Modernist and modern poetry: an overview

At the turn of the twentieth century, English poets might have been expected to take note of the clamour for political and sexual reform, or to gauge the effects of a period of unprecedented urbanisation and technological change. However, when Robert Bridges succeeded Alfred Austin as Poet Laureate in 1913, his intricately crafted poetry appeared less preoccupied by the need to confront modernity than by his meticulous study of classical quantitative metres. If a younger generation of poets, launched in 1912 by Edward Marsh's popular 'Georgian' anthologies, extended the subject matter and idioms of modern English poetry, their innovations were mild in comparison to the Modernist revolt inspired by the European avant-garde. Marinetti's Italian Futurist manifestos, for example, proposed a complete break with the cultural past, the dislocation of poetic syntax and reverence for the machine age of cars and aeroplanes. Partly as a response to Futurism's London publicity, the American émigré Ezra Pound organised an 'Imagist' manifesto, proclaiming a radical overhaul of the diction and metric of English poetry, followed by an anthology, Des Imagistes (1914). The radicalism of Pound's Imagist school was overtaken by the profound cultural upheaval which accompanied the First World War, dispersing their group momentum.
It was another American resident in London, T. S. Eliot, who theorised a way forward for post-war reconstruction. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), he argued for an impersonal modern aesthetic that selectively re-appropriated those elements of the literary past that could be made to live in the present. Oddly, Eliot's tradition needed to be actively fragmented before it could be inherited. Eliot rejected the extremist pure sound poems of Dadaism and what he perceived to be the debased romanticism of Georgian poetry, in favour of a return to the nervous and turbulent energies of seventeenth-century drama and lyric.

Modernism

A broadly defined multinational cultural movement (or series of movements) that took hold in the late 19th century and reached its most radical peak on the eve of World War I. It grew out of the philosophical, scientific, political, and ideological shifts that followed the Industrial Revolution, up to World War I and its aftermath. For artists and writers, the Modernist project was a re-evaluation of the assumptions and aesthetic values of their predecessors. It evolved from the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment positivism and faith in reason. Modernist writers broke with Romantic pieties and clichés (such as the notion of the Sublime) and became

self-consciously skeptical of language and its claims on coherence. In the early 20th century, novelists such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and Joseph Conrad experimented with shifts in time and narrative points of view. While living in Paris before the war, Gertrude Stein explored the possibilities of creating literary works that broke with conventional syntactical and referential practices. Ezra Poundvowed to "make it new" and "break the pentameter," while T.S. Eliot wrote The Waste Land in the shadow of World War I. Shortly after The Waste Land was published in 1922, it became the archetypical Modernist text, rife with allusions, linguistic fragments, and mixed registers and languages. Other poets most often associated with Modernism include H.D., W.H. Auden, Hart Crane, William Butler Yeats, and Wallace Stevens. Modernism also generated many smaller movements; see also Acmeism, Dada, Free verse, Futurism, Imagism, Objectivism, Postmodernism, and Surrealism. Browse more Modern poets.

The literary movement we call Modernism rejected Romantic ideas. It grew out of the philosophical, scientific, political, and ideological shifts that followed the Industrial Revolution, through the shock of World War I, and its aftermath. Modern writers: • break with the past • reject literary traditions that seemed outmoded • reject aesthetic values of their predecessors • reject diction that seemed too genteel to suit an era of technological breakthroughs and global violence • break with Romantic pieties and clichés (such as the notion of the sublime) and become self-consciously skeptical of language and its claims on coherence.

Characteristics of Modern Poetry

• Stylistic experimentation and disrupted syntax • Stream of Consciousness (a term coined by American psychologist William James to describe the natural flow of a person's thoughts) • Theme of alienation: characters or speakers feel disconnected from people and/or society/the world • Focus on images.

Modernist Poetry in English

Modernist poetry is a mode of writing that is characterised by two main features. The first is technical innovation in the writing through the extensive use of free verse. The second is a move away from the Romantic idea of an unproblematic poetic 'self' directly addressing an equally unproblematic ideal reader or audience.

