Modernism: The Manipulation of Context

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The Modernist revolt in Anglo-American literature was different from previous literary movements in so far as its main thrust lay in the various manipulations of linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts. For if one considers the chief literary changes and innovations by such writers as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. C. Williams, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, e. e. cummings and others, one is struck by the fact that the majority of their favourite literary strategies and devices are *context-sensitive*.[1]

While former literary revolutions tended to substitute whole contexts of reference (for instance, nature for culture in Romanticism, the metropolis for nature in Realism) or to replace one literary code by another (for example, stichic poetry for stanzaic poetry in Neoclassicism or blank verse for the heroic couplet in Romanticism), the Modernists manipulated the very relationship between a text and its manifold contexts. Like twentieth-century thought and science generally, Modernism moved from a substantive to a relational approach to things. And as music is the art of relationships par excellence — of tonal or temporal intervals —, it is not surprising that Modernists made such a pervasive use of musical analogies.

Now, one way of describing a literary text is to see it as a hierarchy of contexts arranged like a set of Chinese boxes, the textual elements on a higher level providing the context for the elements on the lower level. Thus the phoneme finds its context in the morpheme, the morpheme in the lexeme, the lexeme in the phrase, the phrase in the sentence, the sentence in the paragraph, and so on through the discursive or narrative

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[1] See Andreas Fischer, "Context-Free and Context-Sensitive Literature: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce' *Dubliners*" in this volume for a clarification of terminology and further illustrations.

elements to the full text which in turn is embedded in ever larger contexts, namely in a context of utterance, a context of reference and a context of culture.[2]

I should now like to show how Modernist authors, each in his different way, manipulated the complex relationships between text and context in three important ways, first, by adapting specific textual elements to their context on a higher level, second, by projecting subjective reactions onto an objective context and, third, by deleting the context altogether to create by a kind of poetics of absence.

1. *Adaptations to the Context*

Let me first deal with some Modernist literary devices that signal an adaptation of textual elements to their immediate contexts. Quite generally, the Modernist programme was to rid literature of clichés in metre, vocabulary and symbolism, which by their very definition are exchangeable and, hence, context-free, by rendering poetic rhythm, diction and symbols highly context-sensitive. As the arch-Modernist Ezra Pound wrote in his early "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" (1911-1912):

> As far as the 'living art' goes, I should like to break up cliché, to disintegrate these magnetized groups that stand between the reader of poetry and the drive of it, to escape from lines composed of two very nearly equal sections, each containing a noun and each noun decorously attended by a carefully selected epithet.[3]

In order to subvert the context-freedom of exchangeable, conventionalized ("magnetized") metrical forms, Pound wished, as a first heave, "to break the pentameter" as he writes in Canto 81. Or, as he declared in his "Retrospect" (1913), poets should no longer "chop [their] stuff into separate *iambs*," that is, no longer compose in the sequence of a metronome but "in the sequence of the musical phrase."[4] In other words, Pound's aim was to replace clichéd patterns of metre, whose units (feet and lines) may be imposed on language relatively mechanically and with

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[2] See Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 86-90.
[3] *Ezra Pound. Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber, 1973) 41.
[4] *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S.Eliot (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1954) 6, 3.

little regard to the syntactic-semantic context, by what he called "absolute rhythm" or by a kind of expressive and holistic rhythm ("musical phrase") which is a direct reflection of its unique linguistic context. Hence, any "relativization" by means of a rhythmic alternative becomes impossible. Pound's "absolute rhythm," then, is a rhythm "which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable."[5] Rhythm, hence, must no longer be context-free or arbitrary but context-sensitive or even iconic ("interpretative").

The phonological context-sensitivity of "absolute rhythm," however, finds its parallel visual expression on the graphemic level in what I should like to call the Modernists' "absolute typography." For the Modernists supplanted the context-free or arbitrary homogeneity of the traditional printed page, of conventional stichic and stanzaic texts by a typography whose visual arrangement of lines — be it "cadenced sentencing," W. C. Williams' "sight stanzas" or other graphemic equivalents of "absolute rhythm" — mimes the context of reference.

