



Modern Poetry: The First Phase, An Overview



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Research Paper :

Modern poetry has a long, varied and tangled history. By and large, the poetry of the 20th century may be put under this. However, I am here concerned with the first half of Modern Poetry. The focus is on the poets who came into prominence roughly between 1900 and 1950. Needless to state that at the early stage, poets like Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot and their progenies were the path breakers and finders. Their period as M.L Rosenthal rightly asserts was the 'heroic age' of modern poetry.

The great trio; Pound, Yeats and Eliot effected a clean break with the Victorian tradition. They deliberately moved away from the sensuousness and picturesqueness of Victorian poetry. Contemporary issues were taken up for 'poetic deals'. The tragic propensity of life caught the eye of the modern poets. Displacement of the old verities by the new findings of

science profoundly disturbed these 'differently thinking, feeling and seeing poets'. The gathering storms, horrifying wars and the consequent atmosphere of violence and destruction affected the modern poets. As a result they strove to find new ways – forms and modes – to throw light on the complex and confounding state of modern man in the contemporary world.

Modern poets were eager to experiment boldly with language, images, metaphors, symbols and more strikingly with poetic forms. They cast away all notions of 'Victorian Complacency' and 'propriety'. A major influence on modern poetry was Arthur Symons' (1865-1945) work; *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). The French Symbolist poetry caught the attention of poets in English like Yeats and Eliot. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) was the result of this. Actually, this work, ushered modernism into English literature.

However, it will be interesting to note that literary movements tend to constitute a dialectical pattern. To be brief, most movements have a directly antithetical relationship to the ones preceding and succeeding them. Imagism is no exception. French symbolism contributed the most for the genesis of imagism. T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford were the towering pioneers as well as shapers of Imagism. Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', written in imitation of a Japanese haiku is the perfect example of an Imagist poem.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

As one can very well see, in this poem, the image functions as an equation for the emotion generated in the poet who saw two beautiful faces of women at La Concorde station of the Paris metro. Pound lays down three major criteria for the Imagist verse: 1. Direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective 2. to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation 3. As regards rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

The first anthology of Imagist poems *Des Imagistes* edited by Pound was published in 1914. Apart from Pound, the most notable contributors were Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams and James Joyce. By 1914, Imagism was turning into 'Amygism', Ezra Pound promoted 'Vorticism'. The following lines of Amy Dowell's "A Decade" should give one an idea about 'Amygism'.

*When you came you were like red wine and honey,
And the taste of you burned my mouth with its sweetness.
Now you are like morning bread
Smooth and pleasant.....*

As an offshoot of Imagism or perhaps, along with it, futurism arose. By 1910, it had become a world movement. But it began to split soon. In Europe it took the garb of Cubism. In England, Pound nurtured it as 'Vorticism'. The periodical *Blast* was launched to sustain its thrust under the leadership of Wyndham Lewis. But only two issues came out.

Miss Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* threw the gates open for the poets with the modernist spirit. She was excited by the poetic ideas of Pound and company. Her genuine reaction on "Prufrock", when she received it for publication throws ample light on it.

When 'Prufrock' reached us via our foreign correspondent, its opening lines-

*Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table
-nearly took our breath away*

(A Poet's Life, New York: Macmillan, 1938, p.394)

Let us move a little backward, for, after all, 'the way backward is the way forward'. To trace the arc of modern poetry in a faithful way it will be unfair to leave out Hardy and Hopkins. Owing to the constraints of space it is suffice to state that Hardy in a bold poetic move caught the attention of contemporary men on their tragic plight and ironic situation tendering shocking contrast to the Victorian temperament of complacency, laxity,

leisure and material gains. His "Channel Firing", dealing directly with the impending outbreak of World War One is a bitter pointer to the inevitable fall of man; the inescapable direction of the new poet

*All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters
They do no more for Christ's sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters....*

