Philosophy and
Literary Modernism
Philosophy and Literary Modernism

By

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is an introduction to some of the intersections of philosophy with literary modernism. It is a continuation a series of volumes begun with previous edited collections: *Music and Literary Modernism* and *Film and Literary Modernism*. The commentary which follows is intended as an invitation to you to read and reflect upon the primary works of the writers and the philosophers who are considered here. This study is intended for students and their teachers, as well as for curious general readers. *Philosophy and Literary Modernism* is an intellectual history, a reflection on literary modernism rather than a work of academic philosophy. Portions of the essay on Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford previously appeared in *English Modernism*, ed. Gregory Tague, Academica Press, in another form. “The River in Paterson,” in the chapter on William Carlos Williams, previously appeared in *The Journal of Imagism*. I am indebted to the sources that are referred to in the notes and to the writers of the texts that are indicated in the bibliography. This work is written in gratitude for the teaching of R.C. O’Brien of Fordham University and the work of other professors of philosophy. I am grateful for teachers of philosophy who have been exemplary models of the philosophical enterprise and thoughtful colleagues: George Abaunza, Richard Burnor, and Irfan Khawaja of the Felician University Department of Philosophy.
This book addresses the relationships between literary modernism and modern philosophy. Modernism was a European and Anglo-American movement which had its most intense impact on the arts from about 1910 to about the time of the Second World War. This study concerns the interactions of philosophy and literary modernism during that period. The focus here is on modernist writers (Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf, Joyce, Proust, Stein, Faulkner, Hemingway, Kafka, and others) in their relationship with the thought of their time. This volume ranges across both the continental and the analytic traditions, drawing from the legacy of Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel and the phenomenology of Husserl. Attention is given to contemporaries of the modernist writers like Henri Bergson, G.E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Bertrand Russell. This inquiry ranges across Continental Philosophy, the Anglo-American analytic tradition, and the rise of Existentialism, which emerged after the Second World War. Perennial themes like truth, beauty, goodness, commitment, identity, and language are considered. The approach in this text is historical and thematic. Philosophy and Literary Modernism is modeled on previous volumes for Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Music and Literary Modernism and Film and Literary Modernism. Thus, this book consists of a series of chapters that probe the intersections between literary modernism and philosophy.

Literary experience is distinct from philosophy. A story is a story, not a treatise. Literature has aesthetic qualities; it is not written to prove a philosophical point or position. Literary narrative is not the same as rational explication. The writers presented here were thoughtful inquirers into the human condition; they were not systematic philosophers. Even so, their literary productions entertain us and enlighten us, and their work may be read philosophically. Jean-Paul Sartre, who was both a literary figure and a systematic philosopher, writes: “a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others; he sees everything which happens to him through these stories, and he tries to live his life as if it were a story he is telling.”

Literary modernism was a movement in the arts that had an impact upon philosophical thought. Its challenges to realism and its explorations into rationality and irrationality were fueled by the spirit of the times: a modern era replete with challenges to the human spirit. Literary modernism sought to reexamine and revive culture, to explore form and expression, to offer new perspectives. The modern world was changing. In one of his several books on Existentialism, philosopher Walter Kaufman writes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*: “He persuaded millions that the modern world is a wasteland.”

Virginia Woolf wrote, “on or about December 1910 human character changed.” This was a large claim. What had begun to change were elements in culture. The post-Impressionist exhibit on November 8, 1910 drew both interest and antagonism. It continued until January 15, 1911. Visual art from the continent had come to shake up British consciousness. The Bloomsbury Group, of which Woolf was a part, introduced the paintings. Roger Fry created the show and Clive Bell, who was married to Virginia Woolf’s sister, Vanessa, gathered English painters for the second exhibit. In response to the first Post-Impressionist exhibit novelist Arnold Bennett, in the *New Age*, commented on the challenge of continental art to British insularity. He wrote: “For me, personally, it has a slight, vague repercussion upon Literature.” Virginia Woolf, who would point out the shift away from Bennett’s realism to interiority in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” wrote to Violet Dickinson of the movement spearheaded by Clive Bell: “Now that Clive is in the van of aesthetic opinion, I hear a great deal about pictures. I don’t think them so good as books. But why all the Duchesses are insulted by the post-impressionists, a modest sample of painters, innocent of indecency, I can’t conceive.” However, some were “insulted.” The conservative commentator Robert Ross, in the *Morning Post* called the French painters “mad.” Ross wrote: “the emotions of these painters (one of whom, Van Gogh, was a lunatic) are of no interest except to the student of pathology, and the specialist in abnormality.”

In modernism we see a reaction to the 19th Century historicist tradition, a response to the traditions of Victorian art for which some were at first unprepared. Modernist writers addressed concerns with industrialism, religion, and political and social organization. They expressed a desire to reexamine culture and to revive it. Free expression, experiment, primitivism, avant-garde innovation, a desire to startle, opposition to convention, and a desire to “make it new” were strikingly present in the modernist spirit.
Content and Issues

The Modernists explored literary form, language, and ways of knowing and understanding the world. The writers discussed here were deeply influenced by certain ‘thought’ and ideas that were in the “air” or the currents of their time. The concerns of modern philosophy at the turn of the Twentieth Century and afterward appear in the modernist sensibility and cultural zeitgeist and in the reflections and insights of modernist novelists and poets. This was a period when scientific thinking engaged in a shift in perspective prompted by observation of the sub-atomic level. A world functioning at these levels is different from the world of common sense. Albert Einstein presented his theory of relativity and Henri Bergson, an intuitionist, explored time as duree. Werner Heisenberg offered a theory of indeterminacy. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis explored dreams and the unconscious. Literary modernism asks how one is to live amid this new world view.

