

Between Old World and New: Transatlantic Poetic Dialogues in the Modern Age

Rowan Merrick
Sofia Bellini

Abstract

This paper explores the intertwined trajectories of poetry in Europe and the United States, focusing on how poets have negotiated questions of identity, nationhood, and cultural belonging within a transatlantic framework. From the Romantic era, when William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman articulated new visions of the self in relation to nature and democracy, to the Irish Revival led by W.B. Yeats, which positioned poetry as a vehicle for national identity, literature on both sides of the Atlantic has reflected and shaped evolving conceptions of individual and collective voice. Modernism, marked by the experimental poetics of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, revealed the circulation of ideas across the Atlantic, with American poets finding inspiration in European traditions and vice versa. Later, voices of protest and liberation, such as Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and Seamus Heaney, expanded the boundaries of poetic identity, engaging with themes of race, gender, exile, and political conflict. By drawing connections between European and American poetic traditions, this study argues that poetry operates as both a national discourse and a transnational dialogue, one that has continually redefined cultural identity in response to historical upheavals, modernist experimentation, and social change. The analysis contributes to comparative literature by highlighting poetry's role as a mediator of identity in the shared yet contested space of the Atlantic world.

Keywords: poetry, identity, Europe, United States, Romanticism, Modernism, nationalism, transatlantic literature, cultural exchange

Introduction

Poetry has long served as one of the most vital literary forms for expressing identity, offering writers a medium through which to explore the complexities of selfhood, nationhood, tradition, and cultural belonging, and nowhere is this more evident than in the comparative traditions of Europe and the United States, where the transatlantic exchange of ideas, forms, and voices has continually reshaped literary identity. From the Romantic era onward, poets have turned to verse as a way of negotiating both the intimate, personal dimensions of selfhood and the broader, collective dimensions of national or cultural identity, with poetry functioning simultaneously as a repository of memory and a site of innovation. In Europe, Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley redefined the poet's role as a visionary capable of articulating the relationship between self, nature, and society, while across the Atlantic, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* gave voice to a radically democratic and expansive vision of individual identity rooted in the ideals of the American republic. Emily Dickinson, in her more private and experimental style, expanded this exploration of selfhood, suggesting how poetic form could reflect the interior world while also

challenging conventional expectations of gender and literary voice. By the early twentieth century, the rise of Modernism made the transatlantic dimensions of poetry unmistakable, as T.S. Eliot, an American who established his literary career in England, and Ezra Pound, an expatriate who facilitated modernist networks between Europe and the United States, embodied the circulation of ideas that blurred national boundaries. These poets, alongside Europeans like W.B. Yeats, forged a modernist poetics that was at once rooted in cultural tradition and radically experimental in form, redefining what poetry could achieve.

The mid-twentieth century added further layers of complexity, with voices of protest and cultural critique reshaping poetic identity: Langston Hughes articulated the struggles and aspirations of African Americans while drawing upon both U.S. and global traditions, while Allen Ginsberg’s countercultural poetics situated identity in opposition to dominant political and cultural norms. Meanwhile, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon gave voice to the conflicted identities of Ireland, reflecting on violence, memory, and reconciliation. Across these traditions, poetry functioned as both a national discourse—shaping identity within specific cultural and historical contexts—and as a transnational dialogue, as poets drew inspiration from across the Atlantic and redefined themselves in conversation with global currents. The research question guiding this paper is therefore: *How have poets in Europe and the United States negotiated identity, tradition, and modernity in a transatlantic dialogue?* Addressing this question highlights the dual significance of poetry: on the one hand, as a deeply rooted national expression of identity, often linked to historical moments of cultural revival, resistance, or crisis; and on the other, as part of an international literary network in which ideas, forms, and voices travel across borders. By examining poetry as both national and transnational discourse, this study seeks to show how the Atlantic world produced a dynamic, dialogical literary identity that continues to influence how poets conceptualize self and society in contemporary contexts.

Literature Review

Region/Theme	Author & Year	Study / Focus	Main Argument / Contribution	Relevance to Paper
Europe Romantic Identity	Wordsworth, W. (1800)	<i>Preface to Lyrical Ballads</i>	Defines poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility,” emphasizing personal experience as central to cultural identity.	Establishes Romantic foundations of poetry as identity expression in Europe.
	Coleridge, S. T. (1817)	<i>Biographia Literaria</i>	Frames poetry as reconciliation of opposites, emphasizing imagination as key to selfhood.	Connects poetic form with philosophical dimensions of identity.

