Chapter 2: Imagisms

Here, I unpack a series of hypotheses, regarding images in text, as they were conceived at the turn of the twentieth century.

To see how the image is a defining element of the writing of this period, we might turn to the writers' definitions, themselves. Of course, we must not be deluded into thinking that the answers to poetry or fiction may be found in the theoretical writings of their creators. This is especially true of the imagists, about whom it has often been noted that they do not always practice what they profess.[Cite] Yet this theory will prove useful.

Nor should we make the mistake of thinking that this selection of writer-theorists is at all a fair or representative sample, only because they are the most-discussed among literary scholars today. Part of what might contribute to these writers' popularity in academe is the volume of their critical output—they are already analyzing their own works, sometimes before even writing them.

Some of the sounding-boards for this output—/The Egoist/ for the imagists, for instance—not only provided a place to publish new creative works-in-progress, but provided a forum for these writers to review each others' works, and present thought on the state of the art. The extent to which these journals are closed-circuit coterie publications, or a free marketplace of ideas, is open to debate, although the in-house advertisement in one issue, "NOTICE: the writers that appear in these pages will also appear in the next issue"—points to the for-

mer.[Cite]

Imagists

The most obvious examples are the imagists themselves. Brash, showy, and defiant, these young poets at times seemed equally as interested in propagandizing their movement as participating in it. One of their most well-known statements is two short notes in a 1913 issue of *Poetry*, the first by F.S. Flint, and the second by Ezra Pound (Flint (1913)). Flint's begins with the tone of an investigative journalist, hot on the trail of the latest trend: "some curiosity has been aroused concerning *Imagisme*, and as I was unable to find anything definite about it in print, I sought out an *imagiste*, with intent to discover whether the group itself knew anything about the "movement." I gleaned these facts" (198-9). The irony is strong for us, since we know Flint to be an imagist himself, but this would have been lost on most readers of the journal then.

In this short note, Flint names as imagist influences "the best writers of all time,"— Sappho, Catullus, and Villon. An unusual selection, it deserves some discussion. First, the poems of Sappho, a Greek poet whose work survives only in fragments, presents a model, however unintentional, of the imagists's fragmentary brevity. Some of her fragments, if treated as intentionally short poems, would be at home in an imagist anthology. Next, Catullus, as a neoteric poet, is known for his choices of quotidian, rather than epic, subjects, similar to those chosen by imagists. His best known work, known as Catullus 64, is told in an ekphrastic mode—a description of an image—and begins with the lines, here translated by Sir Richard Francis Burton in 1894: "Pine-trees gendered whilome upon soaring Peliac summit / Swam (as the tale is told) through liquid surges of Neptune" ((**???**)). Compare this with H.D.'s "Oread," which Pound cited as an

exemplary imagist poem [cite]: "Whirl up, sea— / whirl your pointed pines, / splash your great pines / on our rocks" [cite]. Catullus, who was also inspired by Sappho, was also well-known for his love poems, known as the "Lesbia poems," many of which are unapologetically explicit.[1] François Villon, a late medieval balladeer, was similarly unapologetic in his choice of subject: as a criminal, he often wrote of his exploits.

Of course, for every similarity between these ancient poets and their 20th Century admirers, there is a dissimilarity—even those that violate the rules which the imagists lay out in their prose writings. Sappho wrote chiefly metrically, even in her works of mixed meter, and Catullus, evoking Sappho, wrote in dactylls, as well. Villon's ballads seem the opposite, in form, of what Flint goes on to describe in the next paragraph.

Flint goes on to describe, in a much-quoted passage, the "few rules, drawn up for their own satisfaction only," which the imagists had devised: "1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (Flint (1913) 199).