In this respect, the Chinese written character, as interpreted by Ernest Fenollosa, seemed to offer a model of visual encoding for Modernist poetry that seemed to overcome the context-free arbitrariness of alphabetic writing. "Chinese notation," Fenollosa announced, "is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature . . . in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion."[6] The direct recourse to motivated, naturalized or iconic signification not only on the phonological but also on the graphemic level of the text, Modernists felt, permitted a certain palpable presence of the context of reference in the text. It is this contextual foregrounding, among other things, which accounts for the fact that Pound, Eliot, Williams, and e. e. cummings made a frequent use of iconicity, sometimes even falling back on the tradition of the shaped poem.[7]

[5] Ibid., p. 9.

[6] *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964) 8.

[7] See my "The Need for an Iconic Criticism," *Journal of Literary Criticism*, 1,1 (June 1984) 30-42; "Iconic Dimensions in Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poetics* (SPELL 2), ed. Richard Waswo (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1985) 111-137; "Iconicity in Literature," *Word & Image*, 2,3 (July-September 1986) 199-208.

In addition, Modernists had an acute awareness of the contemporary context of utterance in which print has substituted for voice with the consequence that a printed page was no longer seen as a mere linear recording of speech but also as a visual space with an artistic potential in its own right.

But as my first quotation from Pound shows, Modernists were not merely intent on scrapping the context-freedom of traditional phonological and graphemic forms of encoding but also that of verbal clichés, what Pound calls nouns "decorously attended by carefully selected epithets." For it was the Modernist conviction, as expressed in Pound's "A Retrospect," that such context-freedom no longer relates to the context of actual life: "No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention and *cliché*, and not from life."[8] Now the chief Modernist technique of circumventing the bookish, lifeless and context-free conventionality of literary clichés, (T. E. Hulme's "counter-language") was the semantic discipline of the "mot juste" as exemplified by Gustave Flaubert.

A "mot juste," which Pound's disciple Ernest Hemingway defined as "the one and only correct word to use," is a totally syntagmatized or wholly context-sensitive lexeme. As such a lexeme cannot be substituted or relativized by any other word chosen from a paradigm of synomyms, it represents a sort of "absolute word." This Modernist ideal of a complete context-sensitivity of the "mot juste" which even transcends the immediate context of the sentence is expressed by Hemingway's comment on his short stories of *In Our Time* which, he explained, "are written so tight and so hard that the alteration of a word can throw an entire story out of key."[9] It was due to the fact that especially the prose of the realists excelled in such "tight" and "hard" writing or, as Roman Jakobson has shown, in context-sensitive syntagmatization or metonymy that Pound — heeding Ford Madox Ford's recommendations — demanded a "prose tradition in poetry."

But the "mot juste" as used by the modernists has a further contextual function: it is selected for its evocation of whole contexts of reference and culture. As Pound writes in his *ABC of Reading*:

[8] "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 11.
[9] *Ernest Hemingway. Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (London Granada, 1981) 154.

And the good writer chooses his words for their "meaning" but that meaning is not a set, cut-off thing like the move of knight or pawn on a chess-board. It comes up with roots, with associations, with how and where the word is familiarly used, or where it has been used brilliantly or memorably."[10]

A context-sensitive word in a literary text, then, not only has to be fully syntagmatized and semantically integrated but it should metonymically enrich the text by its connotations of contexts of tradition, culture and even utterance. It is this very enrichment that T. S. Eliot called "the music of a word," meaning semantic overtones that arise from the interplay of various contexts at the node of the "mot juste". As Eliot writes in "The Music of Poetry":

> The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately, preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association. Not all words, obviously, are equally rich and well-connected: it is part of the business of the poet to dispose the richer among the poorer, at the right points, and we cannot afford to load a poem too heavily with the former — for it is only at certain moments that a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization."[11]

To Eliot, then, a "musical poem" is a poem which not only has a musical pattern of sound but also "a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it."[12] And in order to reinforce the presence and the reader's awareness of these allusive contexts both Pound and Eliot used the original language and sometimes even the original script of some of their "musical" words (for example, "usura" in *The Cantos* or "shantih" in *The Waste Land*; the Chinese ideograms and Egyptian hieroglyphs in *The Cantos*).

But what holds true for lexemes generally is also true for the literary symbol as used by the Modernists: the symbol of a Modernist text ought to be entirely contextualized, it ought to arise from the semantic context. Abhorring all context-free, conventional symbols (such as, for example, the cross), the Modernists believed, in Pound's words, that "the natural

[10] *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1979) 36.
[11] *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber 1957) 32-33.
[12] ibid., p. 33.

object is always the *adequate* symbol."[13] I do not think that the expression "natural" here limits these objects to phenomena belonging to nature but rather that it denotes all objects natural to the given semantic context in contradistinction to conventional symbolic objects which usually derive from semantic fields outside the immediate context.

