Problematics of History and Referential Reality

The reading of history is “poeticized” in the postmodernist theories, following the language of modern poetry, that anticipated many of the postmodernist concerns regarding the manner in which the past acted upon the present. This is the premise on which the polemics of this chapter is based. I argue that it is the modernist poetic language, as evident in the poems of Eliot and Stevens, that has led on to the pluralist interpretation of history in the postmodernist context, to the extent that history may be pluralistically perceived more in poetic than factual terms. By drawing parallels between how we view history and the interpretation of poetic texts, I intend to draw attention to the shared problematics of interpreting the past, which is inextricably woven into the present, and the interpretation of modernist poetic texts. “In fact”, as Hayden White declares, “historical studies are as divided over what constitutes a proper sense of history as literary studies are divided over what constitutes a proper notion of literary texts, criticism, or interpretation.”¹ White argues that:

For Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and so on (though not for all pan-textualists),
history is not a body of events lying before us in the manner of a landscape to be
surveyed from a fixed standpoint and reported on in a way a geographer, naturalist, or a painter might do, such that one could then compare different versions thereof and determine which is the most veracious, objective, informative, useful, and so forth. On the contrary, for the pan-textualist, history appears either as a text subject to many different readings (like a novel, poem or play) or as an absent presence the nature of which is perceivable only by way of prior textualizations (documents or historical accounts) that must be read and rewritten in response to the present interests, concerns, desires, aspirations and the like.\textsuperscript{2}

Thus, from this point of view it is clear that, history is less a set of sequential events and more of a critical interpretation or assessment of events much in the manner of reading and interpreting modern poetry by way of giving signification to particular events or personalities in a discourse.

There seems to be a concentration of the problematization of the ontological and epistemological status of the historical “fact” in the postmodernist theories of Derrida, Jameson, Baudrillard, Lyotard. The indeterminate and disjunctive view of historical contexts problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge and “the implication is that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of ‘genuine historicity’ . . . no matter what the nostalgia for such an entity.”\textsuperscript{3} The reading or interpretation of modernists texts like the poems of Eliot and Stevens may be paralleled with the reading or the interpretation of the past in the postmodernist context as a “textual study” where

The formalist’s “text,” or the traditionalist historicist’s discourse of “literature,” as fixed paddocks of meaning, yield to “textuality” - a potentially infinite and
indefinite, all-inclusive series of networks of interrelation whose connections and boundaries are not securable because they are ruled by never-ending movements of linguistic energy that recognize neither the rights of private ownership nor the authority of structuralism's centralized government of interpretive norms.  

Thus, interpreting poetry and the events in the past present similar problematics when they yield to "textuality." An analysis that yields to "textuality" also attends to the issue of the reader's share in the interpretive process. Barthes describes traditional literary history as author-centered, "a series of monographs, each of which, almost without exception, stakes out an author and studies him for himself; history here is merely a succession of individual men."5 Such an authored-centered notion of literary history well refers to Eliot's vastly influential notion of a tradition of unified sensibility in his essay on the Metaphysical poets, which privileges Dante, the great Elizabethan dramatists, and the metaphysical poets over Milton, Dryden and the eighteenth century, where a fall from such unity is marked.6 Perhaps the modernist crisis may have been engendered from this point onward by "on the one hand, a continuing urge to essentialize literary discourse by making it a unique kind of language - a vast, enclosed textual and semantic preserve - and, on the other hand, by an urge to make literary language 'relevant' by locating it in larger contexts of discourse and history."7 Modern poetry like that of Eliot and Stevens with its apparent formlessness and strangeness, which is the characteristic feature of the poetry of the twenties and thirties appears to form a "unique kind of language." Supplemented with the
poet's critical discourse on the manner of interpreting the poems does suggest an "essentializing" of literary discourse. "No poet," writes Eliot, "no artist, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." Eliot advocates a referential approach in the 'valuation' of the poet's merits by referring to "the existing order" that "form an ideal order among themselves." Eliot's prose works and poems are founded on the basis of intertextuality, where

intertextuality' does not indicate merely the strategy of reading one text with another, but the fact that every text is itself already an intertextual event. . . . the text is not itself - because the present is not itself.9

