

IMAGISM

One of the most significant single movements of early 20th century American and English literature, Imagism has exerted a lasting influence on American **modernist** and **postmodernist** poetry. This poetic gathering has been considered by many as the "starting point of modern poetry" (**T. S. Eliot**, 22), turning from a London-based gathering of a dozen or so American and English poets into another kind of school: that which trained generations of poets, mostly American, in modern writing. After the movement was over, Imagism's revolutionary poetic principles became widely accepted tools that shaped the mature writing of most major poets of the century. Rejecting the hegemony of symbolic writing, Imagism emphasized objectivity and directness, clarity, brevity, and hardness of outline, as well as freedom from metrical laws. Making use of diverse poetic and visual models, Imagism found inspiration in Chinese, Japanese, Greek, and Hebrew poetry, Provençal songs and French anti-symbolist writing, as well as contemporary visual art forms. Members of the original group include American poets Pound, **H. D.** (Hilda Doolittle), **Amy Lowell**, John Gould Fletcher, as well as English poets Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint, T. E. Hulme, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), and D. H. Lawrence. Several other poets can be said to have been affected by Imagism, prominently including Williams, Eliot, **Wallace Stevens**, **Archibald MacLeish**, James Joyce, **Carl Sandburg**, **Marianne Moore**, and **e. e. cummings**.

The key date of Imagism is 1912: this is the year when Pound, the chief organizer of the group at this time, sent H. D.'s poems to **Harriet Monroe** with the comment that they were "modern [...] in the laconic speech of the Imagistes," thereby to appear in January 1913 in her newly launched *Poetry* (Chicago) as those of "H. D., *Imagiste*"; this is when he formulated his "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste," later to be known as the First Manifesto, to

appear in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*; this is when in his Prefatory Note to "The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme," five poems in all, published at the end of his *Ripostes*, Pound first referred to Imagism as a school (*Personae* 259). The history of the movement goes back a few years earlier: after Pound arrived in London in 1908 he attended Hulme's weekly gatherings called "Poets' Club" in Soho, soon to be joined by H. D., Aldington, and the others. During these meetings they discussed mostly issues of technique, foreign verse forms, and the necessity of absolute precision in poetry. By 1913, Pound speaks of the Imagists as an actual literary group living in London, determined to bring about changes in poetry comparable to those in the visual arts, music, ballet, or psychology. For this is the time—"In or about December 1910"—when, as Virginia Woolf famously put it in her 1919 essay, "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown," "human character changed" (95) It all seemed to coincide with some other massive events marking the emergence of the new and the modern: the Postimpressionist Exhibition in London in 1910; Diaghilev's Russian Ballet and Stravinsky's music playing in London in 1911; the U.S. lecture tour of Freud and Jung in 1909; the 1913 English publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*; James Frazer's monumental work of comparative religion, *The Golden Bough*, appearing between 1907 and 1915; the 1913 Armory Show in New York, exhibiting Braque, Picasso, Ernst, Picabia, Duchamp, among others. These were the years when ideas of the new included the search for abstract structures behind visible phenomena, as well as for the irrational and subconscious beneath the conscious. During these years just preceding World War I, Imagism emerged as part of the first wave of modernism to break down, with the aggressive dynamism of the new century, all that was considered archaic and stale, reminiscent of an earlier era. Modern poetry, like modern art, Hulme insisted in "A Lecture on Modern Poetry," "deals with expression and communication of momentary phases in the poet's mind" (*Further*

Speculations 68), and the momentary impressions which form experience would come in images to be captured in **free verse**.

Imagist writing was first published by Monroe in *Poetry* magazine: poetry from Aldington (1912), H. D. (1913), and Pound (1913); articles by Pound ("A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," 1913) and Flint ("Imagisme," 1913). Later *The Egoist* (London) would carry significant essays by Aldington ("Modern Poetry and the Imagists," 1914) and Flint ("A History of Imagism," 1915). *Poetry's* September 1913 issue brought out a small collection, titled *The Newer School*, of Imagist poems by Aldington, H. D., Lowell, Skipwith Cannell, Williams, and Flint. The first anthology, *Des Imagistes*, was edited by Pound, and published in 1914; it contained thirty-odd pieces of eleven poets: Pound, H. D., Aldington, Flint, Lowell, Williams, Cannell, Allen Upward, John Cuornos, as well as Joyce and Hueffer. *The Egoist* too brought out a *Special Imagist Number* in May 1915, while the *Little Review* (Chicago) ran a free verse contest in 1918, won by an Imagist poem by H. D. Three anthologies (1915, 1916, 1917) came out in the final stages of Imagism, nicknamed "Amygism" for Amy Lowell's leadership at this time; they were all titled *Some Imagist Poets*, and listed Aldington, H. D., Flint, Lowell, Fletcher, and Lawrence among its contributors. After 1917 Imagism ceased to be a movement; its principles, however, have survived throughout the century.