Thus, the context-sensitive symbolism of Modernism does not, as for instance in Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*, just embrace such natural objects as the brown and dry country on one side of the railway junction and the "fields of grain and trees along the bank of the Ebro" on the other,[14] an opposition which reflects the alternatives confronting the American and his pregnant girl, namely, to have an abortion (death, sterility) or to give birth to the child (life, fertility), but it also comprises the taste of liquorice proper to the drinks anis and absinthe which in the same story may symbolize the childish immaturity of the American who prefers these drinks. The "natural object" may, hence, further include the photographs of healed limbs around the wall of the ward in Hemingway's "In Another Country" which stand for illusionary appearance (they are also described as being "framed") versus the palpable reality of the mutilated soldiers in the Milan hospital; or it may include the man in the rubber cape who crosses the empty square before the hotel where the as yet childless American couple reside in "Cat in the Rain," the rubber cape, according to John V. Hagopian's ingenious suggestion, standing for a contraceptive sheath.[15]

But if the Modernist wished to use symbols of a conventional and, hence, context-free kind after all, these also had to grow out of the immediate semantic context quite "naturally." Thus Pound writes in his "Credo":

> I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use "symbols" he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.[16]

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[13] "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* p. 5.

[14] *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner, 1966) 273, 276.

[15] John V. Hagopian, "Symmetry in 'Cat in the Rain'," in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway; Critical Essays,* ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham, NC, 1975) 231.

[16] "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* p. 9.

In other words, a traditional, decontextualized symbol such as the hawk, which may stand for any of the various meanings listed by Ad de Vries in his *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, must first and foremost be established as a naturally occurring object in its semantic context. Hence, the contextual control over symbols is typical for the metonymic bias of the Modernist author of whom David Lodge writes in *The Modes of Modern Writing:*

> . . . the writer who is working in the metonymic mode [uses] metaphorical devices sparingly, he makes them subject to the control of context . . . by elaborating literal details of the context into symbols . . .[17]

As Lodge continues, Modernist writing not only makes a more frequent use of the simile than of metaphor, that is, of a form of analogy that is syntactically more fully integrated or contextualized than metaphor, but it also prefers to select the vehicle of a metaphor or simile from its immediate semantic context, "drawing analogies from a semantic field associated with the context. . . " But if the vehicle of a simile or metaphor is taken from its context, our awareness of this context is enhanced, it becomes itself more context-sensitive.

To choose one more example from the stories of Ernest Hemingway, in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" most of the vehicles used by Hemingway for his similes and metaphors in this story derive from the context of its setting and from the context of Wilson's biography: the setting is Africa and the guide Wilson, who takes an American couple on a safari, is a veteran of the First World War.

In order to insinuate Wilson's shameful behaviour as a man and as a guide, Hemingway uses the conventionally symbolic colour red which he ascribes to Wilson's complexion. Now, a red face is natural, in a blond or ginger-haired Englishman exposed to the African sun. The colour-symbol of Wilson's shame is unobtrusive because it is "natural" to the story's context. But what is more, Hemingway's metaphor "baked" for the shade of Wilson's red complexion, "the baked red of his face" and "his natural baked color," is an analogy taken from the story's setting, namely the baked, brick-coloured African soil, "the soft baked earth."[18]

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[17] *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Arnold, 1977) 113.
[18] *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, pp. 4, 20, 19.

In like manner the military metaphors and similes in this story, for example, the water-buffaloes which move "like big black tanks" or Wilson calling his gun "this damned cannon," are derived from the context of his past experience in the Great War, which is also implied in such sentences as: "He had seen it in the war," and: "Wilson looked at Macomber with his flat, blue, machine-gunner's eyes."[19] In short, the semantic field of war-experience, which was a natural part of the biography of Wilson's generation of Englishmen, offers a symbolic analogy or metaphor for the deadly war of the sexes described in this story, at the same time also providing an oblique evaluation of Wilson's personality as animal-killer and ladykiller.

