

## MODERNISM

Modernism was a movement in all the arts starting for Americans in 1909, though some historians date it from the 1890s, others from 1910 or 1911 and others from the beginning of World War I in 1914. Abstract Expressionist painting was coming into vogue, led by Picasso. In 1909 Gertrude Stein began publishing her experimental writing in Paris with “Picasso” and *Three Lives* and Ezra Pound published *Personae* and began reading poems to café audiences in London. T. S. Eliot was writing Modernist poems at Harvard, the musical composer Arnold Schoenberg had abandoned tonality and the “Little Theater” movement had begun in New York that would produce the Expressionist plays of Eugene O’Neill. Soon the new cinema in Berlin would contribute German Expressionism.

The international phenomenon of Modernism was so enormous and diverse that few have ever tried to define it. Those who have tried have usually focused on Europe. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century many teachers, deprived of a literary education by Postmodern professors, confuse Modernism with Postmodernism. The many Modernist writers abroad included Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, F. S. Flint, T. E. Hulme, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus, Aldous Huxley, and W. H. Auden. The most significant aesthetic feature of Modernist writing is Expressionism: non-linear structures, incongruous imagery, unconventional typography, omission of logical connectives, apparent nonsense, stream of consciousness—varying in kind and degree from one writer to another.

ORDER OF TOPICS: American literary Modernists, three senses of the term, literary history, Paris, psychological Modernism, Modernism and Transcendence, 25 general characteristics of Modernism, modes of Modernism, intellectual expressionists, holistic realists, unified sensibility, mythic method, Modernist achievements, New Criticism, definitions of Modernism, Modernist poetry, poetry in transition, waste land poets, Harriet Monroe, Hulme, Imagism, free verse, Eliot on free verse, Amy Lowell & Hilda Doolittle, experimental forms, Eliot in history, “Modernism is dead,” Lowell & Wilbur & Roethke, Shapiro, Romantic tradition, American poetic tradition, symbolism, Pound, Pound & Eliot, “The Waste Land,” Williams, Stevens, Frost, Sandburg & Lindsay, Moore & Cummings, Black poets, Southern agrarians, New Criticism legacy, Modernism & movies.

### AMERICAN LITERARY MODERNISTS

This attempt at definition is limited to the most influential American Modernists: Stein, Pound, Eliot, O’Neill, Robert Frost, e. e. cummings, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), Hart Crane, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Thornton Wilder, John Dos Passos, Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, Ralph Ellison, and Saul Bellow. The first American Modernists were (1) younger writers; (2) excited by the beginning of a new century; (3) disgusted by inhibiting Victorian (matriarchal feminist) literary and moral conventions, vapid sentimentality, and genteel taste; (4) eager to revitalize literature, language and culture; (5) inspired to innovate in forms, styles and techniques; and (6) to create authentic art by developing their own individual aesthetics. After 1914, the First World War intensified the ongoing Modernist disillusionment with mechanistic, dehumanizing, materialistic, decadent, increasingly urban western civilization—Eliot’s “Unreal City.”

### THREE SENSES OF THE TERM

“Modernism” has three senses here: (1) an *historical* movement from 1909 to 1962 that peaked in the 1920s; (2) *aesthetic* values, themes and techniques, some of which have precedents in literary history—in Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Poe, Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, Flaubert, Henry James, Baudelaire, Valery, Rimbaud, Mallarme; and (3) a *psychological* state of mind and vision of life. Critics with a more limited conception of Modernism have overlooked many shared characteristics, reduced Frost to “traditional” and failed to recognize the Modernism of such works as Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Porter’s *Pale*

*Horse, Pale Rider*, O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*. The most reductive professors have limited their conception of Modernism to Pound, Eliot and James Joyce.

Some Modernist works also exhibit characteristics of "Postmodernism": For example, Pound passed through a Modernist phase with Imagism and devolved into cynical Postmodernism in his *Cantos*. He was a pedant, Stein a solipsist, Stevens a hedonist, and Williams a materialist. Generally speaking, Modernists see the modern world as a spiritual "waste land" but affirm individual transcendence of it, whereas Postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, and Susan Sontag are wastelanders, atheist intellectuals who do not believe in transcendence or a soul.

## LITERARY HISTORY

Gertrude Stein established herself in Paris, then the center of the cultural vortex called Modernism, in 1903. As a wealthy art patron and critic she proved herself an authority on Modernism in both painting and prose—specifically abstract Expressionism. Her prose-poem portrait "Picasso" is an example of her experimental writing at its best. Meanwhile over in London in 1910, the novelist Ford Madox Ford and the philosopher T. E. Hulme persuaded Ezra Pound to reject all Romanticism and become Neoclassical. As foreign editor for Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, the flagship of "new poetry," Pound led a crusade for Imagism, a movement that included his friend Hilda Doolittle and many other young poets.

Pound was unable to coerce Robert Frost into dropping conventional forms and writing free verse, opening a divide among the Modernists in modes of expression between the *intellectual expressionists*—influenced in particular by Yeats and Joyce—and the *holistic realists*. Frost thought free verse was "like playing tennis with the net down." For awhile, Pound and Amy Lowell made free verse Imagism a virtual requirement of poets who wished to be considered modern, leading to the "objectivism" of William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, and on to more complex "aggregate imagist poems" culminating in Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922). Like Frost, Wallace Stevens was never seduced: "Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this."

Stevens, Williams and Moore were friends. Williams advocated a plain style and a native tradition rooted in local geography and he spent his career opposing Eliot for being too learned, too intellectual, too abstract, too traditional and too European. Hemingway disliked Eliot and his aesthetics—he scoffed at a poet who footnotes his own poem—and he countered "The Waste Land" in "Big Two-Hearted River" and *The Sun Also Rises*. Hart Crane tried to counter Eliot's vision in *The Bridge* but his unsuccessful effort contributed to his suicide.

## PARIS

By the 1920s, American writers in Paris felt obliged to seek an audience with the guru of Modernism, Gertrude Stein. Hemingway literally sat at her feet: "Me and Gertrude were like brothers." Writers paid homage and courted the good opinion of Stein—except for Katherine Anne Porter, who scorned the Left Bank crowd and wrote that Stein sounded "like something chewing through a leaf." The experimental writing of Stein influenced poets including e. e. cummings and fiction writers in even greater number, including Anderson, Hemingway and Thornton Wilder. When Pound moved from London to Paris in 1920 he was the primary force in contemporary poetry, just as Stein was the primary influence in prose—until the super nova advent of James Joyce.

Pound got Joyce's first novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Eliot's first book *Prufrock and Other Observations* published in 1916. Eliot stunned the literary community with *Prufrock* and even more with "The Waste Land," which appeared in the same year as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). "The Waste Land" and *Ulysses* became the two most influential models of Modernism. The American expatriate Sylvia Beach published *Ulysses* in her Left Bank bookstore Shakespeare & Company, the main gathering place for English-speaking expatriate writers in Paris. The book was legally obscene in the United States until a court ruling in 1933 and Hemingway smuggled copies into this country under his overcoat by entering through Canada. *Ulysses* became an underground sensation—as a scandal and as a spectacular literary performance. Everybody had to read it, or pretend to have tried to read it. The imperious Gertrude Stein and the fastidious Virginia Woolf hated *Ulysses*, but most fiction writers were awestruck.

Faulkner visited Paris on a walking tour through France: "I knew of Joyce, and I would go to some effort to go to the café that he inhabited to look at him.... James Joyce was one of the great men of my time. He was electrocuted by the divine fire. He, Thomas Mann, were the great writers of my time. He was probably...the greatest." Faulkner went on to adopt and modify Joyce's technique of the stream of consciousness, giving it more aesthetic order and a greater density of implications. Joyce was a frail, shy, half-blind Irish linguist and teacher of languages and a pal of Hemingway, who managed to be a friend of all three of the Modernist exemplars in Paris—Stein, Pound and Joyce. Stein was intensely jealous of her status as Top Guru, while Pound was busy getting masterworks published and Joyce was indifferent to Stein's opinion.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL MODERNISM

Henry James dramatized the expansion of consciousness through impressions, evolving in his aesthetics and method from impressionistic Realism toward Expressionism. Stein, Pound and Eliot all studied James. Their Expressionism, like stream of consciousness in Dorothy Richardson, Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner, is an extension of Realism into the psyche--as deep as the unconscious. They tried to be more inclusively Realistic by objectifying the subjective. Pound thought poetry was lagging behind in its development and declared his desire to accomplish in poetry what James had accomplished in the novel.

Realism branched into the contrasting modes of Impressionism and Naturalism. O'Neill and Dos Passos are the only Naturalists among the Modernists—in some ways resembling Norris and London in vision more than they resemble the other Modernists. Yet their aesthetics are more Expressionist than is characteristic of Naturalism. Impressionism, known to the intellectual Modernists primarily through James, led to Imagism in poetry, thanks to Pound. Stevens was directly influenced by Impressionist painting and belongs among the *holistic realists*, who are inclined to (1) be more concrete than the *intellectual expressionists*, (2) submerge allusions and (3) dramatize the "illusion of real life."

### MODERNISM AND TRANSCENDENCE

The evolution of American literature into Modernism corresponds to the individuation process of a person: Realism (head) through Impressionism (sensibility) into Expressionism (unconscious), culminating in Modernism (holistic consciousness). This is why so many Modernist masterpieces exhibit characteristics of the transcendental mode as defined in "Model of Metaphors," especially works by Eliot, Frost, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, and O'Connor--all of whom are Christians. Stein, Pound and Stevens, like Henry James, attained transcendence through sensibility in art. In the last month of his life, Stevens converted to Catholicism, in effect recanting the atheism of all his poetry.

Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Melville each wrote their own "bibles" (1836-55) in response to traditional scripture. Modernists did much the same using one form or another of the "mythic method." In *Moby-Dick*, *objectivity*, personified in the black cabin boy Pip, is essential to a vision of the Truth and to psychological salvation as symbolized by the survival of Ishmael. Pip transcends his subjectivity—his ego. Eliot forbade a biography and wrote poetry to "escape from emotion." Faulkner wished that he had been able to publish his books anonymously. The most extreme statement of the Modernist aspiration to transcendent vision through imagination and *objectivity*, the antithesis of Postmodern subjectivity, is by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) when Stephen Daedalus says, "The personality of the artist...finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak... The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." It is this discipline, this ideal of transcendent *objectivity* that yields the epiphanies of Joyce, the style of Hemingway, and the holistic Realism of Porter, Gordon and O'Connor--the opposite of decadent subjective Postmodernism.