Imagism was one of the first self-conscious literary movements that crafted its manifesto. Several essays contain statements of Imagist principles, among them Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," Flint's "Imagisme," and Aldington's "Modern Poetry and the Imagists." Few years later, in 1918, Pound rephrased these principles in "A Retrospect," narrowing them down to three points:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." (*Literary Essays* 3)

To these he adds a "certain doctrine of the image":

An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...] It is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. (*Literary Essays* 5)

Of the principles of Imagism, the "direct treatment of the 'thing'" is most significant, for here lies the formulation of Imagism's anti-symbolic stance. The Imagist poet—or the later poet trained in Imagist technique, for that matter—believes that the object be valued for itself, and not for the symbolic or metaphorical meaning it might convey. The work of art ceases to be a riddle to be solved, or a code to be decoded, where the physical stands for the metaphysical. Words here do not stand for something else, but in and of themselves: as tactile, tangible, audible, objective things. Imagism—and the radical modernism of Pound, Williams, and Stein in general—refuses the reading of meanings into phenomena. Assuming that value is immanent rather than transcendent, they treat objects or natural phenomena as meaningful in themselves, without human mediation, without the creative meaning-making of the poet, as the Romantic-Symbolist tradition would insist. Objects such as the

wheelbarrow in Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" will not be taken to mediate and represent human values; this ordinary object will be presented in its objecthood, as beautiful in and of itself. As Pound stated in "A Retrospect,"

that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk." (*Literary Essays* 9)

In typical Imagist poems such as Lowell's "A Decade" or Pound's "A Girl" emotions are neither evoked by a symbol, nor confessed openly; instead, they are conveyed by the object, the "thing"—red wine, honey, and morning bread, in the first case, a tree growing in/into a woman, in the second --, directly and precisely treated. As Aldington puts it in "Modern Poetry and the Imagists,"

We convey an emotion by presenting the object and circumstance of that emotion without comment. For example, we do not say 'O how I admire that exquisite, that beautiful, that--25 more adjectives woman, you are cosmic, let us spoon forever,' but we present that woman, we make an 'Image' of her, we make the scene convey the emotion. (202)

The second principle demands language economy: language is to be taken seriously, leaving no room for redundancy. In one poem, "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance," Pound

demonstrates this economy of words by adding notes to his somewhat liberal translation of the poem by Chinese poet Rihaku (Li Po).

The jeweled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

(By Rihaku)

NOTE.--*Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.*

The reader used to late-Victorian verbosity is given a playful exercise in perception here: the note expounds what is otherwise contained—but not necessarily noticed—in the poem. Indeed, once the poet uses the exact word, the reader can trust language, in which case the note becomes redundant.

The emphasis on the *mot juste* also implies that no superfluous word is allowed for mere decorum or ornament. No pre-existing form or symmetrical pattern is allowed without the actual emotion demanding them. In line with this thinking, *vers libre* becomes a fundamental part of Imagism's poetic program, expounded in the third principle. By "absolute rhythm" Pound refers to a rhythm interpretive of emotion: where rhythm is

subordinated to meaning, and evolves simultaneously with the treatment of the poetic object. Pound's "musical phrase" (*Literary Essays* 3) or Hulme's "fitting of the rhythm to the idea" (*Further Speculations* 74) is poetic form that responds to the inner control of impression or image; this is contrasted with the outer control of a pre-established pattern of accent and rhyme, Pound's "sequence of the metronome" or "the comforting and easy arms of the old, regular metre" (Hulme, *Further Speculations* 74). The poet writing in "absolute rhythm" will rarely, if at all, use regular meter; most often the object treated will demand free verse form.

As its name suggests, the doctrine of the image plays a central role in Imagist writing. The function of image in poetry is seen in the de-automatization process: in preventing us from getting too accustomed to what we perceive, and help see things as if for the first time. "Poetry endeavors to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process," Hulme insists in his essay "Romanticism and Classicism" (*Speculations* 134). H. D.'s "Priapus" ["Orchard"], together with "In a Station of the Metro" and "Pagani's, November 8" by Pound, seems to present the perfect image in the way they break conventional modes of perception, while rendering particulars and exercising attention and alertness. They capture moments of recognition and discovery—the first pear falling, faces lining up in a metro station as if petals on a bough, the coalescence of two pairs of eyes exhibiting both similarity and difference in passion --, when presupposed dualisms such as the outer and the inner, the objective and the subjective suddenly disappear. This conception of art as determined by perception rather than production coincides with the idea of defamiliarization of the Russian Formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky, and is shared by **avant-garde** artists such as Marcel Duchamp, whose *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Fountain* (1917) turn the mass-produced object into art by the gesture of perception and exhibition.

Further Reading. Selected Primary Sources: *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1914); *Some Imagist Poets*. 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915, 1916, 1917); Aldington, Richard, "Modern Poetry and the Imagists" (*The Egoist* I, 11 [1914], 202); Pound, Ezra, *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952); Eliot, T. S., *American Literature and the American Language* (St. Louis: Washington UP, 1953); Pound, Ezra, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1954); Hulme, T. E., *Speculations*, ed. Herbert Read (New York: Harcourt, 1924); Hulme, T. E., *Further Speculations*, ed. Sam Hynes (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1955). **Selected Secondary Sources:** Woolf, Virginia. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (*The Captain's Deathbed and Other Essays* [New York: Harcourt, 1950], 94-119); Hughes, Glenn, *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1960); Pratt, William, ed., *The Imagist Poem* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963); Goodwin, K. L., *The Influence of Ezra Pound*, ch. 1 (London: Oxford UP, 1966); Fauchereau, Serge, *Lecture de la poésie américaine*, ch. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968); Kenner, Hugh, "Imagism" (*The Pound Era* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1971], 173-191); Jones, Peter, *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Perkins, David, "Imagism" (*A History of Modern Poetry*, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976], 329-347); Gage, John T., *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981); Pondrom, Cyrena N., "H.D. and the Origins of Imagism" (*Signets. Reading H.D.*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis [Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990], 85-109).

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