The Enlightenment tried to create a rational civilization. However, rationalist and utilitarian approaches to life revealed themselves to have limitations. The turn of the Twentieth Century brought new inquiries into vitalism, sexuality, will, language, and gender. Artists had to come to terms with the Nietzschean challenge to rationalism, Freud’s reflections on the unconscious, Marx’s interrogation of society, challenges to notions of universal order, and issues of language, representation, and interpretation. Visual artists introduced Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dada, among other artistic movements. Writers and artists also had to confront the turbulence of the Great War, the Russian Revolution, social unrest, the challenge of Fascism, the struggle of syndicalism, and the rise of the New Woman and her claim for equal rights and a public voice. Literary modernism may be seen as a period of social modernization, scientific discovery, and technological change. It was engaged in textual innovation and reflection on perspective and representation. This period has sometimes been cast as a crisis of modernity: one that was met by inventive writers and thinkers who experimented with language and form, explored time and stream of consciousness, investigated narrative and the fragmenting of plot unity, recalled the power of myth, and startled the public with passionate art and experimentation. Literary modernists confronted the word and the world with irony and they challenged culture and religious orthodoxy. They contested the world of their Victorian forebears and attempted to counter what they saw as the drift of the Western world. Literary modernism grew from small groups of literary artists or visual artists (such as Bloomsbury,
the Harlem Renaissance). These artists could declare with Ezra Pound: “I want a new civilization.” Like Pound, they sought to “make it new.”

Modernists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, explored time and employed non-chronological, spatial fictional strategies. Myth pervaded T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and the Homeric parallel in Joyce’s *Ulysses* suggested something universal beyond that one day in Dublin that comprises the story: a trans-historical and mythopoetic basis of life and a Viconian, or cyclical, sense of history. Literary modernism gives close attention to language and the construction of meaning through signs, symbols, and images. From the discourse of literary modernism comes a view that language can form the world, not only describe it. Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) looked carefully at the structural aspects of language. He observed that the word is a sign, a signifier, which stands in arbitrary relationship to what it points to: the signified, or external referent. Meaning is created within the system of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* wrote: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” James Joyce’s *Ulysses* reflects this linguistic awareness. He makes use of puns, metaphors, a mix of prose styles, and probes the curiosities of the English language through narrative, characters, episodes, parody, and a play of linguistic codes.

This book is an introduction to some of the philosophical issues and concerns of the period in which these philosophers and novelists worked. This volume is not a philosophy of literature. Nor is it a reading of philosophy as literature. It is an inquiry into Modernist ideas and writing. Most books by philosophers have limited coverage of literature. Books that employ literary theory make use of a variety of post-structuralist approaches (deconstruction, feminist analysis, gender theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, neo-Marxist analysis among them) but do not often inquire into philosophers. This book, in contrast, is interdisciplinary. It principally concerns the work of writers like Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot and others as seen in relation with ideas and with modern philosophers (often with those who were their contemporaries). T.S. Eliot studied with F.H. Bradley and Virginia Woolf knew Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore, even while her Paterian aesthetics was at odds with the rationalism of her father, Leslie Stephen. However, this is not a study of influence. The goal is to center this introduction to philosophy and literary modernism upon a history of ideas and on the craft and thought of writers from Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce to Conrad, Stein, and Lawrence. This study is interested in language, form, narrative, the human psyche, culture, myth, history, and creativity. It is not
a study of postmodernism. It focuses only on the period from about 1910 to about 1950.

What constitutes philosophical understanding? Philosophy engages reflection and asks questions about experience. Philosophical thought generates disciplined, argued claims. Literature concerns story, sensibility, and drama, not merely the elaboration or exemplification of a concept or an insight. Literature can and does offer ideas. The conceptual entwines with story: with narrative, characters, culture, voices, feelings, identity claims, situations and circumstances represented in the text. Philosophy may ask where we are to find knowledge in a literary work. It may ask if a literary work provides a path to understanding and insight. One may ask if there is wisdom available in this literary work. How does the literary production make sense of the world and of the human condition? Does this work carry cognitive value? Might we gain understanding from this reading experience even if this is imaginative literature with aesthetic concerns?

A story, a play, or a poem is a linguistically mediated picture of life that has been organized into a pattern. A narrative represents the world: actions, speech, events and the life of the mind. Can it really represent life? Or does it falsify life with its artfulness, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggested in *The Birth of Tragedy*? Does it convey moral content, or is it only artfulness, as Oscar Wilde would say? Aristotle held that *mythos* (a story or play’s plot) is the center of tragic drama. Can a story or a play stage wisdom through a dramatic plot? For Aristotle, drama must unfold logically, plausibly, toward an end. We are moved by what happens. We make sense of what happens. In our reception of a play we sense the universality of our human condition.

Modernist fiction realizes a bringing outward of interiority through representation. In examining subjectivity, we see that in poststructuralist readings with a linguistic emphasis the inner self has been viewed as a construction, a product of language and the movement of signifiers. New Historicism argues that the self is a product of the currents of a particular time and place in history, affected by social and political factors. One may ask if there is not a transhistorical self or essential interior self, an interiority that was known before Descartes, as in Augustine’s reflexivity. How can a writer represent this interiority? That was a concern for modernist writers. Wittgenstein might explore how we speak of interiority as a language game. Does this meaning have a referent? Following Wittgenstein, one might ask what language says about what it means to be human. How do these signifiers convey action, intention, morality, emotion, love, or personal integrity?

