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## A Brief Guide to Imagism

### In a Station of the Metro

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.*  
--Ezra Pound

The Imagist movement included English and American poets in the early twentieth century who wrote free verse and were devoted to "clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images." A strand of modernism, Imagism was officially launched in 1912 when Ezra Pound read and marked up a poem by Hilda Doolittle, signed it "H.D. Imagiste," and sent it to Harriet Monroe at Poetry.

The movement sprang from ideas developed by T.E. Hulme, who as early as 1908 was proposing to the Poets' Club in London a poetry based on absolutely accurate presentation of its subject with no excess verbiage. The first tenet of the Imagist manifesto was "To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word."

Imagism was a reaction against the flabby abstract language and "careless thinking" of Georgian Romanticism. Imagist poetry aimed to replace muddy abstractions with exactness of observed detail, apt metaphors, and economy of language. For example, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" started from a glimpse of beautiful faces in a dark subway and elevated that perception into a crisp vision by finding an intensified equivalent image. The metaphor provokes a sharp, intuitive discovery in order to get at the essence of life.

Pound's definition of the image was "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Pound defined the tenets of Imagist poetry as:

- I. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

An Imagist anthology was published in 1914 that collected work by William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, and James Joyce, as well as H.D. and Pound. Other imagists included F. S. Flint, D. H. Lawrence, and John Gould Fletcher. By the time the anthology appeared, Amy Lowell had effectively appropriated Imagism and was seen as the movement's leader. Three years later, even Amy Lowell thought the movement had run its course. Pound by then was claiming that he invented Imagism to launch H.D.'s career. Though Imagism as a movement was over by 1917, the ideas about poetry embedded in the Imagist doctrine profoundly influenced free verse poets throughout the twentieth century.

## A Brief Guide to Modernism

*"That's not it at all, that's not what I meant at all"*  
--from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T.S. Eliot

The English novelist Virginia Woolf declared that human nature underwent a fundamental change "on or about December 1910." The statement testifies to the modern writer's fervent desire to break with the past, rejecting literary traditions that seemed outmoded and diction that seemed too genteel to suit an era of technological breakthroughs and global violence.

"On or about 1910," just as the automobile and airplane were beginning to accelerate the pace of human life, and Einstein's ideas were transforming our perception of the universe, there was an explosion of innovation and creative energy that shook every field of artistic endeavor. Artists from all over the world converged on London, Paris, and other great cities of Europe to join in the ferment of new ideas and movements: Cubism, Constructivism, Futurism, Acmeism, and Imagism were among the most influential banners under which the new artists grouped themselves. It was an era when major artists were fundamentally questioning and reinventing their art forms: Matisse and Picasso in painting, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein in literature, Isadora Duncan in dance, Igor Stravinsky in music, and Frank Lloyd Wright in architecture.

The excitement, however, came to a terrible climax in 1914 with the start of the First World War, which wiped out a generation of young men in Europe, catapulted Russia into a catastrophic revolution, and sowed the seeds for even worse conflagrations in the decades to follow. By the war's end in 1918, the centuries-old European domination of the world had ended and the "American Century" had begun. For artists and many others in Europe, it was a time of profound disillusion with the values on which a whole civilization had been founded. But it was also a time when the avante-garde experiments that had preceded the war would, like the technological wonders of the airplane and the atom, inexorably establish a new dispensation, which we call modernism. Among the most instrumental of all artists in effecting this change were a handful of American poets.

Ezra Pound, the most aggressively modern of these poets, made "Make it new!" his battle cry. In London Pound encountered and encouraged his fellow expatriate T. S. Eliot, who wrote what is arguably the most famous poem of the twentieth century--*The Waste Land*--using revolutionary techniques of composition, such as the collage. Both poets turned to untraditional sources for inspiration, Pound to classical Chinese poetry and Eliot to the ironic poems of the 19th century French symbolist poet Jules Laforgue. H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) followed Pound to Europe and wrote poems that, in their extreme concision and precise visualization, most purely embodied his famous doctrine of imagism.