Authentic original literary style is rare. It is evidence of a highly individuated writer: Stein, Eliot, Moore, Cummings, Frost, Stevens, Anderson, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, and O'Connor. By modeling individuation in their art, the greatest American writers of the period expressed the aspiration to unity and wholeness in the collective consciousness of Americans after the divisive Civil War and World War I. After the 1960s, Postmodernists took over higher education and the literary establishment and inverted the values of Modernism, replacing high culture with identity politics.

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNISM

1. Objectivity & impersonality (traditions of Neoclassicism & Realism)
2. Universal truth as literary ideal (traditions of Neoclassicism & Realism)
3. International & egalitarian (traditions of Henry James & Walt Whitman)
4. Image as revelation (Impressionism, Imagism, Symbolism)
5. Coalescence of mind and Nature (Romantic tradition of Coleridge & Emerson)
6. Synthesis of modes (such as Romanticism/Neoclassicism: Gatsby & Nick)
7. Organic art (Romantic tradition)
8. Transcendence of society (tradition of Bohemianism)
9. Self-creation (tradition of Emerson & Existentialism)
10. Individuation (American tradition since Jonathan Edwards & Hawthorne)
11. Unique individuated style (Stein, Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter were the most influential)
12. Innovative forms & techniques (Stein, Pound, Eliot, Moore, Cummings, O'Neill, Faulkner)
13. Non-linear structures (Faulkner excels all other fiction writers in original structures)
14. Circular, balanced & mandala structures (*The Professor's House*, *As I Lay Dying*)
15. Open-ended or unconventional closure (Pound's *Cantos*, Williams, Stevens, Moore, Gordon)
16. Multiple points of view ("Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," *The Sound and the Fury*)
17. Expressionism, esp. stream of consciousness (tradition of Stein, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner)
18. Experimentalism (tradition of Stein, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Cummings, O'Neill, Faulkner)
19. Complexity (allusive tradition of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Cather, Faulkner, Porter, O'Connor)
20. Density of meanings (tradition of Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner, Porter, O'Connor)
21. Difficulty (intellectual tradition of Pound, Eliot & Joyce)
22. Mythic method (*Ulysses*, "The Waste Land," *The Women on the Porch*, *Ship of Fools*)
23. Archetypal allegory (tradition of Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, O'Connor)
24. Holistic consciousness (tradition of Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Emerson, Whitman)
25. Ideal of perfect art in transcendental mode (exemplified by *The Old Man and the Sea*)

## MODES OF MODERNISM

Each of the Modernists exhibits *some* of the above characteristics, forming two main groups defined by their contrasting modes: (1) *intellectual expressionists* (Stein, Pound, Eliot, Hart Crane, Dos Passos) and (2) *holistic realists* (Frost, Williams, Anderson, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Porter, Gordon, O'Connor, Welty). Among the Modernists Eliot, Porter, Gordon, and O'Connor are the most capable intellectuals and also the most religious. Moore is an intellectual who bases her Expressionism on objective observation and Neoclassical aesthetics. Wilder is an intellectual grounded in holistic Realism, as best exemplified in *Our Town*, while also capable of Expressionism, as in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Cummings is a pastoral Romantic whose Modernism is expressed mainly as unconventional form, style, typography and language. Fitzgerald is primarily a lyrical stylist in the tradition of Impressionism and the novel of manners—James and Wharton—but in *Gatsby* he uses the mythic method and other Modernist devices. Stevens, Faulkner, Porter, Gordon, and O'Connor synthesize holistic Realism with Expressionism.

## INTELLECTUAL EXPRESSIONISTS

The *intellectual expressionists*, including Pound, Williams and Moore, are critics and theorists as well as poets, who freely discuss the meanings of their work (Stein called Pound a "village explainer"). The poetry of Pound, Eliot and Moore often depends upon allusions to literature, history, anthropology, philosophy, mythology, religion, economics and zoology. Their poems assume an education equal to theirs, or the reader's willingness to ponder footnotes, consult secondary sources, translate foreign languages—Pound quotes from 15 different languages in his *Cantos*. Due to their characteristic difficulty, the later Pound, Eliot and Hart Crane typically appeal to intellect more than to feelings or emotions, dissociating sensibility despite their intention to *heal* "dissociation of sensibility" by evoking ideas and feelings in a synergy of perception. Successful exceptions to this typical effect are "In a Station of the Metro" by Pound and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by Eliot. The innovative techniques of Dos Passos in his trilogy of novels *U.S.A.* (1930-36) have a comparable dissociating effect compounded by the didactic Marxism of his vision.

Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the intellectual expressionism of Postmodernists such as Pynchon and Barth is deliberately cynical, dissociated from the heart and without soul.

The first Modernist intellectuals believed their difficulty was necessary in order to render the truths of modern life. Eliot said: "It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poetry in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results." Someone demanded of Joyce, "Why have you written the book this way?" And he replied, "To keep the critics busy for three hundred years." He once told a reviewer, "The only demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works."

### HOLISTIC REALISTS

The aesthetics of the *holistic realists* are holistic in that: (1) They appeal to the whole psyche of the reader simultaneously and spontaneously, usually through a realistic narrative with logical connections, holding attention by appealing to the common human interest in a story; and (2) they evoke "the illusion of real life" in the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Realism in fiction—usually rendering common human experience to convey a vision of reality. They are concrete rather than abstract and they appeal more to feelings than to intellect, with great power especially in the cases of Frost, Cather, Hemingway, Wilder, Porter, Gordon, O'Connor, Steinbeck, and Welty. They are very readable.

Frost and Hemingway write according to the "iceberg principle" and are so subtle they look simple and readers can enjoy them without knowing what they are missing. Their best work contains just as much intellectual content as that of the intellectuals, but they submerge their allusions, their expressionism is subtle and they rely upon shared human experience with an intuitive sense of archetypal symbolism. Anderson was so intuitive he seems for the most part to have written from his unconscious. He described his creative process as a dreamlike response to characters who manifested in his mind like spirits. As a rule the subtle methods of the holistic realists are more successful in healing dissociation of sensibility than the methods of the intellectuals.

Holistic realists gain psychological depth, power and mythic resonance from primal Nature and from archetypal symbolism, the universal language of the human psyche. By keeping their writing apparently simple and direct and limiting intellectual distractions they intensified effects through the technique of the "objective correlative." Some of their meanings are subliminal, some intuited and some inferred according to the "iceberg principle," serving a psychological function in conscious life that dreams serve in unconscious life. The methods of the holistic realists make their writing stronger in immediate impact upon the common reader than writing that requires intellection, formal education, language dictionaries, and minute analysis. The reader of these holistic realists has significant experiences vicariously and discovers meanings on his own.

The intellectuals wrote for intellectuals, critics and fellow writers in the most erudite language, whereas the realists wrote for the common reader in the speech of ordinary Americans. The intellectuals cannot help but be difficult, whereas the realists can be appreciated by common readers in the tradition of Mark Twain, as indicated when Hemingway said modern American literature begins with *Huckleberry Finn*. The intellectual Modernists raised the level of literary discourse, improved the teaching of literature and taught readers how to understand the subtleties of the holistic realists as well as their own. As an inevitable consequence of their extreme Expressionism and difficulty, Stein, Pound, Eliot and Hart Crane have fewer readers today than they deserve, whereas Cather remains very popular, Hemingway and Frost became the most popular literary writers of the century in their genres, Faulkner is still a favorite among the literate, *The Great Gatsby* is a preferred novel in many classrooms, the reputations of Porter and O'Connor have risen steadily, and the versatile Caroline Gordon has yet to receive due recognition.

The realistic Modernists are more traditional in form than the intellectuals and hence they have not been fully recognized as Modernists, with the exception of Hemingway. The realists avoid what dominates the poetry of the intellectuals: abstraction, explicit allusion, and distracting innovations of form and style.

Hemingway is a purist in style, so opposite from the intellectuals that he not only avoids literary allusions, he avoids similes and other explicit tropes, which he considered “literary” and artificial. His style appears to be common speech, but is actually expressionism in a form so subtle that it seems natural. Its true art became evident when other writers, especially screenwriters, tried to imitate or adapt it without lapsing into parody. Although he had much to say about writing, Hemingway refused to reduce his work by explaining it, even claiming he was not aware it contained any symbolism.

Williams was so “objectivist” he was literal-minded: His motto “No ideas but in things” is *anti-intellectual*. Though a philosophical poet, Stevens likewise stands opposed to the intellectuals: “Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them.” He pursued reality less through objectivity than through imagination but considered himself a realistic “poet of the earth.” His early poetry is lush with exotic imagery and in “Sunday Morning” (1915) his vision is pantheistic, hedonistic and earthbound. The expressionism of Faulkner—who claimed to be a farmer and not a literary man, least of all an intellectual—is so artful, evocative, indirect and true to life his fiction seems “natural” in contrast to the didactic artifice of the intellectual Dos Passos.

The fictions of Porter, Gordon and O’Connor bridge the division between *intellectual expressionists* and *holistic realists* in having qualities of both without the limitations of either. Their fictions are very readable, vivid and powerful while also being richly allusive and symbolic.

#### UNIFIED SENSIBILITY

The *intellectual expressionists* were cosmopolitans living for the most part in big cities and oriented toward Society. Pound declared that “All great art is born of the metropolis.” Eliot chose London. Dos Passos made New York City the protagonist of *Manhattan Transfer*. They became expatriates—except for Moore and Hart Crane—cutting themselves off from their roots, dissociating their sensibilities to be cosmopolitan. In contrast, the *holistic realists* for the most part lived in and/or wrote about the country, were oriented toward Nature and remained nativist Americans: Frost, Cather, Anderson, Faulkner, Gordon, Welty, Steinbeck, O’Connor—pastoral agrarians. Hemingway wrote about Americans coping with both Nature and Society abroad. The urbane Williams, Fitzgerald and Wilder are exceptions. Stevens lived in Hartford but preferred Nature in the tropics and Dos Passos became an agrarian in the end.

The “dissociation of sensibility” diagnosed by Eliot, caused by the progress of scientific rationalism since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was a problem for the *intellectuals*, not for the *holistic realists*: Eliot spent his life trying to overcome it, as did Allen Tate, Stein dissociated from sense into sensibility, Pound went insane, Hart Crane committed suicide and Dos Passos eventually rejected the Marxism that informed the vision of all his major works. Despite alcoholism in some cases and problems in relationships, except for Fitzgerald the *holistic realists* displayed in their lives and art the unified sensibility that Eliot sought. Hemingway committed suicide only at the end of his life after suffering brain damage in two plane crashes, when he could no longer write and felt like a burden harmful to his wife. Porter, Gordon, and O’Connor derived their literary visions and spiritual unity from Christianity.