Modernism is a term used to suggest a change in perspective and a variety of approaches to the modern world and representing the human
spirit. T.S. Eliot, writing “Ulysses, Order and Myth” asserted that modern art had to offer the “mythical method” as a structure of “scaffolding” for the modern age that is searching for meaning.7 Language is a central concern of writers like Eliot. Writing, Eliot claimed, has to be definite and concrete, economical and spare, to have precision to clarify or to intensify. The analytical orientation of Eliot is seen in texts that compare analytic philosophy to literary modernism. T.S. Eliot would strive for objectivity. However, he moved away from analytic philosophy back to a pragmatic approach to language.

This book examines what C.K. Ogden in 1929 referred to as “the cultural forces at work that made linguistic reform and experimentation movement necessary at the beginning of the Twentieth Century.” These cultural forces included the beginnings of mass media in newspapers, periodicals, and then radio, the growth of capitalism, the expansion of higher education, and intellectual trends emerging from science, psychoanalysis and experimentation in the arts. Writing within these circumstances, authors explored new ideas and were aware of philosophical questions. Today questions of feminism, gender, race, class, and politics are indeed important to us. However, questions and concerns of the first half of the Twentieth Century will be the principal focus of this volume. This book engages with the history of modern philosophy and with how literary modernists drew upon the ideas at work in culture, philosophy, and art. The focus is on how writers raised philosophical questions or developed ideas in their work that parallel philosophical concerns. For example, Virginia Woolf parodies Bertrand Russell’s search for precision (and that of her father Leslie Stephen) in Mr. Ramsey in To the Lighthouse (1927). She appears to prefer the artist Lily Briscoe’s sense of perspective.

Philosophy is the home of self-reflection and literary modernism can be seen as self-reflective. We may view literary modernism as aesthetically self-conscious and disruptive of traditional forms. Modernism arises, in part, from the crisis in representation. Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, Joyce’s Ulysses, Eliot’s Wasteland, and Woolf’s Jacob’s Room – all published in 1922- recognize this crisis of modernity. While examining modernist writers’ innovative approaches to language and representation the focus will be on making concepts clear for readers so that they can “follow” the philosophers’ thinking. R.G. Collingwood wrote: “In reading the philosophers we follow them… that is, we understand what they think and reconstruct in ourselves, so far as we can, the processes by which they have come to what they think… The reader of a philosophical work is committing himself to the enterprise of living through the same experience that his author lived through. In this respect philosophy resembles poetry.”8 This
book is intended as a conversation between literature and philosophy. Modern experience is the bond between philosophers and modernist writers. Some themes that are explored in this book are:

**Invention, fragmentation, linguistic experimentation:** these are a few of the characteristics of literary modernism. This new art would shake the old order; it would surprise and bother, question and provoke its audience. It would also face the intellectual challenges posed by Marx and Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, Russell and Wittgenstein.

If the ground of Victorian value was to be swept away, how could civilization persist and find renewal? With modernity came a condition of anxiety, uncertainties, secularization. Painting broke with pictorial representation, turning to post-impressionism, cubism, and other approaches. Poetry struggled for new form. It confronted tradition, the metrics of lyric poetry, and stretched toward ways to, in Ezra Pound’s phrase, “make it new.” There came a disruptive war: its darkness and despair, the static, muddy immobility of trench warfare. The war raised a note of incomprehension. It further prompted irony and emphasized the need for creative response, a search for meaning. Literary modernism was not a retreat from reality, or a political withdrawal by those who sought some higher perfection in art. It addressed literary craft and the need to remake the world. Literary modernism was many things, many temperaments, various strands of innovation, resistance, and reawakening.

*Modernists experimented with Form and Narrative. Inherited classical form seemed less convincing in the modern era. The beginning, middle, and end that Aristotle speaks of in his Poetics now becomes structured differently, as in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, or the single day in Joyce’s Ulysses. The universe was believed to be an ordered structure that was rational and intelligible. Ulysses gives us an ordinary world that is not necessarily of this coherence and logic. Joseph Conrad experiments with point of view and shifts from chronology. He examines the subjectivity of his characters in a world that seems filled with chance. Language is likewise a deep concern of writers and philosophers during this period and considerable attention will be given to reflection on language by novelists and by philosophers like Russell and Wittgenstein.

*Modern Art* had an impact upon writing and upon thought. Following Paul Cezanne’s still-lifes, the cubists turned their attention on ordinary objects like tables and chairs or guitars and bottles and glasses. There was a flattening out of values. The planes, shape, and peak of Mont St. Victoire was observed by writers like Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway was not a philosophical novelist of ideas but one who focused upon craft and sought to break through empty abstractions and to see, sense, and feel. In a famous
passage in *A Farewell to Arms* his narrator says: “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice…” Rather, he seeks the concrete, the names of places, numbers, and dates. This too is a search for precise and meaningful language.

*Phenomenology and Imagism urged attention to the things themselves. In addition to word-play and innovative narrative, *Ulysses* breaks with the sensibility of the previous age and attends to the ordinary objects of Leopold Bloom’s day. We see this in in Edmund Husserl’s call to observe the concrete data of experience and in William Carlos Williams’s attention to the red wheelbarrow.

