

---

[Click for a "pdf" print-friendly version of this file](#)

HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety  
Summer 2012

This lecture, because of the many embedded links which include a biography on and essay by F. Nietzsche, requires extra care in reading. Be sure you don't miss anything. *The links and e-texts are not separated out on the main syllabus.*

At the end are some examples of Modernism in art and literature, without professorial interpretation. The last, "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot, is one of the most famous--perhaps the MOST famous--poems of the 20th Century. It is, maybe, just a middle-age crisis poem about desires not acted out, and to that extent is psychologically realistically. But its poetic form (with quick jumps from image to image, with a "scene" that takes awhile to figure out) and intense yet also hesitant feeling (morose brooding, equivocation, uncertainty) makes it typical of Modernist art which at once exhibits masterful control AND sensitivity to the chaotic feelings, philosophical and personal, within.

---

## MODERNISM AND THE 20th CENTURY: ANGST, AESTHETICS, AND THE ABYSSES OF HORROR

---

### MODERNISM & THE ABYSSES OF HORROR

---

**1<sup>st</sup>:** Remind yourself when the "Modern Age" is in the span of the other historical/cultural periods:

- 900-1300: Middle Ages
- 1350-1600: Renaissance
- 1700-1800: Enlightenment
- 1780-1830: Romanticism
- 1830-1880: Victorian/Industrial Age
- 1900-WWII: Modernism
- WII+: Contemporary or Post-Modern

**2<sup>nd</sup>:** Keep in mind that all these historical-era labels or dates imprecisely designate actual historical periods and cultural mind-sets within those periods. So, for instance, although Nietzsche is writing during the late Victorian period, he is anticipating/developing themes of "Modernism" that become central to 20th-century philosophical thinking.

**3<sup>rd</sup>:** This lecture emphasizes the darker aspects of Modernity and Modernism; other cultural historians might emphasize, even amidst the two World Wars, the spread of democracy and feminism, liberating technology, cosmopolitanism, artistic experimentation and so on.

4<sup>th</sup>: Nonetheless, even more sanguine (look that word up!) historians would recognize a qualitative difference in the *meaning* of the atrocities that occurred in WWI and WWII versus previous wars:

- There have always been horrors: the plague in the late Middle Ages, the mutual blood-letting of the Holy Wars between Christians/”Turks,” the Inquisition’s victims, the brutality of the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, and so on.
- But only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century does mass devastation and death become absurdist (instead of, say, a punishment from God), among other reasons because trench warfare in WWI (although Germany ultimately lost) gained no territory/tactical advantage, just micro-adjustments of the warring sides’ trench lines, as 10,000s were slaughtered by Gatling guns, cannon, and poison gas.
- The absurdist element is compounded by the mechanism/technology of slaughter. In previous wars, the violence was more intimate and personal (a knight charging against an infantry Bowman; the charge of Civil War units against each other); in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century war becomes almost entirely impersonal/mechanistic. This is the point of the famous poem by Randall Jarrell about WWII fighter-bombers, in which military carnage is imaged in terms of an unnatural mechanistic/ cruel pregnancy/abortion:

*“The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”*

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

"A ball turret was a Plexiglas sphere set into the belly of a B-17 or B-24, and inhabited by two .50 caliber machine-guns and one man, a short small man. When this gunner tracked with his machine guns a fighter attacking his bomber from below, he revolved with the turret; hunched upside-down in his little sphere, he looked like the foetus in the womb. The fighters which attacked him were armed with cannon firing explosive shells. The hose was a steam hose." -- Jarrell's note.

- Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century does slaughter/genocide/devastation become not only mechanical, but also hyper-logical and bureaucratic. Think of the perverse efficiency of the Nazi regime; think of the Cold War “logic” of mutual assured annihilation.
- And yet: even as the horror/violence is rendered graphic, intense, and ample by photographic images and newsreels (that is, by 20th-century media), such images also distance us from the visceral immediacy of violence/warfare.
- To put this more simply: only in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century do we become *spectators* of violence/genocide.

---

THE HORRIBLE SPECTACLE OF THE WORLD WARS CONTRIBUTE TO MODERNIST PHILOSOPHICAL ANGST

---

- The bleak, existential perspective of many 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers derives from the historical-contextual gloom described above.
- But it also derives from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century dethroning of the arrogant optimism of Enlightenment-style detached, scientific knowing and confidence:
  - Romanticism writers worry about soulless selves and a soulless world.
  - Darwinian evolution and “deep time” shrink humankind’s story to a mini-slice of time (see the beginning of Nietzsche’s essay embedded below).
  - Marx says most of us who are workers are alienated; Western “progress” has not made humankind substantially happier (Rousseau, roughly a century earlier, complained about modern “civilization’s” decadence and creation of false needs; he thought primitive humankind was much happier).
  - Freud: the famous Descartes line “I think therefore I am” (a pure statement of rationality) is utterly undercut by Freud’s notions of a dark, simmering, & traumatized unconsciousness. “You” don’t even know who “you” are!
- So, broadly in summation, if we move into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with less old world hierarchical restrictions on selfhood, we also lose connection with nature (Wordsworth’s anxiety), with artisan creative labor (Marx’s idea of alienation), with a sense of God’s special plan for us (Darwinian evolution), and our own rational selfhood (Freud).