2. *The Projection of Subjective Reactions onto an Objective Context*

A further Modernist mode of contextual manipulation may be found in the contextualizing literary device of the "objective correlative" which articulates subjective reactions such as emotions, moral and social evaluations indirectly. Quite generally preferring what Wyndham Lewis called "the *external* approach to things" which favours a reliance on "the evidence of the eye rather than of the more emotional organs of sense,"[20] Modernists opted for the metonymical empiricism of an objective context as the locus of subjective reactions, especially of emotions. Instead of expressing emotions directly Modernists hinted at them by means of contextual "circumstantial evidence," a sort of "res ipsa loquitur".

One of the first to make the Modernist projection of subjective reactions onto an objective context explicit — a literary practice which goes at least back to Tennyson's technique of the "interior landscape"[21] — was Richard Aldington who in his "Modern Poetry and the Imagists" (1914) defined this contextualizing method as follows:

> We convey an emotion by presenting the object and circumstance of that emotion without comment. For example, we do not say 'Oh how I admire that exquisite, that beautiful, that . . . — 25 or more adjectives — woman' . . . but

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[19] Ibid., pp. 27, 34, 8, 33.

[20] Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, ed., *The Twentieth Century. Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, vol. 7 (London: Sphere Books, 1970) 211.

[21] See Marshall McLuhan, "Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry," in *The Interior Landscape. The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943-1962*, ed. Eugene McNamara (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969) 135-155; esp. pp. 154-155.

we present that woman, we make an 'Image' of her, we make the scene convey the emotion.[22]

In order to avoid the conventional clichés selected from a paradigm of context-free synonyms ("exquisite," "beautiful," "25 more adjectives"), the Imagist or proto-Modernist conveyed subjective emotions via an objective, present context ("circumstance," "scene"). It was T. S. Eliot who gave this contextualizing method a wider publicity a few years later by apodictically refining on Aldington's context-sensitive strategy. Typically, Eliot formulated his concept of what he termed an "objective correlative" in an essay devoted to drama, that is, a genre which is more strongly dependent on contextual signification, on the highly context-sensitive semiotics of acting and staging. Here is Eliot's famous passage from his essay on *Hamlet*:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.[23]

As can be seen, Eliot's definition of the technique of the "objective correlative" details several possible modes of projecting subjective emotions onto an objective context: it may be done by means of "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events," in short, by means of "external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience." What is of interest here is not so much whether Eliot's method works in the expected way or not but that it is of a highly context-sensitive nature.

I think *The Waste Land* offers an example of Eliot's use of the contextualizing technique of the "objective correlative" and of its frequent misunderstanding. Talking of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, he makes an interesting comment on the relationship between a poet's subjectivity and his objective social context: "It happens now and then that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of

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[22] *The Egoist*, 1 (1914) 203.
[23] "Hamlet," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1953) 145.

his generation."[24] Now, whether Eliot's projection of his subjective feelings, of his private crisis onto the objective context of early 20th century urban civilization in *The Waste Land* was accidental, half-conscious or deliberate, the fact remains that in this poem he offers sets of objects, situations and chains of events that provide the contextual formulae of his particular emotion. As Ezra Pound, using the quotation from Rémy de Gourmont, perceptively described Eliot's contextualizing procedure, "un écrivain s'est raconté lui-même en racontant les moeurs de ses contemporains . . ."[25] With the publication of the facsimile-edition of *The Waste Land* we now have also Eliot's own words as to the contextualized nature of the poem:

> Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.[26]

Hence, what may, at first blush, look like a "criticism of the contemporary world," or like an account of "les moeurs de ses contemporains" to a reader unfamiliar with Eliot's technique of the "objective correlative" is ultimately — if not exclusively so — his Modernist way of projecting subjective emotions onto an objective context.

The Modernist writer who probably made the most pervasive use of the technique of the "objective correlative" was Ernest Hemingway. As he found it extremely difficult to know "truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel," that is, to distinguish conventional, context-free from context-sensitive emotions, he put his entire trust in the recording of the objective context, "the actual things . . . which produced the emotion that you experienced," "the real things, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion . . ."[27] To give but one example of his contextualizing of subjective emotions, in "A Canary for One" the changing scenery through which the train passes, starting with a colourful edenic idyll and ending with a brownish, dark

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[24] "In Memoriam," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber 1975) 243.

[25] "T. S. Eliot," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* p. 418.

[26] *The Waste Land. A Facsimile and Transcript,* ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber 1971) 1.

