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Pound and Imagism in the Twenty-first Century

John R. O. Gery

In the spirit of Imagism's brevity and of what William Pratt identifies (in reference to T.E. Hulme) as Imagism's "'classical' tendency in poetry [to] become 'dry' and 'hard,' meaning that it would become visual, concrete, and communicative once again" (Pratt 35), I wish to make two assertions, one about Ezra Pound's own post-Imagist method as abstracted from Imagist tenets and one about the legacy of Imagism for twenty-first century poets. In short, I want to suggest a link from the initial practice of Imagism to the practice of poetry in a new century. But these remarks will amount to assertions, not an argument with proof.

In *The Imagist Poem*, William Pratt's compilation of what he considers Imagism's essential theory (in his introduction) and practice (in the poems selected) succeeds, in my view, because of its astute arrangement of primary materials. To read through the book is like reading Thomas Jefferson's draft of the *Declaration of Independence*, rather than just reading about it. That is, Pratt's anthology not only helps us to learn what happened between 1909 and 1917 in the activities of Imagism's practitioners, but to experience the invigorating sense of compression the poets themselves were experiencing. Whatever Romantic aspirations, private passions, or grand social ambitions (however erroneous) may bring a reader, especially a new reader, to poetry, they are liable to be dashed, or ironed flat, under the weight of Pratt's small but remarkable anthology. On a first reading, the book douses any notion that having an interesting life is sufficient for poetry; what matters instead is poetry's own "reality."

Yet even more impressive concerning Imagism is how the notion of subjectivity doused is simultaneously reproved in the poems. As we know, the Imagist poem achieves its aesthetic effect through the concrete, descriptive quality of its diction, the spare quality of its presentation, and the lack of excess in its music, therein convincing us that the moment portrayed in the poem, although quite possibly fabricated, has indeed occurred precisely in the manner rendered. Yet once the poem takes us in, it no longer matters whether what it depicts has actually existed, or even *could* exist. For example, look at Pound's "Gentildonna":

She passed and left no quiver in the veins who now
Moving among the trees, and clinging

in the air she severed,
Fanning the grass she walked on then, endures:

Grey olive leaves beneath a rain-cold sky. (Pratt 55;
Pound, *Personae* 93)

The poem seems a straightforward enough appreciation of the image of a woman who has just passed by the speaker. But in fact, despite their “dry,” “hard,” “concrete” quality, these lines are far from being “objective” or even from providing a “direct treatment of the thing” they portray -- for example, in their unabashedly male viewpoint, that insinuates a subtle antagonism, or at least a militancy, toward the figure the speaker observes, evident in such phrases as “quiver in the veins,” “clinging/ In the air she severed,” and “Fanning the grass.” Pound’s image is laden with metaphorical, if not downright editorial commentary. Only the final line redeems the poem’s overt attempt to possess what it observes through its figurative characterization of the “gentle lady,” when the poet attenuates his preoccupation with his own (albeit unclaimed) “veins” by turning to an image outside himself, ostensibly as evidence of what “endures,” of what remains of her: “grey olive leaves beneath a rain-cold sky.” Yet it is the contour of the poem, rhetorically as well as visually, that sustains it through these various gradations of thought: It includes not only three participles of action, each self-contained, but a series of basic nouns that comfort us by their familiarity: *quiver*, *veins*, *trees*, *air*, *grass*, *leaves*, and *sky*.

Despite the poem’s finesse and precision, what it offers, what we “experience,” is not merely its exotic delicacy of expression, but an understated battle, an implosion of the poet’s struggle to make sense, as literally as possible, of this moment that has stuck in his imagination. Whatever sudden harmony it achieves derives from the sense that, at any moment, it may well crack open and fly apart or, worse than that, like the experience itself, be simply overlooked. (Haiku, with its brevity, strict formality, and intensity of focus, bears a similarly precarious quality about it.) Does not any individual’s awareness of the “endurance” of another person passing on the street, exiting an elevator, or crossing the threshold at the post office often overtake her or his consciousness in much the same way? Yet generally such sense impressions, regardless of how they may bombard an observer, do not cripple her or him but are merely shrugged

off and forgotten.

The irony here comes from how the Imagist poet manipulates our assumptions, then. While the Surrealists, for instance, worked hard to convince their readers that the fantastic world they bring into their poems *could* actually be manifest, they were also continually reminding us through their contortions of language, image, and form just how fantastic that world is, was, or could be. But in Imagist poems such as Pound's, the poet entirely dupes us -- thanks to the presumption, grounded in the concreteness of his or her language, that the world the poem presents, no matter how fantastic, is the *real* world. In other words, it is not finally a question of whether or not the "thing" in a poem (the station of the metro, the flame chrysanthemum, the sea rose, the smell of the steaks, the cat atop the jamcloset) is out there to be presented; it is only a question of whether we *see* it (or *smell* it, or *hear* it, and so on). Therein lies the success of Imagism as more than a manifesto or "movement." Whether the world it portrays is the real one or not, the key is that the Imagist poet's readers have always *believed* it is. We still believe it is, almost a century later. As a rhetorical hoax, as pure propaganda, it has been virtually as effective as Jefferson's famous assumption, "All men are created equal," so effective, in fact, that we are convinced that what an Imagist poem envisions *ought* to be the way the world looks, even when everything around us may well suggest otherwise.