#### MYTHIC METHOD

The “mythic method” as used by the intellectuals meant developing a narrative with correspondences to an existing myth in literature, such as those of Ulysses or the Fisher King. That is what Eliot meant by the term in his review of *Ulysses* and in “The Waste Land” (1922). O’Neill uses this method in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) by paralleling the Agamemnon myth as found in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy. Porter uses the method in *Ship of Fools* (1962) and Gordon used it in several novels, including *The Garden of Adonis* (1937). In contrast, there is also a nativist “mythic method” that is traditional in American literature since Bradford, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau.

In *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-164*, Bradford makes correspondences between his group of Pilgrims and the Israelites in the *Bible*. Cooper used the mythic method in *The Prairie* (1827) with a lengthy series of parallels between the adventures of Natty Bumppo and the biblical myth of Moses. In the same romance he also used the waste land symbol as a unifying “vortex” almost a century before Eliot did. Eliot’s mythic

method, spiritual aesthetics, religious faith, historical vision, and allegorical imagination place him in the tradition of Hawthorne, especially *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Likewise *Moby-Dick* (1851) exhibits so many shared features—including the mythic method, vorticism, layered allegories, dense allusiveness and multiple points of view—that it is virtually a “Modernist” masterpiece.

In *Moby-Dick* Melville identifies Ahab with over a dozen previous monster hunters in history, legend and myth. Hawthorne paralleled Hester to the legendary Anne Hutchinson, Miles Coverdale to Miles Standish, and many characters to Adam and Eve. The holistic realists during the Modernist period derived and created their myths from the history, character and places of America. Rather than borrow a myth from Europe, Faulkner articulated “the myth of the South” that he absorbed from his own environment and regional history, achieving universality in his depiction of human nature. Frost did the same for New England and Cather the same for the West. Cather invoked the myth of the Garden of the West by quoting Whitman in the title of *O Pioneers!* She personified the heroic pioneer spirit of the westward movement in Antonia and Alexandra and depicts its decadence in *A Lost Lady*.

In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) Anderson portrayed the myth of the American Dream in the first year when the majority of the population shifted from rural America to the cities. Williams made his *Paterson* a local yet universal place, using techniques borrowed from Joyce. Fitzgerald dramatized the decadence of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and also used Eliot’s version of the mythic method by alluding to a freed Roman slave in Petronius, paralleling him to Gatsby. Hemingway drew upon Christian mythology, making his fisherman a timeless Christ-evoking embodiment of the best in human nature in *The Old Man and the Sea* and rendering the Fall in his unfinished *Garden of Eden*. Stevens thought reality cannot be known and can only be imagined, hence he saw all of reality as mythic, an imaginary order like a poem—what he called a “supreme fiction”—serving the function of religion.

#### MODERNIST ACHIEVEMENTS

Hemingway went on to become the most influential prose stylist in history and the most popular literary writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Faulkner became the greatest American novelist. Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1924) contains some of his major stories and became a model of the short story collection for writers thereafter—most obviously Modernist in its structure of stories alternating with vignettes that counterpoint themes in the stories. Faulkner inspired later novelists with his techniques and by giving every one of his novels a significant original structure, in particular *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—among the greatest American works of Expressionism. Faulkner and Hemingway produced two of the greatest American short novels, *The Bear* and *The Old Man and the Sea* and their contrasting styles were the primary stylistic models for American fiction writers who followed them. Reviewers compared writers with a plain style to Hemingway and writers from the South with Faulkner, especially if they wrote long sentences.

Nevertheless, due mainly to its vivid Impressionism and popular success, *The Great Gatsby* became the most influential model for later novelists. Cather remains the finest novelist of the American West before Stegner and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) remains a landmark in literary history. Of poets and critics Eliot remains the most consequential and “The Waste Land” the most influential poem in American literary history, while Frost is the most popular poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. O’Neill, still the major American dramatist, pioneered many Expressionistic stage techniques adopted by later playwrights. The best play by Tennessee Williams, his experimental *Camino Real* (1953), is his most Modernist.

The most *intellectual* American fiction writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Cather, Porter, Gordon, O’Connor and Stegner—more so than Bellow—though none of them wrote in the mode of *intellectual expressionism*. Ironically, because Feminists have no aesthetic values, only political biases—making them essentially illiterate—they have failed to notice that most of the best American fiction writers in the 20th century are women: Wharton, Cather, Porter, Gordon, O’Connor, Welty, and Marilynne Robinson. Porter, Gordon and O’Connor consistently wrote realistic allegories of symbols. They are masters of the most difficult form of fiction to write and are also popular, though Gordon has been grossly underrated because of Feminist intolerance. All nine of Gordon’s diverse novels are significant. Measured by the number of masterpieces they wrote, Porter and O’Connor are two of the five greatest American short story writers and also wrote

five of the greatest American short novels: *Old Mortality*; *Noon Wine*; *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; *Wise Blood*; and *The Violent Bear It Away*. Additionally, Porter's *Ship of Fools* (1962) is the last masterpiece of the Modernist period.

Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was immediately recognized as and remains the most monumental model of experimental writing in world literature, a megawork that set the highest imaginable standards of literary achievement—of erudition, language, stylistic virtuosity, complexity and vision. Ambitious novelists ever since have felt challenged to try to match it somehow: Dos Passos, then after the 1960s Pynchon, Barth, Gaddis, McElroy, Wallace. All are far from measuring up to Joyce. In fact, none of the Postmodernist fiction writers are as good as any of the great Modernists.

## NEW CRITICISM

Among the most significant legacies of Modernism was the “New Criticism” initiated by Pound, institutionalized by Eliot, and adopted by other writers—mostly prominently John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters. New Criticism was compelled by the complexity of Modernist writing: objective analysis of literature in the context of literary history. Textbooks became New Critical. Most influential were *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1959) edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren; and *The House of Fiction* (1950) by Gordon assisted by Tate and *How to Read a Novel* (1957) by Gordon. The New Critics created new intellectual and employment opportunities for literature professors, established the academic discipline of American literature, promoted the best writers regardless of gender or race or sexuality, and discovered overlooked works such as Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Because its values were aesthetic and universalist, New Criticism was egalitarian, unlike politically correct Postmodern criticism—especially Feminist—which eventually destroyed objective literary study in universities.

Eliot's international stature, objective analysis, aesthetic standards and emphasis on tradition, reinforced by the work of the many other New Critics, contributed to (1) elevating American literature internationally; (2) establishing a canon of American classics; (3) making literary history the foundation of literary studies in American higher education; (4) increasing the teaching of canonical American literature in universities; and (5) approval, at last, of American literature as a “legitimate field of scholarly inquiry” by the Modern Language Association in 1966--after years of snubbing Americans.

From the 1940s through the 1960s New Criticism practiced by hundreds of objective scholars produced most of the existing and still useful scholarship, interpretation and criticism of American literature. That was the very brief Golden Age of literary study in America. Beginning in 1968, the MLA and English departments were politicized by an influx of radicals—mainly Feminists and Marxists—who did not believe in objectivity or literature. After that, overall “literary” criticism became political, theoretical, subjective, reductive, doctrinaire, sociological as opposed to aesthetic, distanced from literary works and often hostile to them—misleading and alienating the common reader.

Michael Hollister (2015)

## DEFINITIONS OF MODERNISM

“The term *Modernism* is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the present century, but especially after World War I (1914-1918). The specific features signified by ‘Modernism’ vary with the user, but many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general. Important intellectual precursors of Modernism, in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self—thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and James G. Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) stressed the correspondence between central Christian tenets and pagan, often barbaric myths and rituals.



Some literary historians locate the beginning of the Modernist revolt as far back as the 1890s, but most agree that 'high Modernism,' marked by an unexampled range and rapidity of change, came after the first World War. The year 1922 alone was signalized by the simultaneous appearance of such monuments of Modernist innovation as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, as well as many other experimental works of literature. The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the continuity of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world. T. S. Eliot wrote in a review of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923 that the inherited mode of ordering a literary work, which assumed a relatively coherent and stable social order, could not accord with 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.'

Like Joyce and Ezra Pound in his *Cantos*, Eliot experimented with new forms and a new style that would render contemporary disorder, often contrasting it to a lost order and integration that had been based on the religion and myths of the cultural past. In *The Waste Land* (1922), for example, Eliot replaced the standard flow of poetic language by fragmented utterances, and substituted for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a deliberate dislocation of parts, in which very diverse components are related by connections that are left to the reader to discover, or invent. Major works of Modernist fiction, following Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and his even more radical *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language by the use of stream of consciousness and other innovative modes of narration.

Gertrude Stein--often linked with Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Woolf as a trail-blazing Modernist--experimented with writing that achieved its effects by violating the norms of standard English syntax and sentence structure. These new forms of construction in verse, prose, and narrative were emulated and carried further by many poets and novelists; they have obvious parallels in the violation of representational conventions in *Expressionism* and *surrealism*, in the Modernist paintings and sculpture of Cubism, Futurism, and Abstract Expressionism, and in the violations of standard conventions of melody, harmony, and rhythm by the Modernist musical composers Stravinsky and Schoenberg, and their radical followers.

A prominent feature of Modernism is the phenomenon called the *avant-garde* (a military metaphor: 'advance-guard'); that is, a small, self-conscious group of artists and authors who deliberately undertake, in Ezra Pound's phrase, to 'make it new.' By violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of social discourse, they set out to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matters. Frequently avant-garde artists represent themselves as 'alienated' from the established order, against which they assert their own autonomy; a prominent aim is to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture."

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon, eds.  
*A Handbook to Literature*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1936-92) 298-99

"In a broad sense *modern* is applied to writing marked by a strong and conscious break with tradition. It employs a distinctive kind of imagination, which insists on having its general frame of reference within itself. It thus practices the solipsism of which Allen Tate accused the modern mind: it believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it. *Modern* implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious.

The psychologies of Freud and Jung have been seminal in the *modern* movement in literature. In many respects it is a reaction against *Realism* and *Naturalism* and the scientific postulates on which they rest. Although by no means can all *modern* writers be termed philosophical Existentialists, *Existentialism* has created a schema within which much of the *modern* temper can see a reflection of its attitudes and assumptions. The *modern* revels in a dense and often unordered actuality as opposed to the practical and

systematic, and in exploring that actuality as it exists in the mind of the writer it has been richly experimental. What has been distinctively worthwhile in the literature of this century has come, in considerable part, from this *modern* temper.

