

# **MODERNISM & MODERNIST LITERATURE: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Broadly speaking, 'modernism' might be said to have been characterised by a deliberate and often radical shift away from tradition, and consequently by the use of new and innovative forms of expression. Thus, many styles in art and literature from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are markedly different from those that preceded them. The term 'modernism' generally covers the creative output of artists and thinkers who saw 'traditional' approaches to the arts, architecture, literature, religion, social organisation (and even life itself) had become outdated in light of the new economic, social and political circumstances of a by now fully industrialised society.

Amid rapid social change and significant developments in science (including the social sciences), modernists found themselves alienated from what might be termed Victorian morality and convention. They duly set about searching for radical responses to the radical changes occurring around them, affirming mankind's power to shape and influence his environment through experimentation, technology and scientific advancement, while identifying potential obstacles to 'progress' in all aspects of existence in order to replace them with updated new alternatives.

All the enduring certainties of Enlightenment thinking, and the heretofore unquestioned existence of an all-seeing, all-powerful 'Creator' figure, were high on the modernists' list of dogmas that were now to be challenged, or subverted, perhaps rejected altogether, or, at the very least, reflected upon from a fresh new 'modernist' perspective.

Not that modernism categorically defied religion or eschewed all the beliefs and ideas associated with the Enlightenment; it would be more accurate to view modernism as a tendency to question, and strive for alternatives to, the convictions of the preceding age. The past was now to be seen and treated as different from the modern era, and its axioms and undisputed authorities held up for revision and enquiry.

The extent to which modernism is open to diverse interpretations, and even rife with apparent paradoxes and contradictions, is perhaps illustrated by the uneasy juxtaposition of the viewpoints declared by two of modernist poetry's most celebrated and emblematic poets: while Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was making his famous call to "make it new", his contemporary T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was stressing the indispensable nature of tradition in art, insisting upon the artist's responsibility to engage with tradition. Indeed, the overtly complex, contradictory character of modernism is summed up by Peter Childs, who identifies "paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair" (*Modernism*, 2000).

## **THE 'EARLY MODERN' PERIOD**

'Early modern' is a term used by historians to refer to the period approximately from AD 1500 to 1800, especially in Western Europe. It follows the Late Medieval period, and is marked by the first European colonies, the rise of strong centralised governments, and the beginnings of recognisable nation-states that are the direct antecedents of today's states, in what is called modern times. This era spans the two centuries between the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution that provided the basis for modern European and American society, and in subsequent years the term 'early modern' has evolved to be less euro-centric, more generally useful for tracking related historical events across vast regions, as the cultural influences and dynamics from one region impacting on distant others has become more appreciated.

The early modern period is characterised by the rise of science, the shrinkage of relative distances through improvements in transportation and communications and increasingly rapid technological progress, secularised civic politics and the early authoritarian nation-states. Furthermore, capitalist economies and institutions began their rise and development, beginning in northern Italian republics such as Genoa, and the Venetian oligarchy. The early modern period also saw the rise of the economic theory of mercantilism. As such, the early modern period represents the decline and eventual disappearance, in much of the European sphere, of Christian theocracy, feudalism and serfdom. The period includes the Reformation, the disastrous Thirty Years' War (1618-48), which is generally considered one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, in addition to the Commercial Revolution, the European colonisation of the Americas, the Golden Age of Piracy and the peak of the European witch-hunt craze.

The expression 'early modern' is sometimes (and incorrectly) used as a substitute for the term 'Renaissance'. However, 'Renaissance' is properly used in relation to a diverse series of cultural developments that occurred over several hundred years in many different parts of Europe – especially central and northern Italy – and spans the transition from late medieval civilization to the opening of the 'early modern' period.

Artistically, the Renaissance is clearly distinct from what came later, and only in the study of literature is the early modern period considered broadly as a standard: music, for instance, is generally divided between Renaissance and Baroque; similarly, philosophy is divided between Renaissance philosophy and the Enlightenment. In other fields, perhaps, there is more continuity through the period, as can be seen in the contexts of warfare and science.

## THE 'MODERN' PERIOD

The modern period (known also as the 'modern era', or also 'modern times') is the period of history that succeeded the Middle Ages (which ended in approximately 1500 AD) As a historical term, it is applied primarily to European and Western history.

The modern era is further divided as follows:

- \* The 'early period', outlined above, which concluded with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- \* The 18th century Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution in Britain, can be posited amid the dawning of an 'Age of Revolutions', beginning with those in America and France, and then pushed forward in other countries partly as a result of the upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars.
- \* Our present or contemporary era begins with the end of these revolutions in the 19th century, and includes World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

The modern period has been a period of significant development in the fields of science, politics, warfare, and technology. It has also been an age of discovery and globalisation: it is during this time that the European powers and later their colonies, began their political, economic, and cultural colonisation of the rest of the world.

By the late 19th and early 20th century, modernist art, politics, science and culture had come to dominate not only Western Europe and North America, but almost every civilised area on the globe, including movements thought of as opposed to the West and globalisation. The modern era is closely associated with the development of individualism, capitalism, urbanisation and a belief in the positive possibilities of technological and political progress.

The brutal wars and other problems of this era, many of which come from the effects of rapid change and the connected loss of strength of traditional religious and ethical norms, have led to many reactions against modern development: optimism and belief in constant progress has been most recently criticised by 'postmodernism', while the dominance of Western Europe and North America over other continents has been criticised by postcolonial theory.

The concept of the modern world as distinct from an ancient or medieval one rests on a sense that 'modernity' is not just another era in history, but rather the result of a new type of change. This is usually conceived of as progress driven by deliberate human efforts to better their situation. Advances in all areas of human activity – politics, industry, society, economics, commerce, transport, communication, mechanisation, automation, science, medicine, technology, and culture – appear to have transformed an 'old world' into the 'modern' or 'new world'. In each case, the identification of the old Revolutionary change can be used to demarcate the old and old-fashioned from the modern.

Much of the modern world has replaced the Biblical-oriented value system, re-evaluated the monarchical government system, and abolished the feudal economic system, with new democratic and liberal ideas in the areas of politics, science, psychology, sociology, and economics.