Modernist poetry in English is generally considered to have emerged in the early years of the 20th century with the appearance of the Imagist poets. In common

with many other modernists, these poets were writing in reaction to what they saw as the excesses of Victorian poetry, with its emphasis on traditional formalism and overly flowery poetic diction. In many respects, their criticism of contemporary poetry echoes what William Wordsworth wrote in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* to instigate the Romantic movement in British poetry over a century earlier.

In general, the modernists saw themselves as looking back to the best practices of poets in earlier periods and other cultures. Their models included ancient Greek literature, Chinese and Japanese poetry, the troubadours, Dante and the medieval Italian philosophical poets (such as Guido Cavalcanti), and the English Metaphysical poets.

Much of the early poetry produced by these writers took the form of short, compact lyrics. However, as modernist poetry in English developed, longer poems came to the fore. These long poems represent the main contribution of the modernist movement to the 20th century English poetic canon.

Modernist Poetry

The questioning of the self and the exploration of technical innovations in modernist poetry are intimately interconnected. The dislocation of the authorial presence is achieved through the application of such techniques as collage, found poetry, visual poetry, the juxtaposition of apparently unconnected materials, and combinations of these. These techniques are used not for their own sake but to open up questions in the mind of the reader regarding the nature of the poetic experience. These developments parallel changes in the other arts, especially painting and music, that were taking place concurrently.

Additionally, Modernist poetry disavowed the traditional aesthetic claims of Romantic poetry's later phase and no longer sought "beauty" as the highest achievement of verse. With this abandonment of the sublime came a turn away from pastoral poetry and an attempt to focus poetry on urban, mechanical, and industrial settings. The new heroes would not be swains laboring in the fields, but office workers struggling across London Bridge, and the new settings would not be "romantic chasms deep and wide," but vacant lots, smoked-over cities, and subways.

Another important feature of much modernist poetry in English is a clear focus on the surface of the poem. Much of this work focuses on the literal meaning of the words on the page rather than any metaphorical or symbolic meanings that might

be imputed to them. This approach to writing is reflected in Ezra Pound's advice to young writers (in his 1937 book *The ABC of Reading*) to 'buy a dictionary and learn the meanings of words' and T.S. Eliot's response when asked the meaning of the line 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree in the cool of the day...' from *Ash Wednesday* (1927); he said "It means 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree in the cool of the day...'". Also pertinent is William Carlos Williams' 1944 statement that 'A poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words'.

The emergence of English-language modernism

The roots of English-language poetic modernism can be traced back to the works of a number of earlier writers, including Walt Whitman, whose long lines approached a type of free verse, the prose poetry of Oscar Wilde, Robert Browning's subversion of the poetic self, Emily Dickinson's compression and the writings of the early English Symbolists, especially Arthur Symons. However, these poets essentially remained true to the basic tenets of the Romantic movement and the appearance of the Imagists marked the first emergence of a distinctly modernist poetic in the language. One anomalous figure of the early period of modernism also deserves mention: Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in a radically experimental prosody about radically conservative ideals (not unlike a later Ezra Pound), and he believed that sound could drive poetry. Specifically, poetic sonic effects (selected for verbal and aural felicity, not just images selected for their visual evocativeness) would also, therefore, become an influential poetic device of modernism.

Imagism

The origins of Imagism are to be found in two poems by T. E. Hulme that were published in 1909 by the Poets' Club in London. Hulme was a student of mathematics and philosophy who had established the Poets' Club to discuss his theories of poetry. The poet and critic F. S. Flint, who was a champion of free verse and modern French poetry, was highly critical of the club and its publications. From the ensuing debate, Hulme and Flint became close friends. They started meeting with other poets at the Eiffel Tower restaurant in Soho to discuss reform of contemporary poetry through free verse and the tanka and haiku and the removal of all unnecessary verbiage from poems.

