



# Modern Poetry: An Overview

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**Abstract**— Modern Poetry presents the modern consciousness in modern idiom. It is a break from the Romantic tradition of thought, feeling and utterance prevalent at the turn of the century. This is brought out starkly in T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' with its declaration that poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality. This Impersonal theory of poetry differentiates between the man who suffers and the mind which creates. Modern Poetry in assessing the changed dynamics of the machine age, rapid industrialization and advance in technological progress, urbanization, the advent of Darwinism, the impact of Marx, Nietzsche, the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Jung, Einstein's theory of Relativity, brought about a veritable storm of progress of ideas, and multiple perspectives on the world. In response, when poetry rallies to Ezra Pound's call to make it new, Modern Poetry presents new aesthetics with dazzling innovation of subject and stylistics.



**Keywords**— *imagism, innovation, modern consciousness, modern idiom, objective correlative.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The first half of the twentieth century saw a revolution in poetic taste in England. The poet was no longer a singer of sweet verses who used conventional romantic imagery to convey self-indulged personal emotion. Rather, he was the explorer of experience of any shade and who used language in a more complex, allusive and intellectual way. The new movement began with a revolt against every kind of verbal imprecision and lushness. 'Imagism' was a poetic movement between 1912-1917, influenced by the theory of T.E. Hulme and was a revolt against what Ezra Pound called the "rather blurry, messy...sentimentalistic mannnerish" poetry at the turn of the century. Imagism abandoned conventional poetic materials and versification, was free to choose any subject and to create its own rhythms or 'Free Verse'. It proved to be the beginning of Modern poetry; it was "the first Modernist movement in English poetry", states David Perkins in *A History of Modern Poetry*. Ezra Pound born in Idaho, America, shifted to London in 1908, it being the literary capital of the English-speaking world: "London...is the place for poetry" he said. London was the place to hone and master this "complete art" and to establish poetic reputation in both England and the United States of

America. Edith Sitwell's *Wheels*, founded in 1916, challenged Georgian poetry and was a bugle call for English poetry to create a distinctly Modernist movement.

## II. DISCUSSION

F.R. Leavis in *Revaluations* states that Modern poetry is the poetry of "actuality". It is in contrast to Nineteenth century poetry with its dreamy lyricism, as evident in the words of O'Shaughnessy:

"We are the music-makers, / And we are the dreamers of dreams" (*Ode*; 1874)

and as manifest in Tennyson's *The Lotus Eaters*. F.R. Leavis condemns Shelley as having "a weak grasp of the actual".

Lawrence Durrell in *A Key to Modern Poetry* (1952), brings out the "Great Divide" between these two ages of poetry by comparing and contrasting Tennyson's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion*. Both are old men and both have a sense of History, though *Gerontion* cynically refers to "the cunning passages of history". Tennyson's *Ulysses* has faith and optimism:

"To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield". In contrast *Gerontion* feels alienated, uprooted and

pessimistic: "I have no ghosts"; "We have not reached conclusion / When I stiffen in a rented house."

The 'Great Divide' is evident in W.B. Yeats poetry itself: in *Coole Park and Ballylee* (1931) he writes of his early dream poetry and the awakening into the harsh political realities of Ireland and the world:

"We were the last romantics--- took for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness.../ But all that is changed, that high horse riderless". Yeats discards his romantic "coat/ Covered with embroideries" to be "walking naked" and will "wither into the truth" (*A Coat; The Coming of Wisdom with Time*).

The ethnic Black poet, LeRoi Jones' words: "We want poems that kill" ---- could form the Epigraph of Modern poetry. The language has more edge and bite, prosaic subjects are commonplace, for eg; ---the spider in the bath tub is the subject matter of Roy Fuller's poem *The Image*, where the spider, an ugly unwanted creature signifies the ugliness and unhappiness of life in the modern times. There are startling titles and subjects for eg; Jarrell's *Eighth Air Force* and *The Woman in the Wahington Zoo*; Lowell's *Skunk Hour* and *For the Union Dead*; Stephen Spender's *Come Let Us Praise the Gas Works* is 'austerely modern' in its reference to Nazi brutality.

