

Modern poetry started in the early years of the 20th century with the appearance of the Imagists. In common with many other modernists, these poets wrote in reaction to the perceived excesses of Victorian poetry, with its emphasis on traditional formalism and ornate diction. In many respects, their criticism echoes what William Wordsworth wrote in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* to instigate the Romantic movement in British poetry over a century earlier, criticizing the gauche and pompous school which then pervaded, and seeking to bring poetry to the layman.

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

Much of early modernist poetry took the form of short, compact lyrics. As it developed, however, longer poems came to the foreground. These represent the main contribution of the modernist movement to the 20th-century English poetic canon.

The emergence of English-language modernism

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

Imagism

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

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

1. Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.
4. Complete freedom of subject matter.
5. Free verse was encouraged along with other new rhythms.
6. Common speech language was used, and the exact word was always to be used, as opposed to the almost exact word.

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

In 1913, Pound was contacted by the widow of the recently deceased Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa, who while in Japan had collected word-by-word translations and notes for 150 classical Chinese poems that fit in closely with this program. The grammar of Chinese offers different expressive possibilities than English, a point that Pound subsequently made much of. For example, in Chinese, the first line of Li Po's (called "Rihaku" by Fenollosa's Japanese informants) poem *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* is a spare, direct juxtaposition of 5 characters that appear in Fenollosa's notes as

mistress hair first cover brow

In his resulting 1915 *Cathay*, Pound rendered this in simple English as

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead

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

Henry Gore (1902-1956), whose work is undergoing something of a revival was also heavily influenced by the Imagist movement, although from a different generation from H.D., Flint etc.

Ezra Weston Loomis Pound (30 October 1885 – 1 November 1972) was an American expatriate poet and critic, who became a major figure of the early modernist movement. His contribution to poetry began with his promotion of Imagism, a movement that derived its technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, stressing clarity, precision and economy of language. His best-known works include *Ripostes* (1912), *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and his unfinished 120-section epic, *The Cantos* (1917–1969).

Of all the major literary figures in the twentieth century, Ezra Pound has been one of the most controversial; he has also been one of modern poetry's most important contributors. In an introduction to the *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, T. S. Eliot declared that Pound "is more responsible for the twentieth-century revolution in poetry than is any other individual." Four decades later, Donald Hall reaffirmed in remarks collected in *Remembering Poets* that "Ezra Pound is the poet who, a thousand times more than any other man, has made modern poetry possible in English."

The importance of Pound's contributions to the arts and to the revitalization of poetry early in this century has been widely acknowledged; yet in 1950, Hugh Kenner could claim in his groundbreaking study *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, "There is no great contemporary writer who is less read than Ezra Pound." Pound never sought, nor had, a wide reading audience; his technical innovations and use of unconventional poetic materials often baffled even sympathetic readers. Early in his career, Pound aroused controversy because of his aesthetic views; later, because of his political views. For the greater part of this century, however, Pound devoted his energies to advancing the art of poetry and maintaining his aesthetic standards in the midst of extreme adversity.

Turn to fascism, Second World War

Pound came to believe during the 1920s that the cause of the First World War was finance capitalism, which he called "usury", and that the solution was C.H. Douglas's idea of social credit, with fascism as the vehicle for reform; he had met Douglas in *The New Age* offices and had been impressed by his ideas.^[66] He presented a series of lectures on economics, and made contact with politicians in the United States about education,

interstate commerce and international affairs. Although Hemingway advised against it, on 30 January 1933 Pound met Mussolini himself. Olga Rudge had played for Mussolini and had told him about Pound; Pound had already sent him a copy of *Cantos XXX*. During the meeting he tried to present Mussolini with a digest of his economic ideas, but Tytell writes that Mussolini brushed them aside, though he called the *Cantos* "*divertente*" (entertaining). The meeting was recorded in Canto 41: "'Ma questo' / said the boss, 'è divertente.'" Pound told Douglas that he had "never met anyone who seemed to GET my ideas so quickly as the boss.