*Time* is a preoccupation of writers like Henri Bergson, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and Dorothy Richardson. Modern writers represent present and past as occurring simultaneously. They create new techniques and narratives from diverse points of view. Philosophers like Bergson attempt a new understanding of time. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner’s character Quentin Compson breaks his father’s watch. He cannot tell the time because the clock face is gone but it keeps ticking: a symbol that he cannot escape time. Heidegger and Bergson, in separate ways, remind us that time is more primal than clocks, watches, or the calendar on the wall.

*Mind and Consciousness* is another obvious concern: William Barrett points out that Henri Bergson was among “the first to insist on the insufficiency of the abstract intelligence to grasp the richness of experience, on the urgent and irreducible reality of time, and… on the inner depth of the psychic life which cannot be measured by the quantitative methods of the physical sciences.”

*Stream of consciousness* is a narrative mode and literary technique that seeks to provide a sense of inner consciousness on the page. This technique offers us access to the thoughts of a character in fiction. Readers are brought into contact with this character’s point of view by way of an interior monologue. Stream of consciousness opens the imagined inner life of the character. It reflects an associative process of thinking and feeling. This thought process is in the mind and may be addressed to the self. What is overheard in the mind may be sounds, rhythms, evocations of feeling, or visual observations, as well as what is verbal. The psychologist William James introduced this term. Stream of consciousness became an important literary technique in the 1920s. We meet with it in the work of James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922), Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* (1915-28), Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927), and Samuel Beckett’s novels. T.S. Eliot makes use of
interior monologue in the form of stream of consciousness in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Stream of consciousness, as a technique, expresses the experimental tendencies of modernism. The flux of life reflected in stream of consciousness writing roughly corresponds with Henri Bergson’s philosophy of *duree*: a sense of inner time, rather than clock time. Stream of consciousness appears to let go of rational categories and external methods of characterization which were dominant in the nineteenth century novel. In James Joyce’s fiction, moments of epiphany or revelation are enhanced by this technique. His use of interior monologue is notable in Molly Bloom’s monologue toward the end of *Ulysses*. William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* brings us into the mental life of three members of the Compson family: Benjie, Quentin, and Jason. Each of their perspectives provides a retelling of the family’s story around a central incident in the life of their sister Caddy. Here experimental stream of consciousness intersects with the unity of action of a more traditional novel. This is a single story told several times through the stream of consciousness of its characters. Action is revealed through their associations and memories. We read the associative processes in circling movements. As readers, we proceed from a lack of clarity in the mind of the retarded Benjie, through the brooding and sullen Quentin and the fractured rationalist Jason.

In “The Mark on the Wall” (1917), in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf gives us what she calls the “myriad impressions” that Clarice Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, a soldier, have of the people around them. Through stream of consciousness, readers are enabled to see the inner life of these characters and how they see the world. This is like our own changing impressions of the world around us. There is a drifting reverie that begins with a mark on the wall. The narrator likens this to the transitory process of life. In *To the Lighthouse*, the reader enters the minds of Mrs. Ramsay, the mother of a large family, and Lily Briscoe, an artist. *The Waves* presents this interiority in a lyrical fashion, reflecting the passage of the seasons and the complex nature of consciousness. Woolf’s stream of consciousness ranges across time and memory. It explores the interior self and the way one looks at the world as being “the proper stuff of fiction.” In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf wrote that the technique of stream of consciousness was a way to “come closer to life” and “to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind… trace the pattern… which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.” She writes that in the stream of consciousness in the fiction of Joyce, he is “concerned at all costs to reveal the flickering of that inmost flame which flashes its messages through the brain.”
Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *Literature and Existentialism*, in his essay “What Is Literature?”: “One of chief reasons for artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world.”¹³ Literature and philosophy are about this relationship. Philosophy is a search for *Meaning*. Literary modernists were concerned with the challenges of being human and the dehumanizing aspects of modern life. So too were philosophers like Karl Jaspers who viewed existentialism as a call to modern people to awaken their potential for authenticity and genuine action in their lives. That call to awaken potential and authenticity will be a goal of this book.
CHAPTER TWO

THE PHILOSOPHICAL INHERITANCE

Invention, fragmentation, linguistic experimentation: these are a few of the characteristics of literary modernism. This new art would shake the old order; it would surprise and bother, question and provoke its audience. It would also face the intellectual challenges posed by Marx and Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, Russell and Wittgenstein. Philosophy and philosophers provide a background for writers like James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, or George Bernard Shaw. Their exposure to philosophy becomes absorbed in their work and is one aspect of a wide array of influences. The philosophic inheritance is alive in these writers and within the spirit of the age. Before turning to a consideration of the work of these writers, this chapter will provide an overview of some key philosophers. The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview of some aspects of modern philosophy and the philosophers who will be referred to in the discussion of modernist literature which follows. A history of philosophy often proceeds chronologically, although philosophy is, in many respects, all of one piece. Ideas are pondered across generations. This section is intended to provide an introduction for readers. It deals with general descriptions rather than the complexities of these philosopher’s works. There will be further discussion of aspects of the thought of these thinkers in the later chapters.

The history of Western philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead once said, is a footnote to Plato. The thought of Plato has had a lasting effect across time. Plato wrote in the form of dialogues, or conversations of question and answer in which someone is seeking rational insight and understanding. At the center of these dialogues was his teacher, Socrates. We are encouraged in the dialogues to accept Socrates’ positions. Plato reflected on a wide range of topics, from cosmological speculation to ethical inquiry and from beauty to the nature of justice. Plato makes a distinction between appearance and reality. What we see here on earth is a distant reflection of the eternal Ideas or Forms. We only see reality at a second or third remove from it. Plato introduced ideas that are important for art and literature. He regarded art as imitation and he developed a moral approach to art. Art can be misleading, Plato claimed. It creates representations: shadows that could
take us away from truth. Such art, Plato held, will take us away from reality. It may also have an impact upon our psychic wholeness. Consequently, Plato called for a banishment of poets from the Republic. He left us with concerns about truth, beauty, and representation.

