through a problematic lens? Of course, I understand that your thesis talks about how the modernist writer has to navigate two different ways of dealing with their context without falling into certain traps, but perhaps by reflecting on why you’re taking modernism’s context as necessarily problematic for granted, this will help you to communicate the significance of your argument for the wider field (i.e. the motivation behind why you’re making the particular argument and not another about, say, why context is this fab, great, unproblematic thing for modernists). You can do this perhaps by having a short section discussing what other people have said in the field – are there any critics who have talked about ‘the problem’ of context? How are you building upon their arguments? Are you disagreeing? Have you got a slightly different way of looking at things? Or has modernist studies fallen into many holes (i.e. that the way context is understood by previous scholars is a ‘problem’, and you’re showing how to navigate context properly in the field?). Once you’ve arrived at your position, this will help you communicate what intervention this particular article is making. This discussion and declaration of the significance of your argument (the “so what” factor, why is your argument important/what are the stakes/what is it giving to the field) can be placed with the thesis (i.e. around line 40).

98-101 – I'd be careful of making such final, declarative statements, as this is something that can be easily attacked by other critics. But I know what you're trying to do by arguing confidently for your own reading.

Whole Stein section: Lovely close reading of Stein, and accompanying argumentation.

188 – Intriguing argument.

190 – Why the word "universal"? Was everyone necessarily at risk of dying at war? But I get that perhaps you're talking about the universal inescapability of death.

207 – Okay, now I can see why you were contrasting modernism with romanticism at the beginning of the article. (Though I would still be cautious of completely opposing them in the beginning of the article [see comments further up about lines 26-34]).

236 – Again, lovely close reading of Stevens as well! A real strength of this piece.

278 – Interesting nuancing of your argument by comparing & contrasting with your previous discussion

328 – Yes, good, you're acknowledging that Eliot integrates the past into his project.

335-342 – Really solid tying together of your different readings.

- The Auden reading is a little rushed and doesn't get the same treatment of the other 3 writers – you could extend it a little just to elaborate on the moves that your argument is making. But I want to stress that I can see that it does have a place in the essay.

The conclusion sums up and reflects on your thesis: good.

Reviewer 4 - Sofie Behluli – Minor

1. Is the subject matter of the article suitable for an interdisciplinary audience?: I don't think this article will be of interest to anyone but literary scholars, particularly those working on Modernist literature. One way to open up the article a bit more would be to include film and photography in the discussion, two extremely formative media at the time; or philosophy, since the author already mentions Nietzsche, Arendt, and others.

2. Does the title reflect the subject matter of the article?: Yes and no. I think the broad title promises more than the article can deliver. Maybe a subtitle would help to make the contents more specific and precise. I think this problem might be linked to the aim to write for an interdisciplinary audience, as the title does indeed sound like it refers to Modernist culture at large (not just literature).

3. Does the article make a contribution to the discussion in its field?: Yes, it does open up an interesting conversation about the relationship between the self and the context on the one hand, and how that relationship is discussed in literature on the other hand.

4. Is the article clearly written?: I think the article is a bit overloaded with critical terminology which merely sounds fancy, but is often unnecessary. Here's just one example from line 159: the use of "transcendental signifiers" is completely misplaced, as it is used for something too specific and too irrelevant to be that which Derrida referred to with this term. There are many more examples like this which clutter up the article and make it unnecessarily hard to read, because they evoke big thinkers and ideas too loosely. Another problem are vastly generalising statements (especially in the abstract!); statements that could be applicable to any other time period as well. For example the statement on l.390-392 does not make sense to me, as ALL literature is concerned more with the HOW rather than the WHAT. I think the article is good, it just needs to be refined.

5. Is the article well structured?: Yes, overall the structure is good. It would be helpful for the reader to have a few more guiding sentences throughout the article - and especially at the beginning - which highlight the structure a bit more. For example: "The analysis will first consider one of Stein's key text, before moving on to etc."; "In the final pages of this article, it remains to be shown how etc."; "As this analysis of T.S. Eliot suggests, my overarching argument is etc."

6. Are the references relevant and satisfactory?: Yes.

7. Do you feel the article appropriately uses figures, tables and appendices?: Not applicable.

8. What is your recommendation?: Minor revision

Reviewer's comments to the author (this will be made public on acceptance of the article): Nice article. I particularly liked the literary analyses. Maybe you can try to link those better to your overarching argument, just to remind your reader a few more times what it exactly is that you are arguing.