Among the American poets who stayed at home, Wallace Stevens--a mild-mannered executive at a major insurance firm in Hartford, Connecticut--had a flair for the flashiest titles that poems have ever had: "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." Stevens, the aesthete par excellence, exalted the imagination for its ability to "press back against the pressure of reality."

What was new in Marianne Moore was her brilliant and utterly original use of quotations in her poetry, and her surpassing attention to the poetic image. What was new in E. E. Cummings was right on the surface, where all the words were in lower-case letters and a parenthesis "(a leaf falls)" may separate the "I" from "oneliness."

William Carlos Williams wrote in "plain American which cats and dogs can read," to use a phrase of Marianne Moore. "No ideas but in things," he proclaimed. In succinct, often witty poems he presents common objects or events--a red wheelbarrow, a person eating plums--with freshness and immediacy, enlarging our understanding of what a poem's subject matter can be. Unlike Williams, [Robert Frost](#) favored traditional devices--blank verse, rhyme, narrative, the sonnet form--but he, too, had a genius for the American vernacular, and his pitiless depiction of a cruel natural universe marks him as a peculiarly modern figure who is sometimes misread as a genial Yankee sage.

Of the many modern poets who acted on the ambition to write a long poem capable of encompassing an entire era, Hart Crane was one of the more notably successful. In his poem "The Bridge," the Brooklyn Bridge is both a symbol of the new world and a metaphor allowing the poet to cross into different periods, where he may shake hands in the past with Walt Whitman and watch as the train called the Twentieth Century races into the future.

### **E. E. Cummings**

Edward Estlin Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 14, 1894. He began writing poems as early as 1904 and studied Latin and Greek at the Cambridge Latin High School. He received his B.A. in 1915 and his M.A. in 1916, both from Harvard. His studies there introduced him to avant garde writers, such as [Gertrude Stein](#) and [Ezra Pound](#).

In 1917, Cummings' first published poems appeared in the anthology *Eight Harvard Poets*. The same year, Cummings left the United States for France as a volunteer ambulance driver in World War I. Five months after his assignment, however, he and a friend were interned in a prison camp by the French authorities on suspicion of espionage (an experience recounted in his novel, *The Enormous Room*) for his outspoken anti-war convictions.

After the war, he settled into a life divided between houses in rural Connecticut and Greenwich Village, with frequent visits to Paris. He also traveled throughout Europe, meeting poets and artists, including Pablo Picasso, whose work he particularly admired.

In his work, Cummings experimented radically with form, punctuation, spelling and syntax, abandoning traditional techniques and structures to create a new, highly idiosyncratic means of poetic expression. Later in his career, he was often criticized for settling into his signature style and not pressing his work towards further evolution. Nevertheless, he attained great popularity, especially among young readers, for the simplicity of his language, his playful mode and his attention to subjects such as war and sex.

During his lifetime, Cummings received a number of honors, including an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard, the Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 1958, and a Ford Foundation grant.

At the time of his death, September 3, 1962, he was the second most widely read poet in the United States, after [Robert Frost](#). He is buried in Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston, Massachusetts.

### **A Selected Bibliography**

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& (1925)  
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## Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound is generally considered the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry. In the early teens of the twentieth century, he opened a seminal exchange of work and ideas between British and American writers, and was famous for the generosity with which he advanced the work of such major contemporaries as [W. B. Yeats](#), [Robert Frost](#), [William Carlos Williams](#), [Marianne Moore](#), [H. D.](#), James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and especially [T. S. Eliot](#). His own significant contributions to poetry begin with his promulgation of *Imagism*, a movement in poetry which derived its technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry--stressing clarity, precision, and economy of language, and foregoing traditional rhyme and meter in order to, in Pound's words, "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome." His later work, for nearly fifty years, focused on the encyclopedic epic poem he entitled *The Cantos*.