The first I take to mean, a distorted ekphrastic mode in which there is no permeability between the metaphor and the emotion whose traditional, abstracted designations it illustrates. [more here]

The second describes not only a certain economy of language, but a prohibition of certain categories of words, namely those which have no visual component. *Presentation* here is antecedent to re-presentation, and recalls forms of presentation in the plastic arts. It also elides agency: presentation is not fabrication, it is

[1] Richard Aldington quotes from one of these poems in the epigraph of "Daisy" ((*Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* 1915) 13)

merely showing what is already there. This is a realist stance, which minimizes the role of the poet's imagination in the creation of the image.

The third aligns the imagists with the writers of *vers libre*, however weakly or tacitly. This is despite the editor's note to this essay, which is suspiciously insistent that "*Imagism* is not necessarily associated with Hellenistic subjects, or with *vers libre* as a prescribed form" (Flint (1913) 198). The imagists here seem more anxious to define themselves as a *new* movement, in contradistinction to their precursors, that they seem unable to give unqualified admissions of their influences.

The essay that follows Flint's in this issue of *Poetry* is Ezra Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," an imagist *via negativa,* in which Pound largely defines the school according to what it is not—in Pound's terms, "Mosaic negative." He first, however, defines an "image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." (Pound (1913) 200). This definition of image reveals a temporal component of the imagist conception of the image: an image presents not only an arrangement of objects or words, as a still-life painting might, but a frozen moment—a photograph or a film still, a dynamic scene rendered static.

Pound goes on to specify that he uses the term "complex" "rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart" (Pound (1913) 200). The British psychologist Bernard Hart, in his work *The Psychology of Insanity* which appeared the previous year, explains the complex as "a system of connected ideas, with a strong emotional tone, and a tendency to produce actions of a certain definite character" (Hart (1912) 61). (The example Hart gives, coincidentally, is a photography hobby which is driven by a "photography complex" [62].)

As elsewhere in imagist propaganda, Pound defines the movement in terms of other media, and other genres. First, he cautions poets, "don't be descriptive; remember that a painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it" (Pound (1913) 203). It is unclear here whether Pound means that a painting "describes" a landscape, metaphorically, or that a painter, having painted the landscape, can describe it in prose much better than the poet.

Of course, it is hard for writing, imagist or otherwise, to avoid description in the strict sense of the word, when one of its primary processes is the conversion of visual information into text—a process necessarily involving description. But what Pound seems to mean by "description" here is closer to verbosity, or prosaic, adjective-laden ekphrasis. Yet paradoxically, he does not eschew prose, but aligns himself with it: "Don't retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Don't think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths" (Pound (1913) 201-2). [more here] This attention to generic distinctions—and to blurring them—is one which we shall see appear again and again in the writers I discuss below.

Elsewhere in Pound's essay, he repeats Flint's trio of imagist rules: linguistic precision, directness [is that different?], and irregular rhythm. The following year, after Pound's leadership in the group was replaced with Amy Lowell's, she, too, lists rules, but ones that have been modified somewhat, and to which three more have been added. Lowell repeats the goals of rhythmic innovation, and of image "presentation." To this, she adds that "we are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities" ((*Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* 1915) vii). Here

again is an analogy to painting, however, strangely, it is not the modern art of Wyndham Lewis, or the impressionism that inspired early Hulme, that provides the referent, but presumably a genre which values realism.

"Exactitude," to Lowell, may be both a matter of language economy, but may also speak to specificity, and to scale. First, using the exact word might mean that one has hit the target in one shot, and can therefore stop shooting. However, since Lowell goes on to explain that "exact" means not "merely decorative," we can infer that "exact" here means something closer to "utilitarian." But what would be a "decorative" word? "Exact" might also refer to specificity—the hypernym level in the lexical hierarchy: *fir*, rather than *tree*. Specificity, then, is related somewhat to scale: *bough* instead of *tree*: a meronymic relation.

