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The Collage Technique in Modernist Literature

(Modernism : Style)

Introduction

The technique of collage, originally associated with the visual arts, became one of the most defining formal innovations of modernism in literature. It emerged from the same cultural atmosphere that gave rise to Cubism in painting and Dada in avant-garde art — a world shattered by war, industrialization, and the loss of unified meaning. In literature, collage describes the juxtaposition of disparate voices, styles, genres, and cultural references within a single text to reflect the fragmentation and multiplicity of modern experience. Rather than presenting reality as coherent and continuous, the modernist collage mirrors a disjointed consciousness and a disintegrating world. It is both a symbol of rupture and an aesthetic of reconstruction — an attempt to create new order out of chaos.

1. The Origins of Collage: From Cubism to Modernist Texts

The term *collage* comes from the French *coller* (“to glue”) and was first used by visual artists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque around 1912. In their Cubist paintings, fragments of newspapers, wallpapers, and advertisements were pasted together to create new forms of meaning. Modernist writers adopted this principle to the verbal and structural level. They began to juxtapose textual fragments — quotations, allusions, multiple voices, and shifting styles — to reproduce the fractured perception of the modern world. In literature, this technique was not merely decorative: it expressed a new epistemological condition, where meaning had to be assembled from the debris of tradition and experience. As Ezra Pound famously commanded: “Make it new.” Collage became a method of renewal — by tearing apart inherited forms and reassembling them into a new, dynamic whole.

2. Collage and Fragmentation in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Perhaps the most celebrated example of collage in British modernism is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The poem is constructed as a mosaic of voices, quotations, myths, songs, and languages, ranging from ancient ritual to urban chatter. Eliot draws on sources as diverse as the Upanishads, Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, and jazz lyrics — assembling fragments from different cultures and epochs into a dissonant harmony. The result is a text that refuses linear narrative and unified voice. Instead, it enacts the fragmentation of modern identity and culture. This deliberate discontinuity is part of the poem's modernist aesthetic: the shattered form mirrors the spiritual and psychological disintegration of post-war Europe. Yet through collage, Eliot also performs an act of recovery — the fragments of the past are “shored against” the ruins of the present. The poem thus becomes both a symptom and a remedy for cultural loss. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (*The Waste Land*, l. 430). In this sense, collage in Eliot's work is both diagnostic (reflecting chaos) and creative (reassembling meaning).

3. Joyce and the Collage of Voices in *Ulysses*

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) employs collage not only thematically but stylistically. Each episode adopts a different narrative technique, parodying and blending diverse literary forms — journalism, catechism, drama, romantic prose, and even the language of advertising. For example, the “Cyclops” episode mimics Irish nationalist rhetoric, the “Oxen of the Sun” imitates the evolution of English prose from Anglo-Saxon to modern slang, and the “Ithaca” episode takes the form of a scientific catechism. This stylistic pastiche or collage of genres expresses the multiplicity of consciousness and the complexity of identity. Joyce presents Dublin — and by extension, the modern world — as a space of linguistic and cultural polyphony. Through this verbal collage, *Ulysses* transforms the ordinary life of one day into a total representation of human experience, suggesting that modern identity is constructed out of diverse cultural fragments.

4. Pound's *Cantos* and the Ideogrammic Method

Ezra Pound explicitly theorized collage through what he called the “ideogrammic method.” Influenced by Chinese characters and classical scholarship, Pound's *The*

Cantos (1917–1969) assembles fragments from history, economics, literature, and politics without explanatory transitions. Quotations in multiple languages (Latin, Greek, Chinese, Italian) are placed side by side, forcing the reader to participate in constructing meaning. This *collage of civilizations* mirrors the breakdown of historical continuity but also attempts to recover a sense of universal order. Pound's poetic collage is thus modernist in both form and method: it is discontinuous yet visionary, chaotic yet striving for coherence.

Conclusion

The collage technique in modernist literature captures the essence of the modern age: fragmentation, multiplicity, and the struggle to reconstruct meaning. Whether in Eliot's mythic montage, Joyce's stylistic pastiche, Pound's ideogrammic method, or Woolf's psychological mosaic, collage becomes the form of modern consciousness itself. It transforms the literary text into an arena of juxtaposition, where the remnants of history, myth, and everyday life coexist in tension and resonance. As an artistic response to cultural disintegration, collage embodies the modernist conviction that art must reflect — and remake — the broken reality of its time. In short, modernist collage is both the symptom of fragmentation and the strategy of survival: it expresses the crisis of modern identity while inventing a new way to imagine it.