The American poet Ezra Pound was introduced to this group and they found that their ideas resembled his. In 1911, Pound introduced two other poets, H.D. and Richard Aldington, to the Eiffel Tower group. Both of these poets were students of the early Greek lyric poetry, especially the works of Sappho. In October 1912, he submitted three poems each by H.D. and Aldington under the rubric *Imagiste* to *Poetry* magazine. That month Pound's book *Ripostes* was published with an appendix called *The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme*, which carried a note that saw the first appearance of the word *Imagiste* in print. Aldington's poems were in the November issue of *Poetry* and H.D.'s in January 1913 and Imagism as a movement was launched. The March issue contained Pound's *A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste* and Flint's *Imagisme*. The latter contained this succinct statement of the group's position:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

In setting these criteria for poetry, the Imagists saw themselves as looking backward to the best practices of pre- Romantic writing. Imagists poets used sharp language and embrace imagery. Their work, however, was to have a revolutionary impact on English-language writing for the rest of the 20th century.

Between 1914 and 1917, four anthologies of Imagist poetry were published. In addition to Pound, Flint, H.D. and Aldington, these included work by Skipwith Cannell, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Allen Upward, John Cournos, D. H. Lawrence and Marianne Moore. With a few exceptions, this represents a roll-call of English-language modernist poets of the time. After the 1914 volume, Pound distanced himself from the group and the remaining anthologies appeared under the editorial control of Amy Lowell.

World War I and after

The outbreak of World War I represented a setback for the budding modernist movement for a number of reasons. Firstly, writers like Aldington ended up on active service. Secondly, paper shortages and other factors meant that publication of new work became increasingly difficult. Thirdly, public sentiment in time of war meant that war poets like Wilfred Owen, who wrote formally more

conventional verse, became increasingly popular. One poet who served in the war, the visual artist David Jones, would later resist this trend in his long experimental war poem *In Parenthesis*, which was written directly out of his experiences in the trenches but was not published until 1937.

The war also tended to undermine the optimism of the Imagists, and this fact was reflected in a number of major poems written in its aftermath. For instance, Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919) uses loose translations and transformations of the Latin poet Propertius to ridicule war propaganda and the idea of empire. His *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1921) represents his farewell to Imagism and lyric poetry in general. The writing of these poems coincided with Pound's decision to abandon London permanently.

The most famous English-language modernist work arising out of this post-war disillusionment is T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922). Eliot was an American poet who had been living in London for some time. Although never formally associated with the Imagist group, Eliot's work was admired by Pound, who, in 1915, helped him to publish a poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which brought him to prominence. When Eliot completed his original draft of a long poem based on both the disintegration of his personal life and mental stability and of the culture around him, provisionally titled *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, he gave the manuscript to Pound for comment. After some heavy editing, *The Waste Land* in the form we now know it was published and Eliot came to be seen as the voice of a generation. The addition of notes to the published poem served to highlight the use of collage as a literary technique, paralleling similar practice by the cubists and other visual artists. From this point on, modernism in English tended towards a poetry of the fragment that rejected the idea that the poet could present a comfortingly coherent view of life.

The Waste Land as example of a Modernist Text

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was a foundational text of Modernism. It represented the moment in which imagism moved in to Modernism proper. It is a text in which broken, fragmented, and seemingly unrelated images come together. It is an anti-narrative and is disjunctive. The metaphor of seeing and vision is central to the poem. This was central to Modernism. We, as readers, are in confusion, we have an inability to see anything except a heap of broken images. However, the narrator (in *The Waste Land* as well as other texts) promised to show the reader a different

meaning; to show the reader how to make meaning from dislocation and from fragments. This construction of an exclusive meaning was essential to Modernism.

Maturity

With the publication of *The Waste Land*, modernist poetry appeared to have made a breakthrough into wider critical discourse and a broader readership. However, the economic collapse of the late 1920s and early 1930s had a serious negative impact on the new writing. For American writers, living in Europe became more difficult as their incomes lost a great deal of their relative value. While Stein, Barney and Joyce remained in the French city, much of the scene they had presided over scattered. Pound was in Italy, Eliot in London, H.D. moved between that city and Switzerland, and many of the other writers associated with the movement were now living in the States.