## MODERNISM

The first half of the nineteenth century saw an aesthetic turning away from the realities of political and social fragmentation, and so facilitated a trend towards Romanticism: emphasis on individual subjective experience, the sublime, the supremacy of Nature as a subject for art, revolutionary or radical extensions of expression, and individual liberty. By mid-century, however, a synthesis of these ideas with stable governing forms had emerged, partly in reaction to the failed Romantic and democratic Revolutions of 1848. Exemplified by 'practical' philosophical ideas such as positivism, and called by various names – in Great Britain it is designated the 'Victorian era' – this stabilizing synthesis was rooted in the idea that reality dominates over subjective impressions.

Central to this synthesis were common assumptions and institutional frames of reference, including the religious norms found in Christianity, scientific norms found in classical physics and doctrines that asserted that the depiction of external reality from an objective standpoint was not only possible but desirable. Cultural critics and historians label this set of doctrines Realism, though this term is not universal. In philosophy, the rationalist, materialist and positivist movements established a primacy of reason and system.

Against this current ran a series of ideas, some of them direct continuations of Romantic schools of thought. Notable among these were the agrarian and revivalist movements in plastic arts and poetry (e.g. the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the philosopher John Ruskin). Rationalism also drew responses from the anti-rationalists in philosophy: in particular, G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic view of civilization and history drew responses from Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, who were



*L to R: Hegel; Kierkegaard; Nietzsche; Ruskin*

major influences on Existentialism. All of these separate reactions together began to be seen as offering a challenge to any comfortable ideas of certainty derived by civilization, history, or pure reason.

From the 1870s onward, the ideas that history and civilization were inherently progressive and that progress was always good came under increasing attack. The likes of the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-83) and the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) had been reviled for their own critiques of contemporary civilization and for their warnings that accelerating 'progress' would lead to the creation of individuals detached from social values and isolated from their fellow men. Arguments arose that the values of the artist and those of society were not merely different, but that Society was antithetical to Progress, and could not move forward in its present form. Philosophers called into question the previous optimism. The work of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was labelled 'pessimistic' for its idea of the 'negation of the will', an idea that would be both rejected and incorporated by later thinkers such as Nietzsche (1844-1900).



Two of the most significant thinkers of the period were, in biology, Charles Darwin, and in political science, Karl Marx. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection undermined the religious certainty of the general public, and the sense of human uniqueness of the intelligentsia. The notion that human beings were driven by the same impulses as 'lower animals' proved to be difficult to reconcile with the idea of an ennobling spirituality. Marx argued there were fundamental contradictions within the capitalist system – and that, contrary to the libertarian ideal, the workers were anything but free. Both thinkers would spawn defenders and schools of thought that would become decisive in establishing modernism.

Separately, in the arts and letters, two ideas originating in France would have particular impact. The first was Impressionism, a school of painting that initially focused on work done, not in studios, but outdoors. Impressionist paintings demonstrated that human beings do not see objects, but instead see light itself. The school gathered adherents despite internal divisions among its leading practitioners, and became increasingly influential. Initially rejected by the most important commercial show of the time, the government-sponsored Paris Salon, the Impressionists organised yearly group exhibitions in commercial venues during the 1870s and 1880s, timing them to coincide with the official Salon. A significant event of 1863 was the *Salon des Refusés*, created by Emperor Napoleon III to display all of the paintings rejected by the Paris Salon. While most were in standard



*The Luncheon on the Grass*, by Édouard Manet (1862-63)

styles, but by inferior artists, the work of Manet attracted tremendous attention, and opened commercial doors to the movement.

The second school was Symbolism, marked by a belief that language is expressly symbolic in its nature, and that poetry and writing should follow connections that the sound and texture of the words create. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé would be of particular importance to what would occur afterwards.

At the same time social, political, and economic forces were at work that would become the basis to argue for a radically different kind of art and thinking. Chief among these was steam-powered industrialization, which produced buildings that combined art and engineering in new industrial materials such as cast iron to produce railroad bridges and glass-and-iron train sheds – or the Eiffel Tower, which broke all previous limitations on how tall man-made objects could be – and at the same time offered a radically different environment in urban life.

The miseries of industrial urbanism, and the possibilities created by scientific examination of subjects, brought changes that would shake a European civilization which had, until then, regarded itself as having a continuous and progressive line of development from the Renaissance. With the telegraph offering instant communication at a distance, the experience of time itself was altered.

In the 1890s a strand of thinking began to assert that it was necessary to push aside previous norms entirely, instead of merely revising past knowledge in light of current techniques. It was argued that, if the nature of reality itself was in question, and if restrictions which had been in place around human activity were falling, then art, too, would have to radically change. Thus, in the first fifteen years of the twentieth century a series of writers, thinkers, and artists made the break with traditional means of organising literature, painting, and music. This wave of the modern movement broke with the past in the first decade of the twentieth century, and tried to redefine various art-forms in a radical manner.

Composers such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and George Antheil represent modernism in music. Artists such as Gustav Klimt, Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian, and the movements Les Fauves, Cubism



*Woman with a Hat*, by Henri Matisse (1905)

and the Surrealists represent various strains of Modernism in the visual arts, while architects and designers such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe brought modernist ideas into everyday urban life. Several figures outside of artistic modernism were influenced by artistic ideas; for example, John Maynard Keynes was friends with Virginia Woolf and other writers of the London-based Bloomsbury group.

On the eve of the First World War a growing tension and unease with the social order, seen in the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the agitation of 'radical' parties, also manifested itself in artistic works in every medium, which radically simplified or rejected previous practice. In 1913 – the year of Edmund Husserl's *Ideas*, Ezra Pound's founding of Imagism, and the New York Armory Show – Stravinsky (1882-1971) composed *The Rite of Spring* for a ballet, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, that depicted human sacrifice. Meanwhile, young painters such as Picasso and Matisse were causing a shock with their rejection of traditional perspective as the means of structuring paintings.

These developments began to give a new meaning to what was termed 'Modernism': it now embraced disruption, rejecting or moving beyond simple Realism in literature and art, and rejecting or dramatically altering tonality in music. This set modernists apart from 19th century artists, who had tended to believe in 'progress'. Writers like Dickens and Tolstoy, painters like Turner, and

musicians like Brahms were not ‘radicals’ or ‘Bohemians’, but were instead valued members of society who produced art that added to society, even if it were, at times, critiquing less desirable aspects of it. Modernism, while it was still progressive, increasingly saw traditional forms and traditional social arrangements as hindering progress, and therefore the artist was recast as a revolutionary, overthrowing rather than enlightening.

