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How French *Symbolisme* modernised the English Elegy

by Bob Gillespie

In the death-chamber for a moment Death,
Sham'd by the presence of that living Might,
Blush'd to annihilation, and the breath
Revisited those lips, and Life’s pale light
Flash'd through those limbs, so late her dear delight.
"Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,
As silent lightning leaves the starless night!
Leave me not!" cried Urania: her distress
Rous’d Death: Death rose and smil’d, and met her vain caress.

Verse XXV of *Adonais*, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1821 romantic elegy for John Keats

Writing poems about death sets a challenge because their main emotion is grief and, as death is ultimate absence, their main subject is void: so what is there to write about? Death has treated all of mankind to precisely the same sad, empty ending, so, if death does not change, we might expect death poetry not to change either, subjecting each generation to a ‘same old elegy’¹. Yet, weathering social and cultural pressure since the times of Shelley, attitudes to death clearly have changed, as has death poetry itself.

And, what if there were more to death poetry than just grief or mourning? Might we discover, for example, other emotions of: horror; patriotism; gentleness; anger; disgust; hate; love; humour; loneliness? After all, poetry is

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¹ According to the OED, the word ‘elegy’ means a mournful poem, typically a lament for the dead, possibly indicating that, if a poem about death is not mournful, it is not an elegy.
language, and language is all-powerful: language can apostrophise death or can even open discourse with it using the trope of Prosopopoeia.

And this uncanny left-over, the corpse, has its poetic role not changed also? Death is survived by this strange thing, a natural, unnatural object; there and not there; a decaying, mindless doppelganger; flesh without mind, invested with spectral properties. Religion has provided an afterlife for it, a supernatural aesthetic; an axis of deistic and demonic legend, which was fundamentally important to our ancestors; and time ‘out of joint’ gave it eternity and an infinite universe, where millions of them believed the dead live on. Yet now, science seems to have pushed religion into a ‘back seat’.

In this essay, I discuss how and why content, form and style of English death poetry have changed since Shelley’s romanticism, and particularly under the influence of French modernism. I use the common idiom of death to be able to compare poetic change through time, approximately from the 1860s to the 1960s, discussing each of three periods and adding illustrative examples of verse\(^2\).

The first period leads up to and includes Charles Baudelaire’s shake-up in France of the old poetic forms and international influence of his symboliste poetry of the city with its dirt, poverty and prostitution. In the second, I describe Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot’s modernisation of English poetry by interpreting French Symbolisme and discuss T.S. Eliot’s elegy for mankind, ‘The Waste land’, possibly the greatest death poem in modern English: after a century, there is still discomfort with the strange allegory and disjointed verse of this English poem,

\(^2\) Discussion of illustrative verse is in the form of a change of font and margin.
but I argue better understanding if the reader accepts that it is an English poem written in the French symboliste style. In the third period, which begins with the ugliness, rather than the glory, of death portrayed in war poetry, I argue how later, peace-time death poetry during religious decline, anticolonialism, socialism and feminism exemplifies English modernism.

**Baudelaire’s shake-up of the old poetic forms**

This first section follows the decentring of early European death poetry from the theme of religious transcendence to poetic interest in the corpse and decay. It traces how, during the 19th century in France, Charles Baudelaire composed disturbing poems on death and city squalor, challenging the romantic, bourgeois tropes of his predecessors; and how, socially, the contemporary literary influence of Baudelaire’s *Symbolisme* and of Marx’s commentary laid a common ground for poetic renewal.

By the time Baudelaire wrote, rich religious themes of medieval death poetry had all but disappeared. Such poetry included Dante’s 14th-century epic, *La Divina Comedia*, employing heaven, purgatory and hell as religious media to promote Thomas Aquinas’s ideas and to surface Dante’s own political disputes with the Black Guelfs and the Ghibellines. Also, in the 17th century, Milton wrote his blank verse epic, *Paradise Lost*, not just to recount aspects of the book of *Genesis* or to explain original sin, but also to take a Protestant pot shot at the Catholic Stuarts.
Following the Enlightenment, 19th-century culture aimed to conceal the reality of death, creating a new sensitivity about the decay of the corpse: it affected people’s emotional relationship with the dead and raised fears about the medical dangers of rotting bodies. Baudelaire, in a graphic poem about a rotting corpse, impudently describes the effects of decomposition in, ‘Une Charogne’, 1857, a poem starting:-

Rappelez-vous l’objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d’été si doux:
Au détour d’un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

By then, Mary Shelley had published her 1818 Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, at a time when death met with scientific interest; medical research into the corpse flourished, and body snatching became a social scourge. Baudelaire wrote:-

The time is approaching when it will be understood that a literature which refuses to proceed in brotherly concord with science and philosophy is a murderous and suicidal literature.

He admired Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* and translated some of them into French: then, he tore a leaf out of Poe’s book and, where the decay of death and death’s release from the tribulations of life had been loathsome subjects before his 1857 poetic collection, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, after it, French poetry burst into a modern age of poetry of the corpse, decay, dirt and prostitution.

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3 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-58328-4_4
4 WB74
5 ibid: Poe was the first to attempt the scientific story...and the description of pathological phenomena.
English critics have at various times doubted that modern English poetry owes any debt to Baudelaire and to his French symboliste followers from 1857: indeed, poetry written by W.B. Yeats, and later by Dylan Thomas and others, shows another symbolism; that of William Blake, born in 1757. However, English poetry did also develop around the style of French Symbolisme unfolding in Britain through the work of Ezra Pound and of T.S. Eliot. Baudelaire is extensively recognised, but not always in Britain, as the creator of European poetic modernism; Ezra Pound is seen, but not always in Britain, as the principal creative figure bringing modernism to English poetry; and Eliot, author of ‘The Waste Land’, 1921, is seen, but not always, as the first major poet to successfully publish important English poetry using French symbolisme.

The impact of symbolisme was crucial to the development of English poetic modernism, and I shall refer extensively to a 1886 analysis of it published as an article in Le Figaro, ‘Le Manifeste du Symbolisme’, by the inventor himself of the word, symbolisme, the poet Jean Moréas. His article reads like the ‘blueprint’ for Eliot’s modernist ‘The Waste Land’.

But, first, what is modernism? The O.E.D. explains it as a generic term; a movement in the arts or religion which aims to depart significantly from traditional forms or ideas. In the case of this essay, and to quote the definition, modernism ‘departs’ from the ‘traditional’ style of Romanticism, a late 18th-century movement emphasising inspiration, subjectivity and the primacy of the

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6 I use the French spelling (symbolisme) to distinguish Baudelaire, Rimbaud or Mallarmé’s practice from English symbolism of, for example, William Blake. I capitalise the word where the syntax refers to the movement.
7 JM: ‘Le Manifeste du Symbolisme’ (Le Figaro supplément 18/9/1886 Paris)
individuals in poetry. We might then expect such a ‘departure’ to emphasise the opposite: empiricism, objectivity and depersonalisation, which indeed it does.

Poetic modernism in France is said to date from the publication of Baudelaire’s 1857 *Les Fleurs du Mal*, but, in Britain, it is said to date from 1910 during social change at the time of Edward VII’s death. According to Jahan Ramazani in *The Poetry of Mourning: the Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, ‘unlike the elegies of nostalgic comfort’, written to commiserate with those who mourn (‘Sonnet 71’, John Donne’s 1633 ‘Death be not Proud’ or Shelley’s *Adonais*), ‘the embittered’ elegies of Hardy, Stevens, Owen, Plath and others, both react against, and incorporate, the suppression of mourning; ‘they provide a special space for mourning, yet mock and ironize it’. In effect, the pace of modern life renders mourning difficult to accomplish; as a result, ‘one art of the modern elegy has become not transcendence or redemption of loss, but immersion in it’. The finality of the coda, the addressing of the dead in apostrophe and the pathetic fallacy, all traditional mechanisms of elegy, no longer afford consolation or closure of mourning. In addition, ‘often the deaths mourned are those of the poets themselves, as in the self-elegies of Stevens, Auden, Hardy and Plath’, a tradition inherited among others from Keats. The modern elegy, states

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8 Whereas the theme of this paper is not Romanticism, it is useful to know that its impact, dating from the French Revolution in 1789 to the coronation of Victoria in 1837, was to reduce emphasis on the objectivity and reason of the age of Enlightenment in order to look to the subjective and irrational parts of human nature, such as emotion and imagination. The movement pervaded all the arts and the six outstanding figures of English romantic poetry were Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge in a first wave, followed by Byron, Shelley and Keats. Wordsworth and Coleridge published together *Lyrical Ballads*, and the latter three corresponded with each other in Rome, where Shelley published his epic elegy on Keats, *Adonais* as a book.
9 IM64
10 PM14
11 PM4
12 ibid
13 PM30
Ramazani, offers refuge from the social denial of *public* grief and enables the work of mourning in the face of Protestant distaste for it\(^4\):

The denial of mourning became prevalent in Britain and in other English-speaking countries with the Protestant tradition...Giving way to grief is stigmatised as morbid, unhealthy, demoralising...one mourns in private as one...relieves oneself in private so as not to offend others\(^5\).

The following paragraphs illustrate some examples of pre-modern death poetry written during the 19\(^{th}\) century: they are by women who were contemporaries of Baudelaire: Christina Georgina Rossetti, 1862, and Emily Dickinson, 1863. One of Thomas Hardy’s 1913 elegies is then discussed. None of these poems adopts the epic, romantic style of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais*, but the poetry does indeed provide ‘a special space for mourning’.

