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## CHAPTER 1

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# H. D., Ezra Pound and Imagism

The poetic movement of Imagism is often the first glimpse that the general reader gains of the poetry of Ezra Pound. The short history of the Imagist movement occupies a key moment in Pound's career, providing important insights into a long and complex development. It also gives access to a series of other careers, English and American, which were temporarily brought together in an attempt to impose themselves on the literary world as the next big thing.

It is worth pausing over the notion of an artistic movement of any kind. In English letters, the notion of a movement which would announce itself through manifestos designed to shape audience taste was not a novelty. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge attempted something similar in *Lyrical Ballads*, especially with the addition of the famous 1802 'Preface' which appears to us now as a permanent document of Romanticism. However, Wordsworth and Coleridge did not *call* themselves Romantics. Really, the notion of a group of artists announcing themselves to the world as a movement with a collective identity had come into fashion again in the first decade of the twentieth century, as various avant-gardes in the different arts sought identification for their particular style, or combined with other arts to insist on a collective identity. Italian Futurism was perhaps the most recent movement to impact on England in the early 1910s, offering a brash, anti-bourgeois modernism, an alliance of all the arts, and a commitment to creating an art of modernism which looked forward to an increasingly industrialized world. Futurism had the advantage of a very noticeable leader and theorist in the person of the abrasive and outspoken F. T. Marinetti, who took a delight in

provoking an audience and confronting received notions about the proper nature of art and audience.

Imagism was first given shape in 1912, and kept going in a series of Imagist anthologies until 1917. Ezra Pound himself, though substantially the creator of the movement, jumped ship and aligned himself with Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism in 1914, probably because Vorticism offered the seduction of an alliance between painting, sculpture and literature, and because Lewis's movement more resembled Futurism in its confrontational approach to existing aesthetic practices and to what were perceived as being the sedentary bourgeois tastes dominating all of artistic production and consumption. Imagism as a literary movement did not adopt the global and confrontational stance of Futurism. Nevertheless it was an umbrella for an interesting range of writers, and the occasion of an important moment of literary theorization.

The term 'Imagist' was conjured by Ezra Pound to characterize the style of recent work by his friends and collaborators, the American Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) and the Englishman Richard Aldington. Pound sent three poems each by H. D. and Aldington to Harriet Monroe, editor of the Chicago-based journal *Poetry*. Pound wrote to Monroe: 'This is the sort of American stuff that I can show here in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives; no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek!'<sup>1</sup> Pound would reformulate and develop this manifesto on several subsequent occasions, but in essence all of the central claims are in place. Of course it is not all American, though this claim is not only there for Monroe's benefit. Imagism aims to bring modern speech into poetry, and rejects the English late Victorian style which it considers has become verbose. The comparison with the Greek is very important. Aldington and H. D. shared an interest in classical poetry, and they found in Greek poetry – especially the surviving fragments of the Lesbian poetess Sappho – a directness which they felt had no equal in contemporary modes of writing in English. They sought to recreate such writing for themselves as the basis of a new modern idiom, and in doing so helped provide the basis for a key element in English modernism – neo-classicism. 'Classicism' became the favoured term behind which such anti-Romantics as T. S. Eliot, Pound and Lewis would organize their projects. It later came to take on a whole swathe of political and

cultural meanings, but in its aesthetic dimension the point of reference is always Romanticism. These writers believed that Romantic art was over-subjective, and argued for a renewed emphasis on the object-like nature of the art-work. The intellectual ramification for this came from the poet F. S. Flint and the philosopher T. E. Hulme (both contributors to the weekly magazine *New Age*), and is reflected in such literary critical notions as the 'objective correlative' briefly expounded by Eliot in his essay on Hamlet;<sup>2</sup> Pound, H. D. and Aldington gave the movement an aesthetic reality which in its sheer delicacy seems surprisingly different in scale to the theorization of 'classicism' which eventually followed.

