

On "In a Station of the Metro"

Ezra Pound (from *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 1916)

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation . . . not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that - a "pattern," or hardly a pattern, if by "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour. I do not mean that I was unfamiliar with the kindergarten stories about colours being like tones in music. I think that sort of thing is nonsense. If you try to make notes permanently correspond with particular colours, it is like tying narrow meanings to symbols.

That evening, in the Rue Raynouard, I realized quite vividly that if I were a painter, or if I had, often, *that kind* of emotion, of even if I had the energy to get paints and brushes and keep at it, I might found a new school of painting that would speak only by arrangements in colour.

And so, when I came to read Kandinsky's chapter on the language of form and colour, I found little that was new to me. I only felt that someone else understood what I understood, and had written it out very clearly. It seems quite natural to me that an artist should have just as much pleasure in an arrangement of planes or in a pattern of figures, as in painting portraits of fine ladies, or in portraying the Mother of God as the symbolists bid us.

When I find people ridiculing the new arts, or making fun of the clumsy odd terms that we use in trying to talk of them amongst ourselves; when they laugh at our talking about the "ice-block quality" in Picasso, I think it is only because they do not know what thought is like, and they are familiar only with argument and gibe and opinion. That is to say, they can only enjoy what they have been brought up to consider enjoyable, or what some essayist has talked about in mellifluous phrases. They think only "the shells of thought," as de Gourmont calls them; the thoughts that have been already thought out by others

Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language, just as a painter must have pigments or shades more numerous than the existing names of the colours.

Perhaps this is enough to explain the words in my "Vortex": --

"Every concept, every emotion, presents itself to the vivid consciousness in some primary form. It belongs to the art of this form."

That is to say, my experience in Paris should have gone into paint. If instead of colour I had perceived sound or planes in relation, I should have expressed it in music or in sculpture. Colour was, in that instance, the "primary pigment"; I mean that it was the first adequate equation that

came into consciousness. The Vorticist uses the "primary pigment." Vorticism is art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary application.

What I have said of one vorticist art can be transposed for another vorticist art. But let me go on then with my own branch of vorticism, about which I can probably speak with greater clarity. All poetic language is the language of exploration. Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of Imagisme is that it does not use images *as ornaments*. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.

I once saw a small child go to an electric light switch as say, "Mamma, can I *open* the light?" She was using the age-old language of exploration, the language of art. It was a sort of metaphor, but she was not using it as ornamentation.

One is tired of ornamentations, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them.

The Japanese have had the sense of exploration. They have understood the beauty of this sort of knowing. A Chinaman said long ago that if a man can't say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the *hokku*.

"The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:

A butterfly."

That is the substance of a very well-known *hokku*. Victor Plarr tells me that once, when he was walking over snow with a Japanese naval officer, they came to a place where a cat had crossed the path, and the officer said, "Stop, I am making a poem." Which poem was, roughly, as follows: --

"The footsteps of the cat upon the snow:

(are like) plum-blossoms."

The words "are like" would not occur in the original, but I add them for clarity.

The "one image poem" is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion. I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work "of second intensity." Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence: -

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals, on a wet, black bough."

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. I a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.

Ralph Bevilaqua

Recent critics, commenting on Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," have invariably referred to the connotative power of the word *apparition* in the first line of that poem. Accordingly, one critic has called it "the single word which lifts the couplet from bald statement to poetry." Many have commented upon the various connotations of the word. It has been stated that the word suggests "the supernatural or the immaterial and a sudden unexpected experience"; that it "first establishes the sensation of unreality and the lack of precision which is then reinforced by the metaphor, and which, therefore permeates the mood of the poem," and that through its use Pound seems to suggest that life "can be made to seem bearable only by the metaphor of an 'apparition,' a ghost of the bright beauty of things that grow freely in the sunlight." All of these remarks direct our attention to that fortunate lack of precision inherent in the word *apparition* which results in its particular richness within the poem. While I agree that in the context of the poem several connotations of the word *apparition* are possible, I should like to suggest the probability of Pound's having a particular and very specific idea in mind that he wished to convey by the use of this word. Once this meaning is made evident, furthermore, it should become apparent that the poem is a clear example, in verse, of Pound's own conception of the manner in which the Image poem operates, which he later defined in a prose essay for *Poetry* magazine.