Between 1914 and 1965, Modernism gained a powerful ascendancy, and, disparate as many of the writers and movements of the period were, they seem, in hindsight, to have shared most of the fundamental assumptions embraced in the term *modern*.”

Richard Ellmann & Charles Feidelson, Jr., eds.  
*The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*  
(Oxford 1965) v-ix

“If we can postulate a modern tradition, we must add that it is a paradoxically untraditional tradition. Modernism strongly implies some sort of historical discontinuity, either a liberation from inherited patterns or, at another extreme, deprivation and disinheritance.... Interwoven with the access of knowledge, the experimental verve, and the personal urgency of the modern masters is...a sense of loss, alienation, and despair.... The paradoxical task of the modern imagination, whether liberated or alienated, has been to stand both inside and outside itself, to articulate its own formlessness, to encompass its own extravagant possibilities.... Modern writers, working often without established models and bent on originality, have at the same time been classicists, custodians of language, communicators, traditionalists in their fashion....

As a social and moral document, as well as a contained art form, the novel, from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* through Joyce's *Ulysses*, has responded more quickly and fully to new ideas than any other literary genre.... The twentieth-century novelist...is concerned chiefly with intensifying aspects of reality; and because he has rejected so many traditional values, he has to recreate for himself what his predecessors could take for granted. When society is reduced to chaos, new systems must be developed... This explains in part the originality and individual style of the modern novelist.... Destroy the solidity of the community, and the problem of communication arises. The public and the serious writer are cut off from each other, for the latter's symbols now become obscure and personal. Or else, the novelist must forfeit certain of his more complex symbols and nuances of meaning so that the reader can understand him.... The novelist's concern has shifted to technique, to a stress on how to say things rather than only on what to say, and this radical emphasis on technique is something new in the genre in English....

After Freud, the soul...was seen as having a multiplicity of aspects, which the novelist uses to demonstrate the controlled disorder of the human mind.... The novelist in attempting to approximate the discontinuity of the mind uses discontinuity in the novel--for instance, a series of free associations of ideas which follow in random, not logical, order.... We can find several psychologically-oriented devices which serve the novelist's purpose: frequent accidental interruptions of conversations or situations; lack of concern with completing a given action or following it through to its logical end; recurrence of themes, a whole rhythm of repetition, of doubling of motifs, characters, even words and syllables; a kind of poetic lyricism that results from a careful use of words for musical effect as well as for meaning, an Impressionism in which repetitive sensations create an atmosphere from which the author, nevertheless, remains impersonal and removed...

Time is heterogeneous, always in motion, fluid, ever-shifting, and things in it are indistinguishable. Space, conversely, is homogeneous, still, measurable. Time, furthermore, cannot be characterized by separate moments... In [Henri] Bergson's 'duration of time,' one is in that stream of non-thinking impulse which constitutes life. One is 'inside the object' by means of intuition, an irrational process, rather than surveying the object from the outside, from a window, which is an intellectual and rational process.... This anti-mechanical mode of thinking places all time--all the past, as well as the present moment--in what one critic has called 'one concentrated *now*.' Bergson's theory of time was appealing for several reasons. Based like modern physics on the relativity of historical and philosophical truths, the time theory, in literary terms, signifies the relative nature of human experience. Most modern novelists, but especially Proust, Conrad, Woolf, Joyce, and Faulkner, deny absolutes in human relationships, and the structural format of their work, in its emphasis on fluctuating time, mirrors this belief in the non-absolute quality of experience and history.... The modern novelist strove to recreate a world that he himself had smashed.

Several of the scientific discoveries of the last century have worked together to remake man's vision of himself, to turn heroes into fallible men. From Darwin's evolutionary theories through Freud to Max Planck and Einstein, the nature of the universe has undergone a number of different interpretations. Darwin upset man's egocentricity and made the individual merely a speck in the historical sweep of biological changes. No longer could man be considered a transitional figure in an evolutionary process. Further, the new physics, as demonstrated in part by Planck's quantum theory (1900), merely fortified man's new role by shattering cause and effect (the basis of any rational view of the universe) and by emphasizing discontinuity and the seemingly irrational.... Quantum theory suggested a breakup of continuity--the bits or portions, or *quanta*, became in literature the bits of characters, scenes, and life itself. Reality, as science gauged it, was broken into pieces, and all the arts somehow reflected this change in perspective.... Einstein spoke of light particles.

These physical theories, both coming at the turn of the century...helped further demolish man's complacency by destroying his belief in causality and determinism; the fundamental idea that Nature exhibits an inexorable sequence of cause and effect was soon abandoned. The very base of French Naturalism no longer existed...leaving the way open for literary theories [Modernism] that encompassed the metaphysical, the irrational, and the unknown.... The former reliance on fixed points of reference which had once utilized man's perceptions was no longer valid when Einstein developed his theory of relativity. All things hitherto seen as fixed and stable were now observed in relation to other things. The important word is *relation(ship)*, in physics as well as in literature... With *relationships*, both the modern novelist and scientist stopped looking for absolutes [not true of Christians such as Hemingway, Faulkner, Wilder, Porter, and O'Connor], and with this change in point of view, the novelist stood of course on different ground from his predecessors. No longer is a romantic hero possible in which he manipulated a stable world that responded to his forceful will.

Jung's...theory posited the collective unconscious of the race...which is the inheritance of every one...the origin of neurosis and myth... Myths...allow points of historical reference and comparison for the novelist. The use of myth provides related ideas of situation and character and gives the novelist a ready-made framework through which he can comment.... Novelists...sickened by the world industrialism had nurtured, turned to creating protagonists who contain the mythical virtues of integrity, unity, and belief in personal values. The new discoveries in myth, science, and psychology turned the modern character in upon himself, for he somehow realizes that survival must come from within.... As much as Impressionism and Naturalism had stressed the environment, Symbolism and Expressionism emphasized the individual. Yet withal the stress on the individual...the modern novelist felt a distinct need to remove himself from direct relationship with his readers. Accordingly, he tried to gain distance by creating a spokesman or a narrator who gave the author an unseen omniscience.

Joyce, following Flaubert, wrote that the 'artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails'.... The modern novelist, in his attempts to achieve impersonality and objectivity of point of view, conceives of a little world in itself."

Frederick R. Karl & Marvin Magalaner  
*A Reader's Guide to Great Twentieth Century English Novels*  
(Farrar, Straus/Nooneday 1959) 3-41

"Modernism might be said to have begun with the assumption that science had proved false the idea of the self as transcendent. [Not so, Modernists affirmed transcendence.] If the soul could not be found in the laboratory, one would have to look beyond the individual self to find real values—to the impersonal "Cause," the redeeming Institution, or the super-personal Way. Eliot and Pound, along with many in their generation, sought for something to fill the gap left by the evaporation of the idea of "the transcendent self." [Not so, most Modernists were Christians, Eliot prominent among them.]

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 689

“The conventional model of Modernism is that of a quantum jump in aesthetic perception—a discreet moment in which the existing decaying culture is definitively thrown off with an explosion of innovation: witness Virginia Woolf’s most quoted remark, “On or about December, 1910, human nature changed.” Against the languorous entropy of the Victorian Mind, the Modern Canon stands in sharp summary relief, that ultimate fantasy metaphor of the revolutionary, the spontaneous mutation of historical necessity. According to its central mythology, Modernism was *not* an evolutionary development, but a free radical departure, the evangelical myth of rebirth by fiat. Therein lies its continuous source of appeal to a culture impatient with its own sense of cyclical retrogression and *déjà vu*.”

Charles Newman  
*The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*  
(Northwestern 1985) 17

“This study is not a Postmodern critique of Modernism...those geniuses whose impossibly great achievements oppress us all... The Modernists have become ‘adopted’ as the self-assured, oppressive fathers of the Postmodernists, just as the Victorians were for the Modernists themselves.... In a sense, the history of Modernism is still dark and hidden, even now as we abjure it. Modernism presented itself as the end, the conclusion—even the fulfillment—of history and therefore as the end of historical writing. It would be difficult to find any Modernist flatly expressing such a claim, but the claim is implicit in the...principle of the autonomy of the work of art, which has been deployed within literary scholarship to liberate the work of art from the tyranny of authorial intention and hence from the cult of personality. The principle of aesthetic autonomy is even more firmly attached to the central tenet of philosophical Modernism, namely, the context-independence of knowledge.... To be ‘modern’ in the Modernist sense is to have transcended history.”

Leon Surette  
*The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult*  
(McGill-Queen’s U 1993) 3-4

#### MODERNIST POETRY

“All poetry is experimental poetry.”

Wallace Stevens

“A particular convention or attitude in art has a strict analogy to the phenomena of organic life. It grows old and decays. It has a definite period of life and must die. All the possible tunes get played on it and then it is exhausted; moreover its best period is its youngest.... What has found expression in painting as Impressionism will soon find expression in poetry as free verse.”

T. E. Hulme

“Imagism was something that was important for poets learning their craft early in this century. But after learning his craft, the poet will find his true direction.... One writes the kind of poetry one likes. Other people put labels on it.”

Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)

“To me, at that time, a poem was an image, the picture was the important thing.... A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. [Neoclassical metaphor] When I say there’s nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.... As in all machines its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem that movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.... There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native.... No ideas but in things.”

William Carlos Williams

“The starting point of modern poetry is the group denominated “imagist” in London in about 1910.... [The movement] is chiefly important because of the stimulus it gave to later developments.”

T. S. Eliot

“If a certain thing was said once for all in Atlantis or Arcadia, in 450 before Christ or in 1290 after, it is not for us moderns to go saying it over, or to go obscuring the memory of the dead by saying the same thing with less skill and less conviction. My pawing over the ancients and semi-ancients has been one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do, and plenty does remain, for if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations. Each age has its own abounding gifts yet only some ages transmute them into matter of duration. No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention and cliché, and not from life.... An ‘image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.... Make it new!”

Ezra Pound (1911)

“To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.”

Amy Lowell  
Preface to *Some Imagist Poets* (1915)

“If you demand on the one hand, / the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness and / that which is on the other hand / genuine, you are interested in poetry.”