One of the Imagist poems first published in *Poetry* and subsequently in the first Imagist anthology was H. D.'s 'Epigram'. The poem demonstrates several interests of the Imagists, and establishes not least that the notion of the 'image' does not refer simply to the visual image. The poem is an adaptation of a Greek epigram of unknown authorship:

The golden one is gone from the banquets;  
She, beloved of Atimetus,  
The swallow, the bright Homonoea;  
Gone the dear chatterer.<sup>3</sup>

H. D.'s method is best understood with reference to the original from which she is working. This is an epitaph which appears in the *Greek Anthology*, and which can be found as epigram no. XLVI in the 'Epitaphs' section of J. W. Mackail's *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (1907). This tiny volume, which does not include translations, is itself almost a model for the Imagist anthologies, presenting the most gracefully concise writing to be found in ancient Greek literature. The original occupies six lines, and can be found in translation in this form:

*'On Claudia Homonoea'*  
*Author Unknown*

I Homonoea, who was far clearer-voiced than the Sirens, I who was more golden than the Cyprian herself at revellings and feasts, I the chattering bright swallow lie here, leaving tears to Atimetus, to whom

I was dear from girlhood; but unforeseen fate scattered all that great affection.<sup>4</sup>

We might also set this against the version of this poem which H. D.'s editor includes in her *Collected Poems* of 1983. It features an extra line which the author had deleted before publication:

The golden one is gone from the banquets;  
She, beloved of Atimetus,  
The swallow, the bright Homonoëa;  
Gone the dear chatterer;  
Death succeeds Atimetus.<sup>5</sup>

H. D.'s version is more economical, more oblique, and more neutral in tone than the literal translation. She is not simply rendering the Greek epigram, but transforming it into an idiom which is, if possible, even more epigrammatic. The content of the original is certainly simplified and reduced, and this is done with a view to removing its overt emotion. The translation exploits the pathos of the dead speaking her own epitaph, but H. D.'s version, in which the first person has disappeared, is in this respect closer to the original. The classical references in the original (to the Sirens, Bacchus and Aphrodite) have been removed, to avoid a deadening 'classicizing' effect, with only the names of the lovers remaining. The fifth and unpublished line is an attempt to avert direct emotion with a figure that requires unpacking, condensing as it does the metaphor of death succeeding Atimetus as the lover of Homonoëa. This notion was H. D.'s own and does not appear in the original, and was probably excluded not because the idea is a bad one, but because the repetition of Atimetus is clumsy (it is enough to give his name once), and since Homonoëa has already twice been said to be 'gone' it seems unnecessary to point out that she is dead. In fact, the repetition of 'gone' is itself redundant and ought, by the canons of Imagism – to 'use no unnecessary word' – to have been eliminated.

H. D.'s poem is not a translation, but a loose version in which aesthetic goals related to the ideals of the Greek epigram are reconfigured as a modern poetics which specifically seeks to substitute a laconic detachment for what was perceived as the emotional effusiveness of the late Victorian poets. In fact, there are few Imagist poems

which really fulfil the criteria of Imagism. Aldington's 'To a Greek Marble',<sup>6</sup> though a featured work of Imagism, is littered with 'thee', 'thou' and 'thy', runs for 23 lines, and seeks to evoke pathos too directly. Imagism is interesting not so much for the range of work which it produced as for the intentions which shaped it and for its theoretical underpinning, which Pound, in particular, developed into a whole poetics that in a variety of forms would buttress the work which occupied him for the whole of his writing life from 1917 onwards – *The Cantos*.

Like H. D., Pound at this time was seeking to create a modern mode of writing which would provide a flexible alternative to the Victorian mode, and satisfy a new aesthetic criterion based not on emotional indulgence but on the precision of the practice of writing itself. Pound pursued this goal over a number of years with incredible single-mindedness. In doing so he developed not one but many ways of writing a modern poem, and the extent of his achievement and of his art should be lost on no one – though Pound was evidently so successful, and so influential on the major practitioners of poetry, that aspects of his art might be invisible to first-time readers.