Modernist philosophy and art were still viewed as being part, and only a part, of the larger social movement. Artists such as Klimt and Cézanne, and composers like Mahler and Richard Strauss were ‘the terrible moderns’ – those farther to the avant-garde were more heard of than heard. Polemics in favour of geometric or purely abstract painting were largely confined to ‘little magazines’ (like *The New Age* in the UK) with tiny circulations. Modernist primitivism and pessimism were controversial, but were not seen as representative of the Edwardian mainstream, which was more inclined towards a Victorian faith in progress and liberal optimism.

However, the Great War and its subsequent events were the cataclysmic upheavals that late 19th century artists had been worrying about: firstly, the failure of the previous status quo seemed self-evident to a generation that had seen millions die fighting over scraps of earth – prior to the war, it had been argued that no one would fight such a war, since the cost was too high; secondly, the birth of a machine age changed the conditions of life and, finally, the immensely traumatic nature of the experience dashed basic assumptions – Realism seemed to be bankrupt when faced with the fundamentally fantastic nature of trench warfare, as exemplified by books such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Moreover, the view that mankind was making slow and steady moral progress came to seem ridiculous in the face of the senseless slaughter of the War. The First World War, at once, fused the harshly mechanical geometric rationality of technology with the nightmarish irrationality of myth.

Thus in the 1920s, modernism, which had been such a minority taste before the war, came to define the age, and was seen in Europe in such critical movements as Dada, and then in constructive movements such as Surrealism, as well as in smaller movements such as the Bloomsbury Group. Each of these ‘modernisms’, as some observers labelled them at the time, stressed new methods to produce new results. Again, Impressionism was a precursor: breaking with the idea of national schools, artists and writers adopted ideas of international movements. Surrealism, Cubism, Bauhaus, and Leninism are all examples of movements that rapidly found adopters far beyond their original geographic base.





Exhibitions, theatre, cinema, books and buildings all served to cement the public perception that the world was changing. Hostile reaction often followed, as paintings were spat upon, riots were organised at the opening of works, and political figures denounced modernism as unwholesome and immoral. At the same time, the 1920s were known as the 'Jazz Age', and the public showed considerable enthusiasm for cars, air travel, the telephone, and other technological advances.

While some writers attacked the madness of the new modernism, others described it as soulless and mechanistic. But nevertheless, by 1930, modernism had won a place in the establishment, including the political and artistic establishment, although by this time modernism itself had changed. There was a general reaction in the 1920s against the pre-1918 modernism, which had emphasized its continuity with a past while rebelling against it, and against the aspects of that period which seemed excessively mannered, irrational, and emotionalistic.

Modernism had by this stage entered popular culture, too. With the increasing urbanization of populations, it was beginning to be looked to as the source for ideas to deal with the challenges of the day. Popular culture, which was not derived from high culture but instead from its own realities (particularly mass production) fuelled much modernist innovation. Modern ideas in art appeared in



commercials and logos, the famous London Underground logo, designed by Edward Johnston (see above), being an early example of the need for clear, easily recognizable and memorable visual symbols.

One of the most visible changes of this period, in fact, is the adoption of objects of modern production into daily life. Electricity, the telephone, the motorcar – and the need to work with them, repair them and live with them – created the need for new forms of manners, and social life. The kind of disruptive moment which only a few knew in the 1880s, had by now become a common occurrence.

Many modernists believed that by rejecting tradition they could discover radically new ways of making art. Arnold Schoenberg believed that by rejecting traditional tonal harmony, the hierarchical system of organising works of music which had guided music-making for at least a century and a half, he had discovered a wholly new way of organising sound. Abstract artists, taking as their examples the Impressionists, as well as Paul Cézanne and Edvard Munch, began with the assumption that colour and shape formed the essential characteristics of art, not the depiction of the natural world. Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich all believed in redefining art as the arrangement of pure colour. The use of photography, which had rendered much of the representational function



of visual art obsolete, strongly affected this aspect of modernism. However, these artists also believed that by rejecting the depiction of material objects they helped art move from a materialist to a spiritualist phase of development.

Other modernists, especially those involved in design, had more pragmatic views. Modernist architects and designers believed that new technology rendered old styles of building obsolete. Le Corbusier thought that buildings should function as 'machines for living in', analogous to cars, which he saw as machines for travelling in. Just as cars had replaced horses, so modernist design should reject the old styles and structures inherited from Ancient Greece or from the Middle Ages. In some cases form superseded function and, following this machine aesthetic, modernist designers typically rejected decorative motifs in design, preferring to emphasise the materials used and pure geometrical forms. The skyscraper, such as Mies van der Rohe's 1950s Seagram Building in New York, became the archetypal modernist building. Modernist design of houses and furniture also typically emphasized simplicity and clarity of form, open-plan interiors, and the absence of clutter. Many aspects of modernist design still persist within the mainstream of contemporary architecture today, though its previous dogmatism has given way to a more playful use of decoration, historical quotation, and spatial drama.

In other arts such pragmatic considerations were less important. In literature and visual art some modernists sought to defy expectations mainly in order to make their art more vivid, or to force the audience to question their own preconceptions. This aspect of modernism has often seemed a reaction against consumer culture, which developed in Europe and North America in the late 19th century. Whereas most manufacturers would try to make products that will be marketable by appealing to preferences and prejudices, high modernists rejected such consumerist attitudes in order to undermine conventional thinking. The art critic Clement Greenberg expounded this theory of modernism in his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, in which he labelled the products of consumer culture 'kitsch', because their design aimed simply to have maximum appeal, with any 'difficult' features removed. For Greenberg, modernism thus formed a reaction against the development of such examples of modern consumer culture as commercial popular music, Hollywood, and advertising. Greenberg associated this with the revolutionary rejection of capitalism.

Some modernists did see themselves as part of a revolutionary culture – one that included political revolution. Others rejected conventional politics as well as artistic conventions, believing that a revolution of political consciousness had greater importance than a change in political structures. Many modernists saw themselves as apolitical. Others, such as T. S. Eliot, rejected mass popular culture from a conservative position. Indeed, one could argue that modernism in literature and art functioned to sustain an elite culture that excluded the majority of the population.

## MODERNIST LITERATURE

Modernism as a literary movement reached its height in Europe between 1900 and the mid-1920s. 'Modernist' literature addressed aesthetic problems similar to those examined in non-literary forms of contemporaneous Modernist art, such as painting. Gertrude Stein's abstract writings, for example, have often been compared to the fragmentary and multi-perspectival Cubism of her friend Pablo Picasso. The general thematic concerns of Modernist literature are well-summarised by the sociologist Georg Simmel: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life" (*The Metropolis and Mental Life*, 1903).