The attentive, sombre tone of ‘*Remember*’, Christina Georgina Rossetti’s 1862 poem, conjures up the humourless expression reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite subjects. The tone of her sonnet is not that of the romantic epic but more that of Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 71’: it is solemn, almost matter-of-fact and never morbid. Going away is her metaphor for death, symbolising loneliness and regret, and Rossetti’s hesitation over her own impending death entails both grief and relief in a rare beauty of phrase:

\[\text{Nor I half turn to go, yet turning, stay}\]

In a post-romantic turn, which nonetheless emulates Shakespeare, the poem encourages the mourner *not* to remember the departed soul. As time goes by, should her lover first forget, and later remember, let this be without

\(^{4}\) PM15 Quoted from Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, grief and mourning* (Garden city Doubleday 1965)
\(^{5}\) Ibid.
remorse or sorrow. Remembrance becomes a symbol of life and not a mechanism for mourning: but, forgetting is the better idea; it assimilates the spectral other, whereas remembrance entails the other’s survival as a spectre within, and allows no closure. It is more successful to sacrifice remembrance and, for the would-be mourner, to kill off the ghost as Jacques Derrida explains\textsuperscript{16}.

Emily Dickinson was another woman writing pre-modern elegiac poetry whilst opening her verse to a new style. This reclusive American wrote prolifically, but was largely unpublished during her lifetime. Published posthumously in 1890, she wrote ‘\textit{Because I could not stop for death}’ as a submissive, lonely narrative about a gentlemanly ‘death’ riding slowly with her and ‘immortality’ into eternity. Despite the year of writing, about 1863, the characteristic hyphens which break up her syntax, in addition to her ‘slant’ rhyming, are features of modern poetry\textsuperscript{17}. ‘Death’ is a man, whom Dickinson finds a benevolent travelling companion, in a coach and horses advancing slowly into the sunset, with a sexual undercurrent possibly osé for her times. Her style is melancholic, the dying narrator dressed in a gown of gossamer as if it were her wedding day, but wearing a modest tippet of tulle and not a veil. Being dressed not quite for a wedding, but for death, heightens the pathos she conveys. Meekly on the way to her eternal grave, just ‘a swelling of the ground’, she falls away distracted, and her language

\textsuperscript{16} JD152. Mourning depends \textit{not} on the other in us, but on us: in ‘successful’ mourning, the other is assimilated but, as the dead person is then no longer seen as other, this amounts to infidelity. Whereas ‘unsuccessful’ mourning allows the other to remain the other within and so to haunt, but this is fidelity.

\textsuperscript{17} IM142
compresses time itself in a iambic tetrameter followed by a iambic trimeter, both favourite rhythms of this poet.

21 Since then- 'tis Centuries- and yet
22 Feels shorter than the Day

Throughout, the reader is aware of the relentless trot of the horses providing rhythmic company for the narrator. When ‘death’ changes to ‘we’ during the journey, the reader understands that she is dying, and the last verse lays her finally in the grave, the ending chilling in the dank humidity of a sunset.

In these two poems, Rossetti and Dickinson write introspectively and use some modern tropes: their elegies are neither theological in content, nor epic in style, nor overdetermined. Both poets are writing death poetry which is different from that of the early 19th century, however, both return to the style of Shakespeare’s early ‘Sonnet 71’, but with discrete sexual tones and with hyphens and slant rhyming. Furthermore Dickinson, who experiments with witnessing her own death in, ‘I heard a fly buzz when I died’, dresses her narrator in a wedding gown, just like Dickens’s Miss Havisham in Great Expectations published two years earlier, in 1861.

Thomas Hardy occupies a special place in the transition to modern poetry. Born in 1840, a contemporary of Baudelaire, of Marx, of Freud, of the Bloomsbury Group, of Pound, Eliot and Stevens, Thomas Hardy is thought of as the last Victorian, and as the first English, modern poet: his self-reproaching elegies for his first wife, Emma, occur early in 20th-century
English poetry\textsuperscript{18}. His elegies flirt with self-destructive melancholia and even question why he finds grief so appealing\textsuperscript{19}. If the poet forgets his beloved, he destroys her ghost within, and this fear explains Hardy's prolific writing of more than a hundred elegies for Emma, his \textit{estranged} wife\textsuperscript{20}. His was a failed marriage which blossomed into success only after her death\textsuperscript{21}. Often, what begins as an elegy for her, ends as an elegy for himself\textsuperscript{22}: he suggests that his obsessive mourning is a show less of love, than of guilt, and this protracts the course of his grief\textsuperscript{23}. Hardy was angry at his wife’s death and angry at himself for being angry with her\textsuperscript{24}. He writes about this in ‘The Going’, 1913.

His poetry is rhyming and of great beauty, the varying iambs lending rhythm in a flourish of mixed metre and enjambment:

\begin{verbatim}
  8      Never to bid good-bye
  9      Or lip me the softest call,
 10     Or utter a wish for a word, while I
 11     Saw morning harden upon the wall,
 12     Unmoved, unknowing
 13     That your great going
 14     Had place that moment, and altered all.
\end{verbatim}

Hardy’s ‘accusing child’ does not jar; the reader really does find him- or herself capturing the emotion. The novelist brings a sober dimension along with a strain of bitterness to an elegy which has nothing of the epic of romantic elegy, nor of classical obscurity, nor of flowery overdetermination or difficult language.

\textsuperscript{18} PM5
\textsuperscript{19} PM36
\textsuperscript{20} PM47
\textsuperscript{21} PM48
\textsuperscript{22} PM52
\textsuperscript{23} PM67
\textsuperscript{24} PM48
During Hardy’s times, W.B. Yeats, Henry James and Joseph Conrad were experimenting with artistic styles, such as impressionism and various forms of symbolism, and the four years between 1879 and 1893 saw the births of a group of exceptional, literary contemporaries-to-be, all who were to contribute in their own style to the birth of modernism: Wallace Stevens; Lytton Strachey; Virginia Woolf; James Joyce; T.E. Hulme; Ezra Pound; D.H. Lawrence; Hilda Doolittle, known as H.D.; T.S. Eliot and Wilfred Owen. These writers and poets were to live through times of social upheaval from late Victorian decline, the Boer War, Edwardian social and cultural change and the Great War, to the Great Depression. Some survived the Second World War, with Stevens, Pound, Eliot and H.D. still writing poetry after 1945. Later British poets were to carry the modernist torch of change in other ways: among them, Dylan Thomas, influenced by William Blake and W.H. Auden, professor of poetry at Oxford between 1956 and 1961 and an admirer of the Victorian Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

An astute observer of her cultural *milieu*, Virginia Woolf wrote in her 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’ that:

> On or about December 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.

December 1910 was the date of the first post-impressionist exhibition in London, which introduced the English public to developments in the visual arts already
existing for a generation in France, but Woolf was rather alluding to social change following Edward VII’s death. Edward’s reign appeared to straddle an abyss between the old world and the new. Where Woolf labelled Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells as Edwardians, as materialists more interested in the trappings of life than in the internal lives of their characters, for her, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence and Strachey, her Bloomsbury friends, represented the real rebellion of English literature against the conservatism of Edward’s reign. As it had happened in France, the artistic idioms of impressionism and of cubism, and the Marxian interest in citizens living in the poverty of the cities, were to disrupt the styles of her contemporaries. French modernism was about to break into, and to upset, English poetic ‘wittering’, which seemed so backward at the time to Woolf’s Francophile pen pal, T.S. Eliot: he wrote, in an indictment of English, ‘freakish and odd’ modernism, that distinguished poets are ‘trifling’ and lack curiosity in moral matters. After reading in Symons’s, The Symbolist Movement in Literature about Jules Laforgue’s use of impressionism to inspire his poetry, Eliot gave his own a distinctly symboliste character, believing that French poetry had much to offer:

The kind of poetry that I needed to teach me the use of my own voice did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French.

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25 IM64
26 Eliot quips that the English poets who consider themselves most opposed to Georrianism, and who know a little French, are mostly such as could imagine the last judgement only as a ‘lavish display of Bengal lights, Roman candles, Catherine wheels and inflammable fire balloons.’ (BL)
27 SM: Symons delves into the symboliste poetry of... Laforgue and especially of Mallarmé
28 Impressionism is concerned with the difficulty of recording the individual experience of the outer world, while symbolism addresses the problem of expressing to the outer world the most interior of experiences. IM55.
At this point, to understand how symbolisme affected Eliot’s work, a little more needs to be said about Charles Baudelaire who, for many, is the creator of European poetic modernism. His Les Fleurs du Mal was immediately challenged as immoral in the French courts and banned from circulation. Pericles Lewis in The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism qualifies this event as:

The starting point in the history of European modernism because it raised the problem of official and public incomprehension in the face of new literary techniques.30

Lewis also attributes a role to Flaubert in launching literary modernism:

generally used today to describe all experimental literature in English of the first half of the 20th century... in its broadest sense... (modernism) refers to art and literature since Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert... in a more restricted sense it applies especially to work produced between the two world wars.31

When the intrepid Baudelaire found himself in court for having published six erotic poems among the one-hundred-and-eight in his Les Fleurs du Mal, other poets among his contemporaries were searching to confront romanticism in their own ways: among them, Walt Whitman, who wrote 'O Captain! My Captain!' and Emily Dickinson in the United States; the English Robert Browning, who wrote 'My Last Duchess' in Italy and, of course, Thomas Hardy in England. Baudelaire's work influenced French contemporaries including Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue, and while he was writing in ways which offended the French bourgeoisie, Karl Marx was writing about Dialectical Materialism in London for the New York Daily Tribune.

30 IM38
31 IM96
32 WB104: Walter Benjamin writes: 'Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality imimical to all this will.'
Baudelaire’s poetry, unlike that of the Parnassiens\(^{33}\), was first branded as ‘décadent’, but it launched a cultural movement which was so radical, that the 1857 ban on his six erotic poems was not lifted by the French courts until 1949.