---

## FREDERIC NIETZSCHE BIOGRAPHY

---

Read this online biography: [E-text: Nietzsche biography](#)

Summary:

- Born in 1844 in Prussia.
- Raised, after his father’s death, by mother and aunts (perhaps he later revolts from “feminine” influence).
- Receives an intense gradeschool/highschool education.
- Studies Classics and languages/philology in college.
- In 1869, asked to teach philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland, before finishing his Ph.D. (he was extremely precocious!).
- Writes a number of philosophical/aphoristic works: ex. Beyond Good and Evil (1886).
- In 1890, goes insane from syphilis of the brain and dies in 1897.
- He is considered the most famous philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries for his radical iconoclasm.

---

## F. NIETZSCHE BELIEFS

---

- He had little faith in democracy or social reform (say, the betterment of the working class).

- He thought the Enlightenment/19<sup>th</sup>-century idea of progress was naive and deluded.
- He thought middle-class society typically makes us complacent, overly comfortable, and thus weak, part of the cow-like herd; constricting individual autonomy, spontaneity, brilliance, will, and instinct (all the latter produce great art, cultural changes, etc).
- He critiqued universal or absolute/transcendental standards of good and evil, especially condemning Christian morality, as herd/slave morality (only the weak say turn the other cheek or that the meek shall inherit the earth).
- In Beyond Good and Evil (1886) he says early Christians/slave herd subdued their aristocratic/Roman superiors by condemning traits they lacked: power and will and life-force; he says that Christianity became an ethic of guilt.
- In his book, The Anti-Christ (1888), Nietzsche wrote that: *“Christianity has waged a war to the death against this higher type of man. . . . Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of opposition to the instinct of strong life. . . . Christianity is a revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is elevated.”*

---

### NIETZSCHE'S ESSAY “ON TRUTH AND LIE IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE” (1873)

---

Read Nietzsche's essay: [E-text: Nietzsche essay--On Truth and Lie](#) [Go here if left link fails](#)

**Be sure to click on the "2" page of the above essay after reading the "1" page.**

There are obscure sections in this essay, and sometimes (largely because of the translation) it is difficult to sense when he is being sarcastic/ironic or making a straight point. Nonetheless, the main points are clear enough:

- Nietzsche opens by de-centering our anthropomorphic sense of our significance within the cosmos. “[How] aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened.” [Remember lecture points about Darwin and “deep time.” In Nietzsche’s day, there was also the anxiety over cosmic entropy; that the universe was running down, and eventually the sun would cool off, etc.]
- For N., the intellect serves to delude us into accepting the fabric of “flattering, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing ... acting a role before others and before oneself...”: in short, living inauthentically. [The critique of “civilized” man’s inauthenticity goes back to Rousseau’s seeming preference for the ‘noble savage.’]
- We are so deluded by our “proud, deceptive consciousness, far from the coils of the intestines, the quick current of the blood stream,” that we’ve lost all vital animal primal-ness, all sense of our darker selves, of appetite and ferocity. [Remember Wordsworth’s anxiety about having laid “waste his power,” in the world of “getting and spending.’]
- N. has a difficult and obscure lead-in to his critique of the conventions of language by which all immediate, creative, spontaneous knowing of particulars or what he calls “things in themselves” is clouded by concepts and abstractions, which are “arbitrary differentiations.” Rather than sensuously appreciating all the multi-varied leaves, we generate the abstraction “leafiness,” or we catalogue the world Peale-like fashion. [Modernism and Post-modernism both are preoccupied with the artifice of language; that language

constructs the world, rather than being a secondary reflection of the world; and, if we are all caught up in the conventions of language, we can never pass beyond language to some truth exterior to ourselves.]

- N. does not object to language's construction of reality; he objects to our forgetting that the "truth" of the world is constructed: "Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid . . . only by forgetting that he himself is an artistically creating subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency."

- The last sections, on ancient Greece, are obscure. But basically N. repeats his opposition between sterile rationality and vital, sensuous, intuition: the rationalist unlike the intuition-ist "wears no quivering and changeable human face, but, as it were, a mask with a dignified, symmetrical features...."

---

## MODERNISM IN ART: OVERVIEW

---

*1st: The Historical Context--the tensions of the late 19th Century/early 20th Century:*

- On one hand, the age rejoices in the overthrow of Victorian prudery and the continual decay of aristocratic hierarchy, and sees industrial/futuristic promise.
- On the other hand, the age suffers the bankruptcy of facile idealism and notions of progress, especially in the face of the brutality of the Russian Revolution and devastation of WWI and WWII.