The Modernist emphasis on radical individualism can be seen in the many literary manifestos issued by various groups within the movement. The concerns expressed by Simmel above are echoed in Richard Huelsenbeck's *First German Dada Manifesto* of 1918: "Art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week. The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time."

The cultural history of humanity creates a unique common history that connects previous generations with the current generation of humans, and the Modernist re-contextualization of the individual within the fabric of this received social heritage can be seen in the 'mythic method' which T.S. Eliot expounded in his discussion of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him ... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (*Ulysses, Order and Myth*, 1923).

Modernist literature involved such authors as Knut Hamsun (whose novel *Hunger* (1890) is considered to be the first 'modernist' novel), Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Dylan Thomas, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, James Joyce, Hugh MacDiarmid, William Faulkner, Jean Toomer, Ernest Hemingway, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Joseph Conrad, Andrei Bely, W. B. Yeats, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Luigi Pirandello, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Jaroslav Hašek, Samuel Beckett, Menno ter Braak, Marcel Proust, Mikhail Bulgakov, Robert Frost, Boris Pasternak, Djuna Barnes, and others.

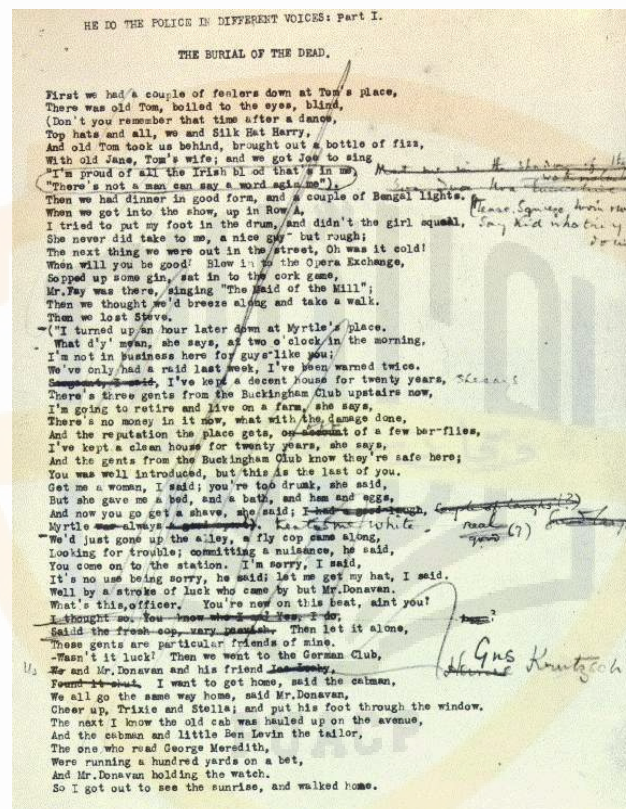


L to R: Samuel Beckett; Ezra Pound (by Wyndham Lewis, 1939); Dylan Thomas; Virginia Woolf.

Modernist literature attempted to move from the bonds of Realist literature and to introduce concepts such as disjointed timelines. Modernism was distinguished by an emancipatory metanarrative. In the wake of Modernism, and post-enlightenment, metanarratives tended to be

emancipatory, whereas beforehand this was not a consistent characteristic. Contemporary metanarratives were becoming less relevant in light of the implications of World War I, the rise of trade unionism, a general social discontent, and the emergence of psychoanalysis. The consequent need for a unifying function brought about a growth in the political importance of culture.

Modernist literature can be viewed largely in terms of its formal, stylistic and semantic movement away from Romanticism, examining subject matter that is traditionally mundane – a prime example being *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot (1915). Modernist literature often features a marked pessimism, a clear rejection of the optimism apparent in Victorian literature in favour of portraying alienated or dysfunctional individuals within a predominantly urban and fragmented society. Many Modernist works, like Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), are marked by the absence of



Manuscript extract from *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot

any central, heroic figure at all, as narrative and narrator are collapsed into a collection of disjointed fragments and overlapping voices. Modernist literature, moreover, often moves beyond the limitations of the Realist novel with a concern for larger factors such as social or historical change, and this is particularly prominent in 'stream of consciousness' writing. Examples can be seen in the work of, among others, two exact contemporaries, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (1882-1941).



## IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

by Philip Glass

Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, on May 29, 1913, was the setting of the most notorious event in the musical history of the 20th century – the world premiere of *The Rite of Spring*. Trouble began with the playing of the first notes, in the ultra-high register of the bassoon, as the renowned composer Camille Saint-Saens conspicuously walked out, complaining loudly of the misuse of the instrument. Soon other protests became so loud that the dancers could barely hear their cues. Fights broke out in the audience. Thus, Modernism arrived in music, its calling card delivered by the 30-year-old Russian composer Igor Stravinsky.



Born in 1882 in Oranienbaum, Russia, a city southwest of St. Petersburg, Stravinsky was rooted in the nationalistic school that drew inspiration from Russia's beautifully expressive folk music. His father was an opera singer who performed in Kiev and St. Petersburg, but his greatest musical influence was his teacher, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. The colourful, fantastic orchestration that Stravinsky brought to his folk song-inspired melodies was clearly derived from Rimsky-Korsakov. But the primitive, offbeat rhythmic drive he added was entirely his own. The result was a music never before heard in a theatre or concert hall.

In 1910 Serge Diaghilev, then director of the world-famous *Ballets Russes*, invited Stravinsky to compose works for his company's upcoming season at the Paris Opera. *The Firebird*, the first to appear, was a sensation. *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* quickly followed. Soon Stravinsky's audaciously innovative works confirmed his status as the leading composer of the day, a position he hardly relinquished until his death nearly 60 years later.

After leaving Russia, Stravinsky lived for a while in Switzerland and then moved to Paris. In 1939 he fled the war in Europe for the U.S., settling in Hollywood. In 1969 he moved to New York City. (The story goes that when asked why he made such a move at his advanced age, he replied, "To mutate faster.") Over the years, Stravinsky experimented with virtually every technique of 20th century music, reinventing and personalising each form while adapting the melodic styles of earlier eras to the new times. In the end, his own musical voice always prevailed.