That Ezra Pound has a sophisticated knowledge of several European languages, especially French and Italian, is a well-established fact. Accordingly, it should be assumed that he is well aware of the subtleties and nuances in the vocabularies of those languages. Of major concern to us here is a particular nuance of the French word *apparition*, which is one of a large group of words known technically as a false cognate, a word the orthography of which in one language is the same as that in another, but which carries a different meaning from that similarly-spelled word. In French *apparition* can and often does carry the special meaning of the way something appears to a viewer *at the precise moment it is perceived* (italics mine). It is my contention that this French word, in addition to its false cognate in English, was in Pound's thoughts as he composed the poem. That Pound knew French well and that the poem was written in France about a French subway station make this contention all the more plausible. Furthermore, not only does this particular sense of the word suit what seems to be the intention of the first line (to suggest the unique way in which the faces appeared to the viewer at the precise moment of their being perceived), but it also enhances with its notion of suddenness that stimulus-response transferral suggested as objects perceived are metamorphosed by the creative imagination into their metaphorical counterparts. If we accept this sense of the word, then the poem seems to exemplify perfectly Pound's notion of the Image (stated in *Poetry*, March 1913) of an "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." Equally significant is Pound's own discussion of the genesis of the poem in question in which he placed substantial emphasis on the precise moment when the objects that moved him dashed before his eyes:

Three years ago [1911] in Paris I got out of a "metro" train at La Concorde, and saw *suddenly* a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that *sudden* emotion. And that evening I found, *suddenly*, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation . . . not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. . . . [Italics mine.]

Later in the same essay Pound speaks of the Image in terms that are significant to an understanding of his conception of this type of poem :

The "one-image poem" is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion.

I wrote a thirty-line poem and destroyed it because it was what we call work of the second intensity. Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later [1912] I made the following hokku-like sentence:

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals, on a wet, black bough."

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort one is trying to record *the precise instant* when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective. [Italics mine.]

What could be more illustrative of the effect Pound speaks of than the function of the word *apparition* with its connotations of suddenness and first perception? In addition, the word enriches the quality and effectiveness of the entire metaphor illustrating, to be sure, Pound's understanding of what Elizabeth Sewall speaks of as the "good metaphor," that which "from its very fittingness and precision should emanate in the mind a divining impetus which communicates to the organism receiving it, hints, unformulable yet convincing, of future interpretative power." It was Aristotle who declared that the faculty for analogical invention and thought was the hallmark of the poet. Surely "In a Station of the Metro" evinces Pound's mastery of this faculty and suggests that Eliot was not without justification in calling him *il miglior fabbro*.

from "Pound's 'In A Station of the Metro': A Textual Note." *English Language Notes* 8.4 (June 1971).

James F. Knapp

"In a Station of the Metro" relies on just two images, both presented in a simple, direct way, plus the catalyst of one word which is not straightforward description: "apparition." Through the metaphoric suggestion of that word, Pound fuses the mundane image of "faces in the crowd," with an image possessing visual beauty and the rich connotations of countless poems about spring. And because "apparition" means what it does, he is able to convey the feeling of surprised discovery which such a vision in such a place must evoke.

From *Ezra Pound*. Copyright © 1979 by G.K. Hall and Co.

Hugh Witemeyer

In practice, the presentation of the Image involves the search for an equation that will approximate a beautiful but ineffable psychic adventure. This much Pound made clear when he described the process of composing "In a Station of the Metro."

....

The moment of delightful psychic experience and the subsequent search for the precise equation could not be more clearly described. In some way, the poem can be interpreted by means of the definitions in "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste": the complex is presented "instantaneously," the

transition from the Metro station to the wet bough somewhere outside liberates us from "space limits," and the transition from the present faces to the remembered petals breaks down "time limits." But the "Don'ts" don't account for one peculiarly powerful word in the poem - "apparitions." This word veils the faces in mystery, for it suggests that they are not a mere visual impression but a vision of beauty appearing to the poet from another realm. "Apparition" links "Metro" with the aesthetic of *The Spirit of Romance*.

The second line of the haiku "super-poses" a concrete image which gives a sensory equation for the rare perception. The heart of the poem lies neither in the apparition nor in the petals, but in the mental process which leaps from one to the other. "In a poem of this sort," as Pound explained, "one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." This darting takes place *between* the first and second lines. In the simplest possible verbal equation ($a=b$), the adventure lies in the unstated relation *between* the elements. The factors exist for the sake of the equivalence, the images for the sake of the Image. As Stanley Coffman puts it, "the images are so arranged that the pattern becomes an Image, an organic structure giving a force and pleasure that are greater than and different from the images alone."

From *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewals, 1908-1920*. Copyright © 1969 by the University of California Press.

Hugh Kenner

He tells us that he first satisfied his mind when he hit on a wholly abstract vision of colors, splotches on darkness like some canvas of Kandinsky's (whose work he had not then seen). This is a most important fact. Satisfaction lay not in preserving the vision, but in devising with mental effort an abstract equivalent for it, reduced, intensified. He wrote a 30-line poem and destroyed it; after six months he wrote a shorter poem, also destroyed; and after another year, with, as he tells us, the Japanese *hokku* in mind, he arrived at a poem which needs every one of its 20 words, including the six words of its title. . . .