Intertextuality in both interpretation of the past, and poetic texts, in the manner of archaeology, derives its influences from one's contemporaries as well as figures from the past. The postmodernist theorists, however, have brought into their inquiry the subject of the referential validity of a "universal" past; when applied to the aesthetic principle, it also brings to question Eliot's notion of the "ideal order" formed by the texts of the past. Cultural theorists like Foucault by denying that historical commentary can be universal meditation, exposes for what it is "the fiction of a universal geometry", the desire of the interpreter "to adopt a faceless anonymity."10 "Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy - the unavoidable obstacles of their passion."11 Eliot
incorporates the "archeological mode" of intertextuality on the one hand, and on the other hand works on the lines of a traditional historian in his early poems, and in his later poems, for instance, *Four Quartets*, he seems to speak the language of the postmodern theorists such as Derrida or Foucault. Consider these lines from 'East Coker':

That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is a new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. (C P & P, 179)

Eliot's later poetry like postmodernist theories seems to be more of a philosophical exploration concerning the role of language as it uses words to describe the past in the present, and the question of the source of their authority. While Derrida and Foucault have ruled out a historical consciousness that is neutral, devoid of passions and committed solely to the truth, Eliot is still groping for the answers through frequent references to the "pattern".
So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years -
Twenty years largely wasted . . .
Trying to learn to use new words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general imprecision of feeling.
Undisciplined squads of emotion. (C P & P, 182)

Perhaps we need a new language to "get the better of words". Or maybe we need to change our attitude towards language, where the meaning of the words refer to a "reality" which is in a constant state of flux, so that, with the changing reality, even the meaning of the words would change. In fact, the above lines from 'East Coker' seem to refer to a "decentered" reality, and the "decentered" meaning of the words that refer to such a reality. From such a perspective there can be no one way reading any text - be it poetry or history.

With the increasing 'conventionalization' of the postmodernist theories of thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard new issues have been raised which in themselves might serve to undermine the more customary modernist view of Eliot and Stevens, as well as provide that more comprehensive - and therefore more powerful - new framework. The past always intrudes into the present and neither is intrinsically and permanently fixed, but rather, continuously made and remade. Literature as well as other forms of art
do not exist in a disciplinary vacuum, but exert their influence on each other, and are also affected by and affect their age. Literary history in that sense may also be regarded as a record of the social changes generating new art forms to address different audiences with different needs.

The awareness of the changing, temporal character of the literary past raises questions regarding the nature and the role of the language required to critically examine the past in the light of new developments. The issue of a new critical language leads us into the fields of philosophy, ethics and social theory. Breaking all barriers between the various fields of discourse, a new critical strategy or a narrative of discourse is created. The present developments make it imperative to wrest the poetry of Eliot and Stevens from the New Critical hold and question "the nature and function of poetic language beyond traditional formalistic and semantic analysis and toward a concept of the mediate, insufficient, self-undermining nature of language."12

If we were to read the disjunctive and open-ended pluralistic interpretation of history in the poems of Eliot and Stevens, it becomes easy to see how postmodernism becomes a stylistic technique to cohere the incoherence of reality. By focusing on the radical decenteredness of the poems and placing this in a socio-cultural milieu of modernism, we can then understand that history, is also a product of the peculiarities of the people who construct the past in the present, as well as being a product of the social conditions. The "reality" of those
events from this point of view, refers to the meaning attached to those events by the 'cultural interpreters'.

Such a perspective can indeed present problematics as the implication is that there can be no one grand totalising view of the events of the past as they are perceived in the present, as also, the reality of the events bear reference to the "structuring" of the past events in a narrative context by the poet, historian or the writer. In other words, there is no way to prevent the "facts" of the events from being modified by the subjective influence of the chronicler of the past events. So, if Eliot refers to the "larger Western tradition", it may not be necessarily be the same "sense" of the Western tradition that a postmodernist historian or theorist may be referring to. What postmodern theories and modernist poets like Eliot and Stevens seem to share is, the inquiry of how we can know of the "real" past events in our present context. The propositions of both appear to be the same - that the past exists in the present through the traces from the "texts", the facts which are constructed and to which we give meaning.

