American Modernism was a philosophical trend that came from enormous changes in culture and society at the beginning of the 20th century. Its main period of influence was between World War I and II. Beyond that, it remains difficult to define. It arose from a rejection of former traditions and forms, and tried to represent the reality of a newly industrialized world.

While you may find the word “modern” in Modernism comforting, especially if you find the language of ancient poetry difficult, the ways in which these poems differ in perceived difficulty is important. Ancient poetry can be hard for modern audiences to understand because they tell of histories, peoples, and lifestyles that are very distant from modern life, often using an archaic dialect or style of writing.

Modernism, on the other hand, upended many traditional forms. This fact brings its own challenges: with some poets, you’re less likely to find a predictable iambic pentameter or clearly defined rhyme scheme. Modernists played with form, language, subject, and style in ways that were unknown to most of their ancient predecessors.

If you are new to this style of poetry, keep an open mind, and think about why the poets made the choices they did.

* * *

T.S. Eliot (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965) was an expatriate American essayist, publisher, playwright, and critic. He is considered one of the twentieth century's most important poets. He moved from the United States to England in 1914. He became a British subject in 1927, and renounced his American citizenship.
T.S. Eliot [1922]

The Waste Land

Books 1 and 2

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD
April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee¹
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,²
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.³
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

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 the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

_Frisch weht der Wind_
_Der Heimat zu_
_Mein Irisch Kind,_
_Wo weilest du?_4
"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl."
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
_Oed' und leer das Meer._5

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations.
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying "Stetson!
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
"You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"6
Notes:
This is only Book 1 of the poem. You can read the entire poem here.

1. Starnbergersee: Lake Sternberg, Bavaria, Germany
2. Hofgarten: Garden in the center of Munich, Germany
3. Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch: “I’m not Russian at all, I come from Lithuania, pure German.”
4. Frisch weht der Wind/Der Heimat zu/Mein Irisch Kind,/Wo weilest du?: "Fresh blows the Wind/ to the homeland./ My Irish child,/ where are you dwelling?"
5. Oed' und leer das Meer: empty and desolate the sea
6. hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!: Hypocrite reader, my likeness, my brother! (A reference to poet Baudelaire’s poem “To the Reader”)

* * *

Walt Whitman (31 May 1819 - 26 March 1892) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. Although earlier than the Modernist movement, as a humanist, he became part of the transition between the philosophies of transcendentalism and realism, incorporating both views in his writing.

I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman [1867]

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

* * *

On Journeys Through the States

_Walt Whitman [1867]_

On journeys through the States we start,
(Ay, through the world--urged by these songs,
Sailing henceforth to every land--to every sea;)
We, willing learners of all, teachers of all, and lovers of all.

We have watch'd the seasons dispensing themselves, and passing on,
We have said, Why should not a man or woman do as much as the seasons, and effuse as much?

We dwell a while in every city and town;
We pass through Kanada, the north-east, the vast valley of the Mississippi, and the Southern States;
We confer on equal terms with each of The States,
We make trial of ourselves, and invite men and women to hear;
We say to ourselves, Remember, fear not, be candid, promulge the body and the Soul;
Dwell a while and pass on--Be copious, temperate, chaste, magnetic,
And what you effuse may then return as the seasons return,
And may be just as much as the seasons.

* * *

**Ezra Pound** (30 October 1885 – 1 November 1972) was an expatriate American poet and critic. He was a major figure in the early modernist movement. His contribution to poetry began with his development of Imagism, a movement came 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 the unfinished 120-section epic, *The Cantos* (1917–1969).

* * *

**Langue d’Oc**

*Ezra Pound [1918]*

*Alba*

When the nightingale to his mate
Sings day-long and night late
My love and I keep state

In bower,
In flower,
'Till the watchman on the tower
Cry:
“Up! Thou rascal, Rise,
I see the white

Light
And the night
Flies”

I

Compleynt of a gentleman who has been waiting outside for some time.

“O Plasmatour* and true celestial light,
Lord powerful, engirdled all with might,
Give my good-fellow aid in fools' despite
Who stirs not forth this night,

And day comes on.

'Sst! my good fellow, art awake or sleeping?
Sleep thou no more. I see the star upleaping
That hath the dawn in keeping,

And day comes on!

'Hi! Harry, hear me, for I sing aright
Sleep not thou now, I hear the bird in flight
That plaineth of the going of the night,

And day comes on!

‘Come now! Old swenkin! Rise up from thy bed,
I see the signs upon the welkin spread,
If thou come not, the cost be on thy head.

And day comes on!

‘And here I am since going down of sun,
And pray to God that is St. Mary's son,
To bring thee safe back, my companion.

And day comes on.

‘And thou out here beneath the porch of stone
Badest me to see that a good watch was done,
And now thou'lt none of me, and wilt have none
Of song of mine.

And day comes on.”

(Bass voice from inside)

“Wait, my good fellow. For such joy I take
With her venust and noblest to my make
To hold embraced, and will not her forsake
For yammer of the cuckold,

Though day break.”

(Girart Bornello)

*plasmatour - Old French plasmateur means ‘creator’
This is the first of four books of the full poem. If you are interested, read the entire poem here.

* * *

Hart Crane (21 July 1899 – 27 April 1932) was an American poet. He found inspiration in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Crane wrote modernist poetry that was difficult and highly stylized. In his most ambitious work, The Bridge, Crane sought to write an epic poem. He committed suicide at the age of 32.
The Bridge: To Brooklyn Bridge

Harold Hart Crane [1930]

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
—Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!
Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)
Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City’s fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
 Vaulting the sea, the prairies’ dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

This is one part of a longer poem. You can read the entire poem here, as part of a collection of all his poems (in PDF format).

* * *

Jean Toomer (26 December 1894 – 30 March 1967) was an African American poet and novelist. He was an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance and modernism. His first book, Cane, published in 1923, is considered by many to be his most important.

Song of the Son

Jean Toomer [1923]

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch’s sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee.
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.