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899), though, chronologically on the edge of Modern Poetry, is perhaps 'more modern than most moderns', especially, when one considers, his astute and adroit poetic craft. To begin with, he was an exciting romantic and an aesthete. But none of his poems of that category is extant. It is part of history. Now looking at his available works, one may conclude that he is, essentially, a religious and spiritual writer, but none will dispute that his handling of language, use of images and symbols and sprung rhythm put him on a different pedestal. As Robert Bridges, rightly observed, he was far ahead of his times. The master-piece of Hopkins, by any canon, is "The Wreck of the Deutschland", written in sprung rhythm. Hopkins himself explained its 'incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm -- that is rhythm's self and naturalness of expression' in 'Letter to Robert Bridges', Storey, p.155. Woven with spiritual inscapes loaded with 'ecstasy and agony' Hopkins' "Wreck", should 'move' any lover poetry. The following lines,

*Is out with it! Oh,
We lash with the best or worst,
Word last! How a lush-kept plush-capped sloe
Will, mouthed to flesh-burst,
Gush!.... (ll. 57-64),*

are only a tip of the iceberg.

The poet considers "The Windhover", the best thing he ever wrote. The lines given below affirm the poet's conviction:

*My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

*Brute beauty and valour and act, and oh, air,
pride, plume here
Buckle! (ll 7-10)*

There may be full agreement on reckoning Ezra Pound, 'the greater craftsman', T.S Eliot, the harbinger of modernism and W.B Yeats, the gifted symbolist, as 'the major voices' of modern poetry. Pound through his 'Mauberly poems', radical critical perceptions and persistent creative innovations revolutionised modern poetry. T.S Eliot and W.B Yeats owe a lot to Pound.

Eliot dissatisfied with the poetic landscape of the early twentieth century and deeply disturbed by the precarious position of modern man encompassed with wars and loss of religious values took to poetry as a means to salvage his contemporaries by incorporating history, tradition, myth, philosophy and religion. For his poetic craft he drew inspiration from Laforgue, Corbiere and the like besides Pound. He broke all the barriers of time and sense. His use of myths, symbols, metaphors, history, tradition, religion and philosophy bears an original stamp. His works from 'Prufrock' to *The Four Quartets* bugle this. In every sense his poetry is meant for the initiated, and in unmistakable terms esoteric. The complexity of the contemporary world is fully reflected in his poems. Deliberately, he skips connectives and props for easy and cosy thinking. He believed, the confounding nature of the complex, contemporary world demands an equally confounding form of poetry. His "Prufrock", *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* etc need a serious mind to perceive its 'weighty' thoughts and startling poetic nuances. Perhaps, the essence of his poetry is explained by him to a certain extent in:

*Words strain
Crack and sometimes break,
Under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, (Four Quartets)*

The Waste Land, a storehouse of knowledge culled from the past and present, depicts “our contemporary state of spiritual aridity as the modern waste land and points to the possibility of its redemption” (C T Thomas, *Twentieth Century Verse*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1979, p.237). For the mythological framework used in this ‘magnum opus’, Eliot acknowledges his indebtedness to Jessie L Weston’s book on the Grail Legend: *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer’s work on anthropology, *The Golden Bough*. It is certainly a modern classic.

Myths, allusions, metaphors and symbols are astutely, even adroitly, woven together to make the readers not only to feel but also to think. To comprehend his poetic vision and diverse meanings, ‘wrestle’, with the following lines. It should persuade one to delve deep into Eliot’s works.

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where sun beats . . . (The Waste Land, ll.19-
22)*
*A rat crept softly through the vegetation
. . . .
Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck
And on the king my father’s death before him (The Waste Land, ll. 187-
92)*

In *Four Quartets*, a group of four poems Eliot makes an attempt to make it musical. He uses some techniques of music effectively for it. Though, loaded with complex philosophical and metaphysical thoughts, at the linguistic level, more connectives are there, when compared to his earlier works. But, the difficulty is in grappling with the ideas. Eliot believed ‘out of intense suffering, gaiety emerges’. The four quartets, ‘Burnt Norton’, ‘East Coker’, ‘The Dry Salvages’, and ‘Little Gidding’, deal with time and eternity, the past and the present, the intersection between man and God. Lofty ideals and ideas are cast in a musical mould. For getting at the core of these poems one

needs a serious mind. In every sense, it becomes a profound mission. In 'Little Gidding', the fourth quartet, Eliot asserts:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time (ll.241-44)*

In a serious vein, 'exploring hands encounter no defence', and as such one can explore Eliot beyond bounds.