In France, the Greek poet, Jean Moréas, recommended that Baudelaire’s inventive poetry should be called, Symbolisme, referring to an idea in line 3 of his early poem, ‘Correspondances’:

1. La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
2. Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
3. L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
4. Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Our understanding of Symbolisme would be far poorer without Moréas’s guidance: in his seminal 1886 article, he describes its aesthetics and how Symbolisme breaks with romantic poetry: however, in doing so, he omits to mention that symbolism is an old idea, which already exists in other forms; in English, for example, William Blake’s allegorical ‘dark satanic mills’, his ‘Lamb’ and his ‘Tyger Tyger, burning bright’, in his Songs of Innocence and Experience (1795), established a different understanding of it. Blake’s symbolism is not Baudelaire’s symbolisme: Moréas describes this as ‘not didactic’; about dirty cities, where shady, mechanical beings quiver between setback and decay; where deeds are never completed\(^{34}\). If characters appear, writes Moréas, they do so as instruments to reveal feeling. Blake did not use symbols like this: his content repeatedly referred to a small number of them, such as children, flowers, doves,

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\(^{33}\) A French 19\textsuperscript{th}-century literary style influenced by Théophile Gautier occurring after Romanticism and before Symbolisme.

\(^{34}\) JM
lambs and seasons, presented in a quasi-sublime style to both communicate and to conceal his political opinions because, as a printer of posters and broadsheets, Blake was continually exposed to political scrutiny. Moréas describes symbolisme as more extensive, explaining that its function is to shut out the ‘exquisite’ inspiration and vain subjectivity of romantic poetry by rejecting its ‘instruction and bluster’.

In presenting the ‘process’ of symbolisme, Moréas explains that it presents objects, nature, actions, things, and phenomena, in a poetry which is not about these objects, nature, actions, things, and phenomena; it is only about producing emotions in the reader. Although symbolisme roots itself in the real and in the natural, it searches to mediate the ineffable: its symbols communicate emotions to be experienced by the reader without specifying those emotions. The poet’s art of symbolisme, writes Moréas, is to use the physical world to produce a desired affect within the mind of the reader: nature, human actions and perceptible phenomena are expressed, but, again, never the emotion itself.

Symboliste poetry can be difficult. Because the poet, writing in this French style, does not specify emotion, he or she deserts the reader to ponder the poetry’s allusions unaided, just as one might ponder an impressionist or a cubist painting alone. Lewis writes:

The emphasis on the arrangement of...a...painting, and the possibility of breaking with the traditional illusion of three-dimensional space, pointed the way toward abstract art, just as Mallarmé’s emphasis on a pure poetry pointed away from literature as representation of the objective world.

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35 ibid
36 IM51
And to stress that this is no mere accident, he quotes Mallarmé:

To name the object is to destroy three quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which comes from guessing at it bit by bit: to suggest the object that it is the dream. It is the perfect practice of this mystery which constitutes the symbol.\(^{37}\)

Accordingly, the varying white gaps (les blancs), between the words of some of Mallarmé’s poetry, bring the reader to wander into loose arrays of meaning: as a result, any reading can be read to mean something different from any other. Symbolisme marks the cultural dawn of the abstract and the artist’s, or poet’s, desertion of his or her viewer, or reader, to face the artist’s work unaided.

Moréas adds that symbolisme uses ‘lush’, vigorous, modern French; that its poetry does not show off and is attentive to, and engrossed in, its narrative. He presents the new poetry as simple and elegant, as free from traditional metrical constraints. The new vers libres show varying rhythms, rotating gaps, baffling ellipsis, hanging discontinuity; the old metres are artfully upset with rhymes, which can be obscure, but must be fluid; unlike the ‘traditional’ Alexandrines, rhythmic combinations may now even be based on prime numbers, seven, eleven or thirteen.\(^{38}\)

John Porter Houston writes that symboliste poetry can be unresolved, disorientating, incoherent, fragmentary, disordered and generally disturbed. Like Moréas, he confirms that symbolisme conveys feeling by describing nature and not by glorifying the poet, and he observes that its content is frequently

\(^{37}\) IM40
\(^{38}\) JM
melancholic\textsuperscript{39}. In this, he concludes that a politics of impersonality is a necessary part of symboliste poetry and not just an idle choice.

Symons claims that, because Baudelaire was little-known and much misunderstood in England\textsuperscript{40}, Symbolisme reached England later than Ireland, Belgium, the USA or even Russia; when it did finally arrive in Britain thanks to the work of Pound and of Eliot, both of whom were familiar with French modernism, it followed a literary foretaste from Irish writers, such as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats, and from the Americans, Henry James and Abbott Whistler\textsuperscript{41}.

The following paragraphs illustrate examples of symbolisme in modern death poetry. I begin with the theme of death in Les Fleurs du Mal, and then present a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, 1863, followed by one by Wallace Stevens, 1921.

Themes of snails, black worms and decaying corpses break any conceivable link with romantic poetry and disconcert the bourgeois readers of Baudelaire’s ‘Le Mort Joyeux’\textsuperscript{42}: the narrator is the ‘joyful dead’ describing how, in a rich soil, he wishes to dig his own deep trench in which he would spread his old bones and sleep ‘like a shark on the wave’. In what Moréas euphemistically describes as ‘oddness of metaphor’, Baudelaire’s ferocious symbols produce feelings of disgust and of distrust of a narrator who admires

\textsuperscript{39} FSZ;23;95
\textsuperscript{40} SM113
\textsuperscript{41} IM57
\textsuperscript{42} WB163 : Walter Benjamin writes, ‘Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside. Baudelaire sees it also from within.’
thanatological decomposition and wishes to lie ‘on the wave’ like a shark, part harmless, and part man-eating.

1. Dans une terre grasse et pleine d’escargots
2. Je veux creuser moi-même une fosse profonde,
3. Où je puisse à loisir étaler mes vieux os
4. Et dormir dans l’oubli comme un requin dans l’onde

Without, as Moréas writes, ‘distilling’ his ideas, Baudelaire claims that he hates the pomp of death, of wills and tombs, and that, rather than expecting the tears of those who mourn him, he prefers their indifference. In self-loathing, he invites crows to peck his carcass ‘down to the blood’; and black worms, blind and deaf ‘friends’, living ‘philosophers’ and ‘children of decay’ to welcome him as a free and joyful corpse. The symbol of black worms eating human flesh is in itself repugnant and re-used almost sixty years later by Wallace Stevens with very similar effect in his 1916 poem, ‘The Worms at Heaven’s Gate’. Baudelaire’s symbols of death created startling poetic content with affects of dismay, disgust, outrage, embarrassment, horror, irritation, hostility, alarm and fear, where other poets had produced only mourning and grief in writing poetry about death.

An angel holding gifts of sleep and of sweet dreams with a clean bed for the poor symbolises their death in Baudelaire’s ‘La Mort des Pauvres’. Also published in 1857, the poem relates how death is the aim of life for the destitute, and this some sixty years before publication of Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, where he describes this as the Death Drive43.

1. C’est la Mort qui console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;

43 The desire to return to an inanimate state such as the one in the womb in the search for quietude. (FR166)
Moréas further writes that symbolisme includes a theme of crowds of city poor advancing with ‘setbacks’ to accomplish deeds which remain ‘incomplete’. Just as if he had read Moréas and been influenced by Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot writes too of city poor and of the distressed in ‘The Waste Land’:

62 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
63 I had not thought death had undone so many.

In 1863, less than a month after his twenty-first birthday, Stéphane Mallarmé’s father died and the poet wrote, ‘Les Fenêtres’: in it, he compares the pain and ugliness of the real world with the beauty and happiness of an ideal one. The opening challenges the stench and the dirt of the hospice and the grim and drooping appearance of his father, a dying man:

1 Las du triste hôpital et de l’encens fétide
2 Qui monte en la blancheur banale des rideaux
3 Vers le grand crucifix ennuyé du mur vide,
4 Le moribond, parfois, redresse son vieux dos

The narrator presents symbols of a bright horizon beyond the windows and of golden galleys as lovely as swans sleeping on a perfumed purple river, writing:

18 Son œil, à l’horizon de lumière gorgé,
19 Voit des galères d’or, belles comme des cygnes,
20 Sur un fleuve de pourpre et de parfums dormir

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44 WB85: Walter Benjamin writes: ‘The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for people who have been abandoned. The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd.’ From the (French noun flâneur, meaning ‘stroller’, ‘lounger’, or ‘loafer’. Flânerie is the act of strolling, which Baudelaire loved to do in the city.)
The word, *dormir*, is playfully located here, not at the beginning of line 20, but at the end: in Mallarmé style, it hangs enigmatically, but syntactically correctly, bringing a reader to reread it in an example of what John Porter Houston calls the disorientating, disordered and generally disturbed syntax of *symboliste* poetry\(^{45}\), disturbed syntax of which Mallarmé was the undisputed master.

In the U.S.A., Mallarmé’s *alter ego* in the *symboliste* style was Wallace Stevens, an insurance company executive, who staged ‘similar collisions of grand abstraction and mundane reality’\(^{46}\). If his ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ describes a wake, then his ‘*Cortège for Rosenbloom*, 1921, describes the funeral march. Exceptional for its rhythms and ethnic playfulness, Stevens’s symbols hover between humour and ridicule. He plays with ethnicity, the corpse seemingly buried according to a Tibetan rite, and the rhyming lines of the first verse using comic assonance of the words *treading, tread* and *dead*, although the second verse quickly focuses on the macabre appearance of the corpse in a funeral *cortège* tramping slowly up a hill.

6 They carry the wizened one  
7 Of the colour of horn  
8 To the sullen hill,  
9 Treading a tread  
10 In unison for the dead.