We need the title so that we can savor that vegetal contrast with the world of machines: this is not any crowd, moreover, but a crowd seen underground, as Odysseus and Orpheus and Korè saw crowds in Hades. And carrying forward the suggestion of wraiths, the word "apparition" detaches these faces from all the crowded faces, and presides over the image that conveys the quality of their separation:

Petals on a wet, black bough

Flowers, underground; flowers, out of the sun; flowers seen as if against a natural gleam, the bough's wetness gleaming on its darkness, in this place where wheels turn and nothing grows. . .

What is achieved, though it works by the way of the visible, is no picture of the things glimpsed, in the manner of

The light of our cigarettes
Went and came in the gloom.

It is a simile with "like" suppressed: Pound called it an equation, meaning not a redundancy, *a* equals *a*, but a generalization of unexpected exactness. The statements of analytical geometry, he

said, "are 'lords' over fact. They are the thrones and denominations that rule over form and recurrence. And in like manner are great works of art lords over fact, over race-long recurrent moods, and over tomorrow." So this tiny poem, drawing on Gauguin and on Japan, on ghosts and on Persephone, on the Underworld and one the Underground, the Metro of Mallarmè's capital and a phrase that names a station of the Metro as it might a station of the Cross, concentrates far more than it ever need specify, and indicates the means of delivering post-Symbolist poetry from its pictorialist impasse. "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time": and that is the elusive Doctrine of the Image. And, just 20 months later, "The image . . . 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." And: "An *image* . . . is real because we know it directly."

That is pure Pound. It is validated by the fact that he wrote numerous poems to which it applies before he had formulated it. . . .

All the confusion about Imagism stems from the fact that its specifications for technical hygiene are one thing, and Pound's Doctrine of the Image is another. The former, which can be followed by any talented person, help you to write what may be a trivial poem. The latter is not applicable to triviality.

. . . .

This setting-in-relation is apt to be paratactic. "In a Station of the Metro" is not formally a sentence; its structure is typographic and metric. Words, similarly, without loss of precision, have ceased to specify in the manner of words that deliver one by one those concepts we call "meanings." "Apparition" reaches two ways, toward ghosts and toward visible revealings. 'Petals,' the pivotal word, relies for energy on the sharp cut of its syllables, a consonantal vigor recapitulated in the trisyllabic "wet, black bough" (try changing "petals" to "blossoms"). The words so raised by prosody to attention assert themselves *as words*, and make a numinous claim on our attention, from which visual, tactile and mythic associations radiate. Words set free in new structures, that was the Symbolist formula. And as we move through the poem, word by word, we participate as the new structure achieves itself.

From *The Pound Era*. Copyright © 1971 by Hugh Kenner.

Steve Ellis

In spite of its celebrated succinctness, the most famous of Imagist poems yields a surprising variety of readings whilst opening up interesting questions about the reading process itself. These readings are influenced to an extent by the frequent changes Pound made to the punctuation of the poem in the early years of its existence, though this topic has received surprisingly little attention from Pound's commentators. Indeed, "In a Station of the Metro" is quoted widely in modern criticism with very little distinction being made between its various stages, as if the differently-punctuated early versions are interchangeable. It is true that the changes Pound made to the poem are small, but they remain far from unimportant, as I hope to show.

[....]

[A]ssessments of Pound's poem have a good deal to do with the *relationship* that is being assumed between line one (with the title) and line two; and that the readings looked at above have tended to assert a predominance of the first line of the poem over the second or vice versa. An attention to this relationship has also figured in much critical writing on the poem; thus Earl Miner's well-known expositions describe it in terms of Pound's use of a "super-pository method": "There is a *discordia concors*, a metaphor which is all the more pleasurable because of the gap which must be imaginatively leaped between the statement [of line one] and the vivid metaphor [of line two]." But here we come on to Pound's punctuation, Miner having neglected to consider the care that Pound himself took to indicate to the reader how that gap should be "imaginatively leaped." The earliest printing of "In a Station" in the April 1913 issue of *Poetry* was spaced and punctuated thus:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The same version of the poem then appeared in the *New Freewoman* on 15 August 1913. In the meantime however, Pound had published an account of the genesis of the poem in *T.P.'s Weekly*, on 6 June 1913, where the poem is quoted as follows:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

In other words, the poem has now assumed the format it has in each of its appearances in book, as opposed to periodical, form, from the Elkin Mathews edition of *Lustra* (1916) onwards, with the exception of the colon as opposed to semi-colon at the end of the first line. That this version was still regarded by Pound as provisional, however, is indicated by his reversal to the earlier spacing and punctuation for the poem's appearance in the August *New Freewoman*, two months after his piece in *T.P.'s Weekly*. It seems likely that the latter publication's lay-out of three narrow columns to the page meant that the spacing of "In a Station" had to be closed up and regularized, whether or not this was Pound's intention at the time; the *New Freewoman* version would indicate, in fact, that it wasn't.