Scale

"We oppose the cosmic poet," Lowell says, on grounds of imprecision ((*Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* 1915) vii). Imprecision here is a matter of scale. The astronomical scale is one which Lowell considers irrelevant to her, and the imagists' poetic interests. Several months later, in a special issue on imagism in *The Egoist*, Harold Monro accuses the poets of the school as being "so terrified at Cosmicism that they ran away into a kind of exaggerated Microcosmicism, and found their greatest emotional excitement in everything that seemed intensely small" (Monro (1915) 78). This critique is seemingly confimed by the first poem in the anthology, Richard Aldington's "Childhood," whose central simile is that of a "chrysalis in a match-box" ((*Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* 1915) 3). Yet, the same poem parodoxically begins on what one might call a cosmic scale: "the wretchedness of childhood / Put me out of love with God. / I can't believe in God's goodness; / I can believe / In many avenging gods." While, in a sense, the speaker of Aldington's poem repudiates the cosmic, he yet engages with it.

It is an unanswered question whether Aldington, or any of the imagists, are really concerned with small things, whether they only seem so in contrast to prior poets, or whether they are in fact more concerned with the cosmos as their predecessors. An unanswered, perhaps, but not unanswerable.

Furthermore, we might ask: just how small is small? How do we know what a small object is, and what a big object is? Are they all relative to the size of human body? If so, which human bodies, precisely? When—under what circumstances, and at what sizes—does an object stop becoming an *thing* and become a collection of things, or a even a *place*?

Other Properties

There are other physical or visual properties that Lowell here uses to describe the work in the second imagist anthology. One of the goals of the imagists, she says, is "to produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite." This word "hard" appears often in imagist rhetoric, and so it bears unpacking. While "hard" is obviously meant to be the opposite of "indefinite," as it is used in phrases like "hard left turn," "hard liquor," or "hard shadow," it also recalls physical properties of objects, like solidity, which Lowell might oppose to ethereality of a concept. Solidity is one of the properties which help to endow objects with objecthood: water and sand are not objects, and do not take indefinite articles, since they do not cohere enough to be handled as such.

In 1918, Pound publishes an article in *Poetry* called "The Hard and Soft in French Poetry" in which he explains these terms somewhat (Ezra Pound, Pound, and Eliot (1954) 285). I say "somewhat" because his explanation is hardly clear or satisfying: "by 'hardness' I mean a quality which is in poetry nearly always a virtue," he begins, "...by softness I mean an opposite quality which is not always

a fault." He continues, puzzingly, "anyone who dislikes these textural terms may lay the blame on Théophile Gautier, who certainly suggests them in *Emaux et Camées*; it is his hardness that I had first in mind. He exorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian." He then goes on to name who, in French or, more often, in English poetry, who is "hard" and who is "soft": "since Gautier, Corbière has been hard, not with a glaze or parian finish, but hard like weather-bit granite. … Romains, Vildrac, Spire, Arcos, are not hard, any one of them" (288). At no point in the essay does he explain himself further.

Pound does, however, quote a few lines from Pierre-Joséph Bernard, an erotic poet, "praised by Voltaire," whom he explains has "clear hard little stanzas." The lines are from "l'Art d'aimer":

J'au vu Daphné, Terpsichore légère,
  Sur un tapis de rose et de fougère,
  S'abandonner à des bonds pleins d'appas,
Voler, languir… (Ezra Pound, Pound, and Eliot (1954) 286)

It is hard to see what Pound could identify here as "hard," especially since the form and subject matter are so *légère*. It likely is related to the density, or in Lowell's phrase, "concentration" of the verses. That is, the ratio of images or visual information carried to the syntax that carries them.

Pound uses another term in this essay which Lowell also uses to describe the imagists in her anthology: "clear." The "clear"/"blurred" dichotomy bears some examination. Lowell probably means lexical specificity, but chooses a visual metaphor, where objects are visible when they're focused by the mind's eye. But "clear" can also mean "transparent," or "unclouded"—is this poetic murkiness merely abstraction? And is clarity merely a richness of visual properties which can be inferred from the specificities of certain nouns and select adjectives?