We learn that this *cortège* ‘turns up the sky’, ‘bearing his body into the sky’. Stevens describes the mourners as ‘infants of misanthropes’ and of

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\(^{45}\) FS

\(^{46}\) Mallarmé’s influence was immense... Eliot, Pound, Joyce... moved in his shadow, and, especially, Wallace Stevens, who staged similar ‘collisions’ of grand abstraction and mundane reality... Thirteen ways of looking at a Blackbird' reflects Mallarmé’s style https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/11/stephane-mallarme-prophet-of-modernism
‘nothingness’ wearing turbans and fur boots ‘in a region of frost’. He writes an onomatopoeic twist with the ‘chirr of gongs’, the ‘chitter’ of the people and the ‘thrum’ of the march, suggesting some jangling Asiatic rite, which, religiously, is probably not Rosenbloom’s own. If this march of grief were Tibetan, where they do indeed bury the dead ‘in the sky’, Rosenbloom’s corpse would be exposed on a mountaintop to be consumed by vultures and to rot. The intention of this playful poem may be to ridicule the pomp of funerals, but is there not also a powerful symbol in a lonely corpse buried by unknown people far from home and family? In precisely a century, Stevens shows how far elegy has come, because such humour, such a topic and such ethnic playfulness are totally unimaginable in the romantic style of Adonaïs, written in 1821: however, Shelley had written ‘Ozymandias’ in plain English in 1818 during a sonnet competition with Horace Smith and John Keats, already, it seems, predicting a dawn of post-romanticism.

10 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
11 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
12 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
13 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

Symbolisme upset Romanticism with an avalanche of new forms and styles: allegory was reinforced; Baudelaire brought dirt, smells, decay, corpses, worms, snails, prostitution, city poverty and squalor to poetry with a dream of vers libres:

Who among us has not dreamed, in his ambitious moments, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, yet without rhythm and without rhyme, supple

\[WB159: \text{Walter Benjamin writes: 'Allegory is the armature of modernity'}\]
and darting enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the
undulations of reverie, and the sudden leaps of consciousness? This
obsessive ideal is born, above all, from the experience of giant cities, from
the intersecting of their myriad relations.\textsuperscript{48}

His followers did adopt plain language, but often with fragmentary, difficult and
disturbed syntax; rhyming became obscure; varying rhythms appeared;
Mallarmé introduced discontinuity, white spaces and ellipsis, and the ‘bluster
and instruction’ of romanticism vanished.

As the fin-de-siècle approached, American interest in Stéphane Mallarmé's
poetry grew. His willingness in Paris to teach others about French modernism
chez-lui in his excellent English in the rue de Rome on Tuesday afternoons,
attended, among others, by the writer, A. Symons, led to publication of this
American’s, \textit{The Symbolist Movement in Literature} in 1899. This book set the
backdrop in the United States and in Ireland to the arrival of a poetry of
modernism, but one which would not appear in England until around 1910, and
this thanks to another American, Ezra Pound, whose influence on British poetry
was to first transform it from a subjective exercise, into a poetry of the ‘image’,
using clear, precise, ‘hard’ language.

\textbf{Clear light, hard edges and an English elegy for mankind}

Baudelaire’s \textit{Symbolisme} set the scene for both European and American
poetic modernism. This section describes the work done, first by Ezra Pound, and
then by T.S. Eliot, to modernise Edwardian poetry in line with the direction set

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{WB98 From Baudelaire, Oeuvres Vol. 1} (p405)
by the French Symbolistes. It happened at a time when romantic aesthetics and Victorian rigidity finally became prey to the winds of change. Poetic modernism was helped along by Ezra Pound between 1909 and 1914 in launching movements with similar poetic tropes, which he called Imagisme, and Vorticism. Both were short lived, but left a lasting heritage of free verse and of sober language. Eliot published ‘The Waste Land’ in 1922, a long, complex poem which, I try to show, embodies most of the instruction of French modernism, bringing a ‘home-grown’ archetype of symboliste poetry to the English language.

Ezra Pound insisted from the start on adding the final ‘-e’ to Imagisme⁴⁹, explicitly admitting French influence on his ideas: French critics confirmed this repeatedly, writing that the Imagistes were nothing more than English descendants of Symbolisme anyway. However, Imagism appeared grotesque to English and American reviewers; its immediate forerunner was unknown because it could be found nowhere in the English language. Launched in 1910, Imagism mixed Moréas’s ideas on Symbolisme with Henri Bergson’s ideas on images, objects and intuition, into a modern guideline aimed at British and American poets⁵⁰. It characterised the poetry of a girlfriend from Pound’s teenage years⁵¹, the American, Hilda Doolittle, who called herself H.D., and Pound worked later with the cubist painter, Percy Wyndham Lewis, to create a

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⁴⁹ The rest of this essay drops Pound’s -e
⁵⁰ Bergson treated... consciousness and the material world as images, so freeing himself from any subject/object opposition (Matière et Mémoire, Henri Bergson 1896)... an object can be known both absolutely through intuition, and relatively, through analysis (Introduction à la Métaphysique, Henri Bergson 1903). ... intellect is quantitative and merely analyses, whereas intuition is qualitative and places the artist within the object... this philosophy seemed essential to a finer understanding of the arts. Also see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Bergson#Lectures_on_change
⁵¹ IM83
movement he called Vorticism, a ‘swirling’, cubist\textsuperscript{52}, version of Imagism, which blended comfortably with Wyndham Lewis’s, work. Reputed for his difficult personality, creativity, energy and focus, Pound was often accused of plagiarism, but, at all events, he broke the poetic inertia of the old ways. Although Imagism and Vorticism were both short lived, not even surviving 1918, their simplifying impact on the language and syntax of English poetry persists. Pound’s stubbornness and creativity may have abetted the political misjudgement of his later life\textsuperscript{53}, but they also connected the umbilical cord of \textit{Symbolisme} to England’s infant modernism.

The Imagists, Flint, Hulme and Pound were joined in 1910 by H.D. and by Richard Aldington, who was trying to attain Mallarmé’s subtleties of cadence in his own English poetry. Their movement aimed at freeing English poetry from the ‘tyranny’ of conventional form and at attacking Victorian, moralising, sentimental, styles, which they found ‘sloppy’, ‘moaning’ and ‘whining’. They wished to oust the portly Victorian poetry of Empire. Only hard, cold, dry, austere and impersonal language could free them from its excessive sentiment, sadness, effeminacy and ‘emotional ‘slither’\textsuperscript{54}. Where \textit{symboliste} poetry was already less lyrical than romanticism, imagist poetry was to be even ‘harder’. Pound wanted to avoid unnecessary words; indeed, his liking for free verse shares something of Moréas’s thoughts; poetry had to be objective, direct, with

\textsuperscript{52} IV: Picasso disjoins separate planes which synthesise a cubist image only when seen together, a cubist poem is made up of a \textit{staccato} of…verses, each one like a cubist plane,…together they constitute a poetic \textit{gestalt}. (See also VB)

\textsuperscript{53} Ezra Pound never renounced his antisemitism nor his admiration of Benito Mussolini in Italy following the 1922 Fascist March on Rome.

\textsuperscript{54} PM21  Kipling’s celebrated ‘If’, 1910, was criticised by E.M. Forster as ‘imperialistic, class-conscious and representative of a world governed by white men and machines’. Wilde called Kipling, ‘our first authority on the second rate’: from, \textit{E.M. Forster as Critic}, Rukun Advani (Routledge Library Editions 1984)
no excessive use of adjectives and with no ‘shaky’ metaphors that ‘wouldn’t permit examination’.

Pound had written to William Carlos Williams in October 1908 on the ultimate attainments of poetics as: to paint the thing as I see it; to add beauty; to free it from didacticism; and to be brief. He later added that ‘poetic ideas are best expressed by rendering concrete objects’\textsuperscript{55}. As Symbolisme had freed French poetry from the conventional form of the Alexandrines, the Imagists found no virtue in iambs, nor even in rhythm itself: poetry was to be composed in the sequence of a musical phrase and not of a metronome. Pound’s image was to be ecstatically held in isolation: he claimed that the gulf between evocation and description…is the ‘unbridgeable difference between genius and talent’\textsuperscript{56}. If the image was to produce such emotion, imagist poetry presumably had to communicate something of the impassioned: he attempted to explain this in 1913, defining the image as ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’, adding in 1914 that, ‘the image is not an idea’, which was possibly the most pertinent feature distinguishing imagism from Symbolisme. Furthermore, authentic feeling, and not ‘high’ emotionalism, was to be the result of direct perception of, or contact with, the thing.

Pound’s instruction became tiresome: it went on and on; he wanted poetry to isolate ‘luminous details’, and his ‘Ideogrammic Method’ was to allow poetry, like Chinese or Japanese writing, to treat abstract content through concrete

\textsuperscript{55} Imagist Anthology 1930, ‘Those Were the Days’ Chatto & Windus, 1930, p. xiii
\textsuperscript{56} ‘The later Yeats’: Poetry, May 1914: reprinted in Literary Essays of Ezra Pound and TS Eliot, Faber and Faber 1960 p. 380
images. The poem itself, not the word, was to be the unit of meaning: it would have to be concise, tight, precise, with no narrative. He became inflexible on any return of ‘flableness’, the watchwords being ‘hard lighting and clear edges’ to protect the integrity of the image.

As Pound probably thought that he approached his goal, imagist poetry lost all possibility of appearing impassioned, in fact, it became terse and, at first glance, superficial. His avalanche of increasingly obscure guidelines became such a constraint that, finally, the Imagists just wrote poetry like everyday speech, using irregular metre with short lines and avoiding traditional stanza forms, and Imagism’s barren, aesthetic system rapidly became minimalist and empty. In addition, he failed to develop the meaning of his intellectual and emotional complex of the image. As a result, Imagism was criticised as precious and cryptic; too poor in imagination; allowing no similes; no moralising; the poetry became dull and contained no narrative. Imagism may have turned the knife in the wound of British ‘emotional slither’, but it replaced it with an uneasy space; so much so that preference for impersonality and rejection of psychological depth placed Imagism outside the mainstream of other modernist writing, which persistently returned to Freudian themes.

Showing the lasting impact of Pound’s instruction, the following modern poems illustrate the influence of both imagist and vorticist styles in death poetry, although of these poets, only H.D. officially joined the Imagist

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57 Based on Pound’s reading of Fenollosa’s, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919)
movement: the poems are by H.D. 1915, 1957, Stevens 1916, 1922, Yeats
1928 and Auden 1940.