Thus strands of history occur in Eliot's vision of history as a "heap of broken images," a medley of "voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells," or fragments which recall ancient Indian or European texts, Western classical music, anthropological or philosophical thought, which

self-consciously remind us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and
narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we know of the past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present.\textsuperscript{13} Eliot through the ‘Notes’ to \textit{The Waste Land} as well as the various epigraphs to his other poems culled from a variety of sources reminds us of the existence of the “real empirical facts” as they are given signification within the context of his verse. To this extent such poetry makes way for pluralistic interpretation as attention is drawn self-consciously to the presence of an absent past which is given signification only by the operation of the present on it. Eliot’s poems reveal that his mind was perceptive to plurality and difference so that although the unity of poetry may indeed be threatened or lost through history, it is also to be understood and re-established in terms of history by means of a complexity coherent narrative. The unity of such a narrative is not one of essentiaalist uniformity since the narrative itself embodies conflict and division. Essentialism is thus unnecessary (and unable) to hold poetry, or any tradition of achievement together.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, what the sense of history that comes through in Eliot’s poems is a discovery of how people have lived in the maze of events, without holding any “essentialist” presumptions that in the events themselves lies some pattern of meaning that can redeem us:

\begin{quote}
Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities.  \textit{(C P & P, 38)}
\end{quote}

As a take-off from the view of history expressed in Eliot’s poem is Hayden White’s opinion who feels that the writing of history in the postmodernist
context, is more of a literary endeavor and in that sense is also logocentric. The events did occur in the real empirical past, in the present context, are named and constituted as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning so that:

a specifically historical inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might mean for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects.\(^{15}\)

History then seems to become a matter of critical interpretation as there can be no one single History which we may all refer to. Eliot seems to be aware of this perspective towards history, yet there is the presence of a pluralist-essentialist tension in Eliot's poetics as he attempts to accommodate history in a pattern (with his constant references to "patterns" in *Four Quartets*). He seems to approach history with a definite model in mind, yet reports none except his "pattern of timeless moments", which for him includes the presence of the past in the present moment:

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ people without history} \\
\text{Is not redeemed for time, for history is a pattern} \\
\text{Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails} \\
\text{On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel} \\
\text{History is now and England.} \quad (C\ P &\ P, 197)
\end{align*}
\]

Melita Schaum's elaboration of J. Hillis Miller's response to Stevens's poetic style may very well apply to Eliot's sense of history:

Stevens's style exhibits an open-ended inclusivity - an aporia - of thought and image. It presents us with poems which violate organic unity in that they "begin
in a middle of a thought, and their ending is arbitrary... Stevens's poetry is, in short, a poetry "appropriate to the incomplete." In fact history from a postmodern perspective may also be viewed as a poetics "appropriate to the incomplete", as the past can only be known through our narratives as they are expressed through the medium of words and language:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those "events" into present historical "facts." On the other hand, Stevens in his poems is more concerned with the authority of the words as they structure our past than in the events themselves. History here becomes an issue of language as it is used for the recording of past events. It is this shared awareness of the paradoxical nature of language, "this intriguing, self-disassembling power of poetry, its decreative attempt to achieve the essential condition of its own being, [which] anticipates much postmodern thought concerning the self-reflexivity of literary language." The struggle with language must be seen as something more than a casual collection of expressions or images in the poetics of Eliot and Stevens, and more as a form of questioning of reality; taking language to its limits as in their later poetry - a central act in modern man's struggle to know himself and the reality in which
they are rooted. They choose to abstract the reality in their attempt to transcend the real to an ‘ultimate reality’. Yet there seems to be an awareness that there can be no one essential reality which is the most striking feature common to both the poets.

As an artistic tendency it makes it worthwhile to study the poetry of Wallace Stevens - situated in the transition between modernism and postmodernism - from a postmodernist perspective, with special reference to his experimentation with language. Fredric Jameson is one of the few postmodernist theorists who has developed a theory of capitalism in which state, economy and culture interact and mutually determine each other. This is why Jameson’s Marxist intervention is of value. On Stevens’s poetics Jameson comments:

That it is avant-garde or elitist poetry goes without saying; but such extreme language experiments have themselves much to tell us about historical possibilities that one would not have been able to read off of other kinds of texts.