[27] *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956) 10.

urban wasteland, offers a kind of contextualized retrospective of the changing emotional relationship between the narrator and his wife that eventually leads to separation. Thus the story starts with "The train passed very quickly a long, red stone house with a garden and four thick palm-trees with tables under them in the shade," then mentions "a farmhouse burning in a field" and finishes with depictions of sober early-morning Paris where "Nothing had eaten any breakfast," with "three cars that had been in a wreck" and finally with "the dark of the Gare de Lyons" and its "long cement platform" at whose end was "a gate and a man took the tickets."[28] To a reader familiar with Hemingway's kind of contextualizing of emotions and emotional relationships the last sentence of the story comes as no surprise: "We were returning to Paris to set up separate residences."

3. The Deletion of Context

Let me now turn to Modernist strategies of deleting contexts, especially the context of utterance, which, once deleted, has to be supplied by the reader's creative imagination from hints in the text.

One of the most important and also most familiar features of Modernism is its suggestive implication of an oral situation of communication in which participants have a shared knowledge of each other and of the past. Now, it can be said that whereas in a literate tradition the meaning is primarily in the text, in an oral tradition the meaning is in the context. For as Deborah Tannen has pointed out, "strategies associated with oral tradition place emphasis on shared knowledge and the interpersonal relationships between communicator and audience."[29]

The orally inspired contextualization of communication may, for instance, be recognized in the Modernists' pervasive use of deictic and anaphoric devices which create a sort of *in medias res* technique. Thus the opening sentences of classic Modernist texts frequently have familiarizing

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[28] *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, pp. 227, 228, 341, 342.
[29] "The Oral/Literate Continuum of Discourse," in *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publ. Corp., 1982) 1-17 (p. 2). See also my "Moderne Dichtung and Mündlichkeit," in *Zwischen Festtag und Alltag. Zehn Beiträge zum Thema Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit*, ed. Wolfgang Raible (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1988) 215-229.

articles and demonstrative adjectives ("the," "this," "that," "these," "those"),
referentless personal pronouns ("I," "you," "they," etc.) or other words that
imply that the necessary information has already been communicated (for
example, the word "another").

To give but three examples of Modernist texts that begin in such a
deictic and anaphoric manner: Pound starts his "In a Station of the Metro"
with the line "*The* apparition of *these* faces in *the* crowd"; Eliot begins the
section "A Game of Chess" of *The Waste Land* with "*The* chair *she* sat in,
like a burnished throne, / Glowed on *the* marble, where *the* glass . . . ";
and, finally, Hemingway's "Indian Camp" starts out with "At *the* lake shore
there was *another* rowboat drawn up. *The* two Indians stood waiting." As
these sentences introduce texts by anaphoric and deictic means they bank
on the fiction that the reader is already familiar with the context which,
hence, may as well be deleted. The narrators of these texts behave like oral
poets who retell a familiar story to a familiar audience or as we do in the
family or in a circle of friends: due to a shared knowledge much may be left
unsaid or merely alluded to elliptically.

Now I think that the adoption of this form of orally oriented, intimate
communication for written texts is deeply indebted to the influence of
Robert Browning, who also bequeathed the model genre of contextual
deletion, namely the dramatic monologue, to the Modernists. For it was
Browning's fiction of a "brother's speech" which, I suggest, laid the basis for
the Modernist strategy of deleting contextual information so frequently. In
his *Sordello* (1840) Browning writes about the poets of the future who
would

> . . . attain to talk as brothers talk,
> In half-words, call things by half-names, no balk
> From discontinuing old aids. . .[30]

Among brothers (and friends) communication may heavily depend on
mere elliptical allusions ("half-words," "half-names") and, by implication,
on deictic and anaphoric expressions. Hence, all contextual details that
have traditionally been thought to be necessary for a satisfactory
communication between author and reader may be deleted. Thus

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[30] "Sordello," Book V, lines 625-627. *The Poetical Works*, ed. Ian Jack (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 1975) 277.