Move on to another major modern poet, W B Yeats, who was also 'disturbed' deeply by the untoward events in the contemporary world. He began as a romantic. Then, due to his intense personal experiences with two outstanding women, Maud Gonne, and Lady Gregory, and with a host of Irish nationalists, he wrote 'highly charged poems with deep thoughts and profound feeling'. During the last period of his poetic life, he became metaphysical, to some extent, as the early Eliot and Pound. However, the symbolist in Yeats stands out. Some of his unforgettable works demanding close study and scrutiny for gauging his stature as a modern poet are "Byzantium", "Sailing to Byzantium" "Easter 1916", "The Second Coming", *The Tower*, *The Winding Stair* etc. Lines like,

*Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart ("Easter 1916", ll 57-58)
Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart (The Second Coming", ll. 1-3)
Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily from any natural thing
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of what is past, or passing, or to come (Sailing to Byzantium, ll.25-32)
Before me floats an image, man or shade
.....
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death ("Byzantium", ll.9-16),*

can throw light on Yeats' potential and stature as a modern poet. He is very much in the company of Pound and Eliot, as an esoteric poet, perhaps more lyrical and less liberal with linguistic liberties. Susanne Langer's precept, "Symbols are not proxy for their objects but are vehicles for the conception of objects", works well in Yeats' poetic arena. (Susanne K Langer, (*Philosophy in a New Key*, 1967, p.60)

Yeats had ample reasons to hammer out a private system of symbols highly esoteric and evocative. He could not subscribe to orthodox Christianity. Therefore, he sought an alternative metaphysical system, placing art at its centre, that would compensate for his debilitated religious belief. This had great impact on his poetry. Similarly, he hated the money crazy Philistines, the middle classes. As a result, he looked to the aristocrats or the peasants as the ideal of his manhood. After his marriage to George Hyde-Lees in 1917, he formulated an esoteric system of values, probably due to her influence and help. This came out as *A Vision* in 1926. To have a better grasp of many of his symbols it will be immensely helpful.

Yeats very much shared the concerns of his generation, just as the other great modern poets. In "Easter 1916" he puts his thrust on the Dublin tragedy. He is lyrical, symbolic and even a little nostalgic. The poem contrasts the 'the casual comedy' with the 'polite meaningless words' of the pre-revolutionary Ireland and the 'terrible beauty' of the Irish rebellion. Its realism and precision are striking modern traits. "The Second Coming" is a typical Yeatsian poem presenting dramatically his cyclical theory of the historical process, according to which human civilisation moves forward in antithetical or dialectical epochs each of approximately two thousand years' duration. His central concern seems to be the gloomy future of the world in the light of the political anarchy in Ireland, the unsettled state of Europe generally and especially the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Obviously the world situation of 1918-19 played on his imagination in conceiving and executing this poem. 'The Waste Land' concerns are harbingered in this poem in a Yeatsian strain.

On the other hand, "Sailing to Byzantium" and Byzantium depict Yeats' set notions on the fleeting nature of life here and the eternal stature of art. Symbols galore in these poems, but at the same time, these poems are noted for their lyricism, sensuous beauty, precision and realism.

He seeks refuge in art to get away from the violence ridden, despair and destruction grabbed twentieth century world. In "Easter 1916", he brings out that sad feeling in,

*All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (ll. 15-16)*

The plight of humanity is well echoed in the "Second Coming":

*The best lack of conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity (ll. 7-8)*

In the companion poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" Yeats is treating his pet themes old age; decay and death and art; permanence and eternity. He is acutely aware of time and timelessness as in the later Eliot. He underscores the need to transcend time to achieve eternity which he equates with imperishable art. See the contrasting lines:

*That is no country for old men
.....
An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in mortal dress
Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make (ll. 1;9-12; 25-27)*

Unmistakably, in the above lines, and in these poems as a whole, the poet ruminates on the momentary, destructive nature of life and the timeless and indestructible nature of art. Yeats must have been affected by the war-torn twentieth century gloom to iron out such a poetic plank with art and its glory

at the centre. The Victorian designs for material gains and comfort are totally set aside by Yeats in the true sense of a modern poet in his own unique way. "The Tower" is a poem of his last period; in a way his 'will', bears testimony to his persistent interest in old age and art resonant with a ring of hope. Mature Yeats with all his experience underscores his pet idea:

*What shall I do with this absurdity- -
O heart, O troubled heart - - this creature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail*

. . . .