In his long career, there was scarcely a musical form that Stravinsky did not turn his hand to. He regularly produced symphonies, concertos, oratorios and an almost bewildering variety of choral works. For me, however, Stravinsky was at his most sublime when he wrote for the theatre. I heard him conduct only once, during a programme in his honour in 1959 at New York City's Town Hall. What an event that was! Stravinsky led a performance of *Les Noces*, a vocal/theatre work accompanied by four pianos – played by Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Lukas Foss and Roger Sessions. Each brought his own charisma to the event, but all seemed to be in awe of Stravinsky – as if he appeared before them with one foot on earth and the other planted firmly on Olympus.

He was electrifying for me too. He conducted with an energy and vividness that completely conveyed his every musical intention. Seeing him at that moment, embodying his work in demeanour and gestures, is one of my most treasured musical memories. Here was Stravinsky, a musical revolutionary whose own evolution never stopped. There is not a composer who lived during his time or is alive today who was not touched, and sometimes transformed, by his work.

*Stravinsky's Riotous 'Rite of Spring'*  
by Miles Hoffman and Renee Montagne

Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* is often held up as a masterwork that changed modern music forever. Music commentator Miles Hoffman takes the distinction one step further.

"*The Rite of Spring*," Hoffman says, "represents one of the greatest creative leaps in not only the history of music, but in the history of the arts." Stravinsky's music is famous for causing a riot at its premiere. It was a warm spring evening in Paris on May 29, 1913, and Hoffman says the well-heeled crowd at the Champs Élysées Theatre was not ready for jagged rhythms, crunching discord, and the strange jerking of the dancers on stage.

"The ballet was choreographed by the great Nijinsky," Hoffman says, "and the noise, fighting, and shouting in the audience got so loud, he had to shout out the numbers to the dancers so that they knew what they were supposed to do." One shrewd musicologist wrote that "the pagans on stage made pagans of the audience." Hoffman says that the idea of pagans is right on the mark. "The subtitle of *The Rite of Spring*," Hoffman says, "is 'Pictures of Pagan Russia,' a celebration of pagan rituals that eventually leads to a sacrifice of a chosen young woman to propitiate the gods of spring. It's not what you call a happy tale."

The shock of the new, in 1913, quickly gave way to a warm embrace. More performances of *The Rite of Spring* followed close on the heels of that famous first night, and by the 1920s, it was played in the U.S. In the 1940s, the infamous piece gained a permanent place in pop culture when Walt Disney used part of it as the soundtrack to *Fantasia*. Today, *The Rite of Spring* remains a classic, but it also still packs a punch. "It's a shocking piece," Hoffman says. "It's still startling to us today when we hear it, but it is not a confusing piece. It's compelling. We're hearing irregular rhythms, we're hearing instruments asked to go to the extremes of their capability, but we're also hearing patterns that we recognise, with pacing, contrast, fascinating harmonies, continuity – all the basic principles of what makes a piece of music work are all there. And that shows us the secret of Stravinsky's genius."

*The Rite of Spring* also opened doors to countless possibilities for future composers. "It liberated many composers," Hoffman says, "and there were many imitators. I don't think you can listen to

modern movie music without sooner or later hearing the influence of Stravinsky and the *Rite*. I like to think of this piece as a celebration of creativity, period. A new music is born, and sometimes births are violent.”



## LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE (1886-1969)

Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, along with Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, is one of the twentieth century's most influential architects. Despite having no architectural training, his influence can be seen in cities the world over, from Anchorage to Adelaide, and the term 'Miesian' is now used to compliment the simplest, most elegant examples of Modernist architecture.



The Seagram Building, New York (1957)

Mies was born the son of a stonemason in Aachen, Germany. As a teenager, he worked on construction sites with his father, before going on to design furniture with Bruno Paul. From 1908 to 1911, Mies worked in the office of architect Peter Behrens, who specialised in building modern industrial buildings. In Behren's office were Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, later to become director of the Bauhaus. After the First World War, all three would shape the emerging Modern Movement.

In 1921, Mies produced his Glass Skyscraper proposal, which although never built, shows how he was already formulating the techniques of 'glass box' buildings which he would perfect after his relocation to the United States in 1937. The steel frame of the building in his proposal would be visible through acres of glass, like a skeleton barely concealed by a taut layer of skin.

This emerging love of purity of form can also be seen in Mies' seminal German Pavilion, commissioned as Germany's stall at the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona. Here, a marble roof appears to float above a collection of travertine and marble slabs. Using subtle steel columns to support the roof, Mies was able to connect roof and ground with expansive glass 'walls'. The whole effect is a building zen-like in its simplicity, an astonishing contrast to the ornate architecture of the time.

Mies left Germany when it became clear that, unlike their Italian counterparts, the German fascists would never wholeheartedly embrace Modernist architecture. He had succeeded Walter Gropius as Bauhaus director, but the Nazis had closed the school for good in 1933.

He settled in Chicago where, as director of the city's School of Architecture, he was to perfect the art of building minimalist, elegant, and often expensive homes for wealthy patrons and corporate clients. His famous phrase "less is more" perfectly captured his steadfast devotion to pure Modernist design, and encapsulated the Modernists' search for rational solutions to the complicated problems of urban existence.

After becoming an American citizen in 1944, Mies' first major project in the US was at the Illinois Institute of Technology campus (1939-1956). His work here is a classic example of his 'glass box' design: simple cubes, framed in steel and covered in glass, became the homes for various Institute faculties. His Farnsworth House of 1951 (a private commission for a wealthy doctor), saw the lessons of Barcelona translated into a living home. And his stunning twin Lake Shore Drive Apartment blocks in Chicago remain the ultimate expression in luxury high-rise living.

By now, corporate America was keen to offer Mies the opportunity to build his pure glass cuboids on their expensive slices of real estate. The most celebrated example was the headquarters for the whisky company Seagram. Completed in 1958, this 38-storey masterpiece was clad in bronze, with its own plaza keeping the rest of New York at arm's length. The effect is an incredibly elegant addition to Manhattan's jumble of towers, and the Seagram Building remains the epitome of 20th century corporate Modernism.

The simplicity of Mies' buildings was deceptive, however. It took a lot of effort to make skyscrapers like the Seagram building look uncomplicated, and the forest of inferior imitations which sprang up across the globe in the 1960s and 70s did much to undermine Modernism's reputation. Nevertheless, Mies' ability to create simple, refined modern monuments is appreciated, even by critics of Modernism, to this day.



## GERTRUDE STEIN (1874-1946)

Gertrude Stein was born the youngest of five children in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, to Jewish-American parents. When she was six months old, her family went to Europe: first Vienna, then to Paris. She thus learned several other languages before learning English. The family returned to America in 1880 and Gertrude Stein grew up in Oakland and San Francisco, California.