Modern poetry mirrors the despair, disillusionment, loneliness and isolation of man, the spiritual barrenness and sterility of the times. T.S. Eliot's masterpiece *The Waste Land* (1922) is the epic of modern times. W.H. Auden's 'wasteland' is his poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1948) and gives classic utterance to the dominant emotions of fear and anxiety typical of the times. 'Fear' is the paralyzing emotion of Prufrock in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: "I was afraid"; "Do I dare?"; "how should I begin?" and he is never able to frame his "overwhelming question". Philip Larkin in *Wants* expresses the "desire for oblivion" as the world has become unbearable. Lawrence Whistler in *A Form of Epitaph* questions modern man's "purpose of visit" or the meaning of life and answers "barely ascertained". Louis MacNeice in *Prayer Before Birth* laments that man has become a "lethal automaton", "a cog in a machine", an unthinking, unfeeling monster. In *Bagpipe Music* he paints the sordidness and lovelessness of the world as the mother callously asks the midwife to take away her newborn babe saying: "I'm through with overproduction". In *Gerontion* the old man is "waiting for rain" or regeneration and hope, but "Christ the tiger" comes not to redeem, but to condemn. This terrifying situation is reflected everywhere by a "wilderness of mirrors". Jack Clemo in *Christ in the Claypit* finds Christ not in the church but in the claypit, cast there by the "facile praise/False to the heart" of modern man who has lost all faith in divine benevolence. Yeats' *The Second*

*Coming* prophecies the coming of the anti-Christ because "the falcon cannot hear the falconer", or be guided by the Messiah, and presents the Apocalyptic modern. Edwin Muir's *The Labyrinth* symbolizes man in quest of God and salvation.

This barrenness and sterility find supreme exposition in *The Waste Land*. The poem has an epic sweep, is complex and allusive, drawing on a great variety of both Occidental and Oriental myth and symbol; it is a long poem in five sections linked together by a profound emotional pattern and a 'music of ideas'----'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water', 'What the Thunder Said'. Eliot's *Wasteland* finds salvation in the message of *The Upanishads* : "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" meaning 'Give, Sympathize, Self- control'. This would lead to peace or "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih". In *Four Quartets*, Eliot deals with Christianity and Hinduism and evolves a 'creative theology' where God is the "still point" and man is at "a point of intersection of time and the timeless". Eliot's search for a mystic centre started with *Ash Wednesday* where he explored the dark night of the soul under the guidance of St. John of the Cross, and achieved its most individual expression in *Four Quartets*.

**The "Impersonal theory of poetry"** advocated by Eliot in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* has been an influential trend in Modern poetry. Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* preferred to talk about the poet first and then the poem, a preference characteristically Romantic. But Eliot distinguishes between "the mind which creates" and "the man who suffers". He contradicts Wordsworth when he states "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (*Tradition and the Individual Talent*). Eliot presents emotion through the "objective correlative" so as to distance the merely personal and achieve 'impersonality'. In his essay *Hamlet and His Problems*, Eliot calls Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* an "artistic failure" because it lacked the 'objective correlative', that is, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion". The Epigraph of *Prufrock* typifies the hellish situation that Prufrock suffers because of his diffidence and anxieties and becomes somewhat neurotic. The triviality of his life is objectified in the self-acknowledgement: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons". His self-contempt is given through the 'objective correlative' of "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas". In *Ash Wednesday*, the passage from struggle to despair to hope is given through the passage of a staircase. Thus 'Literary modernism' encompasses a number of avant-garde works that were attempting to move

beyond traditional practice and conventions in the impulse to shape literature and to 'make it new'.

*The Waste Land* (1922) was the classic of the Modernist movement and resembled an avant-garde documentary film with its vivid impressions of contemporary city life, a cinematic montage, its juxtaposed images, scenes and fragments of conversation. Pound hailed it as "the justification of our modern experiment, since 1900".

**Ambiguity and Obscurity** is of essence to Modern poetry as set out by William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). *The Waste Land* has quotations from six different languages and a reference to thirty-five authors. Ezra Pound in *The Pisan Cantos* has Chinese allusions. Prufrock's "overwhelming question" is never framed and becomes an enigma.