*I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men (ll.1-4;173-74)*

"The Tower was more than a building: it was a symbol of the poet's isolation, and his resolve to lead a lonely life of wisdom; since it contained a spiral staircase, it was also related to the image of a gyre."(E. L. Black, p.189). He revels in symbolism even in this poem.

Yeats stands out as a modern poet on his own merits; a group of poets, however great cannot last long. The 'heroic age' of modern poetry had to give way to a set of younger and anti-esoteric poets by 1930 itself. In 1931 an anthology of poems, *New Signatures*, edited by Michael Roberts came out. Some of the contributors were W. H. Auden, C.D. Lewis and Stephen Spender. They insisted on writing poetry, using contemporary social changes and problems as their prime subject, of course, and not totally rejecting modern poetic techniques. W. H. Auden, a prudent imitator of Eliot, argued that images, metaphors and symbols should be drawn from contemporary life. They yearned for popular poetry. Invariably, an atmosphere of impending calamity and alarm pervaded the poems of *New Signatures*. Roberts' second anthology, *New Country (1933)*, affirmed their concerns and craft.

Auden could be deemed the leader of this group. But, he had divided aims; religious, political; anti-war propaganda etc. "If Freud and Marx were the

most striking and typical intellectual influences of the thirties, then those of the forties were Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr”(Hoggart,p.26) His thematic breadth and poetic depth could be gauged from a variety of poems like, "Missing", "The Quarry", "Refugee Blues", "1st September", "The Unknown Citizen" etc. A few lines from some of his poems are given below for a feel of the typical Auden, the leader of the group.

O where are you going? Stay with me here!

....

But, I must be leaving ("The Quarry", ll. 33-36)

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,

....

We cannot go there now, my dear, my dear, old passports can't do that (Refugee Blues, ll. 7-9)

.

To hill-top temple, from appearing waters to

Conspicuous fountains from a wild to a formal vine yard

By pleasing, or teasing, can easily take (In Praise of Limestone", ll. 16-20)

"Missing" is a typical Auden poem of the thirties combining two themes—the vague melodramatic note of menace, of some imminent catastrophe and the feelings of an isolated wanderer ,the lonely leader. The following lines:

The tall wounded leader

Whose voices in the rock

Are now perpetual,

Fighters for no one's sake, (ll.15-19) voice these concerns.

"The Unknown Citizen" is a post-war poem bitterly satirising the reduction of man to mere statistical facts and figures by modern bureaucracy –ridden society. The loss of humanity is here Auden's prime motive. He deliberately employs the colloquial style and the clichés of bureaucratic speech to

enhance the satiric tone of the poem, almost like Eliot. It bangs on your ears in lines like:

*. . . Both Producers Research and High-Grade living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
And had everything necessary to Modern Man,
A photograph, a radio, a car, and a frigidaire (ll. 18-21)*

In "Refugee Blues" the poet delineates the miserable condition of the refugees in the post-war period. It vents the anger of a refugee at the heartlessness of everyone who ignores the needs of the refugees. Auden deliberately uses jazz blues rhythm, rather monotonous to suggest, the weariness of a refugee speaking. Listen to the burdened and horrified refugee's voice:

*Though I thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying: 'They must die;
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind. (ll. 16-180)*

. . . .

A sense of pervasive doom is there in "The Quarry". An approaching war is sounded. Fear and broken human values are also subtly suggested. No one will miss these in lines like,

*O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming.*

. . . .

*O it's broken the lock and the splintered door,
Their boots are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning. (ll. 1-4;33-36)*

Though he shifted his major subjects from time to time, he always kept in mind the peril humanity faced in the guise of war and violence and the consequent loss of human values intact in his poetry. Technically he was quite sound, almost like Eliot in the use of language, stanza forms and

rhythms. Auden made a path of his own in modern poetry, in spite of occasional adverse criticism.

