The present century has witnessed regular displacements of sensibility in the history of arts and literature so that by the end of this century, contemporary culture has accepted the cataclysmic upheavals readily and seems to, in fact, even revel in the disunity and the chaos of the world. Indeed, this attitude of acceptance leading on to the effacement of the older categories of genre and discourse can be found in what is sometimes called contemporary or cultural discourse, and may well be one of the more important clues for tracking down the postmodern. According to Fredric Jameson, "postmodern is what you have when the process of modernization is complete and nature is gone for good. . . . where 'culture' has become a product in its own right; the market has become a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself."1

According to the contemporary theorists such as Lyotard, postmodernism signals the death of meta-narratives whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimize the illusion of a universal human history. He defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives". According to him "[t]his incredulity is undoubtedly a product of science, but
that progress in turn presupposes it.\textsuperscript{2} Postmodernism privileges heterogeneity and liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse. Charles Jencks defines postmodernism in the most dialectical way imaginable, as "the continuation of modernism and its transcendence."\textsuperscript{3}

In my opinion a postmodernist perspective is ideally suited for the major poetry of the two representative modernist poets - T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens - as it highlights the inherent postmodernist traits in their works as cultural life becomes absorbed and accepted as part of the text. In fact, cultural life may be viewed as a series of texts to produce more texts and this process is always in a state of flux. But whereas the major modernists reacted with horror or despair at the perception of the world as one of increasing fragmentation, or, of the dominance of commercial pressures, and of human powerlessness in the face of blind technology, it is typical of the postmodernism to react in a far more accepting manner. Putting together incompatible source material in modern poetics offers alternative perspectives to one dimensional reality. One of the implicit concerns of a postmodernist approach to modern poetry is the diachronic processes by which the arts come to terms with the totalising processes of capitalism through heterogeneity and pluralism. Both Eliot and Stevens were firmly entrenched in the material world of money. They pursued poetry as a vocation, otherwise professionally they were involved with 'capitalist' undertakings. Eliot worked in
Llyods bank and Stevens was the vice-president at Hartford Accident and
Indemnity. Poetry was a means to convert
the contemporaneous into the poetry of contemporaneous, and by so doing
imaginatively transforms things as they are into something more explicable
and amenable. Poetry is a present perfecting, partial and deferred, of a
poverty that has no remedy, only palliatives. Poetry - real Poetry - does not
make our wishes come true, but it does make our losses good.4

Such a study would also illustrate how within modernism the
critical and increasingly combative conscience of bourgeois civilization has
influenced contemporary culture. However, Hilton Kramer feels that the
voracious appetite for the “new” among the bourgeois is a source of despair
among artists who recognize that this volatile and heartless taste can be quite
as destructive to any real attachment to the object of the artistic imagination
as the old Philistine resistance ever was.5

A feeling common to both the poets is that the active involvement of the
bourgeoisie in the world of public affairs had led to the replacement of
knowledge by power, the exclusion of contemplation, the degradation of mind.
Such an elitist attitude is also reflected in their poetry, and this feature runs
through Modernist culture in a fundamental way. According to Denis
Donoghue, “Stevens and Eliot are together in their contempt for the middle-
class, only Stevens shows it a little more urbanely. Eliot sneers at girls who do
their own laundry (the typist in The Waste Land); Stevens praises the ignorant
man (Opus Posthumous).”6 Donoghue’s observation is that both Eliot and
Stevens are “together in equating good with consciousness. Those who are incapable of such intense consciousness are beneath contempt and probably beneath the degree of damnation.” The particular quality of elitism presented problems for Modernism especially for the Modernists who belonged to the political left and had problems reconciling elitism with their political democracy. Regarding modernism’s “relentless hostility to mass culture”, Alex Callinicos points out that:

Taken as claims about the internal construction of Modernist art these are far too strong. Even the forbiddingly mandarin Eliot loved the London music hall and sought to integrate its rhythms into some of his poetry especially Sweeney Agonistes. Stravinsky wrote not only Le Sacre du printemps but also L'Histoire du soldat, which draws heavily on ragtime. If directed at the great Modernists' Aestheticism, their tendency to view art as refuge from 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history', the accusation of elitism does strike home... While Eliot goes on to press the correspondences towards an ethical and theological end, Stevens’s ends are incorrigibly aesthetic. Where Eliot equates consciousness with sanctity, Stevens equates consciousness with vision which is Imagination's sanctity. The response of both the poets, however, to their age seems to be more aesthetic than realistic or merely illustrative. Such a response to the surroundings would have to be in part, a scrutiny of its politics.