The **use of myth** is a significant aspect of Modern poetry. *The Waste Land* is an interweaving of stark realism, symbolism and the mythical--- creating an allusive, somewhat bewildering and plotless complex of thought and feeling ---all together, conveying the music of ideas to present the anxiety- ridden, sterile and aimless life in this urban wasteland where people are experiencing a living death. It broke the fixed association of poetry with the beautiful, the agreeable, the genteel and the ideal. Its heterogenous fragments, elliptical juxtapositions mirrored the new reality of a world torn asunder by the harsh and grim realities of Industrialization, urbanization, War, the new anthropological, scientific and psychological perceptions about human life, impact of technology, loss of religious faith and identity crisis---'how the human spirit was wounded in modern times'. Yet the interweaving of the symbolic and the mythological enable Eliot to present "the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric" where the past melts into the present, where the crowd on London Bridge recalls Dante's Limbo. *The Waste Land* attributes the angst of modern life to its alienation from myth. Eliot praised Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to the work of Freud as "throwing its light on the obscurities of the soul from a different angle". *The Waste Land* uses the myth of the Fisher King as delineated by Frazer, as the myth of dying and reviving god, its association with fertility rites and vegetative myths. Myth integrated primitive man with the natural world, with fellow human beings, with the past and the future and with the divine, bestowing his world and life with significance, anchoring him with moral, religious and psychological validity. Since myth wells up from the depths of human nature, to lose contact with such powerful resources is to lose emotional vitality and succumb to a dry and barren emptiness. In his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot explains Tradition as : "the historical sense... not only of the pastness of the past, but

of its presence... a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together". No poet or artist has "his meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists". This "mythical method" set up the negotiation of the contemporary with antiquity and endowed poetry with a visionary depth in Yeats and Eliot. Reviewing Joyce's *Ulysses*, he stated how myth was "a way of controlling, of ordering ...the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"; how 'Psychology...ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have bestowed a "mythical method" which will enable "making the modern world possible in art". Eliot's critical essays on poetry paid serious attention to a close analysis of poetic method and formal qualities of verse and were followed with great zeal in England and America. Eliot's *Selected Essays* is a collection of his best pieces and he enjoyed the status of "an oracle" on the literature of his times writes Perkins.

### III. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The **Georgian Poets** of the 1900's dealt with homely topics and valued simplicity and emotional directness. Georgian lyricism is aptly defined by Robert Lynd as "Beatrice born under a dancing star"--- for example: In *Arabia*, Walter de la Mare writes of "dim silked, dark haired musicians/ In the brooding stillness of night" ; in *Cargoes*, the "Quinquireme of Nineveh" brings "a cargo of ivory/And apes and peacocks/Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine". Edward Marsh's anthology, *Georgian Poetry, 1911-12*, announces this movement in poetry. Marsh coined the term "Georgian" and published 5 anthologies of Georgian Poetry, between 1912-1922. Some important poets were—Abercrombie, Brooke, W.H. Davies, Monro, Masfield, Drinkwater, Walter de la Mare, Squire, Shanks, Turner, Freeman. Middleton Murry in the *Athenaeum*, Dec., 5, 1919 criticized them for their "false simplicity"; there is "nothing disturbing" about their poetry and they worship "trees and birds". Inspired by the English Romantics the Georgians were nature poets, treating Nature as in the Wordsworthian belief of it being the "guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being". They rebelled against Victorian "rhetoric", and like the Edwardians before them, they reacted against the 'fin de siecle'; drew inspiration from contemporary poets like Hardy, Yeats and Sygne; they disliked the noisier side of Edwardian poetry – Kipling, Chesterton, and Noyes, but continued with the traditional attitude of cultivation of the 'agreeable' and the 'beautiful', yet preferred a tightening of the loose and slipshod Edwardian narrative style. Georgian poetry was traditional with an easy and smooth popular style, a

cautiously optimistic tone; though some of them had experienced the horrors of War, yet it did not alter their mindset. They had none of the shock effects, dislocation and dissonance typical of the Modernists. Their poetic feelings were wholesome, kindly, compassionate and compromising, “capable of a civilized, complex balance and charm that has been rare since”, writes Perkins.

War Poetry: English poets of the First World War began as Georgians, but their poetry changed gradually as they experienced shock and moral outrage at the horrors of war.