*Gertrude Stein*, by Pablo Picasso (1906)

In 1888 Gertrude's mother died after a long battle with cancer, and in 1891 her father died suddenly. Her oldest brother, Michael, became guardian of the younger siblings. In 1892, Gertrude Stein and her sister moved to Baltimore to live with relatives. Her inheritance was enough for her to live comfortably.

With little formal education, Gertrude Stein was admitted as a special student to the Harvard Annex in 1893 (it was renamed Radcliffe College the next year), while her brother Leo attended Harvard. She studied psychology with William James, and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1898. Gertrude Stein studied medicine at Johns Hopkins for four years, leaving with no degree after having difficulty with her last year of courses. Her leaving may have been connected with a failed romance with May Bookstaver, about which Gertrude later wrote. Or it may have been that her brother Leo had already left for Europe.

In 1903, Gertrude Stein moved to Paris to live with her brother, Leo. They began to collect art, as Leo intended to be an art critic. Their home became the venue for their Saturday salons as a circle of artists gathered around them, including such notables as Picasso, Matisse, and Gris, whom Leo and Gertrude Stein helped bring to public attention. Picasso himself even painted a portrait of Gertrude Stein (see above).

In 1907, Gertrude Stein met Alice B. Toklas, another wealthy Jewish Californian, who became her secretary, amanuensis, and lifelong companion. Stein called the relationship a 'marriage', and love notes made public in the 1970s reveal more about their intimate lives than they discussed publicly during Stein's lifetime. By 1913, Gertrude Stein had become separated from her brother, Leo, and in 1914 they divided the art that they had collected together.

As Pablo Picasso was developing a new art approach in cubism, Gertrude Stein was developing a new approach to writing. She wrote *The Making of Americans* from 1906 to 1908, but it was not

published until 1925. In 1909 she published three stories under the title *Three Lives*, followed later by *Tender Button* (1915) which has been described as a 'verbal collage'.

Stein's writing brought her further renown, and her home and salons were frequented by many writers as well as artists, including many American and English expatriates. She tutored Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, among others, in their writing efforts.

During World War I, Stein and Toklas continued to provide a meeting place for the modernists in Paris, but they also worked to aid the war effort, delivering medical supplies and financing their activities by selling pieces from Stein's art collection. In 1922, Stein was awarded a medal of recognition by the French government for her service.

After the war, it was Stein who coined the phrase 'lost generation' to describe the disenchanted English and American expatriates who were part of the circle that had centred around her. In 1925, she spoke at Oxford and Cambridge in a series of lectures designed to bring her to wider attention and, in 1933, she published her book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the first of Gertrude Stein's writings to be financially successful. In this book, Stein took on the voice of Toklas in writing about herself, only revealing her authorship near the end.

As World War II approached, the lives of Stein and Toklas were changed: In 1938 Stein lost the lease on the house Paris house and, in 1939, the couple moved to a country home. They later lost that house too, and moved to Culoz. Though Jewish, feminist, American, and intellectual, Stein and Toklas were protected from the Nazis during the 1940-45 occupation by well-connected friends. For example, in Culoz, the mayor did not include their names on the list of residents given to the Germans. Stein and Toklas moved back to Paris before the liberation of France.

Stein planned to move back to the United States after the War, but discovered that she had inoperable cancer; she died on July 27, 1946. In 1950, her novel about lesbian relationships, written in 1903, was published. Alice B. Toklas lived until 1967, writing a book of her own memoirs before her death. Toklas was buried in the Paris cemetery beside Gertrude Stein.

## JAMES JOYCE (1882-1941)

James Joyce was one of the pioneering figures of modernism. He was born in Dublin to a Catholic family, and received a Jesuit education at Clongowes Wood and Belvedere Colleges. Subsequently he studied philosophy and languages at University College, Dublin. The linguistic experimentation hinted at in *Ulysses* (1922) and fully explored in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) seems to have derived from this early interest in and talent for language study. His childhood is documented excitingly and with an often-jaded view of Irish upbringing in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and its draft version *Stephen Hero* (1944). At this time it seemed likely that he would become a priest, and something of the fear and intrigue he felt towards this is clear in the first story of *Dubliners* (1914).



However, by 1902, his love for literature, negative feelings about his native country (nationalism was at its fiercest) and distaste for the narrowness of Irish Catholic dogma had drawn him away from Ireland and he had renounced his Catholicism. Nonetheless, in his fiction he portrayed only Ireland – and specifically Dublin – from the distance provided by continental Europe, and there is a consistent religious theme. Joyce lived in Paris during 1902 in a state of poverty which he would seldom leave and, after returning for the death of his mother, he remained away from Ireland permanently. His partner, Nora Barnacle, accompanied him (they finally married in 1931) and he taught in the Berlitz school, which took him to Switzerland and northern Italy. His first published work was a respectable first collection of poems, *Chamber Music* (1907). However, it was his volume of short stories that began a long and difficult relationship with publishing houses and the law – some of its content, language included, caused difficulties in its publication and it took the better part of a decade for *Dubliners* to emerge, during which Joyce made his final visit to Ireland in 1912. William Butler Yeats had been an early supporter of his work, but now Ezra Pound joined with his enthusiastic review of the stories in the London-based literary periodical, *The Egoist*.

A less happy period occurred as Joyce attempted to find his footing in the theatre with the play *Exiles*, published in 1918 and performed the same year in Munich with little success. Greater praise by far had followed the publication of the largely autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916 after it had been serialised between 1914 and 1915 in *The Egoist*. Joyce's finest hour was still to come though. He had gained an award from the Royal Literary Fund in 1915 on the recommendation of Yeats and Pound and further supplemented his meagre income with a grant from the civil list. Though still troubled by poverty and worsening eyesight due to glaucoma, he wrote *Ulysses* – his most famous and substantial work – during these years and it was published in

Paris on his fortieth birthday, 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1922. This incredible feat of diverse literary styles and innovation in the novel form was hailed by Modernist contemporaries such as T S Eliot as a work of genius. It was not admired by all, however, and Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein were among its critics. It took another fourteen years for the novel to be published in the United Kingdom.



Joyce's final revolutionary work and most bizarre offering was *Finnegans Wake*. It portrays a character who, because never fully awake and trapped in a dream-world, is not constrained by the limitations of normal consciousness. Written in a lexicon almost entirely its own – a sensual and playful mixture and corruption of English and other languages – the novel was (and is) a stranger and harder read than the (still hardly accessible) *Ulysses*. Both novels, however, served to change the face of the novel almost totally, and few authors since can claim to be unaware or uninfluenced by them at least in spirit. Joyce pioneered the 'stream-of-consciousness' form, particularly in the last book of *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake* as a whole.