Browning continues:

> . . . Leave the mere rude
> Explicit details! 'tis but brother's speech
> We need, speech where an accent's change gives each
> The other's soul — no speech to understand
> By former audience: need was then to expand,
> Expatiate — hardly were we brothers![31]

Such an orally conceived literature in which the reader takes part in the author's experience in a "fraternal embrace" (W. C. Williams), in which full communication is possible even with minimum redundancy ("an accent's change gives each / The other's soul"), such literature subverts the literate ideal of a "former audience" used to maximum redundancy or virtual context-freedom in literary discourse. This ideal was given classic expression by Poe who postulated the literate criterion that "every work of art should contain within itself all that is required for its comprehension."[32]

In my view it was Browning's chief disciple, Ezra Pound, who was mainly responsible for the acceptance of a "brother's speech" poetics by the Modernists. As early as 1911 Pound wrote in *The Spirit of Romance* that "in most moving poetry, the simple lines demand from us who read, a completion of the detail, a fulfilment or crystallization of beauty implied. The poet must never infringe upon the painter's function; the picture must exist around the words . . ."[33] And in a rarely quoted passage of "The Serious Artist" Pound raises the very issue of context-free versus context-sensitive communication:

> . . . there are various kinds of clarity. There is the clarity of the request: Send me four pounds of ten-penny nails. And there is the syntactical simplicity of the request: Buy me the kind of Rembrandt I like. This last is utter cryptogram. It presupposes a more complex and intimate understanding of the speaker than most of us ever acquire of any one. It has as many meanings, almost, as there are persons who might speak it. To a stranger it convey nothing at all.[34]

[31] "Sordello," Book V, lines 634-639.
[32] *The Complete Works of E. A. Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1902), vol. XI, p.78.
[33] *The Spirit of Romance*, (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, n.d.) 68.
[34] *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 50.

As is well known, Pound and his Modernist friends tend to communicate with "the syntactical simplicity" of the second request ("Buy me the kind of Rembrandt I like"), thus presupposing on their readers' part a contextual knowledge of the author ("a more complex and intimate understanding of the speaker than most of us ever acquire of any one"). But as readers are usually strangers, Modernist writing is often subject to the danger that "it conveys nothing at all."

This may happen in Pound's totally contextualized *Cantos*: In order to understand some passages, for instance, readers ought to have visited the Malatesta Tempio in Rimini or to have access to John Adams's works. Or non-communication may occur in Eliot's poetry which is largely based on a "suppression of 'links in the chain,' of explanatory and connecting matter," as he defines the Modernist poetics of absence in his preface to St.-John Perse's *Anabase*.[35] But "the difficulty caused by the author having left out something which the reader is used to finding," is justified for Eliot by the poet's impatience with meaning which seems superfluous and his perception of "possibilities of intensity through its elimination."[36] Or communication may be obstructed by gaps in the narration or what may be called James Joyce's "gnomonic gaps" in the short stories of *Dubliners*: the story "Clay," for example, reveals its full meaning only after a restoration of the deleted contextual information that the second verse of Maria's song from the opera *The Bohemian Girl* (which she represses, singing the first verse over again instead) is about courtship and a marriage proposal.[37] Obviously, readers unfamiliar with this song will miss an important narrative dimension. Or communication may become difficult due to Hemingway's iceberg-technique of narration which seems to be aimed at boon-companions and brothers-in-arms and whose principle it is that "anything you know you can eliminate." Thus, who could have guessed from the text of "Big Two-Hearted River," for instance, that Nick has just returned from war? or from the text of "Out of Season" that Peduzzi will commit suicide, as Hemingway tells us in a commentary?[38]

I have chosen a few extreme examples because their very extremity highlights the Modernist method of contextual deletion drastically. Very

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[35] *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, p. 77.
[36] "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," ibid., p. 93.
[37] See Margot Norris, "Narration under a Blindfold: Reading Joyce's 'Clay,' " *PMLA*, 2, 102 (March 1987) 206-215; esp. pp. 213, 215.
[38] *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Bantam, 1965) 75.

often, however, and largely thanks to the patience and hard work of readers and critics who have restored parts of the deleted contexts in companions and guides, fuller communication has become possible.

In conclusion, let me illustrate some of the things I have said so far. There are two early poems by T. S. Eliot which offer a basis for a comparison of a pre-Modernist with a Modernist text because both deal with a similar subject, namely morning, and are of about the same length. The first poem, "Before Morning" (1908),[39] is thoroughly conventional. It is largely controlled by context-free, even clichéd devices and a code-oriented textual cohesion:

> Before Morning
> While all the East was weaving red with gray,
> The flowers at the window turned toward dawn,
> Petal on petal, waiting for the day,
> Fresh flowers, withered flowers, flowers of dawn.
>
> This morning's flowers and flowers of yesterday
> Their fragrance drifts across the room at dawn,
> Fragrance of bloom and fragrance of decay,
> Fresh flowers, withered flowers, flowers of dawn.