According to Freud’s analysis of her, H.D. was above all a poet of the
‘thingness of things’\textsuperscript{58}: her verse was said to resemble sculpture rather than
music; the ‘marble quality’ of her imagist poetry communicated exactly the
type of ‘mystery’ Pound was looking for. Her poems are austere with no
reflection on human experience; no striving after the theological; no fixed
metre or rhyme, but a rhythm nonetheless; there is no narrative, nor
vagueness or abstraction. Her poem, ‘Oread’, called after a mountain nymph,
was published in the founding issue of BLAST, Wyndham Lewis’s magazine on
Vorticism, of which only two editions were ever published: ‘Oread’ is one of
the finest examples of vorticist poetry and, although not about death, is
useful as a precise example of what Pound wanted:

\begin{verbatim}
Whirl up, sea-
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.
\end{verbatim}

The image swirls like a vortex: in six lines with no superfluous word, it is
complete, captured in an instant of time, producing consternation at the
overwhelming power of nature, and comforting Pound’s definition:

\begin{verbatim}
The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can,
and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and
into which, ideas are constantly rushing.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{58} Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir (London, 1916), p106
The Vorticists emphasised motion using violent rhetoric. Their artists studied and, to some extent, copied the brash modernism of Picasso’s cubism, from which the English movement strove mightily to distinguish itself.

Some of H.D.’s later poetry veered from strict imagism: for example, ‘Never more will the wind’ (1957) is a short elegy of concise beauty:

Never more will the wind
cherish you again,
ever more will the rain.

Never more
shall we find you bright
in the snow and wind.

The snow is melted,
the snow is gone,
and you are flown:

Like a bird out of our hand,
like a light out of our heart,
you are gone.

Not completely ‘hard edged’, this poem is of deceptive simplicity: it progresses through lines of fondness where, in a departure from imagism, H.D. uses the word ‘cherish’ which, explicitly stating emotion, would not appear in symboliste poetry. The second verse introduces emotional ruin: possibly H.D. evokes Poe’s 1845 ‘The Raven’ with her own, ‘Never more’. Then, two lines denote utter absence brought on by death. H.D. closes with a flurry of symbols: in the last line, her ‘you are flown’ leaves final emptiness, a metaphor for death. A bird is fragile, like life, a being one would gently

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60 Les Demoiselles d’Avignon was painted in 1907
61 IM85
cherish: life flies like a light out of our heart; we are left in darkness, and a simple 'you are gone' closes in, leaving death.

Wallace Stevens was not an Imagist either, but in his 1916 poem, ‘The Worms at Heaven's Gate’, his language mimics imagism and integrates movement in a way which emulates the style of vorticism. This short poem describes the decay of a corpse, opening with an optimistic line carrying hope of the resurrection of Badroulbodour, Aladdin's wife. The poem, written in the first person plural, begins by presenting her in a chariot but then, strangely, she appears 'within our bellies'. Bewilderment turns to revulsion as her body parts are presented, one after another, an eye, the lashes and its lid: fragile flesh regales the bellies of these worms as we read on in disgust at the decay of this woman's erstwhile beauty and at her corpse nourishing these repugnant creatures as they come and go to regurgitate it.

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbodour,
Within our bellies, we her chariot.
Here is an eye. And here are, one by one,
The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
And, finger after finger, here, the hand,
The genius of that cheek. Here are the lips,
The bundle of the body and the feet.
Out of the tomb we bring Badroulbadour.

Stevens’s hard syntax and vers libres paint an image rich in movement, the worms ‘rotating’ back and forth in the style of vorticism: furthermore, it seems clear that Stevens’s poem was inspired by Baudelaire’s living ‘philosophers’, the black worms of 'Le Mort Joyeux'.
The second verse of Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’, 1922, focuses in the style of imagism on the death of a poor, old woman. Almost all of the lines talk of things and of nature before confirming in the last line that, facing death, there is no supreme privilege; that the only ‘Emperor’ is a whipper of ‘concupiscent curds’. The poet paints a poignant image of tenderness towards a poor, dead woman, as Baudelaire shows compassion in, ‘La Mort des Pauvres’. A sideboard of soft pinewood is the dead woman’s furniture: she had never bothered to replace three missing glass knobs, but, embroidering fantails on a sheet, had created a little beauty for her pall; the language is hard and factual. With every line, the poet constructs an image.

9     Take from the dresser of deal.
10    Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
11    On which she embroidered fantails once
12    And spread it so as to cover her face.
13    If her horny feet protrude, they come
14    To show how cold she is, and dumb.
15    Let the lamp affix its beam.

This woman’s lost humanity, and the fear her death mask provokes, lead the narrator to want to cover her face, but then, her 'horny' feet protrude. The narrator forces us to look at this unfolding image and to pity, insisting that the lamp’s beam be fixed on her. There is no romantic fluff: the imagism is cold and clear.

Starting with funeral preparations in Stevens’s imagist-like ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ in a country like Cuba, where they roll cigars, followed by a symboliste-like burial ‘in the sky’ in a country like Tibet in his ‘Cortège for
Rosenbloom’, he completes a death-and-burial trilogy with his vorticist-like ‘The Worms at Heaven's Gate’, in a country like Arabia: the three poems together display a strange worldview of burial and decay, but also his knowledge and mastery of English poetic modernism from 1916.

The majority of W.B. Yeats’s poetry, especially during his early period, shows a conception of symbolism derived from the visionary poems of the romantic, William Blake and from Blake’s ideas of the occult. However, a short poem appearing in The Tower collection, called ‘The Wheel’ and written in 1928, some years after his association with Ezra Pound, shows his modernist command of ‘hard’ syntax, though rhyming in iambic tetrameter:

Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter’s best of all;
And after that there’s nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come -
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.

As ‘our’ seasons lead on, ‘we’ declare that ‘winter’s best of all’, when we shall be able to enjoy the free time left to us: but when winter arrives, it does so as the final season and never again do we cycle into another spring; in life, spring never returns; in fact, there is no cycle in life because, in winter, our wheel stops turning: the progression of our seasons is one-way; there can be no re-turn. Winter ‘disturbs our blood’, and we long in the end only for the tomb. The poem shows a hard, clear imagery as Ezra Pound would have
wished and as H.D. might have written into her work, but its meter and rhyming belie Yeats’s shrinking embrace of modern vers libres even in 1928.

Finally, although W.H. Auden was not an Imagist either, the first two quatrains of his ‘Funeral Blues’, 1940, resolutely mimic imagism, the narrator producing grief by talking of clocks and telephones and of dogs and pianos. There is no weeping or excess. Everyday entities assembled in Auden’s verse powerfully communicate abandon and bleakness, but there is no talk of loneliness, nor of desertion: the narrator pronounces not a single word of it; stopped clocks signify the end of time; silent dogs and a muffled drum signal the end of life itself.

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum

However, Auden’s poetry slips into peculiar hyperbole, bringing in ‘public doves’ and ‘traffic policemen’ and smudging the poem’s hard lighting and clear edges a little. Where, in the first verses, his poetic ideas are expressed as ‘concrete’ images, the two final ‘half-lit’, quatrains abandon imagism to affect a weak symbolism of flimsy analogy: ‘no direction is good’; the narrator has lost his north, south, east and west; nature itself is abolished; like Yeats’s ‘nothing good’ in ‘The Wheel’, Auden’s narrator states an equally extravagant, ‘nothing now can come to any good’. Ezra Pound might have found this second part indigestible, its rhythm too ‘tum-pum at a stretch’ as he comments on T.S. Eliot’s first draft of ‘The Waste Land’63. The difference

63 WL11
between the two halves of the poem arises because they were written at
different times: Auden’s first two quatrains were written and published in a
1939 play co-authored with Christopher Isherwood, called *The Ascent of F6*,
and this appeared before the rest of the poem; Auden’s writing of the second
half of his poem was deferred in time to a moment more inspired by lyricism.
Also, the first part of his elegy reads like a set of instructions to an audience,
raising the dimension of mourning to a public act and drawing a fine line
between private mourning and desire for public recognition: in this, its style
is similar to that of Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ and, at least
in the first part of the poem, Auden skilfully applies Pound’s modernism..

Claims that the imagist pedigree was French appears to be beyond dispute
and, if it extended beyond *Symbolisme*, it did so to include a Bergsonian view of
the object and of artistic intuition, which was also French.

Liking austere, precise presentation and free verse, Pound attacked
conventional, Edwardian lyrics. He attacked narrative, excessive verbiage,
moralising, ‘sloppiness’, ‘moaning and whining’; he struck at candid sentiment
and emotionalism too. He rejected vagueness and the lyrical, promoting a
language of ‘clear light and hard edges’ as in an image; he liked dry, brief, even
colloquial, language, with few adjectives.

Pound promoted major poets of the period in American little magazines
like *Poetry* (of which he was the London correspondent) and *The Egoist* (of which
he was the poetry editor). He befriended W.B. Yeats, who was 20 years his senior,
encouraging him during the winters of 1913 to 1916 towards poetic precision and more colloquial language\textsuperscript{64}. He helped Yeats to ‘harden’ his later poetry: they shared a cottage in Sussex where they studied occult law, Chinese poetry, and Japanese Noh drama; Pound served as Yeats's secretary and Yeats praised the younger man for helping him to eliminate the abstract from his poetry; in return, Pound learned much from Yeats about how to write poetry. Yeats quipped that ‘we make out of our quarrel with others, rhetoric, but our quarrel with ourselves, poetry’\textsuperscript{65}.

D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce joined the periphery of the Imagist group, but both were too passionate to accept the shower of rules which Pound imposed. The movement suffered from his obsessive focus on them, while its members, who were individual artists, were more interested in just getting on with their poetry.