*2nd: The Overall Aesthetic Mood:*

- A self-consciously aesthetically-elite/bohemian artistic coterie dissociates itself from middle-class philistinism.
- Such leads to an artistic sensibility that is at once bleak and existential, **and** highly experimental.
- The art is often fragmentary as a reflection of the loss of unitary truth but also fragmentary as a cosmopolitan-urban montage/vision of new ways of perceiving.
- Modernist art is intensely experimental; it willingly shatters old literary traditions and conventions (a linear plot, for example; and other conventions of Realism that provide easy coherence) and draws upon unconscious processes (stream of consciousness narration, for instance).
- It is indifferent, by and large, to whether the average reader/viewer will comprehend the new avant-garde forms. Much Modernist art is difficult--it does not intend to be "pretty" and easy to understand!

---

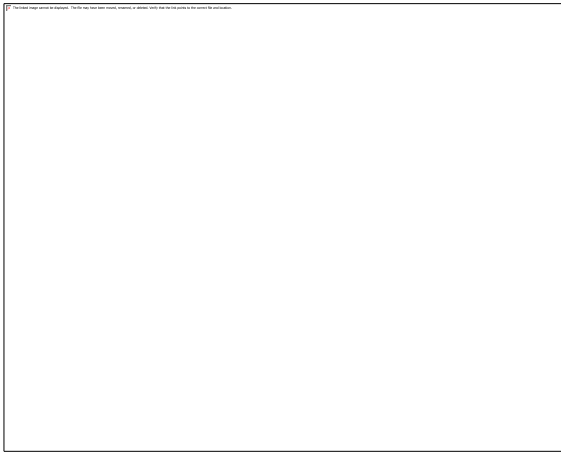
## MODERNISM IN ART: EXAMPLES--MUSIC

---

1: Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's dissonant 1913 *Le Sacre du printemps*. The music was so disturbing that the first concert audience rioted, and police were called to break up fistfights! Click here: <http://www.keepingsscore.org/flash/stravinsky/index.html>

2: Russian composer Shostakovich's chamber music--mix of "sentimental" and savage discord. This link, at its end, has a number of audio-streams [Wiki. Encl. Biography of Shostakovich](#). Listen, in particular (from the Wiki. link sublink), to the "Trio in E-Minor":

[http://www.panufniktrio.com/sites\\_eng/mp3\\_eng.html](http://www.panufniktrio.com/sites_eng/mp3_eng.html)

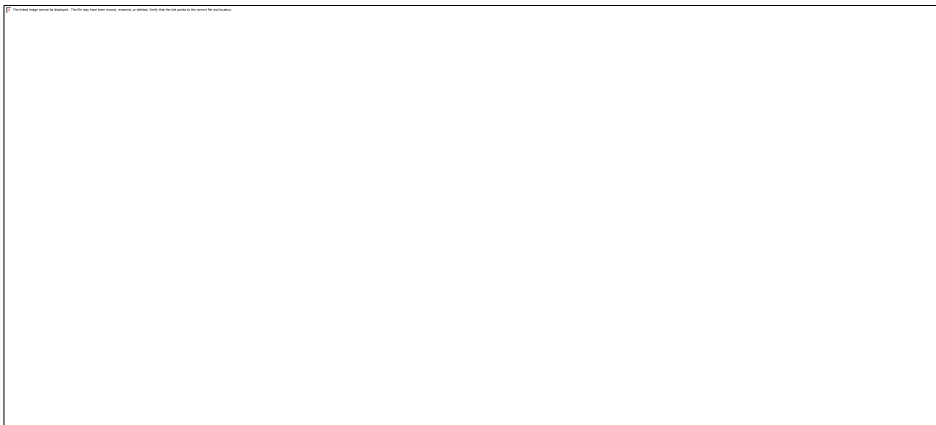


---

## MODERNISM IN ART: EXAMPLES--ART

---

3: Pablo Picasso's cubist-style mural "Guernica" (1937), the artist's reaction to the Nazi bombing of the Basque (Spain) city of Guernica:



4: Explore this marvelous Modernist artist, Marchel Duchamp, thru these links:

a. <http://www.understandingduchamp.com/>

b. <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/surrealism/room1.htm>

---

## MODERNISM IN ART: EXAMPLES--LITERATURE

---

5: First pages of William Faulkner's novel The Sound and the Fury (1929): go to this Amazon.com link to the first pages of Faulkner's most famous novel; click on the small right arrow (right side) for successive pages. The first section of the novel is told, stream-of-consciousness by a 33-year-old idiot.

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0075536668/ref=sib\\_dp\\_pt/104-2790458-3708731#reader-link](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0075536668/ref=sib_dp_pt/104-2790458-3708731#reader-link)

6: T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Prufrock" (below)

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). Prufrock and Other Observations. 1917.

### 1. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

LET us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ... 10  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, 15  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street, 25  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go 35  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair— 40  
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—  
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]  
Do I dare 45  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:—  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all— 55  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!] 65  
It is perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?  
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! 75  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a  
platter,  
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, 85  
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while, 90  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"— 95  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while, 100  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the  
floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen: 105  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all." 110

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use, 115  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ... 120  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

125

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

130