... In particular, however, as damaging as the restriction to an epistemological framework may be, we must here too immediately add the qualification that somehow, again in ways that remain to be determined, Stevens’ poetry manages to transcend the limits of traditional epistemology: here, as in the gradual foregrounding of the theme of language in his work, he may best be read as registering a process analogous to that we will observe in French ‘structuralism,’ namely a dissolution of the older epistemological subject-object framework, which is bought at the cost of a certain reification of ‘Language’.19

Jameson offers an analysis of the ‘sphere of culture’, and its autonomy (or relative or semi-autonomy) in the contemporary world through a study of
Wallace Stevens's poetry. The theory of modernism in this analysis turns on the relationships between modernist language and forms, and the emergence of the imperialist world system in the ‘monopoly stage’ of capitalism. By placing Stevens’s work in the Sixties, Jameson highlights the poetic style of Stevens which is somewhat symptomatic of the condition of language, aesthetics and culture as the Sixties found them in place. Going a step further Melita Schaum ‘rewrites’ Stevens into the Eighties as she explores the genealogy of contemporary debate on Steven criticism. She argues that:

> [t]he complexity of Stevens poetry from the time of his emergence early in the century has occasioned the redefinition of modernism, of the poetic act, and of our own involvement in the project of interpretation and appropriation that continues to inform the scene of 20th century criticism.\(^2\)

Such appropriation of the poetics of Eliot and Stevens by postmodernist thinkers points to the difficulty of distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism as two separate epochs in the history of art. The “defining” characteristics of postmodernism are as much a defining feature of Modernism. Alex Callinicos is of such a view and he criticizes Charles Jencks definition of postmodernism as “double-coding,” and, argues that “if it is taken as a general characterization of Postmodern art... it is hopelessly inadequate.”\(^2\) Callinicos points out that what Jencks terms as “double-coding” in postmodern art is “what Eugene Lunn calls “Simulataniety, Juxtaposition, or Montage”. To illustrate this aspect, Calicos quotes Peter Ackroyd on *The Waste Land*:
Eliot found his own voice by first reproducing that of others - as if it was only through his reading of, and response to, literature that he could find anything to hold onto, anything 'real'. That is why "Ulisses" struck him so forcibly, in a way that no other novel ever did. Joyce had created a world which exists only in, and through, the multiple uses of language - through voices, through parodies of style. . . . Joyce had a historical consciousness of language and thus of the relativity of any one 'style'. The whole course of Eliot's development would lead him to share such a consciousness . . . In the closing sequence of *The Waste Land* itself he creates a montage of lines from Dante, Kyd, Gerard de Nerval, the *Pervigilium Veneris* and Sanskrit . . . There is no 'truth' to be found, only a number of styles and interpretations - one laid upon another in an endless and apparently meaningless process.22

Callinicos concentrates mainly on the early works of Eliot to show how Eliot is a particular relevant example to take in the light of Jenck's claim that Postmodernism represents a "return to tradition" after Modernism's "fetish of discontinuity." For one of Eliot's main preoccupation, expressed, for example, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', was the relationship of continuity and discontinuity between his own work and the broader European community. However, Callinicos is also quick to clarify that "Eliot is in no sense exceptional among the major Modernists in this concern for placing himself with respect to 'the larger Western tradition', as any acquaintance with the work, say, of Joyce or Schoenberg of Picasso will confirm."23

While I tend to agree with Callinicos's view that postmodern art is a continuation of and not a break from the fin-de-siecle Modernist revolution, I feel that it is also the attitude of accepting a fragmented, disjunctive and
indeterminate reality that makes postmodernism distinct from modernism. Callinicos also directs his arguments towards those features of modernism which have been appropriated by postmodern art to give it its distinctive identity. He evokes the arguments of such postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard to illustrate his point of view:

The main thrust of Lyotard's arguments, however, involves the claim that postmodernism is a tendency within Modernism characterized by its refusal to mourn, and indeed its willingness to celebrate our inability to experience reality as an ordered or integrated totality.24

