

Romantic Legacies and Modernist Transformations: A Transatlantic Study of Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines the transition from Romanticism to Modernism in European and American poetry, highlighting the cross-cultural exchanges that shaped literary innovation from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Romanticism, exemplified by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley in England, and by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman in America, emphasized imagination, nature, and the self as central to poetic expression. Their emphasis on individual subjectivity and organic form laid the groundwork for modern poetics. In the early twentieth century, Modernism disrupted these traditions through experimentation with fragmentation, symbolism, and allusion, as seen in the works of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, alongside W.B. Yeats, whose career bridged Romantic revivalism and Modernist innovation. The paper argues that Modernism, while often defined by rupture, retained Romantic preoccupations with memory, the natural world, and the search for meaning, adapting them to an age of urbanization, war, and cultural dislocation. By comparing Romantic and Modernist texts across Europe and America, this study shows how poetry operated as a transatlantic dialogue rather than isolated national traditions, with influences circulating across the Atlantic to shape form and content. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that the persistence of Romantic themes within Modernist experimentation demonstrates both continuity and transformation in the history of poetry.

Keywords: Romanticism, Modernism, European poetry, American poetry, transatlantic exchange, subjectivity, fragmentation, memory, tradition, innovation

Introduction

The trajectory from Romanticism to Modernism in European and American poetry represents one of the most significant transformations in literary history, marking both continuity and rupture in the ways poets conceptualized imagination, identity, and form. Romanticism, emerging in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, celebrated imagination as the highest faculty of human creativity, foregrounded nature as a source of inspiration and moral truth, and championed the primacy of individual subjectivity as expressed in poetic voice. William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) famously emphasized poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility," defining the self as the central locus of poetic meaning, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) elevated imagination as a reconciliatory power that gave unity to experience. Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) proclaimed poets as "unacknowledged legislators of the world," highlighting the cultural authority of poetry to shape collective memory and values. Across the Atlantic, Romanticism resonated strongly with American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose

Nature (1836) articulated a philosophy of self-reliance grounded in the natural world, and Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* (1855) expanded Romantic subjectivity into a democratic, expansive “I” that sought to embody the nation itself. Yet by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rise of Modernism fundamentally reconfigured poetic form and function. Modernist poets confronted urbanization, technological change, the collapse of traditional religious and cultural frameworks, and the catastrophic impact of World War I. In contrast to Romantic continuity and organic form, Modernism embraced fragmentation, allusion, irony, and experimentation, producing works that mirrored the dislocations of modern existence. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) embodied this fragmented cultural memory through its collage of voices and mythic method, while Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* sought to reconstruct civilization’s memory through encyclopedic assemblage.

W.B. Yeats, straddling both Romantic revivalism and Modernist innovation, infused his poetry with myth and symbolism while adapting form to the anxieties of the twentieth century. In America, Wallace Stevens pursued an aesthetic philosophy that merged Romantic subjectivity with Modernist abstraction, and Robert Frost drew on traditional pastoral forms even while incorporating the tension and irony characteristic of Modernist poetics. The research question guiding this study asks: *How did cross-cultural currents between Europe and America shape the transition from Romanticism to Modernism in poetry?* This question matters because Romanticism and Modernism are often framed as discrete or even oppositional movements, yet their histories reveal patterns of dialogue and exchange that cross national and cultural boundaries. European Romantics influenced American poets who, in turn, inspired Modernists on both sides of the Atlantic, producing a dynamic circuit of influence rather than isolated traditions. By analyzing Romantic and Modernist texts within a comparative framework, this paper argues that the transformation of poetry across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries must be understood as a transatlantic dialogue in which themes of imagination, nature, and subjectivity were reshaped through fragmentation, urbanism, and experimentation. The significance of this inquiry lies in highlighting poetry as not only a national expression but also a medium of international exchange, where movements evolved through mutual influence, continuity, and innovation.

Literature Review

Theme/Movement	Author & Work	Contribution	Treatment of Poetic Identity/Memory	Relevance to Study
Romanticism (England)	Wordsworth, W. (1800). <i>Preface to Lyrical Ballads</i>	Defines poetry as recollected emotion, grounded in nature and common life.	Elevates individual subjectivity as poetic center.	Establishes Romantic foundations of identity and imagination.