Aristotle, who studied with Plato, is likewise a most influential figure in Western philosophy. He wrote on logic, politics, metaphysics, cosmology, moral philosophy, art, biology, physics, psychology, and existence. In his treatise, the Poetics, he offers a perspective regarding art in which he rejects Plato’s idea that art is nothing but an imperfect copy of the transcendent Forms. The material, time-bound reality of our world is important to Aristotle. He regards the universal as embodied in the particulars in our world of time and space. Aristotle declares that “All men by nature desire to know” (Metaphysics A 980 a1). He classifies thought as theoria (knowing), praxis (action, or doing), and poeisis (making). In the realm of poetry, Aristotle focuses on tragedy and epic. He addresses the well-made work, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. What is “best” or most excellent is a work of defined proportion (Poetics 13: 1452 b31, 1453 a19, 23). This order is an integral aspect of the work. Aristotle, in the Metaphysics, observes that the beautiful is found in proportion and order, in symmetry and definiteness (1078 a36b-1). In the Poetics, which was likely written sometime between 347 and 342 B.C., Aristotle affirms that beauty is “a matter of size and order” (1450b 40-1). He writes: “A beautiful thing, either a living creature or a structure made of parts must have not only an orderly arrangement of these parts but a size which is not accidental- for beauty lies in size and arrangement” (Poetics 1450 b 35).

Aristotle evidently does not believe that art disrupts the citizen’s rationality or morality, as Plato does. Rather, the viewer or reader is cleansed, healed, or enlightened by the encounter. The tragic drama brings catharsis. The art of Greek tragic drama helps to release emotions within the structured setting of the theatre. An audience attending or reading a Greek tragedy experiences this catharsis, Aristotle says (Poetics Chapter 6:2449 b 28). That is, the audience experiences fear or pity. The drama purges the individual of pent up emotion, or else it frees locked up feelings. Serious art of this sort has an emotional impact and even painful emotions become part of a pleasurable effect. The drama provides a form of knowledge. For example, the recognition (anagnorisis) of Oedipus of what he has done is extremely unsettling. We may fear for Oedipus and then feel pity for him. There is a release in this transition from a sense of tension or angst as the play proceeds and then culminates in Oedipus’s horror of realization and our response of pity. This has been interpreted as a medical or psychological idea: as something that occurs in the viewer. It has also been interpreted as
a structural concept, as something that takes place in the play. The plot of a play “must arise out of the very structure of the plot, in such a way that as a result of what has happened beforehand it follows either necessarily or probably that these particular things happen” (Poetics, Chapter 10: 1452 a 19). Poetry is not philosophy. However, it has intellectual content and may involve psychological insight. The play conveys knowledge through pattern. It follows that the modernist plays of Luigi Pirandello, Berthold Brecht, Eugene O’Neill, and Samuel Beckett provide insights into the human condition.

**Rene Descartes**

Theory of knowledge in modern philosophy, it is generally agreed, begins with Rene Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes, a rationalist, described the human by using logic, systematically, through the language of mathematics. He affirmed that the mind is capable of understanding of reality. The mind can see beyond the physical and mind knows its own ideas. Thus, mind is a priori, active, and capable of being able to grasp the whole of reality in a systematic unity. Descartes’ influence upon modern philosophy was profound. This influence was particularly important in the realm of epistemology, the study of what we can know and how we know it.

Descartes had three dreams on the night of November 10, 1619 which he took as a signal to spend his time focusing on a theory of knowledge and the universe based firmly within reason and mathematics. Descartes’ method became significant. In 1637, he produced *Discourse on Method*. (The full title is *Discourse on Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth.*) With this treatise he established a manner of inquiry which included a method of doubt. His method initiated a new turn in epistemology. Descartes sets out rules for this inquiry:

“The first of these was to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgments, and to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it.

The second was to divide up each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible, and as seemed requisite in order that it might be resolved in the best manner possible.

The third was to carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise
little by little, or by degrees, to knowledge of the most complex, assuming an order, even a fictitious one, among those which do not follow a natural sequence relatively to one another.

The last was in all cases to make enumerations so complete and review so general that I should be certain of having omitted nothing.”

Descartes begins in doubt and takes nothing for certain. He observes his consciousness. In doing so, he begins with the individual and with epistemology, rather than metaphysics. A concern with mind and epistemology becomes “first philosophy.” In Meditations on First Philosophy, Descartes writes:

“It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once and for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundations, if I wanted to establish any form and permanent structure in the sciences.”

Descartes’ proposition was that he existed because he thought. By his assertion “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am) he asserts his existence as consciousness. He then had to proceed to prove that the elements of life that he perceived around him also existed. He writes in Second Meditations:

“I am certain that I am a thing which thinks, but do I not then likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth? Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state, which would not indeed suffice to assure me that what I say is true, if it could ever happen that a thing which I conceived so clearly and distinctly could be false; and accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.”