Callinicos's critique of postmodernism focusing on the stylistic features of modernism as they have been appropriated by postmodernists offers an account which as he himself admits is "negative", mainly because postmodern art is unable to "come up with a plausible and coherent account of its distinguishing characteristics."25 Also, Callinicos does not claim any originality for his views as his point of view is worked up from a number of thinkers he has examined. This methodology seems to be the current critical practice particularly among the late Marxist critics such as Frank Lentricchia who writes that:

One of the lessons that I hope I've learned from reading contemporary criticism and philosophy is that no one is in a worse position to judge the blindness of a particular point of view than the one who subscribes to it; I must leave to others, therefore, the task of specifying and evaluating my perspective.26

Lentricchia accepts Hayden White's premise that methodology determines perspective and that all writing of history is also philosophy of history. Thus an analysis of a text from this perspective is clearly evidence enough of how
interpretations generate more texts, as the stylistic features of literary works (in this particular case it is poetry) become the philosophical expressions of critical metanarratives, so that there can be no one absolute interpretation of the written word. Postmodernism as a term lends substance to such tendencies in art and intellectual trends. As one of its principal propagandists, Ihab Hassan, writes in a collection published in 1987:

Fastidious academics once shunned the word postmodern as they might shrink from the shadiest neologism. But now the term has become the shibboleth for tendencies in film, theater, dance, music, art and architecture; in philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis and historiography; in new sciences, cybernetic technologies, and various cultural lifestyles. Indeed, postmodernism has now received the bureaucratic accolade of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the form of Summer Seminars for College Teachers; and beyond that, it has penetrated the discourse of late Marxist critics who, only a decade ago, dismissed the term as another instance of the dreck, fads and folderol of a consumer society.27

Postmodernism is also a tendency in the understanding of history as evident in the discourse of theorists like Foucault and Derrida. According to Frank Lentricchia their readings are correct as “they have acquired in their struggle with history a more intimate and self-conscious grasp of the logocentric structures of constraint than have any of the thinkers of their philosophical heritage.”28 The focus on postmodernism as a stylistic device in poetry is saved from being reduced to a mere word-play by the critical interpretation of just such ‘late Marxists’ critics, such as Alex Callinicos, Frank Lentricchia and Fredric
Jameson, who placing the term 'postmodern' within a historical context see it at best, as a symptom. The "gaiety of language" is thus exposed more or less as the symptom of the times, while the underlying concerns of literary and artistic endeavor are passed on from the past to the present. This in main, is the focus of this present analysis - the manner in which the past may be read into the present - as modernist poetry becomes the philosophical expression in the contemporary context.

Postmodernist theorists, critics and thinkers have explored the manner in which Stevens has contributed to postmodern poetics, and his immense impact on the course of modern theory.29 The appropriation of Stevens’s poetics by postmodernist thinkers is as open to a deconstructionist reading of Stevens’s criticism as are the poems themselves. Schaum summarizes Riddel’s deconstructionist views regarding Stevens’s thus:

Riddel sees the project of deconstruction as not so much to re-read the poet "correctly" but in fact to contest the authoritative "correctness" of any critical reading, to "challenge the claims of other methods to read him properly." Riddel’s claim is that by virtue of the nature of language, both literary and critical, all texts are "already self-deconstructions" which undo and create disrupting closure in themselves as well as engaging in the ‘dis-semic’ play of meaning occasioned by that rupture.” And deconstruction as a critical act “keeps pointing up those moments when the illusion of self-reflexivity in a text breaks down, whether upon an undecidable sign or a rhetorical crux, and where in this catachresis a play takes over. Finally, regarding the conventional desire for explicative meaning and truth in Stevens criticism; deconstruction “can only remind us that such closures belong not to the poems, which are readings
themselves, but to the reading of the poems which have grown tired of Stevens' challenge to, if not lack of, seriousness.\textsuperscript{30}