Christopher Norris notes that "a recourse to theory is typically the response of any marginalised fraction of dissident intellectuals excluded from
the mainstream of political life and left little choice but to cultivate a range of more or less hopeful alternative visions. While acknowledging that this fact is also noted by Perry Anderson in his book *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Norris feels that

> it is a curious turn of events when this response takes the form of a deep investment in the issues of aesthetics, philosophy of art, and literary theory as the chief areas of concern among a sizable number of committed left-wing cultural activists. . . .The suspicion must be - or so it would seem from a commonsense-realist standpoint - that these theorists are just whistling in the dark, discovering all manner of pseudo-radical rhetoric and postures by which to disguise their own deep sense of political failure or defeat.

However, Norris’s real concern is to validate that theory has consequences beyond the professional or academic sphere, and that the question whether or not to “do theory” is always within the reach of the larger question that whether anything we do or think is likely to affect the course of social and political events. Summarizing Lyotard’s arguments in his recent book, *Le Differend*, Norris writes, that the arguments are

> based on a heterodox reading of Kant that distinguishes the various ‘phrase-regimes’ of cognitive, practical and speculative reason in order to maintain some margin of hope for the exercise of political thought. . . .What is most important to grasp about these writings, Lyotard argues, is the fact that they appeal to the Ideas of Reason - speculative reason - and not to any form of determinate theoretical judgment which could ever be confirmed (or disconfirmed) by recourse to the realm of empirical self-evidence.
Norris, in his essay, has focused on all those present day thinkers who are prompting this turn toward aesthetic models and analogues - especially that of the sublime in order to raise questions in the realm of socio-political theory.

I feel that the present day response of cultural theorists is similar to the response of the modernist poets. A postmodernist perspective on modernist poetry, would then read poetry from the point of view of the study of the text as a cultural discourse; as the response of dissident intellectuals who through their poetry and critical works have attempted to project a poetics of imagination which offers more or less hopeful alternative visions. It is in this manner, thus, that the style of the two poets is similar to postmodern theories, where “style” is not a matter of form, of something imposed on the subject matter. It is something much more intimately related to the matter: without it the artist's personal vision, his “sense of fact” cannot find objective embodiment.\textsuperscript{14} It is imperative that we study the style of the two poets “whereby” writes Roy Harvey Pearce, “point of view sets perspective.” “Knowing a poet's style we can know how much of the fullness of life he can allow into his consciousness and still be true to what has traditionally he called his idea of order,” says Pearce.\textsuperscript{15} Such a study may be said to be a “raid on the inarticulate”\textsuperscript{16} as there is much in thought that cannot be directly expressed in language. Thus the poetry of Eliot and Stevens may be said to be an embodiment of personal experiences that have been objectified and consciously structured into the language of poetry.
Both the poets shared the 20th century concerns of coming to terms with reality in a world that seems to lack spiritual significance, a world often visualized as a wasteland. Their poetry is an "act of the mind" where thoughts and ideas become utilitarian with the aim of integrating the mind with the processes of reality. Both Eliot and Stevens attempt to probe the elusive reality through the language of art and experience. What is common to both is their concern for the creative processes at work in the making of poetry.

A postmodernist perspective also focuses on how the changing economic and social trends determine and give shape to broad movements of thought and opinion in every age. Even the structure of the works of art (the style of composition) may be a matter of taste and fashion determined by social context. Scientific and industrial progress particularly in the 19th century, threw up as a by-product certain theories and inventions which had a direct impact on the techniques and social significance of art. The development of an obscure style in modern poetry has been influenced in part by the technological advancements in the twentieth century, such as, the invention of photography and photographic methods of reproduction. The effect of this on the creative artist has been profound, for it has relieved him of one of the social functions of art, that of visual aid. The creative artist's main concern is now fulfilled by means of mechanical devices by which to interpret reality. Modernist style now attempts to go beyond the mere illustration of reality to the interpretation of material and psychic phenomenon by resorting
to 'structured reality'. By structured reality I refer to reality as portrayed in works such as Picasso's *Guernica* or *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or 'The Hollow Men', James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Three Graces* by Munch, 'Sunday Morning' and the war poems of Wallace Stevens in *Parts of a World*. Modernist works were attempts more aimed at interpreting reality rather than illustrating it as a sequence of ordered events. Such works combined several different aspects of the human form, an article or an event, in paintings, poems or prose works, in order to incorporate the multi-dimensional aspects of one image. The multiple aspects of one particular event or object as captured by the creative artists and structured within their works, further invites the reader or spectator to structure another facet of the image according to their perceptive imagination. The Modernists deliberately distorted the harmony of form to give as full a description of it as possible. Yet this strange technique of fragmentation and distortion makes the reader or a spectator of a visual work more alert to every angle and facet of the work. Such strategies in modernist works also capture the movement in life as the works no longer remain static and confined to a page or canvas. The fragmentation or distortion in modernist works alerts us to their various facets and we begin to see them with greater insight.