Cogito ergo sum appears to be a deduction. However, several of Descartes’ other writings suggest that he grasps this intuitively. To think means also to feel, to understand, and to will. Descartes writes, “I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way as we are immediately conscious of it.” He concludes that he is a conscious being. To affirm God’s existence is necessary for Descartes in his effort to establish the existence of an external world. Descartes’ argument for the existence of God appears in Discourse on Method in the manner of a mathematical-geometrical theorem and proof.
The Philosophical Inheritance

Rene Descartes’ skepticism fostered distrust in the senses. While seeking certain knowledge that could not be doubted he asserted the reliability of the cogito. His clear and distinct ideas presumably removed doubt. However, his method launched further probing of consciousness and the world. The Cartesian world-view, emerging from the method of Rene Descartes, split the world in two: there is mind and there is body; there is subject and object, the knower and the known. Pierre Gassendi and Pere Mersenne asked if Descartes’ truth claims about consciousness were only subjective. Did these clear and distinct ideas represent reality? Nicholas Malebranche ventured to revise Descartes. Pascal insisted that daily life would not allow for such radical doubt. The heart has reasons that reason itself cannot know. (*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*)

In his consideration of human knowledge, Descartes emphasized reason rather than the senses. The empiricists John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume regarded the mind as registering sensations. They considered the range and limits of knowledge. The Empiricists saw the senses as bringing knowledge of phenomena in the object world to the mind. There are no innate ideas or inherent concepts. We gain knowledge through experience and information is given to us by sensory data. Consequently, the empiricists were concerned with things directly apprehended by the senses. They argued with the Continental Rationalists’ view that there is a priori knowledge. The rationalists, such as Leibniz and Spinoza, held that reason, logic, and mathematical principles provided a good model for knowledge and how we obtain it. The empiricists interrogated knowledge claims posed by the rationalists. They questioned the theorems of math and science and challenged the notion that reason was the primary source of human knowledge.

The British Empiricists:
Locke, Berkeley, Hume

In Britain, John Locke’s empiricism made an appeal to common sense. Locke asserted that the source from which knowledge claims were derived was experience in the world. The language we use to describe our world corresponds to ideas in our minds. At one’s birth one’s mind is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, upon which life-experience writes. Knowledge begins in experience. It begins in sense perceptions.

For Locke, ideas are produced by sensations. We reflect upon sensation. As the mind perceives sensations it associates them. One begins with simple ideas and develops complex ideas. Knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas. We build up our ideas out of our
sense impressions. We construct ideas through association out of resemblances that we become acquainted with through experience. Our ideas are built out of units. In objects there are primary qualities (those determined by shape, solidity, space and extension, weight and mass, motion and rest) and secondary qualities (sound, taste, texture, temperature) which Locke says are derived from the primary ones. These qualities are not inherent in the object but are just characteristics. A person has only a supposition that there is an underlying substance beneath these accidents. We can know that real objects exist, but the certainty of sensory knowledge is limited. The perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas is called intuition by Locke. This serves as a basis for knowledge. It proceeds from the activity of the mind itself.

When Locke considers our language about objects, general or universal terms refer to general ideas, not to existent universal things. General ideas are formed by an abstraction from the ideas we have of particular objects. The abstraction of common features and the conjoining of these will provide the general idea. The mind constructs its universal concepts.

Bishop George Berkeley, pushing skepticism further, suggested that only ideas are real. His thought showed a distance between appearance and reality and he asserted that this world is a spiritual reality. Pierre Bayle rejected all of this and wrote against religion and theology. The Enlightenment philosophes of France, like Voltaire, followed in this manner. Newtonian science had by then made the physical world clear and understandable. Reason could doubt the metaphysical, not the physical reality. That is, until David Hume (1711-1776) came along and undercut that rational Newtonian perspective. Pushing his empiricism, he raised skepticism about humanity’s capacity to know anything other than sensory impressions and the association and relation of ideas. He undermined assumptions about cause and effect.

The philosophy of David Hume continues to be influential in our time. Hume holds the empiricist position that knowledge comes from experience. We cannot know with certainty that the material world we think exists does indeed exist independent of ourselves. We live with probabilities, expectations based upon experience. Following Hume, one may ask questions about identity, given that the subject who experiences is a network of sensations. Hume is known for his interrogation of the cause and effect relationship, or causality. We live according to common sense, in which we take for granted that causal connections always exist. We act in the world with the belief that one event causes or is caused by another event. Our scientists and our historians seek causal connections. Hume holds that causal connections are inferred but cannot be observed. We merely see a
sequence of events. We make associations and we come to expect a pattern. However, it is possible that the next event may be different from what we have experienced in the past. An expectation is not the same thing as a logical proof. Nor is it the same thing as knowledge.

Hume’s skepticism questions induction: the movement from a collection of instances to a general conclusion. Hume also distinguished between analytic statements and synthetic statements. Analytic statements occur in an empirically established world of experience. Synthetic statements cannot have that certainty.

For Hume it follows that all knowledge comes from perceptions from which we obtain impressions. The only thing we can know are our sensations. We cannot know the objects or the other people around us. The kind of knowledge a mind produces is an endless chain of unrelated sensations and ideas. We associate things according to habit, but we have no firm justification for doing so. We cannot justify the fundamental reality of what we perceive. We can only report that we see it. Obviously, it follows that whatever cannot be perceived cannot exist.

Hume contends that inductive reasoning is based on erroneous views of the relation of cause and effect. There is no necessary relationship between a cause and an effect. Inductive arguments go beyond experience. Since our knowledge is based on our experience it is an assumption that one can reach a sure conclusion by collecting and associating a series of examples. The fact that there have been conjunctions of events in the past does not assure us that there will be conjunctions in the future.