The **World War I poets** like Rupert Brooke romanticized war: “If I should die, think only this of me:/That there’s some corner of a foreign field/That is forever England”. Nationalistic feeling, patriotism and heroic death on the battlefield are prized values. But Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen write of the harsh and grim realities of war. Owen wrote: “my subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity”. This is to be found in his poems, especially *Futility*, *Anthem for Doomed Youth* and *Insensibility* which presents cynicism about War: “Men are gaps for filling/ Losses who might have fought/Longer, but no one bothers.” Though there is not a very significant connection between War poetry and the first Modernists -- Pound, Eliot and others-- since their line of development moved in a different trajectory and they adopted traditions completely different from those of the Georgians and War poets. Yet the War poets with their shocking descriptions, satire, invective and bitter irony widened the possible tones and subjects of poetry. War poetry and the War itself prepared an audience for the High Modernist poetry of the 1920’s when the Modernists voiced disgust, stark realism, horror, satire and black humour, as well as a spiritual questing atmosphere of literature in the post-war period.

The **World War II poets** could not romanticize war at all because of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Edith Sitwell wrote *Dirge for the New Sunrise*, “dirge” or song of lamentation at the “new sunrise”, the intense, searing heat of the atomic mushroom of destruction. Man with his “murderous brain/...conceived the death/Of his mother Earth, and tore/ Her womb, to know the place/ where he was conceived”.

**Imagism**, a poetic movement between the years 1912-1917, influenced by the poetic theory of T.E. Hulme, sought to present an image that is hard, clear and concentrated as in the famous lines of Ezra Pound, its pioneering guru: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; /Petals on a wet, black bough” (*In a Station of the Metro*). Pound saw the Imagist poem as a complex in which “painting or sculpture seems as if it were just coming over into speech”. He saw *Des Imagistes*, published in 1914, as a collection to promote this new poetry. Imagism has been described as “the

grammar school of modern poetry, the instruction and drill in basic principles”, writes David Perkins. Precision of phrase wrought with metaphor, free verse, the use of idiomatic and colloquial language, the rejection of poetic diction and ‘rhetoric’---are its essential features. Imagist poetry, inspired also by the Japanese ‘Haiku’, suggests short free-verse impressions of places, objects, human interactions with a consciousness of craft and technique, controlled and reticent evocation of emotion and the significantly insightful. The Imagist poem was considered the most accessible way to the “modern” and to “make it new” as Pound exhorted the poets of his times. Their subjects were not the conventional ideas of beauty, love, death or God; instead, the focus was on “Hedges”, “Leaf Prints”, “Fog”, and “Meeting-House Hill”---- often containing wry humour and evoking complex feelings. Such poems displaced the Romantic nature lyric with new perspectives of the modern consciousness. Influential names associated with Imagism are those of Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell (*Some Imagist Poets* 1915-17), H.D., D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, John Gould and Richard Aldington.

T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* becomes the harbinger of Modern poetry. A vision of the apocalyptic modern is presented in W.B. Yeats’ *The Second Coming*.

**Eliot and Yeats dominate the modern poetic movement.** Eliot’s “Objective Correlative” as well as the emotional-intellectual complex in Yeats’ poetry are a modernistic rehabilitation of Donne and the Metaphysical School of Poetry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1900 Yeats wrote ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’ wherein he expressed his belief in inspiration, imagination, magic and mystical transcendence, a belief in a shared human mind and memory or the ‘Spiritus Mundi’ and the ‘Anima Mundi’. Pound in his poem ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ rues the absence of ‘the sublime’ in the twentieth century’s preoccupation with mass consumerism mass media and mass culture, where beauty and transcendence have faded away. Pound in *The Cantos*, having 120 sections, is akin to another modern epic poem, namely, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,---both are concerned with the disintegration of modern civilization.

**Social and political unrest** finds expression as in Yeats’ *September 1913*, *Easter 1916*, and *The Second Coming* which reflect the Irish political turmoil and the World Wars; in W.H. Auden’s *September 1, 1939* and *Spain*; Stephen Spender’s poem *Not Palaces an Era’s Crown* reflect Communist ideology : “No man shall hunger/Man shall spend equally”.