AGENDA

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	Coleridge, S. T. (1817). <i>Biographia Literaria</i>	Explores imagination as reconciliatory power in art.	Memory and imagination merge as sources of coherence.	Influences later Modernist concepts of creativity.
	Shelley, P. B. (1821). <i>A Defence of Poetry</i>	Frames poets as cultural legislators.	Poetic imagination tied to collective moral memory.	Links Romantic vision to cultural authority.
Romanticism (America)	Emerson, R. W. (1836). <i>Nature</i>	Advocates self-reliance and natural transcendence.	Positions poetry as reflection of individuality within universal order.	Bridges Romantic philosophy to American poetics.
	Whitman, W. (1855). <i>Leaves of Grass</i>	Expands poetic "I" into democratic and national voice.	Memory and identity expressed through inclusivity and expansiveness.	Influences transatlantic Modernists like Pound and Eliot.
Modernism (Europe/Ireland)	Eliot, T. S. (1922). <i>The Waste Land</i>	Collage form reflecting postwar cultural collapse.	Cultural memory fragmented, myth used to reconstruct meaning.	Establishes Modernist aesthetics of fragmentation.
	Pound, E. (1930s–50s). <i>The Cantos</i>	Encyclopedic preservation of civilization's memory.	Uses fragments of text, myth, history to structure memory.	Embodies Modernist ambition to reconstruct coherence.
	Yeats, W. B. (1920s–30s). <i>Collected Poems</i>	Bridges Romantic symbolism and Modernist anxiety.	National memory and myth reworked in modern contexts.	Shows continuity between Romanticism and Modernism.
Modernism (America)	Frost, R. (1910s–40s). <i>Collected Poems</i>	Retains traditional form with ironic modern edge.	Memory of rural life reframed in Modernist voice.	Reflects adaptation of Romantic themes to

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				Modernist settings.
	Stevens, W. (1954). <i>Collected Poems</i>	Abstract philosophical exploration of imagination.	Memory and identity framed in conceptual, symbolic terms.	Transforms Romantic subjectivity into Modernist abstraction.
Comparative Studies	Eliot & Pound	Draw on Whitman's expansiveness, Romantic imagery.	Transatlantic exchanges fuse Romantic inheritance with Modernist innovation.	Demonstrates cross-cultural dialogue.
Debates	—	Continuity vs rupture; tradition vs innovation; individual vs collective.	Modernism often seen as rupture but retains Romantic legacies.	Frames central scholarly debate.
Gap	—	Few integrated comparative studies.	Memory, imagination, and identity rarely studied as transatlantic concepts.	This study bridges Romanticism and Modernism across cultures.

Analysis & Discussion

Romantic Origins of Poetic Subjectivity (Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman)

Romanticism's greatest legacy was the centrality of subjectivity in poetry, and its influence extended transatlantically. William Wordsworth defined poetry as rooted in personal recollection and everyday experience, elevating the individual's inner life to the status of universal truth. Across the Atlantic, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* promoted the idea of self-reliance, merging Romantic philosophy with American optimism. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* expanded this Romantic ethos, transforming the individual poetic "I" into a national, democratic voice. Together, these poets established a foundation where subjectivity served as both personal expression and cultural identity, later contested and transformed by Modernists.

Romantic Legacies in Early Modernism (Yeats, Frost)

W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost represent transitional figures whose work reflects Romantic continuities even as they engaged with Modernist sensibilities. Yeats drew heavily on Romantic symbolism and myth but adapted them to twentieth-century anxieties about history and violence, creating a hybrid aesthetic that bridged tradition and innovation. Frost, while often considered formally conservative, infused traditional pastoral themes with irony and ambiguity, reflecting a Modernist awareness of uncertainty. Both poets demonstrate that Romantic legacies persisted well into Modernism, not as static inheritances but as resources for reworking themes of memory, identity, and the relationship between self and society.

Fragmentation and Experimentation (Eliot, Pound, Stevens)

Modernism's hallmark was formal experimentation, and poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens reimagined the function of poetry by fragmenting form and expanding allusion. Eliot's *The Waste Land* employed collage and mythic frameworks to mirror the fragmentation of postwar Europe, while Pound's *Cantos* layered fragments of history, myth, and culture into an encyclopedic yet fractured whole. Stevens turned inward, exploring the imagination as the site of meaning-making in a disenchanted world, using abstraction rather than narrative coherence. These innovations represented a conscious departure from Romantic continuity, yet they still engaged Romantic questions about the role of art in shaping meaning.