Pound famously derided Edward Storer's poetry as "custard" in comparison with H.D.'s "Hellenic hardness" (quoted in Jones (2001) 22). Indeed, H.D.'s first poem in the second anthology begins, "you are clear, / O rose, cut in rock, / hard as the descent of hail" ((*Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* 1915) 22). It is not a coincidence that Pound's passage of Bernard is densely Hellenic—sculptural, even. Nor indeed that his analogies are to granite and to Parian, the marble used by the Greeks for sculptures. The solidity, hardness, of the marble is what gives it objecthood, and distinguishes it from custard. It is also what makes it an *image*, that is, a word that has definite visual properties.

In Philosophy

Although Pound never admits it, except in alluding to the "forgotten school" of 1909, one of his great influences, and where precursors of many of these ideas may be found, is in the philosophical writings of T.E. Hulme. His "Notes on Language and Style" was probably written in 1907, although first published posthumously in 1925 (Jones (2001) 224). Here, we find Hulme using "firm" and "solid" as descriptors for the kinds of books he promotes:

> "Rising disgust and impatience with the talking books, e.g. Lilly and the books about Life, Science, and Religion. All the books which seem to be the kind of talk one could do if one wished.
>
> Rather choose those in old leather, which are *solid*. Here the man did not talk, but saw solid, definite things and described them. Solidity a pleasure." (Hulme (1998) 39)

Hulme contrasts "solidity" with "talk," which seems to support a reading of "hard" as not unsoft, but terse, economical. Unlike Pound, he does not reject

description, but seems to see the writing process—at least that of "the man" who writes leatherbound books—as a process which begins with visual experience, is cognitively categorized into "definite things," and ends with description.

"Talk," for Hulme, is language which is abstracted, and at a remove from, sensory experience. He explains this process in mathematical terms:

> "…in algebra, the real things are replaced by symbols. These symbols are manipulated according to certain laws which are independent of their meaning. … An analogous phenomenon happens in reasoning in language. We replace meaning (i.e. *vision*) by words. These words fall into well-known patterns, i.e. into certain well-known phrases which we accept without thinking of their meaning, just as we do the x in algebra." (Hulme (1998) 37)

Hulme equates "meaning" with "vision," implying the primacy of visual experiences in the constructions of words. He also attributes clichés to habit and to thinking which takes place at a remove from vision. Later, he draws the distinction between *rhetoric* and *solid vision*:

"All emotion depends on real solid vision or sound. It is physical. But in *rhetoric* and expositional prose we get words divorced from any real vision. Rhetoric and emotion—here the connection is different. So perhaps literary expression is from *Real* to *Real* with all the intermediate forms keeping their *real* value." (38)

His use of "physical" is unusual, given the fantastical, and thus non-physical, nature of fairy-tale beings, but the paradox highlights the importance, for Hulme's poetics, of writing that evokes physical properties, meaning, usually, visual properties, as well: "sun" and "sweat" are not merely emblems, of happiness, hard work, or otherwise, but have discernable sizes, colors, and other visual properties.

Like Pound, he finds that prose is typically more aligned with these criteria than Romantic poetry.

> The contrast between (i) a firm simple prose, creating in a definite way a fairy story, a story of simple life in the country … Here we have the microcosm of poetry. The pieces picked out from which it comes. Sun and sweat and all of them. Physical life and death fairies. And (ii) on the other hand, genteel poetry like Shelley's, which refers in elaborate analogies to the things mentioned in (i). (39)

In a later essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," probably written around 1911, Hulme draws the distinction between the two eponymous forces that he sees as opposing factors in cultural history. "After a hundred years of romanticism," he begins, "we are in for a classical revival." Here, he disparages the habits of "the romantic," who, "because he thinks man is infinite, must always be talking about the infinite … The word infinite is in every other line. … In the classical attitude you never seem to swing right along to the infinite nothing" (71-2). Hulme might object to the use of the word "infinite" on grounds that the scale is irrelevant to human concerns, or that it's difficult to visualize: it has no visual properties.