If 1930s belonged to Auden and his friends and followers, in 1940s, Dylan Thomas and his tribe took the centre stage of modern poetry. Thomas and his 'folk' looked for a radical shift; a bold return to neo-romantic tradition. They hoisted the beauty of nature and gave prominence to regional themes. In many respects, they advocated surrealist techniques. Along with Dylan Thomas, George Barker, Herbert Read and David Gascoyne strove for creating a niche of their own in modern poetry by resorting to surrealism and impersonality, but absorbed subtly the nuances of modern poetry.

Thomas' main contribution to English poetry was to recast the English language to enshrine his vision. "Reading Dylan Thomas, we rarely find uncommon words: yet all the words seem tantalizingly unfamiliar, pressed by the poet into strange image combinations" (R.N.Maud, 1963). Let us enter his poetic world through some of his abiding lines:

The land that whirls the water in the pool

. . . .

How of my clay is made the hangman's lime. ("The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", ll. 11-15)

It was my thirtieth

Year to heaven

On this high hill in a year's turning. ("Poem in October", ll. 65-70)

One could see a shift in his imagery in the later poems. The sexual imagery which dominated his early verse gave way to a dominant religious faith. "The poems in *Deaths and Entrances*, his most distinguished and enduring collection, are instinct with vivid colour, compelling music and memorable rhetoric. The favoured themes are recollections of childhood and death" (C. T. Thomas, p.400).

Dylan Thomas often takes 'the road not taken'. For instance, in "And Death Shall Have No Domain", he uses the Christian belief that Christ will conquer death and the dead shall be resurrected. But he gives this traditional belief

a twist and asserts that matter may imperishably subsist, through all its transformations. The creative-destructive phenomenon of the 'life force' is elaborated in "The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower", in his wonted musical tone with astutely woven paradox and irony. The opening stanza of this poem itself is a fine example:

*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age the flower that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the wintry fever. (ll. 1-5)*

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death by Fire of a Child in London", has also the gusto of typical Thomas, especially since it is a poem about a child killed in an air-raid during World War Two. He creates 'absorbing' poetry out of a contemporary ghastly event. The speaker of the poem refuses to mourn the death of a child till the darkness which is the source of life brings the world to an end. The poet seems to stress the grim fact that human tragedy should be viewed against the timeless. In this poem too, Thomas in his characteristic, original way, undermines the notion of resurrection. The ambivalent end of the poem has ignited a lot of controversy.

*Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
.....
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After first death, there is no other. (ll. 19-24)*

In a classic of Thomas, *Fern Hill*, he is banking on nostalgia; childhood experiences and its memories and ever abiding 'green' nature. Though the theme is a romantic, traditional one, the technique and imagery used by the poet makes it an excellent modern poem. He accepts the inevitability of death but believes, life is glorious and joyous. Therein lies the strength of

this poem, perhaps, the newfound strength of the poet too. Nobody will willingly let die lines like:

*Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among the wagons I was prince of the apple towns
.
.
.
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long, I heard, blessed among stables, the night-jars.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (ll.4-6;24-25;53 -55)*

Dylan Thomas' kinship with daringly original imagery, feast of colours, musical overtures, unusual stanza forms and rhyme schemes for 'odd themes' of his choice gave, indisputably, yet another new direction to modern poetry, perhaps to 'sing and clap and dance'.

Let Dylan Thomas and the slightly earlier 'heroic' modern poets sing unfettered, for, therein lies the meaning and merit of poetry, without time or place constraints.

In my limited, rather, cursory survey of the modern poets of the first half of the twentieth century, I could not but leave out a good number of them like, Wilfred Owen, John Betjeman, R.S. Thomas, Stephen Spender and many more. With due apologies, I hold my pen, nay computer, with the belief that 'less is more'.

However, none can dispute that modern poetry is a 'chequered arena': a veritable mine with infinite riches' to refine and extend human sensibility' and hence to create a finer humanity even in difficult times.

One may get some courage and hope from Robert Frost's pregnant lines:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep*

And miles to go before I sleep. ("Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", (ll.13-16)

Adieu.

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