Marianne Moore (1921)

#### POETRY IN TRANSITION

“For the sake of a few loose but usable terms, I offer the following classification of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry in English: (I) The Generation of Forerunners: Hardy, Bridges, Yeats, T. Sturge Moore, and Alice Meynell; (II) The Generation of Transition: Robinson, Frost, and Agnes Meynell; (III) The Experimental Generation: Stevens, Williams, Miss Moore, Miss Loy, Joyce (whose prose is related in important ways to the verse of his contemporaries), Adelaide Crapsey, Pound, Eliot, H. D., and Lawrence; (IV) The Reactionary Generation: Crane (a member of this group, instead of the last, solely by virtue of his dates, personal affiliations, and inability to write or understand free verse), Tate, Baker, Blackmur, Clayton Stafford, Louise Bogan, Grant Code, J. V. Cunningham, Don Stanford, Barbara Gibbs. Mr. J. C. Ransom is a kind of ambiguous and unhappy though sometimes distinguished connective between this group and the last. The direction and significance of this group are clearest in Howard Baker, in a little of Tate, and in the writing, very small in bulk at present, of Stafford, Stanford, Cunningham, and perhaps Miss Gibbs. Such a classification omits good poets here and there: De la Mare and Viola Meynell cannot quite be included; the most important omission is Elizabeth Daryush, the finest British poet since T. Sturge Moore.”

Yvor Winters  
*In Defense of Reason*  
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 104-05

#### WASTE LAND POETS

“Although for the most part they use the conventional rhythms and stanzaic forms, the Waste Land poets as a whole [T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom] employ images of defeat, and stress bones rather than stars, death rather than life. They recall the Romantic imagery of Nature, love, and passion only by way of contrast to the modern imagery of the industrial city. The hue and cry over simple diction died almost as soon as it had been raised by the Imagists. Poetic language became more complex because of the rapidly accumulating associations gathering around each newly introduced thought or object in a complex civilization.

Attempting to record now all the subtle shades of reaction to city living and at the same time to keep in mind old reactions to the more peaceful country living, the poets employed whatever language might suit

their purpose.... They contrasted passages in the rich poetic phraseology of the nineteenth century with blunt realistic or scientific statement of the twentieth century... Even after the faith in individualism ceased to be the chief subject for poetry, the individualism continued to be displayed as a kind of virtuosity in form, in novelty, distortion, or shock expressed by the manipulation of language.”

George K. Anderson & Eda Lou Walton, eds.  
*This Generation: A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present*  
(Scott, Foresman 1939) 196

#### HARRIET MONROE

“Those who recognized new cadences and themes in *The Lyric Year* [1912 anthology of 100 poets] had already been encouraged by the literary radicalism of a recently founded little magazine, edited in Chicago, which bore the plain title *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. This venture was destined to have a remarkable future. *Poetry* survives today, and it has ‘discovered’ more good poets than any other magazine published in English. The driving force of the enterprise came from Harriet Monroe, shy but determined, widely traveled, well read, and, as an entrepreneur, something of a genius....

Miss Monroe possessed the essential quality of an editor of a magazine of this kind—a willingness to be educated by her contributors.... She believed the traditional forms were played out, and she wanted poets to try freer rhythms. But it was no time at all before Ezra Pound, a young American who had expatriated himself in England, informed her that the new poetry would be far more revolutionary than she imagined.... Pound with others from abroad saved the magazine from parochialism and uplift. He brought Yeats and the ‘Imagistes’ of London into its pages. His knowledge of verse technique, of Provencal and early Italian poetry, and of the French moderns enlarged the scope of *Poetry* and tied it to the new international movement in literature.... The pages of the early numbers of *Poetry* crackle with controversy: Chicago against Boston; the traditionalists (e.g., W. S. Braithewaite, Conrad Aiken, Max Eastman) against the experimentalists. Pound takes command to battle for the rights of Imagistes. Amy Lowell, with assistance, carries the day for *vers libre*....

From 1908 to 1912 a diverse company of English and American poets gathered in London were working out together a new verse-style and an aesthetic to justify it. Representing England were Richard Aldington (who later became an American citizen) and F. S. Flint, master of ten languages and especially learned in French poetry. Among the Americans was the mercurial Ezra Pound who had fled from academic philology at home. Hilda Doolittle, daughter of an American astronomer and a graduate of Bryn Mawr, brought to the discussions of their company more than an amateur’s knowledge of Greek verse. It was this group of writers, soon to be contributors to *Poetry*, who saved Miss Monroe’s Chicago magazine from provincialism by bringing into it the current of new ideas....

#### HULME

The dynamic force at the center of this group of London poets was T. E. Hulme, a young philosopher whose *Speculations*, as they were called when finally collected in 1924, were gospel to his friends.... Hulme was an antiromantic. Romanticism he considered as the final decadent stage of the humanism which had dominated Western thought for three centuries and had produced the vicious concepts of progress and human perfectibility. He reacted violently against the Victorian poetry which had contrived to fit the dogmas of evolution and the new faith in English imperialism into the master-idea of a gradual perfectionism stretching out to infinity. To the cosmic poetry of the nineteenth century Hulme was determined to oppose a new style. [Old actually, as this is essentially Neoclassicism.] ‘The particular verse we are going to get,’ he wrote, ‘will be cheerful, dry, and sophisticated. There must be no words which fail to contribute to the desired impression.’

#### IMAGISM

Having begun to meet as a group in March, 1909, he and his friends set themselves the task of working out, in a series of exercises, a style which would present impressions precisely. Wherever they found a poetic style or form which confirmed their purpose, as in the severe and brief Japanese *tanka* (thirty-one syllables in five lines) and *hokku* (seventeen syllables in three lines), they advertised their discoveries....

The first article in the Imagist creed asserted the dogma of the 'pure' image. None of the impressions caught in the image should be allowed to escape through weak adjectives and needless connectives. All extraneous emotion or intellectual comment should be purged. To their detractors who said that Imagism was nothing new, that all poets are imagists by the nature of their medium, Hulme's followers replied, sensibly enough, that imagism had never been fully exploited as a technique.

#### FREE VERSE

The dogma of the "pure image" proved to be only a mild heresy. What alarmed the traditionalists and provoked a critical war was the abandonment by the Imagists of the song forms used by English poets since the Middle Ages. The issue was joined: Was free verse, the new medium of the Imagists, verse at all? Was it not merely prose cut up into varying line-lengths? The Imagists demanded that poets should be freed from the requirement of subduing a unique impression to a traditional metrical pattern associated through long use with particular emotional states and attitudes. To do so was to impose an alien form on an experience which had already emerged in a form of its own. In the polemical writing of the Imagists the phrase 'organic rhythm' began to appear. Although the new poets were only vaguely aware of the fact, they were working in a critical tradition which begins with certain poetic dicta of Coleridge and numbers among its adherents Emerson and Whitman.

But even if one granted that the free-verse poem written by an Imagist had found its appropriate form, how could one be certain that it was still poetry and not prose? F. S. Flint tried to lift his associates from the horns of this dilemma. He admitted that there is no way to draw a fast line between free verse and prose since both are rhythmical. The difference is noticeable at the extremes. The cadences which flow under impassioned utterance are of one sort and may be poetry; those which follow the pattern of the syllogism and are useful in setting forth facts or arguments, by general assent are prose. Flint's argument gave the Imagists a new and precious technical term which they could use with effect—'unrhymed cadence.' Their line of defense was now that the ear of the skillful writer of free verse instructs him how to vary the length and rhythm of his lines with precision to create cadences suited to his theme and total image. They talked of 'rhythmic return' and of the inevitableness of the free-verse poem; of 'thematic invention' in the rhythms of *vers libre*, of 'concentrated stress' and the right use of 'the poetic interval—the pause.'

#### ELIOT: "*Vers Libre* does not exist"

The most sapient observations on the quarrel over free verse were made by T. S. Eliot in an article in the *New Statesman* for March 3, 1917. The defenders of the new form could not admit the justice of his view because the pitch of his argument is that free verse can be defended only in negative terms. '*Vers libre* does not exist,' he declared bluntly, 'and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *elan vital*...into oblivion.' Its limit of effectiveness is attained when it reaches the farthest point to which it can depart from known patterns and still not slip into formlessness. Its strength comes from nothing within itself but from the pattern to which, to a greater or lesser degree, it approximates. In his own early verse, Eliot proved the soundness of his remarks by using free rhythms when they suited his needs, but most often in ironic or emotional contrast to conventional metrical patterns revitalized by the new content with which he filled them....

#### AMY LOWELL & HILDA DOOLITTLE

The real contribution of the Imagists was the exploration of a special technique which could be used to achieve certain ends but should not be expected to bear the weight of profound emotion or involved thought. By the determined evangelism of Miss Lowell other causes were dragged under the standard of Imagism.... There is not much left of all this brave experimenting except a handful of anthology pieces.... With Hilda Doolittle the case is different, for she is the one poet of the Imagist faith who by her strict devotion to it brought forth good works. The second of the two poems entitled 'The Garden,' for instance, communicates perfectly in thirteen lines the oppressiveness of fructifying summer heat. The poem penetrates to essence much as Cezanne's painting of still life does. One can feel the solidity of the heat as one might expect to hear one of Cezanne's apples bump on the floor if it rolled off the table. It is not unfair to say that the chief service of the Imagists was to develop a technique which could be put to excellent use by the poets who followed them."

### EXPERIMENTAL FORMS

“The scope of experiment in modern American poetry can perhaps best be understood if we examine five ‘experimental forms of order.’ The first of these is ‘pure imagery,’ with little or no attempt to ‘intrude’ a meaning upon an isolated imagistic statement (H. D., Hulme, some few of Pound’s verses). Beyond that form of simplicity or purity, there is the poetry which ‘adds on to’ or imposes upon the image an indication of attitude or an external ‘use’ of the imagery: William Carlos Williams’ occasional adjectives (“These things are important”; “These things astonish me”; “So much depends...”; or H. D.’s ‘spare us from loveliness.’ More complicated and elaborate, and an advance in structure as well, is the ‘image cluster’ (what Randall Jarrell has called the ‘mosaic’): an accumulation of images, with spatial and temporal orders of varying complexity. Eliot’s ‘Preludes’ are perhaps the best illustration of this form, as indeed they are the finest examples of what the Imagist disciplines were able to do for modern poetry.

The question of clusters or mosaics of image raises the poem considerably above the level of the first two groups. Pound spoke of the superimposition of images, one upon another. Another way of putting it, perhaps, is the suggestion of accretions. As in Eliot’s ‘Preludes,’ the images do more than accumulate or cluster; they move qualitatively and suggestively, in implicit order.... The fourth form of order is symbolic in an elementary sense. Such a poem as Miss Lowell’s ‘Patterns’ is complex only because its images are given as symbols and provide its narrative unity. They are *explicitly* symbols or symbolic ‘tags,’ and they are symbolic precisely and only because the poem’s development depends on them rather than on a more ‘rational’ order.