Pound's 'The Return' is a fully realized exercise in the kind of free verse tempered by metrical precision that he made into the centrepiece of his art. This poem is ostensibly about hunters returning to a hunt in which they once participated gloriously, but who now are tentative in their approach, perhaps wary of trying their powers once again. The content is given a classical air, but there is no reference to any specific and ready-made mythological situation. The situation has no explanation outside the poem, as if the idea were to evoke an atmosphere without reliance on any external scenario. Moreover, the uncertainty of the returning hunters is matched by the uncertainty of the reader who tries – and fails – to recognize a familiar situation in this poem. It is above all the sense of uncertain motion that Pound tries to create – the writing is much more about the mode and movement of the poem than about any supposed content:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative  
Movements, and the slow feet,  
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain  
Wavering!<sup>7</sup>

The reference to 'feet' reminds us that technique is an abiding concern of Pound's. Here, in a *tour de force* of prosodic technique, Pound demonstrates that the organization of the poetic foot – the basic unit of verse – must be as rigorous in the context of free verse as it is in that of formal verse. The metric organization in free verse is given not by the set of demands of any adopted verse pattern, but by the content itself, so that the very movement of the verse will suggest a kind of concrete content. In this poem, it is the shape of a stumbling, tentative motion, along with a slow gaining of confidence, which the verse form musically imitates and embodies. As Pound explained:

I believe in an ultimate and absolute rhythm as I believe in an absolute symbol or metaphor. The perception of the intellect is given in the word, that of the emotions in the cadence. [...] The rhythm of any poetic line corresponds to emotion. It is the poet's business that this correspondence be exact, i.e., that it be the emotion which surrounds the thought expressed.<sup>8</sup>

One aspect of this passage is that it reveals the almost mystical importance that Pound gave to the organization of sound in poetry. He called this 'MELOPOEIA, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning'.<sup>9</sup> Note that Pound does not merely celebrate the mellifluousness of wonderful-sounding poetry – far from it. His notion is that the sound of verse corresponds to a certain type of meaning quite as definitely as does its semantic content. On the one hand, a work like 'The Return' is a dazzling exercise in rendering a mood as much or more in terms of organization of sound as in terms of the elusive content. Here we see Pound the great virtuoso at work. On the other hand, what we also see at play is an aspect of his work which more recent and theoretically inflected critics have fastened on to – a theoretical insistence on a kind of absolute meaning, which adopts various forms throughout Pound's career, but is a relative constant and is viewed suspiciously by modern readers brought up on the theory of the differential displacement of meaning, which (as we shall see later) Jacques Derrida has extracted from the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. There are clear extrinsic reasons, too, to regard Pound's theories of meaning as tending to an authoritarian closure – his later advocacy of Mussolini and

his virulent anti-Semitism lead us to examine his theories of poetic language with a sceptical eye.

In some sense we have two Pounds: on the one hand, one of the principal inventors of modern poetry, who throughout his career (and not merely in his early years) created novel modes of poetic writing and led the way in showing others how many things modern poetry could be; on the other hand, a political undesirable, whose attempts to theorize his art and to give it a social role are too involved with his reprehensible anti-Semitic theory – for Pound was not simply a bigot or racist but a committed anti-Semitic *theorist*.

I would like to stay with Pound the technician for a moment, although in the context of poetry ‘technique’ is not an adequate term. ‘Technique’ implies that poetry might have a ‘substance’ which precedes expression, even, a general content already given a broadly literary form; ‘technique’, this notion suggests, is merely the finishing process in which details of no interest to the consumer are attended to, the behind-the-scenes mechanics of which only the engineer need be aware. It should hardly need saying that ‘technique’ goes to the heart of the mode of being of poetry – technique ‘*is*’ what poetry ‘*is*’, its substance as an object and activity, not merely its manner of presenting some other substance. Pound’s capacity for creating new poetic modes testifies to a real hunger for writing as an art, not simply a means to some end, even if his work eventually became involved in a general crisis for the notion of the artist.