Joyce died in Zürich, still in self-imposed exile, in 1941. Characteristically arrogant and amusing was his comment to an interviewer: "The only demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works".



### T. S. ELIOT (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in Missouri on September 26, 1888. He lived in St. Louis during the first eighteen years of his life and attended Harvard University. In 1910, he left the United States for the Sorbonne, having earned both undergraduate and masters degrees and having contributed several poems to the *Harvard Advocate*. After a year in Paris, he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, but returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914. The following year, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood and began working in London, first as a teacher, and later for Lloyd's Bank.



It was in London that Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary Ezra Pound, who recognised his poetic genius at once, and assisted in the publication of his work in a number of magazines, most notably *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in 1915. His first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published in 1917, and immediately established him as a leading poet of the avant-garde. With the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, now considered by many to be the single most influential poetic work of the twentieth century, Eliot's reputation began to grow to nearly mythic proportions; by 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world.

As a poet, he transmuted his affinity for the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century and the 19th century French symbolist poets into radical innovations in poetic technique and subject matter. His poems in many respects articulated the disillusionment of a younger post-World-War-I generation with the values and conventions – both literary and social – of the Victorian era. As a critic, moreover, he had an enormous impact on contemporary literary taste, propounding views that, after his conversion to orthodox Christianity in the late 1930s, were increasingly based in social and religious conservatism. His major later poems include *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1943); his books of literary and social criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1940). Eliot was also an important playwright, whose verse dramas include *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*.



*T. S. Eliot*, by Wyndham Lewis (1938)

He became a British citizen in 1927; long associated with the publishing house Faber & Faber, he published many younger poets, and eventually became director of the firm. After a notoriously unhappy marriage, Eliot separated from his first wife in 1933, and was remarried, to Valerie Fletcher, in 1956. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, and died in London in 1965.

**Nobel Literature Prize, 1948: Presentation Speech by Anders Österling (Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy).**

In the impressive succession of Nobel Prize winners in Literature, T.S. Eliot marks a departure from the type of writer that has most frequently gained that distinction. The majority have been representatives of a literature which seeks its natural contacts in the public consciousness, and which, to attain this goal, avails itself of the media lying more or less ready at hand. This year's Prize winner has chosen to take another path. His career is remarkable in that, from an extremely exclusive and consciously isolated position, he has gradually come to exercise a very far-reaching influence. At the outset he appeared to address himself to but a small circle of initiates, but this circle slowly widened, without his appearing to will it himself. Thus in Eliot's verse and prose there was quite a special accent, which compelled attention just in our own time, a capacity to cut into the consciousness of our generation with the sharpness of a diamond.

In one of his essays Eliot himself has advanced, as a purely objective and quite uncategorical assumption, that poets in our present civilization have to be difficult to approach. "Our civilization", he says, "comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon

a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.”

Against the background of such a pronouncement, we may test his results and learn to understand the importance of his contribution. The effort is worthwhile. Eliot first gained his reputation as the result of his magnificent experiment in poetry, *The Waste Land*, which appeared in 1922 and then seemed bewildering in several ways, due to its complicated symbolic language, its mosaic-like technique, and its apparatus of erudite allusion. It may be recalled that this work appeared in the same year as another pioneer work, which had a still more sensational effect on modern literature, the much discussed *Ulysses*, from the hand of an Irishman, James Joyce. The parallel is by no means fortuitous, for these products of the nineteen-twenties are closely akin to one another, in both spirit and mode of composition.

*The Waste Land* – a title whose terrifying import no one can help feeling, when the difficult and masterly word-pattern has finally yielded up its secrets. The melancholy and sombre rhapsody aims at describing the aridity and impotence of modern civilization, in a series of sometimes realistic and sometimes mythological episodes, whose perspectives impinge on each other with an indescribable total effect. The cycle of poems consists of 436 lines, but actually it contains more than a packed novel of as many pages. *The Waste Land* now lies a quarter of a century back in time, but unfortunately it has proved that its catastrophic visions still have undiminished actuality in the shadow of the atomic age.

Since then Eliot has passed on to a series of poetic creations of the same brilliant concentration, in pursuance of the agonized, salvation-seeking main theme. The *horror vacui* of modern man in a secularized world, without order, meaning, or beauty, here stands out with poignant sincerity. In his latest work, *Four Quartets* (1943), Eliot has arrived at a meditative music of words, with almost liturgical refrains and fine, exact expressions of his spiritual experiences. The transcendental superstructure rises ever clearer in his world picture. At the same time a manifest striving after a positive, guiding message emerges in his dramatic art, especially in the mighty historical play about Thomas of Canterbury, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), but also in *The Family Reunion* (1939), which is a bold attempt to combine such different conceptions as the Christian dogma of original sin and the classical Greek myths of fate, in an entirely modern environment, with the scene laid in a country house in northern England.

The purely poetical part of Eliot’s work is not quantitatively great, but as it now stands out against the horizon, it rises from the ocean like a rocky peak and indisputably forms a landmark, sometimes assuming the mystic contours of a cathedral. It is poetry impressed with the stamp of strict responsibility and extraordinary self-discipline, remote from all emotional clichés, concentrated entirely on essential things, stark, granitic, and unadorned, but from time to time illuminated by a sudden ray from the timeless space of miracles and revelations.

Insight into Eliot must always present certain problems to be overcome, obstacles which are at the same time stimulating. It may appear to be contradictory to say that this radical pioneer of form, the initiator of a whole revolution in style within present-day poetry, is at the same time a coldly reasoning, logically subtle theorist, who never wearies of defending historical perspectives and the necessity of fixed norms for our existence. As early as the 1940s, he had become a convinced supporter of the Anglican Church in religion and of classicism in literature. In view of this philosophy of life, which implies a consistent return to ideals standardized by age, it might seem that his modernistic practice would dash with his traditional theory. But this is hardly the case. Rather, in his capacity as an author, he has uninterruptedly and with varying success worked to

bridge this chasm, the existence of which he must be fully and perhaps painfully conscious. His earliest poetry, so convulsively disintegrated, so studiously aggressive in its whole technical form, can finally also be apprehended as a negative expression of a mentality which aims at higher and purer realities and must first free itself of abhorrence and cynicism. In other words, his revolt is that of the Christian poet. It should also be observed in this connection that, on the whole, Eliot is careful not to magnify the power of poetry in relation to that of religion. In one place, where he wishes to point out what poetry can really accomplish for our inner life, he does so with great caution and reserve: "It may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves."