Pound’s biggest problem was his behaviour, which was not liked: as a result, he deserted the Imagists and joined Wyndham Lewis at the vorticist magazine, \textit{BLAST}, which was to disappear at the end of the Great War. After that, he left to live in Italy, where his sympathies with Mussolini’s Fascism were to seriously curtail his popularity and his career.

But, by 1918, free verse was accepted in bourgeois society and rhymed verse even became thought of as shabby and old-fashioned\textsuperscript{66}, a clear imagist legacy. In

\textsuperscript{64} IM81
\textsuperscript{65} IM117
\textsuperscript{66} Poetry, March 1918, by Alice Corbin Henderson.
addition, Ezra Pound’s ‘hard light and clear edges’ are still seen in poetry long after the disappearance of his poetic instruction.

Published three years after the end of the Great War, T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’, marks a high point in English poetry: this English elegy for mankind assembles in one poem almost all of the guidelines of the contemporary movements in poetic modernism, be they those specified by Moréas or those created later by Ezra Pound. Living in England from 1914, Eliot remained on the boundary of Imagism until, in 1915, Pound got his ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ published: later, he helped Eliot to edit and to publish ‘The Waste Land’ too.

Like Hulme and Pound, Eliot attended some of Bergson’s lectures and, although not convinced by all the French philosopher had to say, accepted that his own poetry should centre on the ‘object’. In 1919, he wrote that, ‘the emotion of art is impersonal’ and that, since a poet cannot transfer his own emotions directly to his reader’s mind, he concluded that there was a need for a form of mediation. Twenty five years previously, the Symbolistes had similarly held that poetry cannot express emotion directly but that it could only hopefully be elicited from the mind of the reader. So, to arouse emotion in ‘persons of sensibility’, Eliot concluded that:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that, when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the

67 SE22 in ‘Tradition and the individual Talent’ 1919
emotion is immediately evoked. 68

Eliot’s objective correlative, here, was already so well predicted in Moréas’s 1886 article that it is almost impossible to conclude, in light of his intimacy with French poetry, that Eliot had not read Le Manifeste du Symbolisme. If le symbole is an idea, then Moréas states that it must be ‘clothed’ in ‘perceptible form’ as a set of objects (to which Eliot adds, as a situation or a chain of events, and Pound would have added, as an image), this symbole having no other purpose than to instil an idea in the mind of the reader which produces the intended emotion, which is precisely Eliot’s objective correlative. Moréas writes that le symbole can be ‘developed’ using allegory or odd metaphor, but insists, as we have read, that the emotion it symbolises must not be expressed.

If the symbol does its job, it then disappears from the mind of the reader, eclipsed by the emotion it symbolises. Not all critics agree with going so far as to state that emotions should dislodge the perceptible forms, objects, situation or chain of events which symbolise them69. For example, the compassion we may feel for Stetson’s lunacy in line 69 of ‘The Waste Land’ should not necessarily occlude other messages that he was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or that he was haunted by the death of a comrade at arms, recurring post-war themes researched by Freud and found contemporaneously as Virginia Woolf’s Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway.

68 SE145 in ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ 1919
69 ‘I see no reason to assume that all else in the poem is put there merely to arouse an emotion in us ... Surface, formal and ideational elements are all ... of intrinsic interest... the emotion should...not be, of chief or exclusive, interest to the reader’. Vivas Eliseo. The Artistic Transaction. (Ohio State University Press, 1963).
A further recurrent and, according to Maud Ellmann, apparently unsuccessful\textsuperscript{70}, approach in Eliot’s writing is his wish to depersonalise his poetry:

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality... The feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet... 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\textsuperscript{71}.

As a result:

The poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not impressions and experiences combined in peculiar, unexpected ways\textsuperscript{72}.

This ‘impersonal’ concept of poetry is intended to focus attention ‘not upon the poet, but upon the poetry’, and, of course, an impersonal conception of art is ‘belligerently anti-romantic’\textsuperscript{73}. Furthermore, the idea of authorial impersonality was not new: Flaubert, resisting the excessive subjectivity of romanticism, wrote in 1852 that:

The artist in his work should be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere\textsuperscript{74}.

While living in Paris in 1921, Ezra Pound edited Eliot’s draft of ‘The Waste Land’, applying his credos to use images, to cut verbiage and to compose poetry as would a ‘musician’ rather than a ‘metronome’. Despite Pound’s harsh deletions, ‘The Waste Land’ really is Eliot’s creation, but Eliot confers the epithet, \textit{il miglior fabbro}\textsuperscript{75}, the best craftsman, on Ezra Pound for the cuts: they include

\textsuperscript{70} Maud Ellmann argues that neither Eliot nor Pound achieved impersonality in their writing but placed their persona in full view of their readers (PI9;12;15).
\textsuperscript{71} SE17 in ‘Tradition and the individual Talent’ 1919
\textsuperscript{72} ibid
\textsuperscript{73} ‘Impersonality in the Works of T.S. Eliot’ by Dr. Ravi (International Journal of English Research, Volume 2; Issue 6; November 2016; Page No. 64-65)
\textsuperscript{74} Flaubert’s letter to Louise Colet, December 9, 1852
\textsuperscript{75} Quoting line 117 of Canto XXVI of Dante’s Purgatorio
reducing ‘Death by water’ from more than one hundred lines, to ten, and throwing out Eliot’s ‘delirious’ original first page, starting, ‘First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom’s place’\textsuperscript{76}. But Pound had immediately recognised the poem’s stature, writing shortly after it was published in 1922, that:

Eliot came back from his Lausanne specialist looking okay; and with a damn good poem in his suitcase... About enough, Eliot’s poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop\textsuperscript{77}.
Eliot’s waste land is I think the justification of the movement, of our modern experiments since 1900\textsuperscript{78}.

To understand ‘our modern experiments’, Moréas provides the key to reveal the complex symbolisme of Eliot’s ‘difficult language’: thanks to Moréas, the reader recognises that the poem, which alludes twenty-five times or so to death\textsuperscript{79}, exists to produce its affects of fear, horror, pain, anger, isolation, fatigue, revulsion, grief, depersonalisation and of despair and compassion, or even of relief, through the final Upanishads. The poem’s symbolisme does its job by stirring emotion: the reader does not need to pore over Eliot’s ‘difficult’ individual references; once the emotion is felt, Eliot’s scholarship has done what the poet, according to Moréas, set out to do.

Additionally, a reading of ‘The Waste Land’ exhibits everywhere Moréas’s guidelines on syntax and style. Among the numerous examples are: rhythms which block, alternating with rhythms of oscillating gaps (‘I think we are in rats’ alley’ 115-124); weighty over-determination (‘I too awaited the expected guest’

\textsuperscript{76} WL5
\textsuperscript{77} IM145
\textsuperscript{78} IM129
\textsuperscript{79} In total, twenty-five mentions are made in ‘The Waste Land’ containing the words: Dead; Death; Die; Drowned; Corpse; Hanged; Burial or Bones
mystifying ellipsis (‘…The hot water at ten.’ 135); unexpected, hanging discontinuity (‘Why then Ile fit you.’ 431); fine, lush, vigorous language (‘Summer surprised us,’ 8-11); disorder artfully ordered (‘My nerves are bad tonight.’ 111-114); rhymes of obscure fluidity (‘You who were with me’ 70-76); the use of prime numbers in metre resolved into rhythmic combinations (‘A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,’ 62-64); and *vers libres* everywhere.

It *all* seems to be there in ‘The Waste Land’: if we accept the Moréas’s authority, Eliot’s long poem appears as the English archetype of French *Symbolisme*, with more than a *soupçon* of Pound’s imagism too (‘Here is no water but only rock’ 331-345) and possibly of his vorticism in Phlebas’s whirlpool (‘As he rose and fell’ 316-318).

Eliot believed that poetry ought to perform to ‘reverse the cultural and moral slide of humanity’: he was upset that English poetry, unlike Baudelaire’s in France, had not done its job. In consequence, he borrowed city squalor from Baudelaire: lines 60 to 63 of ‘The Waste Land’ paraphrase Baudelaire’s 1857 ‘Les Sept Vieillards’

80 Baudelaire describes a ghostly passage, one after the other, of seven similar, scruffy, bent, old men, each one entering and leaving the narrator’s murky field of vision.

81 Literally an ‘ant-like city’

82 fog

Eliot mimics it with a zombie-like crowd:

60 Unreal city,
61 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
62 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
63 I had not thought death had undone so many.
He further copies Baudelaire with a pastiche of the start of the last line of introduction to *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

> You! Hypocrite lecteur!-mon semblable,-mon frère!

Despite so many unmistakeable references, no suspicion of French influence appears in the poem’s pedigree, but Eliot’s unwillingness to specify *symboliste* influence on his long poem comes as no surprise after earlier criticism made of ‘Prufrock’. Clearly, the contemporary English literary community was, at best, suspicious of French modernism and acknowledged nothing more than Eliot’s work as a ‘new manner’. Louis Untermeyer wrote:

> Prufrock, published in 1917, was immediately hailed as a new manner in English literature and belittled as an echo of Laforgue and of the French Symbolistes to whom Eliot was indebted.83

Houston credits Laforgue, and not Eliot, with the invention of the ‘modern, fragmented, first-person poem’84, and he claims that ‘difficult expression’ in poetry cannot be imagined without French *Décadence*85, but Untermayer’s term, ‘new manner’, importantly refers to a poem in English and not in French. Despite its cubist86 structure of twenty-five ‘verses’, ‘The Waste Land’ is indeed created in the French modern style and rich in the frustration of ‘difficult’ *symbolisme*, but it is a monument of English culture, although remaining, with some of Wallace Stevens’s poetry, among the finest poetic witnesses to French modernism in the English language.

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84 FS82

85 FS142

And, born of Eliot’s depression and cultural anxiety, it is also a poem about death with allusions to hanging; drowning; desolation; rats eating dead men’s bones; decay; death in childbirth and death in war.