In the same, often cited passage in which he talks about ‘melopoeia’, Pound also discusses ‘logopoeia’, a term which he says refers to ‘the dance of the intellect among words’, adding that ‘it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. [ . . . ] It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode.’<sup>10</sup> This is a condensed characterization of the modern mode of writing, which might include the laconic speech of Imagism and the irony of Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’, as well as some of Pound’s most remarkable early writing. Here, Pound succinctly characterizes the self-conscious modernist mode of working with different discursive sources to produce a complex ‘world’, and the particular pleasure of playful interaction which accompanies this art of discursive mixing. Yet even in these early formulations, there is a crisis developing for

Pound, concerning the purpose and meaning of the writer as artist, and of writing as art.

Pound was aware of the forces shaping this dilemma because, in a literary London newly aware of continental art movements, the pressures on the notion of 'art' were visibly mounting. His poem 'Les Millwin' is a wry exercise in his own art, which also serves as a satirical documentation of the confrontation between the stance of aestheticism of the 1890s and the incoming Futurist attitude to art. It is characterized as a juxtaposition of the anaemic, wealthy Millwins (whose surname, in the title of the poem, is absurdly offset by the French 'les') and the robust art students from the Slade School (where Wyndham Lewis studied). The setting is a performance by Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, the height of fashion at that time. In the audience are the young Millwin family, lying on the seats 'like so many unused boas', and the art students, a 'rigorous deputation from "Slade"' who hold aloft their 'fore-arms / crossed in great futuristic X's'. The approach of the poem is to create an image as object-like as possible, avoiding comment and concluding only with two dry lines:

Let us therefore mention the fact,  
For it seems to us worthy of record.<sup>11</sup>

Pound satirically objectifies both sides in the imaginary juxtaposition, then withdraws from any further authorial comment or other explanation of the material.

The art of creating an object-like structure in words was taken virtually to its limit in this famous poem:

*In a Station of the Metro*

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals, on a wet, black bough.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps remarkably, considering the brevity of the poem, there are various versions of the text, and readers will excuse the fact that I have opted for the version contained in Pound's 1914 essay 'Vorticism', since it is this extended essay which furnishes the theoretical commentary on language which, in its various forms, Pound developed as an increasingly central component of his subsequent work.

The poem itself perhaps requires little commentary. Like a Romantic lyric, it attempts to capture a moment of heightened aesthetic awareness, but it does so with a pronounced economy of means. There is no 'poet' present, no 'I', not even a main verb. Instead there is just a location given, in the title, an image of faces briefly evoked, and, by means of a juxtaposition, a further image introduced which serves as a simile or analogue of the first. Although Pound remarks in his commentary on this poem that 'it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought' (p. 89), in fact the opposite could be asserted: that such a work demands very little in the way of emotional assent or intellectual participation from the reader. It is what it is: a juxtaposition of images of the starkest kind. While we can adduce a certain type of aesthetic emotion on the part of the poet whom we imagine undergoing this experience in the Parisian Metro, this remains not only understated but unstated, a mere possibility left, undiscussed, in the background.