Using terms Pound would later adopt, Hulme refers to the "classical attitude" as having "dry hardness":

> How many people now can lay their hands on their hearts and say they like either Horace or Pope? They feel a kind of chill when they read them. The dry hardness which you get in the classics is absolutely repugnant to them. Poetry that isn't damp isn't poetry at all. They cannot see that accurate description is a legitimate object of verse. Verse to them always means a bringing in of some

of the emotions that are grouped round the word infinite. (75)

The "dry" / "damp" dichotomy here introduces a new figuratively physical set of poetic properties, as Hulme sees them. "Dry," when used of writing, usually means "boring": technical manuals are "dry." The OED gives, in sense 17 for "dry,": "deficient in interest; unattractive, distasteful, insipid. (figurative from food that wants succulency.)" ((“Dry, Adj. And Adv. : Oxford English Dictionary” n.d.)). Yet Hulme is certainly not suggesting that writing should be boring, or distasteful. The liquid, in his metaphor, might be emotion, or abstraction.

Symbolism

Imagist rhetoric has its roots in a number of other poetic rhetorics. The symbolist movement is one such, well-documented influence.

- Pound's insistence that "imagism is not symbolism"

"The Symbolist Manifesto," as it is now known, Jean Moréas wrote and published in *Le Figaro* in 1886. In it, he declares symbolist poetry to be "ennemie de l'enseignement, de la déclamation, de la fausse sensibilité, de la description objective," and that it "cherche: à vêtir l'Idée d'une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout in servant à exprimer l'Idée, demeurerait sujette." (Vanier (1889) 33-4).

- Symbolism is against "objective description"
- Symbolist poetry is ideas clothed in the **sensory**
  - This is translated otherwise elsewhere, but The Trésoir du langue Français informatisée has a philosopicial meaning: "qui peut être perçu par les senses."

Bergson

Woolf

Virginia Woolf was one such writer-critic. A prolific essayist, she published in []. Her essay "The Cinema," although ostensibly discussing the new artistic medium, ends with a discussion of what she knows best: fiction. She is interested here in the interface between the thought and the image, imaginal image and literary image.

"For what characteristics does thought possess which can be rendered visible to the eye without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has also an inveterate tendency especially in moments of emotion to make images run side by side with itself, to create a likeness of the thing thought about, as if by so doing it took away its sting, or made it beautiful and comprehensible. In Shakespeare, as everybody knows, the most complex ideas, the most intense emotions form chains of images, through which we pass, however rapidly and completely they change, as up the loops and spirals of a twisting stair." ((**???**) 252-3)

Here, for Woolf, literary art serializes what thought presents in parallel: it transforms images that "run side by side" into "chains of images."

Her spiral staircase analogy recalls the gyres of Yeats's "The Second Coming," [timeline?] and the Vorticism of Lewis and Pound. It is at once dizzying and transporting.

Her example of image-thick writing in Shakespeare appears again in "How Should One Read a Book," of [date?]. But here she elaborates on the quality of the image:

"reading poetry often seems a state of rhapsody ... and we read on, understanding

with the senses, not with the intellect, in a state of intoxication. Yet all this intoxication and intensity of delight depend upon the exactitude and truth of the image, on its being the counterpart of the reality within. Remote and extravagant as some of Shakespeare's images seem, far-fetched and etheral as some of Keats's, at the moment of reading they seem the cap and culmination of the thought; its final expression." ((**???**) 131-2)

We hear the echo of the imagists' "precision" here in Woolf's "exactitude and truth." The ambiguity in *truth*, straddling an arrow's true flight and the opposite of a lie, allows Woolf to hint that the literary image should be both representationally accurate to the thought, and mimetically accurate to the real-world referent. Like Eliot's objective correlative, the image corporializes the thought, gives it body.

Eliot's Objective Correlative

Joyce

H.D.

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