For the empiricist, existence is restricted to the phenomenal, to the perceived and experienced. There can be no substance. There can be no God. These do not exist in the phenomenal realm. Scientific laws are imperceptible. Hume asserts that there are no innate ideas. Knowledge is obtained from impressions, perceptions, ideas. Reasoning concerns assembling the relations of ideas and matters of fact. One makes use of inference and determines matters of fact based on experience on the basis of resemblance, contiguity, and assumptions about cause and effect. Objects have no known stability. No object of perception has any necessary connection with any other object of perception. Hume attacks all attempts to validate a principle of cause and effect. When we perceive objects in space we tend to associate these objects for the future with past experiences. There is no psychological necessity to associate two things through time and space in the way they always have been associated in the past. The immediate object in perception is always an idea, not reality itself. Any universal and necessary statements of reality were rejected by Hume.

**Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) confronted the skepticism of Hume and contested with Hume’s challenge to Enlightenment reason. He explored the mind and ventured an inquiry into how knowledge is possible. Kant lived his life in Konigsberg in Eastern Prussia. He was a professor of logic and metaphysics there. His first major work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) was revised in 1787. The *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) followed. In Kant’s study of knowledge and knowing he asserted that a priori knowledge is knowledge which is independent of experience. Experience brings knowledge. There is empirical knowledge (a posteriori) and universal, necessary a priori knowledge. Kant distinguishes between analytic and synthetic judgments. Reason that is utilized critically attempts to understand the world. To study a priori knowledge is what Kant calls transcendental metaphysics. Kant identifies the mind’s capacity to know the phenomenal world. He concludes that we cannot know the noumenal. In this sense, he makes a space for faith apart from reason.

Kant sought grounds for reason and knowledge in the unity of consciousness. That is to say that *my* thoughts are indeed *my* thoughts and these thoughts proceed by rules, or “categories.” We are born with these rules of mind: awareness, unity, plurality, thought about substances, cause and effect, possibility, necessity. I bring my thoughts and perceptions together so that I can make judgments. I know the world as it appears to me. The mind provides the form by which we know these appearances. Kant demonstrated that universal and necessary knowledge can be obtained and is needed in making judgments. We may act in life by practical reason. However, our experience does not tell us about the noumenal realm. Kant left us with a bit of a conundrum about the distinction between phenomena and what he called noumena and between appearance and reality. In Kant’s view, we are unable to gain metaphysical knowledge by pure reason.

Kant said that he was most awed by the starry heavens above him and the moral law within him. William Barrett has expressed how philosophy begins in wonder this way: “The mystery of the cosmos before which our
mind stands in awe becomes one with the mystery within us by which we ethically strive, and both come together in the sense that somehow, in a way inexpressible to us, it is all meaningful.”

Modern thinkers have struggled with the challenge of skepticism. Modern philosophy has not resolved the issues raised in ancient times, reprised in the Renaissance, or advanced in the analytical approaches of Hume, Kant, and post-Kantian epistemologists. Thinkers as diverse as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have fostered relativistic skepticism. Others like Albert Camus have regarded the universe as absurd and have embraced the view that life is meaningless, unless one makes meaning in the human situation.

Our knowledge is subject to limitation, Immanuel Kant demonstrated. We know elements of reality that our senses have the means of experiencing. What things are independently of our perception and thought lies beyond our conceptual grasp. The world of things is the world of phenomena. What things are in themselves belongs to the noumenal world. This noumenal realm is the transcendental.

Immanuel Kant’s inquiry into the limits of reason resulted in one of the great works of philosophy: *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Two years later he contributed a second volume, the *Prolegomena*, to introduce the book. In 1785, Kant’s *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics* was published. In 1787, he produced a revised edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant also wrote the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790).

Kant asserted that humans possess free will and are morally autonomous. We can choose how to act and whether or not to act in any given situation. Humans are rational beings for whom morality is possible. A sense of duty guides moral decision making. One universalizes this. If this is the right thing to do for me, it is also right for someone else who may be in this situation. Kant states the categorical imperative to act as you would as if through your action this would become universal law. Kant dismantles the classic rational arguments or ‘proofs’ for the existence of God. For Kant, confidence in the existence of God requires reliance upon faith and grace. He does not disprove the existence of God, only that our rational knowledge is limited.

**G.W.F. Hegel and the Impact of Hegelian Thought**

Much of Nineteenth Century Continental Philosophy emerged in response to the philosopher of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel grappled with the issue of self-awareness and understanding and the
unfolding of Geist in the historical process. Hegel developed a dialectic for understanding how the mind builds knowledge and for considering historical change. His important works include *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1806), *The Science of Logic* (1812), *The Philosophy of History* (1818), and *The Philosophy of Right* (1821). The wide-ranging impact of his thought was felt in the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and others, who each grapple with the Absolute Idealism of Hegel.

Hegel’s first statement on philosophy was a book distinguishing between the thought of Fichte and that of Schelling. From Fichte he drew his dialectical scheme of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. From Schelling came his organicism, his sense of spirit from matter. Whereas Fichte saw around himself a universe of lifeless matter, Schelling asserted that Nature was a living and evolving reality and that the human being is Nature spiritualized. Hegel likewise viewed all of Nature as an organic unity, one that was engaged in a process of unfolding and developing. This would move in a conscious way toward a kind of self-recognition. Mind or Spirit was within the historical process. Geist- which is both spirit and mind- is the very essence of being unfolding toward self-awareness. When the culmination of this process is reached all will be one in itself, in Absolute Spirit. This is a spiritual process filled with change. Every situation or condition has within itself conflict. This upsets the stability of the order. In the first stage there is thesis. This provokes a response, a reaction of conflicting elements, or an antithesis of the thesis. This antithesis prompts a new situation. The conflict results in a new synthesis. This dialectical process of change is at the basis of history.