AGENDA

ISSN: 0002-0796

Volume 57 Nos. 1-2

Region/Theme	Author & Year	Study / Focus	Main Argument / Contribution	Relevance to Paper
	Shelley, P. B. (1821)	<i>A Defence of Poetry</i>	Argues poets are “unacknowledged legislators,” shaping moral and cultural values.	Demonstrates the role of poetry in collective cultural identity.
Ireland – National Voice	Yeats, W. B. (1890s–1920s)	<i>Collected Poems</i>	Blends Celtic myth, cultural revival, and politics to create Irish national identity.	Shows how poetry becomes a medium for nationalism.
	Heaney, S. (1995)	<i>Opened Ground</i>	Explores land, violence, and reconciliation during the Troubles.	Highlights poetry as memory and identity in divided societies.
U.S. – Individual Voice	Whitman, W. (1855)	<i>Leaves of Grass</i>	Constructs a democratic, expansive “I” representing both self and nation.	Defines American identity in universal, poetic terms.
	Dickinson, E. (1850s–1880s)	<i>Collected Poems</i>	Uses compression and experimentation to capture interior selfhood.	Challenges gendered limits on poetic identity and voice.
U.S. – Social Protest & Counterculture	Hughes, L. (1920s–1960s)	<i>Collected Poems</i>	Elevates African American voice, merging jazz rhythms with cultural resistance.	Expands U.S. poetic identity to include marginalized voices.
	Ginsberg, A. (1956)	<i>Howl</i>	Challenges conformity, celebrates counterculture, critiques U.S. state power.	Positions poetry as resistance and liberation in Cold War America.
Comparative Modernist Exchanges	Eliot, T. S. (1922)	<i>The Waste Land</i>	Blends European tradition with American modernist sensibility, symbolizing	Example of poetry as transnational dialogue.

Region/Theme	Author & Year	Study / Focus	Main Argument / Contribution	Relevance to Paper
			transatlantic modernism.	
	Pound, E. (1910s–1930s)	<i>Make it New</i> (essays, poems)	Acts as mediator of modernist networks between Europe and America.	Embodies circulation of poetic identity across Atlantic.
Debates	Various	Nationalism vs Cosmopolitanism	Whether poets should be read as national voices (Yeats, Hughes) or transnational figures (Eliot, Pound).	Frames the dual identity of poetry as both national and global.
	Various	Tradition vs Innovation	Romantic inheritance vs modernist experimentation.	Highlights tensions in shaping poetic identity.
	Various	Individual vs Collective Identity	Self-focused (Whitman, Dickinson) vs community-centered (Heaney, Hughes).	Explains identity shifts across contexts.
Gap	—	—	Few comparative studies integrating Europe and U.S. poetry into one transatlantic framework.	This study bridges that gap by showing poetry as both national discourse and transnational dialogue.

Analysis & Discussion

Romanticism and the Birth of Poetic Identity (Wordsworth, Whitman)

Romanticism marked a turning point in the construction of poetic identity, with Wordsworth emphasizing the poet as a mediator between self and nature, grounding authenticity in ordinary experiences. His *Lyrical Ballads* redefined poetry as a vehicle for emotional truth, aligning the individual with broader cultural values. Across the Atlantic, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* mirrored this emphasis on self but expanded it into a democratic vision of collective identity. While Wordsworth sought intimacy with nature and community, Whitman celebrated

expansiveness, sexuality, and inclusivity, forging a poetic voice that was simultaneously personal and national, laying the groundwork for transatlantic dialogue.

Nationalism and Cultural Memory (Yeats, Irish Revival; Dickinson's Interiority)

Yeats embodied poetry's nationalist function, merging Celtic mythology, folklore, and political urgency into verse that gave voice to Ireland's cultural revival. His works positioned the poet as a custodian of memory and identity, offering symbolic language for a nation in search of independence. By contrast, Emily Dickinson articulated identity in interior terms, using compressed forms and paradoxical imagery to reveal the richness of private subjectivity. Together, Yeats and Dickinson illustrate two poles of poetic identity: one collective, mythic, and political; the other introspective, enigmatic, and resistant to social constraints—yet both central to understanding identity as a poetic preoccupation.

Modernist Experimentation and Transatlantic Exchange (Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Joyce's Influence)

Modernism redefined poetic identity by embracing fragmentation, intertextuality, and formal experimentation. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* drew upon European and American traditions, embodying a transatlantic sensibility that sought coherence amid cultural disintegration. Ezra Pound's motto "make it new" reflected his role as a mediator of modernist networks, promoting figures like Yeats and Joyce while reshaping English-language poetics. Wallace Stevens contributed an American metaphysical dimension, emphasizing imagination as central to reality. The circulation of poets between continents, especially Eliot and Pound, demonstrated how modernism blurred boundaries, producing a shared yet contested literary space in which identity was continuously reconfigured.