The revolution in the formal aspect of poetry that began with Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and is prevalent in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, played a major role in evolving "a new era of aesthetic self consciousness and
non-humanistic representationalism in which art turns from realism and humanistic representationalism towards style, technique and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life."^{19} It is this stylistic representation of the reality around them that is a shared feature of most modernist works. Stevens and Eliot too stylize and abstract reality by selecting certain elements from a wealth of human experience and mould these elements into a certain ordered pattern. The experience presented, in proportion to the stylization of the way in which it is presented, becomes less of a human experience and more of an aesthetic one. Stylization removes the experience sufficiently from life so that our tendency to react towards the experience as though it were a real-life one is checked. The concern of both the poets is with the structure of words. Both Eliot and Stevens work on the aesthetics of language structures. Their “pure” literary pursuits, however, were apparently dislodged by other pursuits. A postmodernist perspective focuses on the manner in which the world of ‘street and speeches’, is structured within the poetics of imagination.

Aesthetics is a field of contesting opinions of the theorists of the left persuasion. While some theorists of the Left, like Terry Eagleton have argued that “it is important to study the history of aesthetics since it occupies a crucially contested domain where political interests are often involved, albeit in a highly oblique or attenuated form,”^{20} others like Tony Bennett, regard it as a mystified pseudo-discipline, a strictly “useless kind of knowledge”. One of the chapters in Bennet’s book, Outside Literature, is titled as: “Really useless
'knowledge': a Political Critique of Aesthetics", which appears to be a reflection of his views of the role of aesthetics on society. Then again, Norris, in his analysis of the postmodern feels that there has long existed a counter-tradition of what he calls left-wing aesthetics, a tradition that runs (roughly speaking) from Schiller to Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Fredric Jameson and other such proponents of a secularized hermeneutic. These critics hold out the saving possibility that theory might recapture the speculative high ground and thus transform aesthetic philosophy into a discourse responsive to art's always latent utopian or emancipatory promise.

A postmodern perspective would take into consideration the "left wing aesthetics" as it is translated into the poetics of Stevens and Eliot. A study of the works of the two poets from this point of view would show that they were certainly not apolitical, and at crucial moments in their career they were compelled to consider poetry in the light of contemporary politics. It is from this point of view, then, that the more recent studies portray these poets "not as retiring aesthete[s] writing hermitic verses but one of many writers caught up in the social and aesthetic controversies of the day." It is because of this pre-occupation that the critics now attempt to analyze in greater detail the relationship between their poetry and the larger culture of which it is integral. A great strength of a postmodernist perspective is its relationship with and integration into the culture of daily life - architecture, advertising, fashion, films, staging of multi-media events, grand spectacles and political campaigns.
Christopher Norris also draws attention to Paul de Man's essays of his middle and late periods, which focus on the topic of "aesthetic ideology as a potent force in historical and political affairs," and also "the question as to how aesthetics can figure as a distinctive mode of understanding, given its avowedly non-conceptual character and its lack of any determinate relation to the realm of phenomenal intuition." Comparing Walter Benjamin's views about aesthetics with those of Paul de Man's, Norris comments:

Like Benjamin, de Man is deeply suspicious of the drive to 'aestheticise politics', as happens - so he argues - when philosophers like Schiller ignore Kant's studious demarcation of the border-lines between these various faculties, and make the aesthetic a privileged term in their ethical and political thinking. What this amounts to is a dangerous . . . vision of how society might turn out if it could only achieve the state of ordered perfection envisaged by the poets and philosophers.