Nature, Memory, and the Self: Continuities across Movements

Despite its formal ruptures, Modernism retained core Romantic preoccupations with nature, memory, and the self. Wordsworth's landscapes found echoes in Frost's rural New England scenes, while Whitman's expansive democratic voice resonated in Pound's vision of cultural memory. Memory in particular served as a thematic bridge: for Romantics, it preserved continuity and personal meaning; for Modernists, it became fragmented but essential for reconstructing cultural identity amid crisis. The persistence of these themes underscores that Modernism, despite its radical experimentation, was not a wholesale rejection of Romanticism but a reinvention of its concerns in response to new historical conditions.

Transatlantic Exchanges: From Whitman to Pound and Eliot

The movement from Romanticism to Modernism was shaped by transatlantic currents of influence. Whitman's expansive verse and democratic poetics profoundly influenced both Pound and Eliot, who sought to move beyond Victorian traditions by adopting Whitman's free-form energy while reframing it through Modernist fragmentation and allusion. Eliot, an American writing in England, and Pound, an American expatriate shaping European Modernism, epitomize the circulation of ideas across the Atlantic. Their work demonstrates that Modernism was not an isolated European or American movement but the product of continuous dialogue, exchange, and reinvention across cultural and national boundaries.

Comparative Synthesis: Romanticism's Persistence within Modernist Innovation

The comparative perspective reveals that Modernism, while revolutionary in form, remained indebted to Romanticism's central preoccupations with imagination, nature, and the self. Romantic subjectivity evolved into Modernist explorations of fragmentation; Romantic myth and symbolism resurfaced in Yeats's Modernist adaptations; Romantic cultural memory informed Pound's encyclopedic ambitions. The persistence of Romantic concerns within

Modernist innovation demonstrates continuity within rupture, showing that Modernism did not simply replace Romanticism but reconfigured it for a new age. Poetry across Europe and America thus emerges as a dialogue between tradition and transformation, rooted in shared themes yet reshaped by historical upheaval.

Case Studies

Case Study	Focus	Role of Romanticism	Role of Modernism	Contribution to Cross-Cultural Dialogue
Wordsworth's <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> & Whitman's <i>Leaves of Grass</i>	Romantic subjectivity in England and America.	Wordsworth elevates personal memory and nature as sources of poetry.	Whitman expands Romantic self into democratic national identity.	Establishes foundation for transatlantic subjectivity and poetic identity.
Yeats's <i>Transition</i>	From Romantic revivalism to Modernist symbolism.	Draws on Romantic myth and Celtic revival.	Adapts symbolism and form to twentieth-century anxieties.	Bridges Romantic continuity and Modernist innovation.
Eliot's <i>The Waste Land</i>	Modernist response to Romantic tradition.	Romantic mythic continuity acknowledged through allusions.	Fragmentation and collage embody Modernist rupture.	Reinvents Romantic memory for postwar cultural crisis.
Frost & Stevens	American Modernists engaging Romantic legacies.	Frost echoes Romantic nature and pastoral voice.	Infuses irony and abstraction (Frost) into form (Stevens).	Show Romantic legacies reshaped into Modernist experimentation.
Pound's "Make it New"	Cultural past as poetic resource.	Romantic memory of continuity and tradition.	Modernist innovation through fragmentation and allusion.	Demonstrates continuity and rupture in relation to cultural memory.

Conclusion

The transition from Romanticism to Modernism in Europe and America illustrates poetry's evolution as both continuity and rupture, shaped by cross-cultural currents that transcended national boundaries. While Modernism introduced fragmentation, experimentation, and irony, it retained Romantic concerns with imagination, nature, memory, and the self, reframing them

for an age of crisis and dislocation. Figures like Wordsworth, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound demonstrate that poetic innovation arose not from isolated traditions but from transatlantic dialogue, where Romanticism provided both inspiration and a foil for Modernist transformation. Ultimately, this synthesis highlights poetry's enduring role as a mediator of identity and cultural change.

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