In *The Cantos* Pound himself exploits this same assumption about the candor of presentation as a proof of reality, in order to overload his epic with something much more than "imagery": Dare I call it "meaning"? It has to do with the difference between visualization and vision. More than reportage, more than testimony, more than memorial, the successfully rendered Imagist conceit induces us to see something that before the poem came along was, basically, not visible, without our having had the benefit of the words, something analogous to what is also said about the psychological tropes in Shakespeare.

If, for instance, in Venice you go to the Santa Maria dei Miracoli church, the small beautiful church made entirely out of polychrome marble, you will no doubt be struck by its formal heaviness compressed into such a small space on a crowded, low-lying piazza, steeped in water on three sides; and if you go inside the Miracoli, which John Ruskin considered among the finest examples of early Renaissance

architecture, the pink, blue, and green streaks of marble, the fifteen steps leading dramatically from the nave up to the domed apse, and the pint-sized carvings of childlike sea creatures behind the balustrades along the base of the pilasters to either side of the presbytery may all catch your attention as you look around. But if you have heard what Pound says about those carvings, attributed to Tullio Lombardo, in a few lines in Canto 76 -- squeezed in madly, as they are, between a plethora of other images and phrases, often stated in unfamiliar languages -- not only will you *notice* the carvings and the church, but you will no doubt *see* them exactly as Pound instructs you:

And Tullio Romano carved the sirenes
As the old custode says: so that since
then no one has been able to carve them
For the jewel box, Santa Maria Dei Miracoli
(Pound, *Cantos* 76/480)

And if (encouraged by others such as Hugh Kenner, Gianfranco Ivancich, and William Cookson), when you examine these pint-sized "sirens" behind the balustrades, you notice the figure with one hand on its breast and also recall Pound's Canto 3 ("And in the water, the almond-white swimmers,/ The silvery water glazes the upturned nipple" [Pound, *Cantos* 3/11]), you will now *see* these carvings at least threefold -- as the angels they are meant to suggest, as Tullio Lombardo's (not Romano's) classical sirens, and as Pound's modern swimmers, as well as something else, maybe, something you bring into that sanctuary from your own experience. Indeed, the layers of understanding of this "luminous detail" (Pound, *Selected* 23) soon have little to do with "reportage" at all, and you can no longer look at the "thing" in front of you without investing it with this wealth of *ideas* under pressure that the sculptor, his patron, the art historian, the poet, his critics, and you all together bring to bear in an orgy of abstractions rushing headlong into the experience you are having standing there and looking, like ionized matter into a black hole. This is not simply representation; this is poetry: no things without the names we call them by.

In my view, the legacy of Imagism in the twenty-first century has less to do with its formal liberation, that breaking away from English metrical patterns and mellifluous diction that F.S. Flint, Pound, H.D., Richard Aldington, Wyndham Lewis, D.H. Lawrence, and all the poets in Pratt's anthology

had come to find oppressive, each after her or his own fashion, than it has to do with its poetic intensity -- intensity of feeling, yes, but also intensity of *discipline* (I do not mean whips and chains here, nor a strictly formal order as opposed to randomness, nor the order of a systematic randomness or "chaos.") For twenty-first century "*vers*" to be "*libre*" requires something besides breaking the pentameter or eschewing adjectives. For contemporary poets, we have our own era's deadly habits of language to contend with, different from those for the Imagists, not the least of which are the bad habits found in the languages of technology, marketing, the "new journalism," and alarmist media, among other rhetorical hoaxes foisted upon us every day. Yet ironically, because of the *success* of Imagism (from "Amygism" to the present), we no longer tend to think of Imagist poetry itself as different, as awkward, as breaking through conventions to refresh how we see things -- at least not while we're reading it, since it has become comfortable, even comforting. Rather, as Tim Redman reminds us in the introduction to his catalogue on the 2007 Imagist exhibition at Brunnenburg, in his *Ezra Pound and His Metric*, T.S. Eliot argues, "The emphasis here is certainly on discipline and form."

Consequently, unless and until poets extend the more visionary arc of Imagism into their own writing, something in the way Pound does -- whether through unexpected juxtapositions, awkward variations, concentrated clusters of time, or some other means -- they do not really embody what matters about Imagism, in relation to poetry's candor.¹

Imagism succeeded not only because of its concrete language, concision, and idiomatic sounds and rhythms, but because it provided poets the opportunity to demonstrate how much fun it can be to work hard, with the reward of an intense experience with beauty, "whether subjective or objective." The experience itself is downright philosophical. It is that particular kind of intensive experience, more than their poetic technique, that the Imagists have bestowed us. Only such poetry, with its own peculiar properties of expression, can liberate us from the immense forces pressing against the inherent dignity of each individual. Only such poetry can breathe new life into that most essential of human endeavors, the making of meaning. And only such poetry can, in Pratt's words, "become . . . communicative once again." This strange power of poetry, in all its candor, as something different, as *a* difference, is what the Imagists seized. Despite its reputation for concreteness, commonplace subjects, and clarity, it is

Imagism's *uncommon* method of putting thought into language (or as Pound put it, ideas into action) that sets the precedent for the twenty-first century.

Note

¹ I am not necessarily advocating here, by the way, a poetry that entirely breaks down conventional "meaning" as "insight," the kind of poetry (such as that known as LANGUAGE poetry) that derives from *other* aspects of Pound's, Williams's and H.D.'s polemical poetics; rather, I mean in reference to "poems that mean," despite Archibald MacLeish's famous disclaimer (Pratt 135), yet poems whose meaning might not be so easily discerned merely because they employ familiar or accessible imagery or treat familiar conditions, qualities generally associated with Imagism.

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