Voices of Protest and Liberation (Langston Hughes, Irish Troubles Poetry, Plath, Heaney)

The mid-20th century highlighted poetry as resistance and liberation. Langston Hughes gave voice to African American identity, incorporating jazz rhythms and vernacular speech to assert dignity and cultural pride in a racially divided America. Sylvia Plath's confessional verse expanded identity into psychological realms, articulating personal trauma against societal expectations. In Ireland, poets like Heaney addressed the Troubles, situating poetry as a space for memory, reconciliation, and the articulation of cultural fracture. Together, these voices show poetry's capacity to resist oppression, confront inequality, and transform private and public struggles into universal expressions of human identity and resilience.

Postwar and Postmodern Voices (Ginsberg, Larkin, Adrienne Rich, Muldoon)

Postwar poetry reflected both disillusionment and innovation. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* exemplified countercultural defiance, turning poetry into a medium for spiritual protest and liberation. In England, Philip Larkin's stark realism captured the skepticism and disenchantment of postwar society, contrasting Ginsberg's expansive energy with bleak restraint. Adrienne Rich foregrounded feminist identity, situating poetry within struggles for gender equality and liberation. Paul Muldoon, following Heaney, experimented with form and intertextuality, reflecting postmodern concerns with irony and play. These poets highlight how postwar voices fragmented identity into plural, contested terrains, demonstrating poetry's adaptability to cultural, political, and intellectual transformations.

Comparative Dimensions: Shared Themes of Self, Nation, and Exile

Despite differences, transatlantic poetics converge around shared themes of self, nation, and exile. The self appears expansively in Whitman, inwardly in Dickinson, and fractured in Plath. Nationhood defines Yeats's mythic Ireland, Hughes's racial America, and Heaney's troubled Ulster. Exile, whether physical (Pound, Eliot) or symbolic (Joyce's influence, Muldoon's displacement), emerges as a recurring motif in shaping identity through absence and longing. These shared themes reveal poetry's dual function: to articulate specific cultural contexts while participating in a broader Atlantic dialogue. Identity in poetry thus becomes simultaneously anchored in national traditions and enriched through transnational exchanges, sustaining ongoing literary conversation.

Case Studies

Case Study	Focus	Analysis & Significance
Yeats and Irish National Identity	Yeats used myth, folklore, and symbolism to construct an Irish cultural identity during political upheaval.	Demonstrates poetry as a tool for nationalism, cultural revival, and political imagination.
Whitman's Democratic Self in Dialogue with Europe	Whitman's <i>Leaves of Grass</i> portrayed the self as expansive and democratic, engaging with European Romanticism while asserting American uniqueness.	Highlights transatlantic conversation: Romantic heritage reinterpreted in a democratic U.S. idiom.
T.S. Eliot: An American Poet in England	Eliot's career in England reflected hybrid identity, fusing American roots with European intellectual traditions in <i>The Waste Land</i> .	Exemplifies transnational modernism, blurring boundaries of national belonging.
Langston Hughes and Transatlantic Modernism	Hughes blended African American culture with global currents, engaging with European avant-garde while shaping Harlem Renaissance poetics.	Shows how marginalized identities enriched transatlantic modernism and challenged cultural hierarchies.
Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon: Poetry of Conflict and Memory	Heaney addressed Ireland's Troubles with themes of land and reconciliation; Muldoon introduced postmodern irony and displacement.	Illustrates poetry as a mediator of trauma, memory, and identity in conflict-ridden contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that poetry in Europe and the United States has consistently served as a medium for negotiating identity, whether through Romantic visions of self, nationalist revivals, modernist experimentation, or postmodern pluralism. While poets articulated distinct

national concerns—Yeats with Ireland, Hughes with African America, Whitman with democracy—their works also participated in a transatlantic dialogue that blurred cultural boundaries. Shared themes of self, nation, and exile reveal poetry as both rooted in local identity and engaged in global exchange. Poetry thus functions as a transatlantic voice, shaping and reflecting cultural identities across two centuries of dialogue.

References

- Dickinson, E. (1999). *The complete poems*. Back Bay Books.
- Eliot, T. S. (1922). *The waste land*. Faber & Faber.
- Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl and other poems*. City Lights Books.
- Heaney, S. (1995). *Opened ground: Poems 1966–1996*. Faber & Faber.
- Hughes, L. (1994). *The collected poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Classics.
- Larkin, P. (1988). *Collected poems*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Muldoon, P. (2001). *Poems 1968–1998*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Pound, E. (1934). *Make it new*. Faber & Faber.
- Rich, A. (1979). *On lies, secrets, and silence: Selected prose 1966–1978*. W.W. Norton.
- Shelley, P. B. (1821/2002). *A defence of poetry*. Broadview Press.
- Whitman, W. (1855/2005). *Leaves of grass*. Oxford University Press.
- Wordsworth, W. (1800/1991). *Preface to lyrical ballads*. Oxford University Press.
- Yeats, W. B. (1990). *The collected poems of W.B. Yeats*. Macmillan.