The final class may be called ‘forms of symbolic order.’ The most important modern poetry belongs to this class. The simplest variation of it is the poem in which the substance is the symbolism contained within it; the order is implicit within the location, the action, and the modulation of the symbols. Such poems as Marianne Moore’s ‘The Grave,’ Williams’ ‘The Yachts,’ Wallace Stevens’ ‘Sea Surface Full of Clouds,’ are examples... Most complex are the poems of symbolic structure or symbolic progression; the great demonstrations are ‘The Waste Land’ and the *Cantos*. Another example is Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, in which the continuity of the poem as a whole comes from symbols that reveal a mythology personally invented and fashioned. The development in each of the poems depends upon a repetition of symbolic motifs, with qualitative changes in dramatic, lyrical and thematic value....

Fundamentally the lesson of modern poetry was one of restoring the communicative varieties and precisions in the language.... The new poetry and the New Criticism were revisionist, forms of a ‘secular conversion’ which has affected all aspects of twentieth-century thought.”

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 203-04

“In his more complex verse [Stephen] Crane is more ambitious than the Imagist aesthetic allows. In so far as his verse resembles the work of that movement, it is in his Impressionistic pieces; Imagism, after all, attempted merely to expand by association the significance of the impression. While Crane appealed to Pound, Sandburg, Edith Wyatt, and others as a forebear of the then contemporary movement, he had long since gone beyond the limitations of the Imagist aesthetic. This was a journey almost all the Imagists themselves were to make—Eliot moving toward soliloquy and drama, Stevens toward the most Symbolist symbolism in English verse, Fletcher reverting to the lush romanticism of Lanier, Marianne Moore developing a unique combination of moral sensibility and parable derived from Whitman and La Fontaine, Sandburg losing completely the economical control Imagism had imposed on his language as he literally appropriates the idiom of everyday speech for poetry.

Of the original Imagists, H. D., William Carlos Williams, and Pound remained most influenced by their own programme of the Little Renaissance. H. D. continues with admirable integrity to chisel verbal



cameos, and fails to deal successfully with themes rather than with impressions. Pound and Williams have more omnivorous ambitions, the one Ovidian, the other Whitmanesque, but in the organization of both *The Cantos* and *Paterson* we see the limiting effectiveness of Imagist images connected chiefly by mood. Of the two attempted epics, *Paterson* is the more cohesive, but its flaw is another Imagist limitation: the philosophical naivete of ‘no ideas but in things’.”

Daniel G. Hoffman  
“Stephen Crane and Poetic Tradition”  
*The Poetry of Stephen Crane*  
(Columbia U 1957) 252-64

## ELIOT IN HISTORY

“Modernism in American poetry could be said to have begun in 1911, when Eliot wrote ‘Portrait of a Lady.’ A more public kind of calculation—since that poem was not published until several years later—might set the date at 1914, the year of the first Imagist anthology. The latest date one could choose would be 1917, when Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations* appeared. Poets and critics who had missed the significance of the Imagist anthologies did not miss the significance of this. Modernism quickly became the dominant school in American poetry, and remained so for almost thirty years.

It was so genuinely the cutting edge of literary advance, the new poetry for a new age consciously in revolt against the past...that careers were made and ruined by the decisions of poets to join or oppose the new movement. The reputations of poets like Robinson and Frost, with already established styles, were seriously damaged.... *Prufrock* made Frost’s kind of writing seem as out-dated as the late Victorians.... For Modernism seemed to most of our best minds, both critical and creative, the only honest and sensitive way a poet could write—and feel—in the new age. It seemed, and I suspect in a sense it was, the only way of writing that represented a fully *conscious* response to the radically altered social and cultural conditions of the early years of this century. A school of criticism—the ‘New’ Criticism—arose to explain and defend the new poetry, and to provide it a rationale which would guarantee its being seen not as one way of writing but *the* way of writing, the way in which all good poets in all ages had always written. Poets like Hart Crane who began late in the second decade of this century did not suppose there was any other way a modern poet *could* write.

## “MODERNISM IS NOW DEAD”

But Modernism is now dead, and has been for some time. Almost exactly thirty years after writing ‘Portrait of a Lady,’ which contained every quality essential to Modernism, Eliot announced its demise in the passage on style in ‘East Coker’ in 1940. Most younger poets who began to write in the 1940’s significantly modified the still dominant Modernist tradition in one way or another—Robert Lowell by returning to strict syllabic-accentual meters, for example—but only a few were really in rebellion. They were still making personal adjustments in an accepted style. With poets beginning their work in the 1950’s, rebellion was the norm. Most of our younger poets in the 1960’s no longer feel any need to rebel. With some curious exceptions whom they sometimes venerate—Pound and Williams chiefly, for very different reasons—they write almost as though the revolution of Modernism had never occurred. Their affinities are with poets long out of fashion, with Whitman for instance. Though they find much to admire in Stevens, they cannot write in his manner. Poets who continue to think of the great Modernist poets as ‘the enemy’ are generally over fifty.

So far as the public could know, with Eliot’s earliest work still unpublished, the Imagist movement initiated Modernism. As a poetic ‘school,’ Imagism was at once, paradoxically, short-lived, and in its emphasis on concreteness, the most lasting feature of Modernist poetry. Insignificant in the number of memorable poems it produced that really exemplify its principles, it yet had an enormous influence which in some respects is still discernible today.... In the more than twenty years since the end of the Second World War, a new poetry expressing a new sensibility has come into being. At least for those of us in middle age, who still felt young in 1945, this is *our* poetry, the poetry for which we need make no allowances. This is ‘Modern’ poetry, not ‘Modernist.’ The period has been extraordinarily rich in poets of distinctive talent and authentic personal voice....

## LOWELL & WILBUR & ROETHKE

Robert Lowell's change, between his poetry before and his poetry in and after *Life Studies*, in 1959, will illustrate what I mean by the change from 'Modernism' to the 'Modern.' Lowell's early Catholic poetry amounted to a brilliantly original and immensely talented variation on the styles and attitudes established by the classic Modernist poets. Today one admires its virtuosity but makes allowances for it; it is not Lowell's own way of feeling any more, or ours. We are aware of the pyrotechnics of the style and we respect its intention, but it does not speak to our condition in the way 'Skunk Hour'...does.... [Richard] Wilbur seems the most traditional, if we let the norms established by the great Modernist poets of the first half of this century determine the content of 'traditional'; [Karl] Shapiro the most rebellious. But if we grant the continuing presence of the great poets who wrote before the Imagist revolt, a different grouping emerges. Roethke becomes, in this way of thinking, the most 'traditional' in his achievement, Shapiro 'traditional' too in a curious way, in intention at least. Roethke, though he honored several of his contemporaries, particularly Yeats, felt that his closest affinities were with earlier poets; and Shapiro in his latest work is furiously in revolt against all aspects of Modernism....

## SHAPIRO

Shapiro has felt the need to try to obliterate those who shaped his own early poetry. It may well be that the slowness of the pace at which Shapiro has moved toward discovering his own identity as poet has something to do with the muddled quality of the thinking in *Beyond Criticism* in 1953 and the frenetic quality of the attacks on the Modernists, especially Eliot, in *In Defense of Ignorance* in 1960.... Whitman and Hart Crane, Blake and Jesus are openly his heroes now... The preference for 'truth' over the tinkling of rhyme goes back at least as far as Emerson, if not to Edward Taylor. That Shapiro seems not to know this does not tell against his future career as a poet—though we may hope that he keeps his word and makes *In Defense of Ignorance* his last critical effort. A prose so confused, inchoate, and irresponsible as Shapiro's does nothing to help the causes he would like to promote.... A poet more unlike Karl Shapiro than Richard Wilbur would be hard to imagine.... Toward Modernism [Wilbur] continues to maintain the attitude of the 'grateful inheritor,' discriminatingly appreciative, like Roethke, of the achievements of the great Modernist poets, critical only of those Modernist theories and practices that seem to him 'reductive' in limiting the resources of the poet. He insists on playing 'the whole instrument.'

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 331-33, 585, 595-96

## ROMANTIC TRADITION

Modern poets are not necessarily proud of their descent from Romanticism. Yeats called himself one of the last Romantics, but repudiated the last half of the nineteenth century; Eliot, more sternly, repudiated both halves. Yet one relation has held doggedly on: Romantic poets offered subsequent writers an all-important idea, the primacy of the imagination, its power to invest the external world with a new light—or even, as many would contend, to transform it altogether, to invent what W. H. Auden calls 'alternative worlds'....

At the risk of oversimplifying, it may be proposed that the general framework within which modern poets have written is one in which the reality of the objective world is fundamentally called into question. Many modern poems exhibit what Paul Valéry calls a 'drama of mental images,' a drama which is made out of the different and conflicting gradations of reality or unreality which mental images seem to possess. A modern poet need not confine himself to a single stance. At times he may veer towards a Platonic world of essences, beside which material things offer only ghostly semblances; at other times he may recognize the stubborn powers which lurk in what Richard Wilbur calls 'things of this world,' and their ability to overcome attempts to reshape them by imaginative will. Or, as in Wallace Stevens' 'The Comedian as the Letter C,' man may conceive of himself as 'the intelligence of his soil'... The verging of what is visualized upon what is seen, of fiction upon fact, the search for more adequate fictions...may be said to culminate in Wallace Stevens' pursuit of a 'supreme fiction'...

In Eliot the theme is turned so that the imagination invokes not a congenial world of symbolic mastery, but one in which the world has been fragmented. Yet Eliot belongs to the same school, image-breaking being next to image-making. His work can be read as an effort, after having arrayed broken images, to reconstruct the symbols needed for survival, symbols which for him are not only imaginative but spiritual, implying the interdependence of art and religion.

## AMERICAN POETIC TRADITION

There were modern poets before there was modern poetry. Walt Whitman stands monolithically at the threshold, as poets like William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane have eagerly attested, and as Ezra Pound more grudgingly conceded. Whitman expressed a new way of looking at the world: In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he orchestrates the universe by finding and acknowledging the relationships among the most disparate things... Whitman became the first major poet to write in free verse, a crucial innovation which Pound was to institutionalize fifty years later as a prime tenet of 'Modernism'...