Hegel held that Geist evolves change from within itself. The person is carried along by historical forces in the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times. Geist will come to know itself as the ultimate reality. Until then, it is alienated from itself. This alienation, this quest for completion, prompts further dialectical change. Thus, reality itself is an historical process. It is in the process of becoming. The world has a rational structure, which is unfolding. Humanity continues to build civilization, creating new possibilities against constraints. This ongoing development aspires to the culmination and completion of the Absolute Spirit.

To some thinkers, rational procedures appeared inadequate for reaching ultimate truth by rational means. Hegel asserted a broader picture and posited the unfolding, developing historical Absolute Spirit, looking forward to its self-realization. Soren Kierkegaard was skeptical of this grand sweep of reason and insisted upon choice, commitment, and a leap of faith. Twentieth Century thought in positivism, pragmatism, and empiricism
countered idealistic metaphysics. There was an insistence in these strands of thought that one cannot go beyond empirical data and must remain within logical and tautological statements.

**Soren Kierkegaard**

Soren Kierkegaard offered a sharp rebuttal to Hegel and emphasized the priority of individualism and subjectivity. He has often been considered a precursor of existentialism. Kierkegaard looked upon a time of the leveling out of individualism and the impressment of the individual. Kierkegaard’s pursuit is to concentrate on the singular person. He aimed at a critique of Hegelianism and how society was developing in the 19th Century. This resulted in the smothering of the individual and the rationalization of religion. Kierkegaard, who was fervently religious, held that organized religion could be a rationalization for the comfortable and for the bourgeois way of life. His emphasis on individualism and commitment precede similar expressions by existentialist writers like Albert Camus and by fiercely independent modernist innovators like D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce.

Kierkegaard, like Friedrich Nietzsche, writes on behalf of uniqueness and individuality. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stand out as eccentric in their time and in their call for people to be more than a product of culture, or a nice, benevolent part of the mass or mob. Kierkegaard writes a diatribe against the tribe, against what ‘everybody’ thinks and what ‘everybody’ knows (or think that they know), which no one will stand out against. He is against the status-quo. In this way, he also attacks Hegel’s rationalism. One needs a life that is not just thought out but one that is also lived.

Kierkegaard asserts the importance of subjectivity. He rejects any positioning of the human as object – for scientific experimentation, fitted to a collective environment. The view of men and women as mechanisms or functions looks on people as objects, for a supposedly ‘scientific’ worldview. Kierkegaard resists this. Kierkegaard thinks of the striving, choosing being. He calls his era “pretentious.” It dehumanizes humanity while trying to set itself up ‘scientifically.’ Similar concerns are later expressed by modernist writers like Dos Passos and Lawrence. In this respect, Kierkegaard anticipates a Twentieth Century condition. Meanwhile, his emphasis upon commitment suggests that his subjective emphasis is unlike that of postmodernists who emphasize subjectivity and relativism.

For this Danish thinker, an individual is an existent who strives, drives, and moves through life. To “exist” and to “be” is to be something in the world. The human individual stands forth. Men and women are unique. The human stands out; he is outstanding. He can see that he stands in a world.
But he also has the capacity to turn back upon his being in the world. The human individual is the being who questions what it means to be. In this way, he stands beyond common materiality. Men and women are transcendent. They go beyond just being. Kierkegaard exhorts people to dare to be the uniqueness that each one is: to go beyond others and beyond self. Only the human is capable of being more than what he is. (A desk is a desk. A dog is a dog.) There is a double aspect about human beings: categories and existence. (Existence as a being. Being an existence.) The human can transcend herself. This being outstanding is open to all. But the temptation is to stand back and be “they”: not individual but part of a mass. Kierkegaard encourages the one who would be outstanding. He shakes his head at the ones who would give up and lose themselves in the crowd.

Kierkegaard’s emphasis on individualism is an important reference point in our consideration of the uniqueness of the modernist literary artist. The modernist writer is a risk-taker, an innovator, an individual voice. The Individual is the single one, unique, differentiated from the others. Self is a relating process of what one is and what one will be. There is 1) What we are now: We are what we have been, our past is ourselves here and now. We are the sum of what we have done, chosen, thought, enacted. There is also what we may be: our “possibility.” There is a relation of the self that is and a self that may be. To be a self is to be constantly moving beyond what one is, toward what may be. A person lives in hope and engages life with this hope. Those who do not attempt to transcend toward what they may be are in despair. This is the refusal to exist, the despair of becoming more than what one is. Kierkegaard challenged his contemporaries and his voice rings out across the centuries, insisting that one be an individual. While Ortega y Gasset, Wyndham Lewis, and other critics of the early Twentieth Century made no reference to Kierkegaard, they shared his distaste for ‘mass man.’ The conformity that Kierkegaard opposed was one he saw as an outgrowth of Hegelian rationality.

For Hegel, the human being moves through life by reason, by thought and rationality. The possible self is thought; it is an ideal to which culture and social surroundings contribute. Kierkegaard asks: does one become this self only by thinking about it and by reflection? No, says Kierkegaard. No amount of thinking does the becoming for a person. One must not only know; one must act and one must be. To be alive is to be engaged in this becoming. Knowing what it means to be a self is not just being part of Geist moving through history. For Kierkegaard, one moves through life existentially. One must move beyond reflection, beyond thinking about what one will do with one’s life. One must be one’s life.