The economic depression, combined with the impact of the Spanish Civil War, also saw the emergence, in the Britain of the 1930s, of a more overtly political poetry, as represented by such writers as W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. Although nominally admirers of Eliot, these poets tended towards a poetry of radical content but formal conservativeness. For example, they rarely wrote free verse, preferring rhyme and regular stanza patterns in much of their work.

1930s modernism

Consequently, modernism in English remained in the role of an *avant garde* movement, depending on little presses and magazines and a small but dedicated readership. The key group to emerge during this time was the Objectivist poets, consisting of Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting and Lorine Niedecker. The Objectiveists were admirers of Stein, Pound and Williams and Pound actively promoted their work. Thanks to his influence, Zukofsky was asked to edit a special Objectivist issue of the Chicago-based journal *Poetry* in 1931 to launch the group. The basic tenets of Objectivist poetics were to treat the poem as an object and to emphasise sincerity, intelligence, and the poet's ability to look clearly at the world, and in this they can be viewed as direct descendants of the Imagists. Continuing a tradition established in Paris, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Oppen went on to form the Objectivist Press to publish books by themselves and by Williams. In his later work, Zukofsky developed his view of the poem as object to include experimenting with mathematical models for

creating poems, producing effects similar to the creation of a Bach fugue or a piece of serial music.

A number of Irish poets and writers moved to Paris in the early 1930s to join the circle around James Joyce. These included Samuel Beckett, Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin. These writers were aware of Pound and Eliot, but they were also francophone and took an interest in contemporary French poetry, especially the surrealists. Indeed, Coffey and Devlin were amongst the first to translate the works of Paul Eluard into English. Around the same time, a number of British surrealist poets were beginning to emerge, among them David Gascoyne, George Barker and Hugh Sykes Davies. Like the Objectivists, these poets were relatively neglected by their native literary cultures and had to wait for a revival of interest in British and Irish modernism in the 1960s before their contributions to the development of this alternative tradition were properly assessed.

Long poems

Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* marked a transition from the short imagistic poems that were typical of earlier modernist writing towards the writing of longer poems or poem-sequences. A number of long poems were also written during the 1920s, including Mina Loy's 'auto-mythology', *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* and Hugh MacDiarmid's satire on Scottish society, *A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle*. MacDiarmid wrote a number of long poems, including *On a Raised Beach*, *Three Hymns to Lenin* and *In Memoriam James Joyce*, in which he incorporated materials from science, linguistics, history and even found poems based on texts from the *Times Literary Supplement*. David Jones' war poem *In Parenthesis* was a book-length work that drew on the matter of Britain to illuminate his experiences in the trenches, and his later epic *The Anathemata*, itself hewn from a much longer manuscript, is a meditation on empire and resistance, the local and the global, which uses materials from Christian, Roman and Celtic history and mythology.

One of the most influential of all the modernist long poems was Pound's *The Cantos*, a 'poem containing history' that he started in 1915 and continued to work on for the rest of his writing life. From a starting point that combines Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* to create a personal epic of 20th century life, the poem uses materials

from history, politics, literature, art, music, economics, philosophy, mythology, ecology and the poet's personal experiences and ranges across European, American, African and Asian cultures. Pound coined the term 'ideogrammatic method' to describe his technique of placing these materials in relation to each other so as to open up new and unexpected relationships. This can be seen as paralleling techniques used by modernist artists and composers to similar ends.

Other Imagist-associated poets also went on to write long poems. William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* applied the techniques developed by Pound to a specific location and in a specific, American, dialect. H.D. wrote *Trilogy* out of her experiences in London during World War II and *Helen in Egypt*, a reworking of the Helen of Troy story from the perspective of the female protagonist, as a kind of feminist response to the masculine mind-set behind Pound's epic. Eliot's experiences of war-torn London also underpinned his *Four Quartets*. A number of Objectivists also wrote long poems, including Zukofsky's *A*, Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, and Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*. Brian Coffey's *Advent* is the key long poem by an Irish modernist. All these poems, to one extent or another, use a range of techniques to blend personal experience with materials from a wide range of cultural and intellectual activities to create collage-like texts on an epic scale.

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/modernism

https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/m/Modernist_poetry_in_English.htm