## SYMBOLISM

The term that is most frequently used to describe post-Romantic verse is 'symbolism.' This movement was related to idealist conceptions which find truth to inhere in consciousness rather than in the outside world. Against materialism or Naturalism—movements adversary to it—practitioners of symbolism in varying ways and degrees proclaimed the supremacy of idea over fact. They rejected the conception of objects uninfluenced by perceiving subjects, and found in seemingly disconnected things secret and unexpected links. Their poetry is an attempt to render organic what appears fragmentary....

The symbolist movement is often said to have begun with Charles Baudelaire, who in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), published two years after Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, describes Nature as a temple filled with symbols which all secretly echo each other in a complexity of correspondence, the seen echoing the unseen and being echoed back.... The term symbolism became popular in France about 1886, and after about ten years crossed the English Channel. Arthur Symons had begun writing about the new French poets as 'The Decadent Movement in Literature,' but eventually called his book, instead, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*....dedicated to Yeats. It was the book which introduced to T. S. Eliot the French symbolist poets who provided the models for his early verse. For these reasons the year 1899 is probably the aptest from which to date the beginning of modern poetry....

## POUND

Yeats found unexpected company in an American, Ezra Pound. Pound arrived in London in 1908, at the age of twenty-three, convinced that Yeats was the best poet then writing in English and determined to learn from him. He did so, but Yeats also discovered how much this young man could tell him of new ideas and techniques. Pound's openness to Modernism—his exhortation to 'make it new'—and his generosity and gregariousness made his apartment in Kensington the headquarters of innovative verse for both England and America. He was set on this new course by the novelist Ford Madox Ford and the philosopher T. E. Hulme, both of whom encouraged him to renounce his earlier Browningsque rhetoric in favor of a more epigrammatic and ironic mode, which became Imagism.

Hulme believed that the Romantic view of the individual as a bottomless well of possibilities, which were to be released by the destruction and reconstruction of society, was wrong, and that a new Classicism, taking exactly the opposite view, must check it. In 1912 Pound, with H. D. and others, founded the Imagist movement, demanding 'direct treatment of the thing.' Whether the thing was inside or outside the mind. They warned against slackness and sentimentality and counseled that form, whether free verse or not, should not be determined by the metronome.

These were useful rules, but rather bare, and Pound soon shifted from Imagism to Vorticism. In his manifesto for the latter he emphasized not the do's and don'ts of style but the dynamism of content. The vortex, which Pound conceived of as the central image, must energize and double the force of the life it encompassed. Vorticism lasted only for a short time, and after it Pound left off founding movements, but he

began to demonstrate in his verse what innovations were possible. He remarked that Henry James had done things in the novel which had not yet been attempted in verse, and in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* [1920]...he undertook to try them...

#### POUND & ELIOT

For Eliot the disjunctiveness of the world was intolerable, and he was determined to mend it (as his eventual conversion to Anglican Christianity helped him to do), but Pound preferred to accept and exploit this disjunctiveness... Pound preferred his own 'Ideogramic method,' as he called it, by which he meant the heaping up of the components of thought so that they would eventually converge almost without artistic intention. (The effect of this theory on later poets like Olson and Berryman is clear.) His image was one of iron filings which, drawn towards a piece of glass by a magnet, assume the pattern of a rose.... *The Cantos* collate slices of time and space, fable and fact, examples from aboriginal tribes and effete cultures. There is no purification or evident exclusion; the poet achieves his effect by collocating diffuse materials. Eliot consolidated his innovations, while Pound restlessly extended his.

#### "THE WASTE LAND"

'The Waste Land' was published in 1922, and the first collection of the *Cantos* in volume form appeared in 1925. In recent years Pound has probably exerted the greater influence on younger poets, but during the Twenties it was Eliot who had the cry. Yet the reaction to Eliot's poems was violently mixed. His friend Conrad Aiken was quick to praise 'The Waste Land,' but most poets, while admiring its technical inventiveness and finish, found it hard to like. Yeats felt it was dour and despairing. Robert Graves clung to traditional forms, disparaging their disintegration by Eliot. John Crowe Ransom wrote an adverse review of the poem to which his sometime pupil Allen Tate published a refutation. Hart Crane was moved by 'The Waste Land' but thought that Eliot's despair was exaggerated and that his own mission, with the help of Walt Whitman, must be to effect a redemption of Eliot's fallen world.

#### WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams found it necessary to campaign against the poem; its sinister merit was so powerful that it might well block the movement towards an indigenous American verse. For him it was 'the great catastrophe' which by its genius (a quality he admitted) interrupted the 'rediscovery of a primal impulse, the elementary principle of all art, in the local [as opposed to cosmopolitan] conditions.' Williams considered that Eliot had imposed a shape upon material which should have been allowed to take its own shape. His own conception of poetry he expressed by the poem beginning, 'So much depends upon / a red wheelbarrow,' as if objects in the world should be allowed to retain their nature without being conceptualized into abstract schemes.

When during the Thirties Louis Zukofsky devised the term 'Objectivism' to enforce the primacy of the natural object in works of the imagination, Williams heartily endorsed it as a formulation of his own practice. 'No ideas but in things,' was the credo Williams espoused in his epic, *Paterson*, which is like Pound's *Cantos* in extending the principles of Imagism, and also rebukes those symbolists who invest 'things' with foreign significance. Williams agreed with the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud...in opposing 'literature' as a phenomenon created by the 'establishment'; he regarded language as the vital instrument which must be sharpened by keeping it local rather than cosmopolitan. His own poems, unlike Pound's or Eliot's, are all but devoid of 'literary' English, and their unmistakable distinctiveness comes, as he insisted, from contact with native materials. He founded a magazine with *Contact* as its defiant title.

#### STEVENS

Stevens led a different revolt against the religious presuppositions of 'The Waste Land.' In *Harmonium* (1923) and later books, he presented the death of the old gods as a liberation of the imagination. In contradistinction to Eliot's return to Christianity, Stevens asked for a new religion which should be closer to physical life and willing to encompass death, as well as life, in its conception of being. Its paradise must be within the world. The poet's task is to replace the satisfactions of belief once provided by religion with those of verse [Stevens converted to Christianity before he died]: 'What makes the poet the potent figure

that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.' The creation of these fictions, which he changed even as he affirmed, occupied Stevens steadily....

#### FROST

In America, during the first two decades of the new century, poets explored their environment with little regard for the symbolist patterns being woven by their compatriots Pound, Eliot, and H. D. in England. Edwin Arlington Robinson exposed the life of his Tilbury Town, and Edgar Lee Masters of his Spoon River, so as to impart public lessons from private scandals. Robert Frost returned from England in 1915, bought a farm in New Hampshire, and consolidated his reputation as America's greatest pastoral poet. For many he was its greatest poet of the twentieth century. Frost brought a toughness to pastoralism; on the one hand he tapped the seasoned country wisdom of New England, on the other he converted his self-disgust and loneliness into verses of Horatian dignity phrased in the accents of New Hampshire and Vermont.

#### SANDBURG & LINDSAY

The more brazen Carl Sandburg wrote of the brawling city of Chicago and its workers; Vachel Lindsay adapted the rhythms and imagery of revivalist hymns, political speeches, and Negro spirituals to his use, making of them exciting chants for public performance. Sandburg's and Lindsay's ebullient rhetorics constituted the most 'modern' literature to gain much public acceptance in the United States. Many poets who wished a more radical break with tradition left the country to find it, while the early poems of others, such as William Carlos Williams, were printed either privately or abroad. In 1923 the Pulitzer Prize for poetry went not to 'The Waste Land' but to three books by Edna St. Vincent Millay....

#### MOORE & CUMMINGS

Some poets of less prominence were to outstay some of the more obvious reputations. In New York two poets, Marianne Moore in Brooklyn and E. E. Cummings in Greenwich Village, were proceeding with subtlety in ways more decisively modern. Marianne Moore, like her friend William Carlos Williams, was a sharp observer, and upholder, of the physical world, but hers was a world which few others knew, made up of rare birds and animals, insects, baseball players and steeplejacks, steamrollers and other creatures. Pretending that her lines were prose, she employed light rhymes and odd stanzaic patterns as if to conceal the finish of her work. Poetry, she alleged, was all 'fiddle,' and yet, she confided, it had in it 'a place for the genuine.' Cummings was a more flamboyant poet: he invented an astonishing number of typographical oddities, partly to tantalize and disconcert, partly to amuse, but mostly to indicate to his devotees how the poems might be best read aloud. With all his up-to-date pyrotechnics, he kept to the ancient themes of lyric poetry.

#### BLACK POETS

The black poets of the Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, sought revitalization by content rather than form. They adopted the devices of nineteenth-century verse in expressing their new theme of black racial consciousness and culture. They rejected the 'Uncle Remus' dialect and the exoticism of Paul Laurence Dunbar and other earlier black poets in order to develop a new intransigence. Claude McKay, politically the most militant if prosodically among the more conservative of the new black writers, was first with *Harlem Shadows* (1922); then followed Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1924), a loosely knit collection of poems, stories, and sketches expressing the life of a southern black. Countee Cullen's elegiac verse was first published in *Color* (1925). The most prominent and talented member of the group was Langston Hughes, the only one whose work continued to be published after the stock market crash of 1929 dropped the bottom out of the largely white market for black writing. During the Depression, writers like Richard Wright barely subsisted by working on travel guide books for the Works Progress Administration, and only occasionally published a poem in a socialist newspaper. For some twenty-five years there was just an occasional spurt of attention, as when in 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, to show that black poetry was still alive.

## SOUTHERN AGRARIANS

The year 1922 saw many important tendencies in modern verse put into motion. It was the year of 'The Waste Land' and of Joyce's *Ulysses* (published in Paris), and of several bursts of concerted activity such as the Harlem Renaissance in New York. It was also the year when a group of teachers and students at Vanderbilt University brought out a literary magazine called *The Fugitive*, in which they published their own and others' poems and urged an alternative to the cosmopolitan Modernism centered in London. Of the Fugitives, the central figure was John Crowe Ransom, and the younger members of the group included Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon and Robert Penn Warren; later, Laura Riding, who had published poems in the magazine and received an award for her work, became a member.

The original Fugitives cultivated an astringent wit as an antidote to Southern nostalgia; politically, through the Agrarian movement, they hoped to keep for the South some of its traditional values. They came to view their provinciality, their remoteness from metropolitan culture, and their sense of rootedness in time and place as sources of strength for their writing. The magazine ceased publication in 1925; Tate had already moved to New York, Laura Riding (who had not joined in their political manifestos) soon left the United States for England, Warren (after graduate study at Berkeley, Yale and Oxford) went to Louisiana State University, and Ransom joined the faculty of Kenyon College and founded the *Kenyon Review*. As poets, teachers, and critics, these, and other poets speaking from the university such as Yvor Winters, continued to write in a style that younger poets liked for its aloofness and its complexity of motives and materials. Tate and Gordon turned their plantation home in Tennessee into a gathering place for southern writers, a traditionalist alternative to Greenwich Village.