Lentricchia too reiterates Stevens's impact on modern criticism's tendency toward privileging the literary realm and later places Stevens in a central role in the advent of deconstructive criticism in America. According to Lentricchia, it was J. Hillis Miller who introduced the theories of Derrida into the American critical scene of the early Seventies by way of numerous reviews and attacks, and a major two-part essay on Wallace Stevens.\textsuperscript{31} It was Miller "who assumed the burden of chief spokesman and polemicist" for deconstruction in America, and during this course of time he "carried Stevens into the poststructuralist camp."\textsuperscript{32} Rajeev Patke, however, regards Joseph N. Riddle as "the foremost American deconstructionist . . . because he is the most articulate among American critics in his systematic application of the Derridean vocabulary to the reinterpretation of modern American poetry."\textsuperscript{33} According to Patke, J. Hillis Miller has "more theory than practice to his deconstruction, and writing in a style marginally less accessible than Riddle's."\textsuperscript{34} Thus a postmodernist taking into its purview deconstruction, constantly challenges not only the text, but also challenges the claims of other methods to read a text properly. This demonstrates that modernist text susceptible to deconstruction, generate more texts, which appear in themselves to be acts of deconstruction.

In his analysis of Stevens's work in After New Criticism, Lentricchia finds that Stevens's factionalism - earlier as a token of the poet's authenticity, a type of good faith, a "gaiety" in spite of (or because of) language's provisional
freedom and the poet's own scrupulous self-awareness — now becomes a
tendency “perilous and schizoid” in the phrasing of his ideas, in statements such
as: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction,
there being nothing else, the exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that
you believe in it willingly.” This rather self-evident statement is followed up by
Fredric Jameson who begins his evaluation of Stevens’s work from an “initial
axiological” paradox, whereby Stevens is

somewhat able to accommodate the seeming irreconcilable impressions of an
astonishing linguistic richness on the one hand and impoverishment or
hollowness of content on the other, each of these in constant tension with one
another and on various readings each seeming to draw the other into its force
field and transfigure it. On the one hand, a familiar modernist practice of the
unique personal or private style in these poems opens up into a wealth of
vocabulary and syntactical fluidity that seems both absolute... and
somehow impersonal again, as though this style were in reality something like an
older rhetoric, with its collective, prepersonal capacities, its pre-existing of the
individual speaker who only needs to move in it as in an element. Therewith,
however, one of the key features of modernist will to style is lost: the necessity
for its violent birth, for a painful conquest of the private voice over against the
universal alienation of public speech.

Jameson attempts to account for the phenomenon of the ease of speech in
Stevens's poetry or “the inner hollowness of content”, which tends to turn upon
its language and cast some doubts upon the latter’s density and authenticity. It is
a concern shared by Paul Bove and Joseph Riddel, who agree that Stevens is
engaged in the destructive enterprise of turning traditional discourse back upon
itself. It is a view of Stevens as an "archetypal 'ironist' who uses poetry to scrutinize its own origins until he finds that at the 'centre' of poetry and all reality there is really no "presence"." This point of view is expressed succinctly in the last line of 'The Snow Man': "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CPWS, 10). From this perspective the past and its traditions are mere souvenirs, the structures of belief have dissolved in mid-air, and there is no authority according to the poet "except force, operative or imminent." In poems such as 'The Search for Sound free from Motion', Stevens turns to the imagination which invents "[th]e world as word", where the poet has the final authority to structure beliefs by the imaginative use of language for his own appeasement:

The world lives as you live,
Speaks as you speak, a creature that
Repeats its vital words, yet balances
The syllable of a syllable. (CPWS, 268)

For Stevens, poetic imagination is the only clue to reality as it is, "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos." In an age of disbelief - an age which questions the "reality" of the world, if there is no truth, there is still fiction. Stevens writes that "in an age of disbelief, when the gods have come to an end, when we think of them as the aesthetic projections of a time that has passed, men turn to a fundamental glory of their own and from that create a style bearing themselves in reality."
The style that Stevens incorporates in his poems is parody which reinstates a dialogue with the past. The past as a referent is modified and given a new and different life, and meaning in the poems. For example, the jar in ‘Anecdote of the Jar’ recalls Keat’s “Grecian Urn”, as an aesthetic object placed in “slovenly wilderness”. Here, the focus is not just on the jar but also the effect of the jar on its surroundings as “It took dominion everywhere.” The Grecian Urn seems to have transmogrified into a “gray and bare” jar so that the parody of Urn here suggests “ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity.”