**Ugly war poetry and modern affects**

The third and final part of this essay traces the period extending from the violence and ‘sadomasochism’ of modern war poetry, to the religious decline, feminism, socialism and anti-colonialism of contemporary peacetime. In effect, the Great War marked a dividing line in the history of modern literature, appearing, with the Russian Revolution, at a climax of the 19th-century social crises foreseen by Marx. In Britain, modernism is understood as a reaction to these social forces, which were already at work well before 1914.87

The war elegies of the 20th century ‘demystify the supposed glories of combat’88 and throw ‘clear light’ onto the ugliness of war: for example, Hardy’s ‘Drummer Hodge’, ‘uncoffined-just as found’, is thrown ‘to rest’ to ‘forever be’ a portion’ of a boer’s ‘unknown plain’, just like the remains of Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’ ‘far from an English heaven’ in Flanders’ Fields. Such ugliness accompanies a quarter-of-a-million British and Allied troop casualties in 1917 lost only in recapturing Passchendaele, a Belgian village of ‘questionable strategic importance’89. Modern war poets focused on such monstrosity and searched to produce emotion around, among others, the futility of war; the dangers of

87 ibid
88 PM107
89 IM109
patriotism; compassion for the god-forsaken, dead soldier; the injustice of death in war; and vicarious terror facing violent death.

The following short overview of war poems presents verse from Rimbaud, 1870; Brooke, 1915; Owen, 1917, whose fighters go to their death like ‘cattle’; Stevens, 1918; Yeats, 1919; and from Jarrell, 1945.

‘Le Dormeur du Val’, 1870, is an Alexandrine written by the sixteen-year-old French Symboliste, Arthur Rimbaud, during the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. Rimbaud’s modernist poem opens with two serene quatrains describing the beauty of nature in a sunny, verdant valley with a flowing brook. A soldier sleeps there, a ‘poorly’ child’s smile on his face, his feet among wild flowers.

5        Un soldat jeune, bouche ouverte, tête nue,
6        Et la nuque baignant dans le frais cresson bleu,
7        Dort ; il est étendu dans l’herbe sous la nue,
8        Pâle dans son lit vert où la lumière pleut.

These rhyming lines in the second quatrain have a sober, almost lyrical quality about them: they paint a vivid image of nature in a style which would have interested Pound. In 1870, Rimbaud was indeed presenting an image, ‘ecstatically held’ in his poetry, but his cool words carry a ‘sting in their tail’: as the title is about a sleeper, and as sleep is mentioned four times while the narrator steers the reader through this serene vale, it follows that the anxiety, dismay and pity we feel reading the very last line describing two blood-red bullet holes piercing the ‘sleeper’s’ heart, come with dismay. Already in 1870,
this is a modern ending and a clever one: we know not whether this young man’s death follows the glory of war or the shooting of a deserter.

In contrast, ‘The Soldier’ by Rupert Brooke, 1915, is an Englishman’s much read war poem, beginning in self-pity, and ‘swooning’ into patriotic propaganda. It produces a mood of devotion to the fictions of Victorian England and, where Mary Elizabeth Frye’s narrator prettily asks to forget her when dead, Brooke’s narrator asks rather to think of him when dead. ‘Some foreign field’ becomes England itself, where rotting English bones ‘enrich’ Belgian and French mud, parroting the South-African fate of Hardy’s ‘Drummer Hodge’. Brooke’s ‘heightened’ state may conceivably justify such hyperbole, which, no doubt, brought comfort to mourning English families who lost English sons, husbands, fathers and grandfathers in the horrific conflict. A soldier like Brooke, waiting to die abroad might be pardoned for turning his thoughts to happy times, to laughter, to friends and to gentleness at home; but is to an English ‘heaven’ not going a bit far? Brooke’s lines appear in the style of Blake’s romantic flag-waving, ‘And did those feet in ancient time’, and indeed reading ‘The Soldier’, in its romantic style, was possibly as popular as a religious surrogate at funerals, as singing Blake’s romantic ‘Jerusalem’ is, in an élan of patriotism. But, Brooke’s poem also serves as a comparison with Wilfred Owen’s tough modernism. Ramazani writes that:-

\[\text{Do not stand at my grave and weep}
\text{I am not there. I do not sleep.}
\text{Do not stand at my grave and cry;}
\text{I am not there. I did not die.}
\text{Mary Elizabeth Frye, 1932}
\text{William Blake, Jerusalem, 1804}\]
Wilfred Owen, writing sadomasochistic (sic) elegies for the war dead, compels us to reconsider the assumption that the basic economy of elegy is compensation for loss. Owen’s tougher elegies appear to reject any romantic flow of patriotic verse, but they do allow propaganda: one of Owen’s most popular poems quotes Horace’s ancient ode, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, 1917-1918, and ends in instruction and bluster. It begins strongly enough with sixteen ‘marble-hard’, rhyming, lines, of which the first four are:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Using iambic pentameters, of which Pound might have complained, ‘too penty’, these images skilfully produce horror at a graphic tale of violent death by mustard gas. The first line brings again to mind the dirty, yellow Baudelairean fog and the old beggars of ‘Les Sept Vieillards’. The poet presents this image with a violent backdrop of haunted flares, of men marching blood-shod and asleep, with the frightening ‘hoots’ of gas-shells eerily dropping ‘softly’ behind. Owen’s lines rush on with an alliteration of, ‘coughing’, ‘cursing’, and ‘knock-kneed hags’. In Owen’s image of terror, the reader lives a vicarious ‘ecstasy of fumbling’ for a gas mask, floundering, plunging, ‘guttering, choking, drowning’ in a ghostly, ‘thick, green light’. Not once does Owen express emotion here; there is no need, his symbolic military trappings alone produce the desired affects. But, the second part loses it: his

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92 PMxii  
93 Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori from Horace’s Odes (III.2.13): literally, ‘it is sweet and proper to die for the fatherland’.  
94 WL11
long, last verse preaches at the reader: the narrator insists on giving ‘the lesson’. After some gargling blood, obscenity and bitterness, the reader is told that Horace’s ode is an infamous old lie. Owen’s propaganda here challenges the politics of war, but loses his crisp rhythm to ‘instruction and bluster’. The poetry around the Latin is clever, but it becomes lyrical, and the tough, vorticist power of ‘floundering, plunging, guttering, choking and drowning’ vanishes.

Wallace Stevens’s, *The Death of a Soldier*, 1918, ‘forcefully negates the theological archetype in refusing to ‘deify’ the soldier’ with a ‘three-days’ funeral’. The poem embraces a protest: a gallant man dies in ugliness, but the world goes on not honouring his death; grievance against such injustice is fundamental to this ‘muted elegiac lament’.

Life contracts and death is expected,  
As in season of autumn.  
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage.  
Imposing his separation,  
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn,  
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,  
The clouds go, nevertheless,  
In their direction.

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95 PM99  
96 PM100
Four brief, imagist-like tercets summarise violent death as normal a feature of war, as it is for autumn to come around every year. Stevens’s symbolism ‘screams’ injustice at the reader without even mentioning the idea. The cycle of the seasons goes on, but only for the rest of creation, not for this unfortunate soldier. There can be no funeral pomp for ex-servicemen who disappear in mud. The poem appears rhythmic but not rhyming, using nature’s symbols and bearing an intriguing similarity in its seasonal treatment of death to Yeats’s 1928, ‘The Wheel’, written ten years later. But Yeats does not end life early in autumn, he ends it in winter at its normal conclusion.

Randall Jarrell compares the tenuous protection of the gunner in a ball-turret of a World-War-II bomber, where he sits in torment, not to a foetus in a maternal womb, but to an icy and damp tomb. In ‘The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner’, 1945, the poet describes the horror of an airman’s impending death in five spare lines with an irregular rhythm and one concession to rhyming.

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

He is ‘loosed’ from life and earth to face the void. Awakened six miles up in a nightmare of explosions, shock and degradation accompany his death. What is left of his butchered corpse is hosed out of the turret. 'The State' in the first line is a shrouded reminder of the merciless, ideological machinery which relentlessly sends men to their death. The ball-turret gives death, not birth:
it is an enigmatic place, able both to kill others and to entomb the killer: it is a heterotopia\(^\text{97}\) more like a tomb than a womb.

In modern times of peace, the demise of religion brings humorous poetry to border on sacrilege, such as Eliot’s sanctification of a dead hippopotamus being used to attack the established Church, or such as wanting to die young, but with no religious trappings. Also, peacetime death poetry draws on an array of themes, including, for example, on murder, in contemporary poems of a violence breathtakingly overtaking the gentle dismay felt in reading Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’. Below, is a short overview centred on twentieth-century, peacetime death poetry by, in order, Eliot 1920, McGough 1967, Thomas 1947, Larkin 1956 and Plath 1962: the poems include lines on the aged facing death, on futility, on marital love and on patricidal anger fuelling feminist emotion; they produce a wide range of affects beyond grief and at times do not even provide space for mourning.

T.S. Eliot’s humorous ‘anti-elegy’, his playful ‘The Hippopotamus’\(^\text{98}\), sails cheerily into the sacrilegious, with lines describing the arrival in heaven of a hippopotamus soul:-

29 Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean
30 And him shall heavenly arms enfold,
31 Among the saints he shall be seen
32 Performing on a harp of gold.

33 He shall be washed as white as snow,

\(^\text{97}\) Foucault’s heterotopias are spaces which are ‘other’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory such as prisons and ships: in Foucault, Michel "Des Espace Autres" (1984).