The reader of 'In a Station of the Metro' may of course generate a whole series of readings of this work, concerned with the city, the juxtaposition of nature and society, the underground Metro as a modern hell, the transitory and the permanent – thematically, there is a great deal here, even if materially there is not. Pound, shifting his allegiance from the Imagism which he had helped initiate, but which now seemed to him perhaps precious or tame, adopts the dynamic insistence of his new ally Wyndham Lewis, explaining that: 'The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing' (p. 92). In describing this 'rush' of ideas, Pound seeks to place the thinking outside the poem rather than within it – meanings are to be adduced rather than stated. However, as well as setting out an aesthetic manifesto, Pound begins to theorize the nature and status of poetic language. He will eventually move on from this to theorize language itself. Pound followed the tenets of post-Impressionist art in declaring that the Imagist poem was a matter of a purely formal arrangement. He compares the Imagist poem to an algebraic equation, 'not something about *a*, *b*, and *c*, having something to do with form, but about *sea*, *cliffs*, *night*, having something to do with mood' (p. 92). In tandem with this, he expresses a distrust of what he calls 'rhetoric' in language, in terms which suggest not simply an aesthetic hostility towards redundant words as

used in poetry, but a doubt about the authenticity of words which can drift away from any secure meaning. On the one hand, by insisting that a composition in words can be as object-like as a sculpture, Pound makes an interesting assertion about the possible affinity of a linguistic and non-linguistic art-work, a comparison which is open to question but seems mostly stimulating and potentially productive. On the other hand, he opens the way to an insistence that words must be immediate and objective in their meaning, something problematic for language, which achieves its effects over time and can only ever approach, rather than assimilate, its object. Pound hopes to insist on a kind of immediate correspondence between word and thing. For this reason he advances the Chinese ideogram as a model for poetry. In this, he followed the scholar Ernest Fenollosa, whose book *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* Pound edited and brought to press. This book emphasized that the Chinese ideogram was, in its origin, pictorial in nature, and that therefore it offered a more direct mode of communication than Western phonetic script. Fenollosa wrote: 'Chinese poetry [ . . . ] speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate.'<sup>13</sup>

In Pound's art there is, almost paradoxically, a distrust of language, especially of writing, which extended into a similar distrust of money. Money, like language, circulates with no real certainty that the object which it 'represents' will ever be restored. Like language, money is peculiarly groundless. Pound's long anti-Semitic campaign in his work takes root in his developing theory, throughout the later 1920s and 1930s, that corruption of the meaning of words and corruption of the value of money could be blamed on Jews.

How possible is it to read the early poetry of Pound without making mental reference to the politics he developed? One reason that we cannot in any simple fashion separate the two is the manner in which the Imagist method was transformed and extended throughout the *Cantos*. In 1948 Pound published a volume called *The Pisan Cantos*. This series of works had been written in Pisa in 1945, when Pound was under arrest for treason by US forces. At one point held on death row, later moved on account of his age (he was 60), these were unpromising circumstances for the composition of a major masterpiece. Not only

that, the matter of the *Pisan Cantos* was a lament for the defeat of Mussolini and Italian Fascism, a similarly unpromising matter as far as many English-speaking readers might have been concerned at that time. Yet the *Pisan Cantos* are a remarkable work which set a new standard in modern poetry. Pound finds an idiom, based on the brevity, allusiveness, and juxtapositions of Imagism, that is a perfect vehicle for a review of his own life and untimely entry into history. The fragments which make up these Cantos concern the whole of his thought, the people he has known, the art he has loved and the places he has visited, all combined in a lament which is also an aggressive defiance of the forces that have eclipsed the developing experiment in social organization which (as Pound saw it) the defeat of Italy had cruelly ended. The plangent tones in which he insists that his idea of an ideal state can be preserved in his mind, even if the attempt to realize it has been destroyed, is presented in terms of great grace and economy, juxtaposing the personal and the cultural in an idiom which seems to come easily yet which is hard won. In dialogue with an absent friend, Pound writes: 'yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper, / with a bang not with a whimper'. Pound rebukes Eliot (the Possum) for the quiescence of his poem 'The Hollow Men', which ends 'not with a bang but a whimper'. Pound ends, yes, defiantly lamenting the execution of Mussolini by Italian partisans in the closing stage of the war, but also with a work which is a defiant *tour de force* that, whether we choose to attend to it or not, is the culmination of Imagism and one of the defining works of modernist poetry.