Thus, if it can be said with some justification that Eliot's philosophical position is based on nothing but tradition, it ought nevertheless to be borne in mind that he constantly points out how generally that word has been misused in today's debates. The word 'tradition' itself implies movement, something which cannot be static, something which is constantly handed on and assimilated. In the poetic tradition, too, this living principle prevails. The existing monuments of literature form an idealistic order, but this is slightly modified every time a new work is added to the series. Proportions and values are unceasingly changing. Just as the old directs the new, this in its turn directs the old, and the poet who realizes this must also realise the scope of his difficulties and his responsibility.

Externally, too, the now sixty-year-old Eliot has also returned to Europe, the ancient and storm-tossed, but still venerable, home of cultural traditions. Born an American, he comes from one of the Puritan families who emigrated from England at the end of the seventeenth century. His years of study as a young man at the Sorbonne, at Marburg, and at Oxford, clearly revealed to him that at bottom he felt akin to the historical milieu of the Old World, and since 1927 Mr. Eliot has been a British subject.

It is not possible in this presentation to indicate more than the most immediate fascinating features in the complicated multiplicity of Eliot's characteristics as a writer. The predominating one is the high, philosophically schooled intelligence, which has succeeded in enlisting in its service both imagination and learning, both sensitivity and the analysis of ideas. His capacity for stimulating a reconsideration of pressing questions within intellectual and aesthetic opinion is also extraordinary, and however much the appraisal may vary, it can never be denied that in his period he has been an eminent poser of questions, with a masterly gift for finding the apt wording, both in the language of poetry and in the defence of ideas in essay form.

Nor is it due only to chance that he has written one of the finest studies of Dante's work and personality. In his bitter moral pathos, in his metaphysical line of thought, and in his burning longing for a world order inspired by religion, a *civitas dei*, Eliot has indeed certain points of contact with the great Florentine poet. It redounds to his honour that, amidst the varied conditions of his milieu, he can be justly characterized as one of Dante's latest-born successors. In his message we hear solemn echoes from other times, but that message does not by any means therefore become less real when it is given to our own time and to us who are now living.

Mr. Eliot – according to the diploma, the award is made chiefly in appreciation of your remarkable achievements as a pioneer within modern poetry. I have here tried to give a brief survey of this very important work of yours, which is admired by many ardent readers in this country.



Exactly twenty-five years ago, there stood where you are now standing another famous poet who wrote in the English tongue, William Butler Yeats. The honour now passes to you as being a leader and a champion of a new period in the long history of the world's poetry.

With the felicitations of the Swedish Academy, I now ask you to receive your Prize from the hands of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince.

From: [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/)

**Nobel Literature Prize, 1948: T. S. Eliot's speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm.**

When I began to think of what I should say to you this evening, I wished only to express very simply my appreciation of the high honour which the Swedish Academy has thought fit to confer upon me. But to do this adequately proved no simple task: my business is with words, yet the words were beyond my command. Merely to indicate that I was aware of having received the highest international honour that can be bestowed upon a man of letters, would be only to say what everyone knows already. To profess my own unworthiness would be to cast doubt upon the wisdom of the Academy; to praise the Academy might suggest that I, as a literary critic, approved the recognition given to myself as a poet. May I therefore ask that it be taken for granted, that I experienced, on learning of this award to myself, all the normal emotions of exaltation and vanity that any human being might be expected to feel at such a moment, with enjoyment of the flattery, and exasperation at the inconvenience, of being turned overnight into a public figure? Were the Nobel Award similar in kind to any other award, and merely higher in degree, I might still try to find words of appreciation: but since it is different in kind from any other, the expression of one's feelings calls for resources which language cannot supply.

I must therefore try to express myself in an indirect way, by putting before you my own interpretation of the significance of the Nobel Prize in Literature. If this were simply the recognition of merit, or of the fact that an author's reputation has passed the boundaries of his own country and his own language, we could say that hardly any one of us at any time is, more than others, worthy of being so distinguished. But I find in the Nobel Award something more and something different from such recognition. It seems to me more the election of an individual, chosen from time to time from one nation or another, and selected by something like an act of grace, to fill a peculiar role and to become a peculiar symbol. A ceremony takes place, by which a man is suddenly endowed with some function which he did not fill before. So the question is not whether he was worthy to be so singled out, but whether he can perform the function which you have assigned to him: the function of serving as a representative, so far as any man can be of thing of far greater importance than the value of what he himself has written.

Poetry is usually considered the most local of all the arts. Painting, sculpture, architecture, music, can be enjoyed by all who see or hear. But language, especially the language of poetry, is a different matter. Poetry, it might seem, separates peoples instead of uniting them.

But on the other hand we must remember, that while language constitutes a barrier, poetry itself gives us a reason for trying to overcome the barrier. To enjoy poetry belonging to another language, is to enjoy an understanding of the people to whom that language belongs, an understanding we can get in no other way. We may think also of the history of poetry in Europe, and of the great influence that the poetry of one language can exert on another; we must remember the immense debt of every considerable poet to poets of other languages than his own; we may reflect that the poetry of every

country and every language would decline and perish, were it not nourished by poetry in foreign tongues. When a poet speaks to his own people, the voices of all the poets of other languages who have influenced him are speaking also. And at the same time he himself is speaking to younger poets of other languages, and these poets will convey something of his vision of life and something of the spirit of his people, to their own. Partly through his influence on other poets, partly through translation, which must be also a kind of recreation of his poems by other poets, partly through readers of his language who are not themselves poets, the poet can contribute toward understanding between peoples.

In the work of every poet there will certainly be much that can only appeal to those who inhabit the same region, or speak the same language, as the poet. But nevertheless there is a meaning to the phrase 'the poetry of Europe', and even to the word 'poetry' the world over. I think that in poetry people of different countries and different languages – though it be apparently only through a small minority in any one country – acquire an understanding of each other which, however partial, is still essential. And I take the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature, when it is given to a poet, to be primarily an assertion of the supra-national value of poetry. To make that affirmation, it is necessary from time to time to designate a poet: and I stand before you, not on my own merits, but as a symbol, for a time, of the significance of poetry.

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