

Department of English
Tezpur University



Two-Day Seminar
on

THE BOOKS OF 1922

[23-24 March 2022]

Concept Note

Often seen as the *annus mirabilis* of Anglo-American Modernism, 1922 marked the publication of books now seen as modernist classics. Joyce's *Ulysses* came out in February, Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious* and Aaron's *Rod* in April, Woolf's *Jacob's Room* in October, and Eliot's *The Waste Land* in December 1922. The year also marked the publication of Stein's *Geography and Plays*. Though no two persons agree on how and why—and indeed where—modernism began, there is a tacit agreement that these signature texts mark the miracle year of Anglo-American Modernism. It makes sense therefore to revisit the classics of 1922 a hundred years after they were first published, and in the process sample some of their contexts and consequences.

While Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Stein and Lawrence automatically merit inclusion in any discussion of modernism, there would be two notable absences—Ezra Pound and William Faulkner—if we go by the publication years of works such as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). This two-day seminar seeks to celebrate the multiple trajectories—contexts and consequences are but windows—of the modernist breakthrough, some retrospective, some others prospective.

The occasion also allows us to historicize contexts and consequences of modernism in the light of the books of 1922. The publication of these books seems to have forged, one, a new kinship among canonical Anglo-American literary texts within their respective traditions and, two, a highly selective bandwidth to legitimize a Eurocentric literary-

cultural historiography bordering on infamy and intolerance. The modernist writer, while mapping 'ancient' and 'emergent' knowledge systems—in multiple, contestatory and competitive frames, not as part of a consensual order—seems to speak in a forked tongue.

Eliot's invocation of a 'congenial ancestry'—seemingly met by modernist mythogenesis seen and explicated in these texts over the last hundred years—is informed by contradictory demands of form and ideology that are discussed by specialists but ignored in general discussions of modernism. There is, on the one hand, a symbolist aesthetic that operates as a shorthand for all that we associate with modernist literature. On the other hand, this overarching aesthetic demand speaks with an ideological imperative that frustrates any attempt to equate the multivalence of modernist texts with modernity—freedom, equal opportunity, justice—as a common goal for humanity. In essence, it is difficult to separate the ambiguity of modernist texts from their possibly complicity with oppressive power structures.

Do we look at the events of 1922 as part of inter-textual relationships or as a restructuring of the human subject? Do we approach modernism as a necessary re-ordering of the 'coordinates' of art and criticism? Have we been inattentive to issues other than challenges of form? Have we only been looking at the texts and not at events surrounding them? Have we paid enough attention to objects and species other than (hu)man? Does modernism speak for or against modernity? Does ideological criticism open up or close off windows of critical inquiry? Do the books of 1922 tell us 'everything' we need to know?

The history of modernism does not allow for easy categories and conclusions. The seminar sees 'the modern tradition' (Ellmann's phrase) as a dialogic space where people, spaces, species, nations, genders, genres, ideas, economies and desires are either connected historically—calling for spatiality and sequential closure—or ordered rhetorically as interpretive signposts that are available only for the willing and the resourceful. The books of 1922 highlight the frenetic search in/of the modernist text for a unifying order or the rhetorical admission of its failed quest. What these texts create is a reader who is willing to fight and yet ready to cooperate.

The Seminar

The seminar is structured around six interrelated lectures on modernism. Experts in the subject have agreed to share their perspectives on specific aspects of the books of 1922, in the process commenting on the pleasures and problems of reading and teaching these texts at different levels, creating and discovering new and decidedly more appropriate contexts to understand the modernist tradition and its many contradictory impulses.

Our speakers include

Prof. K Narayan Chandran, University of Hyderabad

Prof. Udaya Kumar, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Prof. Brinda Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Prof. Bibhash Choudhury, Gauhati University

Prof. Farheena Danta, Tezpur University

Prof. Bijay K Danta, Tezpur University

Advisors

Prof. Gautam K Borah, Head of Department

Prof. Farheena Danta, Dean, Humanities and Social Sciences

Prof. Bijay K. Danta

Coordinators

Dr Sarat Doley

Raktima Bhuyan.