Ezra Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, in 1885. He completed two years of college at the University of Pennsylvania and earned a degree from Hamilton College in 1905. After teaching at Wabash College for two years, he travelled abroad to Spain, Italy and London, where, as the literary executor of the scholar Ernest Fenellosa, he became interested in Japanese and Chinese poetry. He married Dorothy Shakespear in 1914 and became London editor of the *Little Review* in 1917. In 1924, he moved to Italy; during this period of voluntary exile, Pound became involved in Fascist politics, and did not return to the United States until 1945, when he was arrested on charges of treason for broadcasting Fascist propaganda by radio to the United States during the Second World War. In 1946, he was acquitted, but declared mentally ill and committed to St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. During his confinement, the jury of the Bollingen-Library of Congress Award (which included a number of the most eminent writers of the time) decided to overlook Pound's political career in the interest of recognizing his poetic achievements, and awarded him the prize for the *Pisan Cantos* (1948). After continuous appeals from writers won his release from the hospital in 1958, Pound returned to Italy and settled in Venice, where he died, a semi-recluse, in 1972.

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## William Carlos Williams

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, in 1883. He began writing poetry while a student at Horace Mann High School, at which time he made the decision to become both a writer and a doctor. He received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, where he met and befriended [Ezra Pound](#). Pound became a great influence in Williams' writing, and in 1913 arranged for the London publication of Williams's second collection, *The Tempers*. Returning to Rutherford, where he sustained his medical practice throughout his life, Williams began publishing in small magazines and embarked on a prolific career as a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright. Following Pound, he was one of the principal poets of the Imagist movement, though as time went on, he began to increasingly disagree with the values put forth in the work of Pound and especially [Eliot](#), who he felt were too attached to European culture and traditions. Continuing to experiment with new techniques of meter and lineation, Williams sought to invent an entirely fresh—and singularly American—poetic, whose subject matter was centered on the everyday circumstances of life and the lives of common people. His influence as a poet spread slowly during the twenties and thirties, overshadowed, he felt, by the immense popularity of Eliot's "The Waste Land"; however, his work received increasing attention in the 1950s and 1960s as younger poets, including [Allen Ginsberg](#) and the Beats, were impressed by the accessibility of his language and his openness as a mentor. His major works include *Kora in Hell* (1920), *Spring and All* (1923), *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), the five-volume epic *Paterson* (1963, 1992), and *Imaginations* (1970). Williams's health began to decline after a heart attack in 1948 and a series of strokes, but he continued writing up until his death in New Jersey in 1963.

## T. S. Eliot

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in Missouri on September 26, 1888. He lived in St. Louis during the first eighteen years of his life and attended Harvard University. In 1910, he left the United States for the Sorbonne, having earned both undergraduate and masters degrees and having contributed several poems to the *Harvard Advocate*. After a year in Paris, he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate in philosophy, but returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914. The following year, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood and began working in London, first as a teacher, and later for Lloyd's Bank.

It was in London that Eliot came under the influence of his contemporary [Ezra Pound](#), who recognized his poetic genius at once, and assisted in the publication of his work in a number of magazines, most notably "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *Poetry* in 1915. His first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published in 1917, and immediately established him as a leading poet of the avant-garde. With the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, now considered by many to be the single most influential poetic work of the twentieth century, Eliot's reputation began to grow to nearly mythic proportions; by 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world.

As a poet, he transmuted his affinity for the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century (most notably [John Donne](#)) and the 19th century French symbolist poets (including [Baudelaire](#) and Laforgue) into radical innovations in poetic technique and subject matter. His poems in many respects articulated the disillusionment of a younger post-World-War-I generation with the values and conventions—both literary and social—of the Victorian era. As a critic also, he had an enormous impact on contemporary literary taste, propounding views that, after his conversion to orthodox Christianity in the late thirties, were increasingly based in social and religious conservatism. His major later poems include *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1943); his books of literary and social criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934), and *Notes Towards the Definition of*

*Culture* (1940). Eliot was also an important playwright, whose verse dramas include *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*.

He became a British citizen in 1927; long associated with the publishing house of Faber & Faber, he published many younger poets, and eventually became director of the firm. After a notoriously unhappy first marriage, Eliot separated from his first wife in 1933, and was remarried, to Valerie Fletcher, in 1956. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, and died in London in 1965.

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