Similarly, the embarrassingly anachronistic statues of political heroes in ‘The Dance of the Macabre Mice’ and ‘The American Sublime’ again not only recalls the great American heroes of the past but also draws attention to their status in the present, which ironically is the state of such a statue in Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’. ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ recalls Wordsworth ‘Daffodils’ except there is “no bliss of solitude” in the memory as it acts upon the present. What the poet in ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ seems to seek is not to participate in the memory of the past events, but to accommodate that memory in the present through words, through the language of poetry and structure the reality of the past event in the present through the imaginative use of language. Denis Donoghue observes about the poem that: “For Stevens, the sea is not enough, reality is not enough. He needs the words of the sea, and if he cannot have them he will settle for words and let the sea look out for itself.” It is
through the sound of the words of the song that the singer masters the reality through her imagination, “until reality is taken up into her song and there is nothing but the song.” It is, as if, the poet seems to be aware that the present moment will soon fade away into the past, so we need words to give meaning to that memory to sufficiently “order” its reality. And the poem ends:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  (CPWS, 130)

Donoghue feels that Stevens's *Collected Poems* are “an edifice of form to replace the old structures.” In a way Stevens’s poems helps us to fathom the manner in which modernist poetry becomes the philosophical expression of literary endeavor in the postmodernist context. History becomes a “referential reality” when like in modernist poetics we give up the search for truth and set about creating our own fiction. Donoghue enumerates the benefits of such a fiction as evidenced in Stevens's poems:

The fiction would have several advantages: it would be in the image of the creator, it would be amenable to the whole range of his powers, it would always be under his control, like the art object that it would resemble to the point of identity. It would even change to suit its creator's desire for change. . . . Things would be good for as long as they lasted, and when they died they would be superseded by other things. Thus the vacancy of life would be filled. Where there is nothing, you put yourself and your inventions, thereby raising desires and appeasing them. Life becomes a rhetorical situation in which you are your
own audience. History becomes mythology; ideas that are or might be true are replaced by ideas that are undeniably beautiful. The understanding of history like the understanding of poetry, then becomes a subjective affair. We see in the events what we want to believe. For instance in ‘Examination of the Hero in a Time of War’ Stevens asks, “Unless we believe in the hero, what is there / To believe?” (CPWS, 275). Stevens after attributing all obsolete forms to him realises that the forms no longer apply. He is not, for instance, the classic hero, nor the bourgeois hero. He is not a person at all, not even an image. “There is no image of the hero.”

The hero is a feeling, a man seen
As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen and saved that mystic
Against the sight, the penetrating,
Pure eye. (CPWS, 278-9)

For Stevens a hero is more of a creation of the imagination structured according to our belief: “The hero is not a person.” So maybe it is again the imagination that is capable of creating a God and a hero, which is the real hero. In this sense the work of the imagination is “a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains.” As with the hero, the past too now appears in desperate need of being accounted for: “The past looms as a distant, discrete, discontinuous, and dispersed question that history must shape into meaning.” This is, no doubt, to some degree, true of all ages but the attitude
towards the problematics of confronting the past, as also the manner of
structuring the past into the present is not the same.

The provisional, disjunctive, indeterminate nature of the historical past as
also the radical ambivalence toward the role played by the past in the present is
a source of neurosis for the modernist. A postmodernist attitude on the other
hand, celebrates these very features and willingly embraces it with all its
paradoxes and contradictions. The quest for a single, essentialized,
transcendent concept of "genuine historicity" which was such a major concern
with the modernists does not end with the postmodernist either. It is just that the
'attitude' towards the quest has been transformed from an anxiety-ridden angst
(as in Eliot) to a celebration of the past. It must be mentioned, that as far as
attitude is concerned, Eliot is definitely a modernist, while Stevens has moved
on to a more postmodernist attitude as revealed in his poems as 'Sunday
Morning', 'Dance of the Macabre Mice', 'To a High-Toned Old Christian
Woman' (discussed at length in an earlier chapter). At this juncture it may be
asked that as we read the poems of Eliot and Stevens in this postmodern age,
are we not reconstructing the past as an object of knowledge, as also
reinstalling "historical contents as signifiants and even determining, but in doing
so, [problematising] the entire notion of historical knowledge?" Are we to base
our analysis of Eliot's and Stevens's poems on the "historical contents" of their
works and club them both as modernists, or, may we not, structuring their works
in the present context, interpret their poems to reveal that Eliot is more-
modernist, while Stevens’s attitude is postmodernist? Eliot in his early poems moans as he perceives the past to be corrupted in the present context, while for Stevens, the present is reason enough for celebration, even though the past appears to be eroded, corroded - yet it exists- and that is cause enough for exuberance. According to Donoghue:

We can assume that he [Stevens] was exhilarated by the actual procedure of writing the poem, by the manipulation of ideas, possibilities, connivances of language, by playing all the great parts, by playing the most exhilarating of all roles, the Great Impresario, God. Instead of a God in whom he could not believe, Stevens set up a God in whom his belief was total.47

Louis Menand focusing on the ‘literary honesty’ of a work questions the authority on which art makes its claim on the emotions of the audience and asks: “The postmodernist will want to know just how the sincerity of this order is to be measured, and how the genuine act of self-expression is to be distinguished from the factitious one.”48 However, Menand does not want to ascribe to Eliot a ‘postmodernist ethic’ and is cautious in his reading of Eliot’s works in the contemporary context. He emphasizes the skeptical side of Eliot’s relation to a certain tradition of literary values which as he admits, does imply a reading of Eliot’s works “as a subverter of established forms of knowledge, a kind of writing that, without imposing a new normative structure on us, disrupts conventional habits of perception and the ideological assumptions those habits are understood to enforce.” Yet, Menand is aware that such a reading is in itself
"not enough to explain literature's value to us, and as though it did not carry with it ideological baggage of its own." 49

Reading Eliot's and Stevens's poems side by side, highlights the different approaches to the presence of the past in the present. The manner in which the two poets structure the "reality" of the past in their works, thus, depends on their historical memory and each of their "literariness depends crucially not on the formal property of the text themselves, but on the position which those properties establish for the text within the matrices of the prevailing ideological field." 50

Thus the narratives of two distinct expressions - T. S. Eliot's and Wallace Steven's - in the prevailing postmodernist matrix, highlights not only the difference in their attitude towards their "reality", but as Miller in his preface to The Poets of Reality asserts that Eliot, Stevens (as well as other poets of reality - Conrad, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and William Carlos Williams) begin "with an experience of nihilism or its concomitants and each in his own way enters the new reality." 51 The reference to the "new" is not a release into an unrepressive new order, but of a search for a style that would generate writings that question the values most dear to a tradition, question the historical order from within the order itself.

Thus the poets of reality search and incorporate the style that disturbs what was considered immobile, fragment what was thought to be unified, and thereby show the heterogeneity of what was imagined, consistent with itself.
NOTES

1 Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, 3: 484.

2 Ibid. 485.


7 Lentricchia "Preface" xiii.


9 Lentricchia, 175.


11 Ibid. 158.


13 Hutcheon 97.


15 White 487.

16 Schaum 112.

17 Hutcheon 89.

18 Schaum 108.

Schaum 182.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 15.

24 Ibid., 18.

25 Ibid., 28.

26 Lentricchia, "Preface," xi-xii


28 Lentricchia 209.

29 A collection of essays edited by Albert Gelpi titled Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), attests to a newly complicated faceting of Stevens as he is rewritten into the Eighties, moving between and beyond the later theoretical battles of strong reading, existential phenomenology, deconstruction, and historicism.

30 Schaum 165.

31 The essay was "Stevens' 'Rock' and Criticism as Cure," Georgia Review 30, 1 & 2 (1976).

32 Lentricchia 162.


34 Ibid.

35 Lentricchia 241.

36 Jameson 11.


Ibid., 193.

Ibid., 195.

The Necessary Angel, 171


Hutcheon 89.

Donoghue 202.


Ibid., 7.

Tony Bennett, Formalism And Marxism (London and New York: Methuen, 1979) 59.