ENGL 310 Modern Poetry
Professor Langdon Hammer

Lecture 1 Introduction

1. ---Syllabus and requirements.
---This course will use visual images from Sterling and Beinecke libraries to suggest
some of the material, historical, and biographical dimensions of modern poetry.
---Modern poetry was first published in Little Magazines (examples: Blast, Rogue,
Broom, The Criterion). Contrast the covers of Yeats's The Wind Among the Reeds
(1899), Eliot's Prufrock and Other Observations (1917), and Hughes’s The Weary Blues
(1926); self-conscious Irishness, lavishness and romance of Yeats's book v. the flat,
impersonal design of Eliot's, v. the honky-tonk singer on Hughes’s.

2. ---Poems always project an image of the poet who creates them. While the poet is
creating her or his poems, she or he is also creating a poet, a public image of the poet, and
this is an evolving project, a work in progress.
---Examples: photographs of Pound in 1913 (London), 1923 (Paris), 1946 (intake photo
at St Elizabeth's Hospital), and 1971 (Rappallo); Eliot as Harvard student (1907) and as
editor of Faber and Faber (c. 1950); Pound's descent into infamy and indignity and Eliot's
rise to cultural power and prestige: these are key, interlocking stories in modern poetry,
and two versions of the fate of modern poetry as a whole.
---Moore old and young.

3. ---Moore: poetry should include "business documents and school-books" ("Poetry");
Eliot: macaronic quotation from the end of The Waste Land; modern poetry "must be
difficult" ("The Metaphysical Poets"); modern poetry comes out of the Babel, the special
linguistic environment, of the modern metropolis (image from Blast by Wandsworth of
"Rotterdam"
---the metropolis is a symbol of the ambivalence of modernity: its simultaneous promise
and threat (Hughes’s “125th Street” and "Harlem"; cover of Blast "War Number"; Alfred
Stieglitz's photo of Manhattan, "City of Ambition"; photos of Brooklyn Bridge by Walker
Evans).

4. ---for Crane, the modern city promises "new thresholds, new anatomies"
("The Wine Menagerie"); he asks Brooklyn Bridge "to lend a myth to God" ("Proem: To
Brooklyn Bridge," The Bridge; photo of Crane by Evans);
---for Stevens as for Crane, when modernity takes away God, it reveals the poet's God-
like power to create the world through imagination, which created God in the first place
(photos of Stevens as choirboy and as insurance executive)
---Modern poetry in most of our poets is utopian, Promethean, seeking absolutes, primary
truths. But there are alternatives, skeptical poetics that subject modernism to critique and
revision: for example, Auden: "Poetry makes nothing happen" ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats"; photo of Auden at Oxford with his inscription: "The cerebral life would pay")
Bishop: "The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear"
("Sandpiper"; photo of Bishop by George Platt Lynes, c. 1940).