The fact that this poem uses "dawn" four times at line end explicitly associates it with the long tradition of dawn-poems (*albae*), thus weakening its present context. Both the temporal and spatial definitions of the poem's context of reference are rather vague and general ("Before Morning," "This morning's," "dawn," "day," "yesterday"; "East," "at the window," "across the room"). What is rather unconventional is the context-sensitive use of deictics, obviously a Modernist trait ("*the* window," "*This* morning," "*the* room").

The poem's theme of life in death, mutability ("weaving red with gray," "bloom" and "decay"), its conventional metaphor of "weaving," which does not derive from the immediate context, the symbolic use of flowers and their fragrance as emblems of short-lived, evanescent phenomena, as well as the personifications of "the East" and of the heliotrope flowers, are well-worn clichés of poetic tradition, a fact which again enfeebles the present context.

The same holds for the formal characteristics of the poem. Its two

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[39] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969) 597.

stanzas, which are both semantically and formally parallel quatrains of rhymed (abab) pentameters hark back to the elegiac stanzas used by Thomas Gray, not to speak of the utter conventionality of the refrain. The cohesion of "Before Morning" is achieved primarily by context-free, code-oriented principles of similarity, opposition, and symmetry (even chiasmus) on all levels of the text.

Beginning with the chiastic pattern of vowels in the title, the poem is governed by both formal and semantic dualities: two stanzas of two rhymed pairs of lines, two refrains, two words of two syllables in the title, exclusively either words of two syllables or one syllable in the text — with the exception of "yesterday"; and semantically speaking, there is the duality of inside and outside, that is, of two symmetrical spaces separated by the window and the flowers, there is the duality of macrocosm and microcosm, of bloom and decay, of today and yesterday, of night and day, of tenses (past and present) and of movements (away from the window towards the outside and towards the inside).

The second poem, "Morning at the Window" (1915),[40] however, is a truly Modernist text in so far as it is fully indebted to context-sensitive devices, to various manipulations of context both formal and semantic:

Morning at the Window

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

What characterizes this poem is, first of all, its break with poetic convention. Thus, the genre-tradition is merely (and parodically at that) implied if not deleted: the poem is a dawn-poem with a difference. Semantically, it substitutes a lower class, workaday scene for the courtly and amatory context of the traditional *alba*. And formally speaking, it has

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[40] Ibid., p. 27.

neither a clichéd metre nor a conventional stanza form (the first stanza has four lines, the second five), and there is neither a rhyme-scheme nor a refrain.

Furthermore, the cohesion of the text is no longer guaranteed by context-free principles of similarity, opposition, parallelism and duality but by the contextual frame of what a perceiving consciousness ("I am aware") hears and sees from the vantage-point of a window overlooking a street. The context of culture, early 20th century London, is deleted but implied in such expressions as "basement," "area" and "muddy skirt," the last of which presupposing a skirt that goes down to the ankles. Both the temporal and spatial parameters of this immediate perceptual context are themselves indicated metonymically or contextually: a specific time of day is suggested by the noises produced by the washing-up of dishes after breakfast ("They were rattling breakfast plates") and particularized spaces are delimited by activities at their borders ("trampled edges of the street," "Sprouting despondently at area gates," "toss up to me / Twisted faces from the bottom of the street," "vanishes along the level of the roofs").

Apart from a number of context-sensitive deictic expressions ("*the* window," "*They* are rattling," "*the* street," "*I* am aware," "*the* roofs"), further manipulations of context may be discerned in the first stanza in such displacements as "the *damp* souls of housemaids / *Sprouting* despondently at area gates," where both "damp" and "sprouting" actually belong to the context of basement and area and not to the housemaids within it. But whereas the first stanza offers us contextual contamination, the second stanza provides contextual amputation: it contains such synecdoches as the tossed up "twisted faces" and a hovering "aimless smile." Thus, while the nonhuman context affects the human world in the first stanza, detached human features affect the non-human context as well as the human observer which is enclosed by it.

I think enough has been said to demonstrate that important traits of literary Modernism have one thing in common: a manipulation of context of some kind. Or in Eliot's programmatic words for Modernism: "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning."[41]

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[41] "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays*, p. 65.