The "dangerous" engagement of aesthetics with the radical politics of the day is to be found in many of the modernist works, and this version of aesthetic ideology is implicit also in the poetry of Stevens and Eliot. Both the poets were radicals, in the sense that they were aware of the malaise in the society around them, and rejected the solutions offered by the liberal political leaders of their day as hopelessly shallow. Their own solutions would have meant fundamental changes in the structures of society and both men were probably aware of this: it must be kept in mind, however, that Stevens and Eliot were not uniquely political nor were they uniquely unwise in their views. At this point, consider the two poet's aesthetic involvement with the popular ideology.
of the day (their fascist stance followed by Eliot's later retraction, and Stevens's seeming indifference to the political situation of his times), and then take into consideration the later writings of two poets of the romantic age - Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the writings of the latter poets, we may observe how the radical theories of the poets of an earlier century reconciled with the Church and State establishments. During the French Revolution and before it both the poets supported its ideals, but later they conformed “aesthetically” to the establishment. A postmodern reading would take into consideration the radical outlook of modernist works as it either conforms to the establishment or becomes 'coventionalized' over a period of time. Such a perspective addresses the issue of the quality of poetic output, its durability and audience appeal despite its seemingly radical content.

The fundamental premise of my thesis is that there are basic 'structures' to every field and it is the power of the Imagination which forges links between these fields. Modernist works give expression to the belief that the universe may not be a unity but a chaos, and even though it is comprehensible, it is comprehended only in fragments. This perception of fragmented reality is the cause of pessimism reflected in modernist works. Thus it became part of the modernist agenda to structure reality out of chaos. Modernism took on multi-perspectivism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a complex underlying reality. Postmodernism in contrast tends to retain the relativism while abandoning the
belief in a unified reality. A postmodernist perspective on modernist works accepts readily the idea of a fragmented reality. Such a perspective adopts a stance of irreverent pastiche and contrived depthlessness which offers greater freedom to interpret modernist expressions in the artistic sphere. The closest interpretation of reality is attempted by presenting a phantasmagoria of disparate images that are structured within a canvas, novel, poem or a piece of music. Thus, it is this interaction between structured reality and poetic imagination in the poetry of Eliot and Stevens which seems to question signs and representations, in order to reiterate the insistent and centerless plurality at the core of their poems.

It must be admitted however, that there is a fundamental difference between the fields of language and literature: each of which is imbued with its own unique structures. Language may be perceived as just one of the tools of a literary work used as vehicle to communicate an idea. According to Raymond Williams, "within the distinction between language and reality, language could be conceived as an instrument used by men for specific purposes, and these could be studied in rhetoric and in the associated poetics."\textsuperscript{27} It cannot be denied that both language and literature are always in a state of flux, and it is this what imparts variety to literary texts. A postmodern reading of modern poetry explores the emergence of the new poetics of language itself, as it attempts to break all barriers between various disciplines. The field or range of this poetic thought comes from the modernist
agenda to pattern the cultural chaos as perceived by the modernists. This was attempted by the borrowings of the language and ideas from the various fields in the immediate cultural environment as painting, films, music, photography, etc. The presence of corresponding innovation of method on different media suggests that there is a relationship between them - a relationship based on general and elusive qualities rather than content. This leads on to multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary borrowing till the boundaries between the various fields were effaced and a new field of 'creative arts' emerged taking within its purview all the above mentioned fields; in the postmodernist context it expanded to include the relatively new fields of media and computers. Thus patterning of the chaos seems to celebrate the formation of a new field of 'cultural discourse'.

Postmodernist theorists as Derrida advocate a close study of texts to trace out a path among textual strata in order to stir up and expose forgotten sediments of meaning which have accumulated and settled into the texts fabric. According to Derrida, deconstruction "is a way of remembering, of recollecting what culture is made of, a way of re-analysing our western philosophy and the different layers and stratas of assumptions which have made it what it is." A postmodernist perspective on modern poetry thus offers a more comprehensive study of the style of modernism, where style reflects the unconscious thoughts and feelings emerge, and in turn are conditioned by subtle and pervasive influences originating outside the arts.
NOTES


7 Ibid., 215.


11 Norris 1.


13 Norris 8.


16 T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays (London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 182. I have quoted all Eliot’s poems from this particular volume. All subsequent references to Eliot’s poems are given parenthetically within the text with the page numbers. I have used the abbreviation C P & P to refer to the poems in Eliot’s text.

17 Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 240. I have quoted all Stevens’s poems from this particular volume. All subsequent references to Stevens’s poems are parenthetically given within the text with the page numbers. I have used the abbreviation CPWS to refer to his collected poems.


20 See Norris 17.


22 Norris 17.


25 Norris 17.

26 Ibid.

27 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Great Britain: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990) 22.