\(^\text{98}\) PM26
With no sign of mourning in this poem of death, Eliot, a convert to Anglicanism and an odd advocate of sacrilege, becomes sardonic and even scurrilous about the Church. But he is not alone in writing such irreverent humour: Roger McGough wrote his swaggering lines, ‘Let me die a young man’s death’, 1967, in a personal style reflecting the sixties ‘Liverpool scene’. In quick, rhythmic verse, McGough refuses to die in bed with, ‘holywater’, candle wax or angels around him: he dreads a peaceful, assonant, ‘out of breath death’ and would rather be ‘mown down’ by a ‘bright red sports car’ at 73 while ‘in constant good tumour’ after an ‘allnight party’; and, when he is 91, he would rather be strafed by gangsters at the barber’s, getting a ‘short back and insides’. At 104 he wants to be attacked by his mistress for making love to her daughter. The narrator creates for himself a lusty death far from religious trappings, and the poem ends amusingly in clever assonance between sin, in, drawn and borne:

24 Let me die a youngman’s death
25 not a free from sin tiptoe in
26 candle wax and waning death
27 not a curtains drawn by angels borne
28 ‘what a nice way to go’ death

There is no mourning, bringing into question whether this poem is an elegy at all. McGough claims that:-

I wrote ‘Let Me Die a Youngman’s Death’ in my early twenties, when I thought ‘live fast and die young’. I failed on both counts! It was not long
after my father had died and I must have been coping with that... it stirred up the Dylan Thomas effect.⁹⁹

McGough is referring to Thomas’s 1947 ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’. Among modern forms after World War II, free verse, ‘hard’ language, irregular metre and irreligion survive, yet Dylan Thomas’s verse does not reflect these styles: he appears an enigma in the fraternity of British modernists. John Goodby writes of Thomas in Oxford Bibliographies that he is:-

A unique example of a ‘difficult’ modern poet...His writing is clearly in the visionary tradition of William Blake, given expressionist energy and existential angst by virtue of his historical situation in the midst of the Great Depression, fascist upsurge, and looming world war. Offsetting this, often in an anguished manner, is an astonishing verbal power and playfulness.¹⁰⁰

Thomas counsels burning anger as an antidote to the recurring mindless haze of the old. ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ was written for his dying father to try to breathe resilience into his parent, heartening him against blind acceptance of death. His words exhort the time-worn to rage at the threshold of the grave; to blaze in the pit of darkness; to leave life as they entered it, kicking and screaming:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

This death poem returns again and again to symbols of day and light for life and to night and darkness for death. The poet accomplishes all this within a

⁹⁹ https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/older-wiser-angrier-roger-mcgough-settles-some-old-scores-8053567.html
Villanelle; a French, 17th-century, lyrical form of nineteen lines divided into five tercets followed by a quatrain; the Villanelle is rhyming and powerfully rhythmic, but its rigid, romantic construction leads Thomas far away from modern vers libres; additionally, he uses simple allegory and renders emotion heavily explicit, which distances the style of the poem from symbolisme, and his verse does not follow Pound’s guidelines nor Eliot’s example. At all events, Dylan Thomas’s poetry does appear in a class of its own.

Philip Larkin wrote ‘An Arundel Tomb’ in 1956 following a visit to Chichester Cathedral, where he was ‘affected’ by the joint tomb of Richard FitzAlan, 3rd Earl of Arundel (d.1376), and of his second wife, Countess Eleanor of Lancaster (d.1372). The poem comprises seven elegantly composed verses of six lines, each in iambic tetrameter, rhyming abbcac, showing a return to rhyme and to lyricism in modern poetry, which Yeats never gave up on. The first verse reads in a spiritless tone, but the others become more lyrical as the poem approaches its end:-

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd—
The little dogs under their feet.

Ancient marital love is fleeting, but Larkin feels that this tombstone symbolises long past affection over the centuries: it is worn, the retainers are dead and forgotten, but the effigy of a man and a woman holding hands

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101 Philip Larkin reads An Arundel Tomb David Quantick (Youtube: acXxM2WAeNE) 31st December 2006
expresses love throughout time. A tombstone echoes futility in the way that ‘Ozymandias’s’102 proud stony stare, millennia after his disappearance from the Egyptian desert, is met with disinterest; time brings estrangement, disrespect and irreverence, but Larkin insists that the symbol of hands of stone held in love for almost a millennium survives so powerfully, that it affects the poet as an eternal value.

Finally, from love to hate, Sylvia Plath suffered for most of her life from violent patricidal mourning until her suicide in 1963. Born in 1932 of a German father, she was eight when he died the year after Hitler’s attack on Poland. Through the eyes of a child, she looks upon her fat Daddy with disgust for his grey toe, whose gangrene resulted from untreated diabetes, and from which he quickly died. In anger she denounces him as ‘sick-dead’, ‘insufferable’, a ‘danger’; a ‘barnyard’; a ‘barbarous butcher’; a ‘Fascist’; a ‘devil’; a ‘vampire’ and a ‘bastard’103. Possibly no other great elegist brands a dead parent so brutally. In, ‘Daddy’, 1962, she blames him for being an un-American, Nazi sympathiser. Just a girl during the war against Germany, she assumes blame for persecuted Jews, yet she mixes eerie grief and gentleness towards her father in her only tender words, ‘Ach, du’ (‘Oh, you’).

71 If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two——
72 The vampire who said he was you
73 And drank my blood for a year,
74 Seven years, if you want to know.
75 Daddy, you can lie back now.
76 There’s a stake in your fat black heart
77 And the villagers never liked you.

102 ‘Ozymandias’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley 1817
103 PM262
They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you. Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.

Her harsh lines have been saluted by a generation of women who have experienced similar suffering, although, in a flash of contradiction, she writes:

He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him.”

I have tried in this journey through time to explain why and how English elegiac poetry interacted with, and absorbed, creative aspects of Baudelaire’s 19th-century, poetic Symbolisme.

Firstly, in terms of poetic content, a need for change appears to have arisen from shifting religious attitudes to death and from social turmoil at a time of recurring wars.

During a decline in religious conviction, poetic focus changes from death’s transcendence to its natural character: as a result a Gothic, literary idiom appears as the corpse and its decay become of literary curiosity; Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe write about it, and Baudelaire, Wallace Stevens and Wilfred Owen base some of their more graphic poetry on its macabre character. In the end, English modernism marks an almost sacrilegious break with religion.

Socially, Karl Marx inspires French modernism with an ethic supported by Baudelaire’s ‘fellow-feeling’ poetry of poverty and of city squalor: the poet writes
sympathetically of the death of the poor, but in a style which disconcerts the bourgeoisie and brings him into court; it also assures him a durable, international following of poets who admire his perturbing, symbolic style.

Close to the end of the modernist period, the brilliant, patricidal, American poetess S\textsuperscript{105} Sylvia Plath, poses a challenge to the phallogocentrism of contemporary poetry by contributing through her elegies to the aesthetic tenor of feminism: she does so in a movement which, already from 1903, leads to serious unrest, when Suffragettes are imprisoned and one is fatally injured in 1913 under the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby.

In addition, as the seemingly never ending slaughter of men and women in war becomes detestable, glory in war poetry turns to ugliness: during the Great War, which costs the lives of tens of millions of men, Owen’s war poetry becomes ferociously explicit. These are times of almost continuous conflict: civil war in France brings social upheaval during the 1848 revolution; following the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, when Rimbaud composes his \textit{Le Dormeur du val}, the attack on the 1871 Paris Commune leaves 20,000 civilians dead. In Britain, similar turmoil extends to embarrassing Victorian wars in the Crimea from 1853 and in South Africa from 1899, which, although exalted by Tennyson and Kipling’s poetry, can no longer allow such poems to depict colonial glory.

From 1910, with the death of Edward VII, the British feel a dangerous wind of independent militancy sweep through their numerous colonies: protecting these distant possessions leads to more unacceptable deaths of young British

\textsuperscript{105} ...and author of \textit{The Bell Jar}
soldiers far from home and essentially marks the decline of the British Empire, whose destruction is completed during two more immensely destructive ‘world’ wars from 1914 and from 1939, a period which includes the 1919 war of Irish independence.

Secondly, in terms of poetic form and style, change appears to have followed a wave of literary restlessness during the 19th century, which questioned contemporary romantic forms of poetry: in France, it set about the Parnassiens and their French Alexandrines, and in Britain it attacked the English romantic legacy of Byron, Shelley and Keats.

In France, where new visual art forms flourish from the 1860s, the artistic genres of impressionism and, from 1907, of cubism, bring poets, like Laforgue and Mallarmé, to try to mimic the sometimes abstract symbolism of these visual arts in their poetry. This encourages Jean Moréas to analyse the poetic style of their first mentor, Baudelaire, explaining the impersonality of his verse, its objective language and use of natural symbols, to identify the mechanisms behind this poet’s style: he then campaigns for it to be renamed in 1886 from *Décadence* to *Symbolisme*.

In British elegiac poetry, the form and style of romanticism is increasingly seen as mawkish, although in the visual arts, the Pre-Rapahelites exploit symbolic themes whilst remaining romantic in style. With more simplicity and clarity of language, and with shorter form, less complex, elegiac poetry appears during the 19th century, which still provides an effective ‘place’ for the practice of Protestant mourning. At the death of Edward VII, even clearer, harder poetic
language appears, when, from 1910, the American, Ezra Pound introduces the ‘clear light and hard edges’ of Imagisme into English poetry. This is instantly recognised by the French as a clone of Symbolisme; then Pound follows with a dynamic, ‘cubist’ variant he calls, Vorticism.

In 1932, ten years after publishing, ‘The Waste land’, T.S. Eliot translates Baudelaire into English and publishes an essay on this poet’s relation with modernism, writing that, to understand the how of poetic change, it is enough to recognise the symboliste creativity of its talented instigator:

Baudelaire is indeed the greatest exemplar in modern poetry in any language, for his verse and language is the nearest thing to a complete renovation that we have experienced.

Following Baudelaire, the legacies of Pound and of Eliot profoundly mark the dawn of English modern poetry: Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal is still admired today in most languages; Eliot was awarded the 1948 Nobel prize for literature, and many of Pound’s simpler guidelines survive, appearing every bit as relevant to contemporary English poetry, as they were a century ago.

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