Modern poetry’s **experimental and innovative aspect** is to be witnessed in the ‘--isms’ that influenced it ---Imagism, Symbolism, and others. “On or about December 1910



human character changed” stated Virginia Woolf in her essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*. The London Art exhibition of 1910 entitled ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ curated by Roger Fry, her fellow member of the Bloomsbury group, shocked many art enthusiasts who witnessed such Abstract and experimental works. Visual and Fine Art was blazing a new path and creating new ones ---Impressionism/Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Vorticism, Surrealism, Dadaism and Futurism. Modernism moved away from traditional Victorian representation and depiction of the world to focus on aesthetics of representation--- language, form, narrative strategies and perspectives on a rapidly changing world.

Cassirer defines a symbol as the “actualizing of inarticulate experience in an apprehensible form”. The **Symbolist Movement** in France began with Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and continued by such major poets like Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme and Valerie. English and European literature since World War I has been a notable era of Symbolism. The important practitioners are--- Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens and others. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* employs symbolism of the elements—Air, Water, Fire, Rock. Yeats’ ‘Tower’ stands for truth; Byzantium symbolizes the ‘Artifice of Eternity’; ‘gyres’ denote the cycles of history.

Eliot becomes ‘minor industry’ after the 30’s and Modern poetry witnessed movements like ‘Pure Poetry’, ‘The Movement Poets’ and ‘Confessional Poetry’.

“**Pure Poetry**” of Middleton Murry and Swinburne sought to communicate its experience in an instance like music in keeping with their belief “poetry is akin to music”. They wrote poetry ‘unaltered’ by any allusions whatsoever.

D.J. Enright in *Poets of the 1950’s* writes of the group of poets known as “**Movement**” and who rejected the neo-romanticism of the 1940’s. They sought to cleanse poetry of the ‘dead spots’ of Allusion and valued the neatness and pithiness of the great Augustan figures—Dryden and Pope. The ‘Movement’ poets are ---Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, William Empson, Thomas Gunn, Donald Davie who also wrote *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952).

**Confessional Poetry** of American poets--- Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke and Alan Ginsberg deals with the poet’s self intimately, and sacrifices aesthetic distance between self and utterance. Plath’s *Fever 103* frankly confesses her suicidal tendencies. ‘**Confessionalism**’ influenced famous English rock artists like Madonna, Peter Gabriel and Morrissey.

British poetry in the late 1970’s, 1980’s and 1990’s adopted a self-consciously energetic manner in reaction to uneasy

political developments and economic stress of the time. A. Alvarez called for a ‘new seriousness’ in British poetry--- likening it to an American poetry industry instead of treating it as an art. The ‘**Martian School**’ is associated with Reid and Raine. Reid describes ‘**Martianism**’ as “a parish matter”. Craig Raine’s poems establish a parochial typicality—‘The Butcher’, ‘The Barber’, ‘The Grocer’, to suggest a sense of community, domestic environments, the rural village milieu, and ‘global concepts’ were obscured. ‘**New Generation**’ poetry is associated with Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage. They cultivated a ‘class-free’, easy accessibility, ‘a man-of-the-people’ attitude. For Duffy, ‘voice is an index of moral health’; characters are diagnosed by the words they speak: “She didn’t shit, she *soiled* or *had a soil*/and didn’t piss, *passed water*. Saturday night,/ when the neighbours were fucking, she *submitted*/to *intercourse* and, though she didn’t shit cobs then,/later she *perspired*. Jesus wept. Bloody Nora. *Language!*” (*Selling Manhattan*;1987).

**Modernist ‘Little Magazines’** played a central role in promoting this new aesthetics of poetry of the early twentieth century. While many favored the modernist male canon, others included the emerging discourses like Anarchism and Feminism. It was “the golden age of the literary manuscript” writes D. Van Hulle. These magazines created a platform for the dazzling experimentation, the new idiom, the newness of urban culture and perceptions, and focused on the literary value of the avant-garde. The pioneering spirit of the little magazines brought out the best in Anglo-American interfusions. Some important magazines providing an outlet to the work of new poets --- *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*(1912), *The Dial*(1916), *The Little Review* (1914), *The Seven Arts*(1916), *BLAST*(1914), *The Criterion*, *The Egoist*.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Yeats declared: “All art is.... an endeavor to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection”. In 1930, Edmund Wilson questioned: “Is Verse a Dying Technique?” But with so much experimentation the possibilities on the human landscape are immense as Malcolm Bradbury suggests in his book *Possibilities* (1973).

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