## NEW CRITICISM LEGACY

The influence of this style began to take shape during the later Twenties and Thirties, when a number of important critical works were published whose general tendency was applauded by John Crowe Ransom in a book, *The New Criticism* (1941), whose title became a byword for the entire movement. In a *Survey of Modern Poetry* (1927), by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, Miss Riding had been perhaps the first to try the experiment of reading a poem apart from any historical or linguistic context; her intense appreciation of the semantic complexities of a Shakespeare sonnet encouraged the young William Empson to discover how far one might go in this line, and to read every poem in sight as if it had just been written anonymously. The result was his famous study, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which sought to characterize the semantic strategies of multiple meanings which distinguish imaginative writing from straightforward exposition. Another force behind the New Criticism was Empson's teacher, I. A. Richards, who urged that poems be read with active and exclusive attention to what they said and not be distorted by the reader's subjective preferences. Eliot, important for his criticism as well as for his verse, agreed that what was needed in reading poetry was 'a very highly developed sense of fact.'

These prescriptions for readers, and by extension for writers, were codified by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in their textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), which had a masterful influence on the teaching of verse at American colleges. Taken to extremes, the New Criticism implied that the essence of poetry was not to convey ideas or feelings as such but to create intricate structures of language which would manifest the density of psychophysical experience. Some of Empson's own poems are perhaps the most thoroughgoing exemplifications of this principle; few other poets went so far, but they understood his goal. During and immediately after the Second World War, most poets living in the United States came to write in a way that poets of the Twenties and critics of the Thirties had got ready for them."

Richard Ellmann & Robert O'Clair, eds.  
*The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*  
(Norton 1973) xiii, 1-11

"The great accomplishment of American poetry of the Modernist period was to equal English poetry—not by the work of a single genius like Whitman or Dickinson but rather by the productions of a long line of poets changing the face of the art. The new American poets defiantly claimed equal status with the parent literature and explored to the full the native resources of the American language. A number of black poets,

for instance, encouraged by the example of Langston Hughes, began to write in the black vernacular, taking as their rhythmic base not the English pentameter but the syncopation of jazz, the first black art form to be incorporated into American life.

Hughes's vignettes of Harlem life participated in the large democratization of poetry sponsored by his contemporaries. Dissatisfied with the historically aristocratic role of poetry in Europe, some modern American poets—Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams—began writing poetry for a mass audience, a poetry in which that audience could find reflected its own environment and concerns. 'My nonliterary listeners,' said Langston Hughes in *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), 'would be ready [at this point in the reading] to think in terms of their own problems': 'Then I read poems about women domestics, workers on the Florida roads, poor black students wanting to shatter the darkness of ignorance and prejudice, and one about the sharecroppers of Mississippi.... Many of my verses were documentary, journalistic, and topical.'

While Hughes was documenting Harlem and Mississippi, Cummings was sketching, in slang, the flappers of the jazz age, Williams was writing proletarian portraits, and Frost was describing, in terms the common reader could understand, the bleak isolation, hostility, and seclusion of rural New England. But American readers, on the whole, were not prepared for the new poets, even these most accessible ones; all of the American Modernists found themselves writing in a raw culture not yet ready for them... In the early part of the century, when the poets were exploring Europe and European avant-garde writing, America was firmly isolationist.... American taste preferred genteel Anglophilia or robust American good sense to the sort of experimentation being carried on by its new poets.

That experimentation...directed itself chiefly against the prescribed English models. The 'international style' that American Modernist work exhibits (in common with modern French and Italian poetry) distinguishes it sharply from nineteenth-century American poetry. Though some nineteenth-century poets, notably Longfellow, had borrowed from European literature, their borrowings were domesticated into a 'fireside' style and on the whole did not exhibit linguistic experimentation. But now Eliot, who had studied comparative literature at Harvard, began to imitate topics and tones that he had found in French poets—the urban ennui of Charles Baudelaire, the satire of the bourgeoisie of Jules Laforgue....

Eliot and Pound were not the only poets to borrow from foreign sources. E. E. Cummings learned his typographical play from the French modernist poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, and he adopted an aesthetic based on the manifestos issued by the French Surrealists and Dadaists, poets who detached literature from referential meaning and linked it to experimental play.... And Marianne Moore, though she went abroad only once, served for four years (1925-1929) as the editor of *The Dial*, the New York magazine that, more than any other, brought the news of avant-garde art (including painting, sculpture, and music) to the American audience. Her expert knowledge of French was probably instrumental in her form of rebellion against English prosody when she decided to count syllables in her verse, as the French do, in lieu of feet....

Almost all the Modernist American poets lived their creative years in cities. The American hinterland offered no base for poetry.... New York became the center toward which most poets converged.... But New York was not the only city to produce poetry. There was a 'Chicago school' of poets that included Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg; and the magazine *Poetry*, founded and edited by Harriet Monroe, was published in Chicago. There was also a 'southern school' of poetry clustered around John Crowe Ransom, a school that would produce Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and even Robert Lowell. Still, New York was where the Modernist movement in poetry, supported from abroad by its expatriate wing, was created and sustained....

William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane opposed Eliot's and Pound's search for foreign materials for poetry.... The 'Europeanizing' Modernists...were conservative in their social and political alignments: Eliot declared himself an Anglo-Catholic royalist, Pound eventually came to sympathize with Fascism, and Frost and Stevens became increasingly Republican. The southern writers, though Democrats, preached an agrarianism that was profoundly conservative in its preference for the southern agricultural past over the northern technological present.

The division in American literary life between left and right wings has been the cause of bitter quarrels and literary scandals, the most famous centering on Ezra Pound, who in 1948 was awarded the Library of Congress Bollingen Prize for poetry while under indictment for treason for his World War II Italian radio broadcasts supporting Mussolini. Pound's literary supporters—of all political persuasions—argued that the poetry could be separated from the politics, since Pound had been declared of unsound mind and was incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's mental hospital; political antagonists replied that Pound's alliance with Fascism and his declared anti-Semitism should have precluded any award for his poetry. The controversy revealed the persistent American tendency to judge a poet's work by his life and to demand an ethical standard for literature to the exclusion of an aesthetic one.... [This describes current Political Correctness, according to which "ethical" judgments are made by Feminist professors against all "dead white males."]

'The Waste Land' and Pound's *Cantos* scattered bits of the literary and historical past over the page and expected the reader to perform as archaeologist, piecing together the fragments of a ruined culture. Even in *Paterson* and *The Bridge*, development was neither linear nor logical. These works, American in theme, were nonetheless radically Modernist in form. *Paterson* mixed prose with poetry, history with lyricism, personal letters with dramatic vignettes; *The Bridge* mixed myth with history, narrative with rhapsody, stanzaic forms with free verse. Moore's patchwork of quotations, united by a quirky intellectual associationism, was no easier for the common reader to appreciate. The public embraced Frost and Cummings because they seemed accessible, brief, and explicit. Yet the public simplified both poets, seeking the sage more than the skeptic in Frost and preferring the sentimental to the satiric Cummings, reducing the one to a benign pastoral poet and the other to a poet of easy eroticism....

Because Eliot and Pound saw the war from the European side, they felt a shock similar to that experienced by European poets, and the total work of each can be seen as a long meditation on the dissolution of the cultural past. Both used anthropological and archaeological methods to explore the myths that have sustained the West. Pound's reaction to World War I was to attack capitalism itself and to urge a return to an economic system that did not permit 'usury,' the making of money by lending money. Williams, Crane, and Hughes, on the other hand, dealt more immediately with domestic events....

The new style manifested itself in many ways. Some poetry could be distinctively American in language, as in Frost's 'sentence sounds' and Hughes's black vernacular, or it could rewrite in American idiom (as in Frost and Robinson) traditional genres like the Wordsworthian pastoral narrative. Frost learned from Longfellow and Whittier and Bryant that rural New England was worthy poetic territory, but he learned even more, stylistically, from the Latin poets, especially Horace and Lucretius. His domestication, in American poetry, of the language of Roman stoicism is a brilliant native achievement.

Prosody too is a distinguishing feature of Modernist poetry: Both Eliot and Pound, but in different ways, brought free verse into prominence. Eliot's extreme musicality, visible throughout all his work, culminated in his calling his last poems 'quartets' after the example of Beethoven; Pound, on the other hand, amassed Imagist phrases into a fragmentary line that broke off after each breath. Modernist poetry is distinguished by structure, too, from the traditional poetry of earlier centuries; it is a poetry of fragments. Many of the Modernist poets wrote long poems, but they constructed them on a principle different from the apparent unity that governs the sustained epics of Milton and Wordsworth.

'The Waste Land,' the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, and *The Bridge* are all discontinuous epics, coming at their topics from a variety of perspectives. They borrow from art the metonymic technique of collage, in which one thing after another is glued onto a surface, and they borrow from film the technique of montage, in which one frame is contrasted with the next. They also change disconcertingly from 'high' to 'low' language instead of keeping a constant level of diction. The ars poetica of Wallace Stevens, a long poem called 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,' is similarly unpredictable in diction and form; it is sometimes serious, sometimes farcical, sometimes philosophical, sometimes anecdotal."

Helen Vendler  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1489-97



## MODERNISM AND MOVIES

“The most important of contemporary innovations, the stream-of-consciousness technique, is closely connected with the motion picture devices of cut-back, dissolve, and montage. In the use of montage, especially, one finds the basic ingredient of the interior monologue: that past and present time can be telescoped into one image that is all present at once. The film flashback, moreover, has now become a staple of the novel, and as well the shift in perspective which in films became known as fade-in and fade-out. The close-up, the speed-up...the angle or point of view, among others, are all devices common to both media. There is little evidence that the borrowing was all on the part of the novel from the films; rather, that the novel, extremely sensitive to all other artistic expressions and the most inclusive of arts, borrowed and loaned devices interchangeably. Thus, cubism, Expressionism, even surrealism in art, together with dissonance, broken chords, interrupted development in music, find their counterpart in the novel.”

Frederick R. Karl & Marvin Magalaner  
*A Reader's Guide to Great Twentieth Century English Novels*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1959) 37

Michael Hollister (2015)