In 1914 however, Pound seems to have decisively rejected the *Poetry/New Freewoman* format: his article on "Vorticism" in the September 1 issue of the *Fortnightly Review* follows closely the account of the genesis of "In a Station" given in *T.P.'s Weekly*, reproducing the same version of the poem with the addition, however, of a comma after "Petals" (p. 467). Although a tiny detail, this is not without significance; the comma represents Pound's wish to retain the suggestion of the prominence of the word "Petals" which the original spacing, by isolating the word, had given to it. Given that several students, as I mentioned above, see the poem as evincing an idea of urban bleakness, with the word 'Petals' being subsumed too readily perhaps into the supposedly negative connotations of the words "wet" and "black," then we can infer that Pound's care with punctuation was a reasonable one. In the final version of the poem, however, from *Lustra* onwards, the comma has once more disappeared; indeed, it is missing from the next independent printing of the poem in the *Catholic Anthology: 1914-1915*, published in November 1915, where Pound has reverted to the version given in *T.P.'s Weekly*. Presumably Pound felt (as do many of his subsequent readers) that the poem's final line contains a consistent rather than contradictory image of the beauty of his Parisian experience, and that there is no need to "safeguard" "Petals" through increasing the distance between it and the following adjectives.

For the April 1916 publication of *Gaudier-Brzeska* Pound simply reprints the article "Vorticism" with the version of "In a Station" as it was there given, but by September of the same year the poem has assumed its familiar form in the first edition of *Lustra*:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The final and most important change Pound had made to the punctuation was the substitution of semi-colon for colon at the end of line one. It seems to me that this alteration makes the relationship between the two lines appreciably more subtle and suggestive than was previously the case: the colon tended to subordinate the first line to the second by indicating that by itself line one was incomplete, its function being primarily that of introducing the "Image" in line two which the colon informs us is necessary to complete the first line's meaning. With the semi-colon the first line is, so to speak, less definitely a "prologue" to the second, the linkage between the two lines being insisted on less emphatically. The relationship between them can be said to be not only more subtle but even more equivocal, and the cost of not foregrounding the "Image" is the possibility, as some of my sample readings indicate, that the semi-colon assists the first line in overturning its subordinate position and becoming foregrounded itself.

From "The Punctuation of 'In A Station of the Metro'" in *Paidenma* 17: 2-3 (Fall/Winter 1988). © National Poetry Foundation.

Sylvan Esh

Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a poem that capitalizes on the tension between similarity and polarity as extremely as ever a couplet has. Earl Miner has spoken of it in terms of *discordia concors* (in J. P. Sullivan's *Ezra Pound* 235), others of an inter-relationship of subjective/objective imagery, and many have struggled for conclusive characterizations of its metaphorical nature. One dichotomy that has remained unnoticed, however, is the one that exists between this poem and the poetry of Arnaut Daniel. Daniel's fourth and fifth odes might be mentioned here, but it is particularly his "Doutz brais e critz" ("Sweet clamour and cries") that is to the point. The passage appears in *The Spirit of Romance* (34), just one page after Pound's discussion of "language beyond metaphor." Here, for easy reference, are both Pound's poem and his translation of the fifth stanza of Daniel's:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The flowering bough with the flowerets in bud, which the birds make tremble with their beaks, was never more fresh than she); wherefore I would not wish to have Rome without her, nor all Jerusalem, but altogether, with hands joined I render me to her, for in loving her the king from beyond Dover would have honor, or he to whom are Estela and Pampeluna.

The contrast between the two poems is profound and supports the anti-pastoral reading "In a Station" is often given. The terms that link the two—"flowers in bud," trembling, freshness, capital cities (especially the one "beyond Dover")—mark first the yearning, then the tragedy concealed in the later poem. The common terms become the occasion for a figure of disjuncture: the trembling of one is of new-born activity, of the other, of the under-ground. Sunshine, sound, and the south accent one, rain and silence the other; the earlier is expansive and cohesive, the latter composed of two terse figurations. The second, unpastoral present is Pound's subject, and he writes of it as an absence vis-a-vis the first. Thus the melancholy associated with the beautiful apparitions has a basis not only on personal, but also on more general, cultural grounds. Moreover, although the poem was begun in

1912, it was cast in its radically changed, couplet form only two years later, in a London fixed on the brink of war.

The split is one with a primary base in Pound's studies of the Provencal literature, though it was one that would grow quickly in the course of the war. It is neatly summed up in what may be a passing, self-reflective note which appears just five lines following the Daniel passage, where Pound compares Daniel's original use of imagery with a line by Juan de Mena, where arms and omens are the indirectly-represented image:

And the arms irons give forth new (strange) reflections.

The modification in parenthesis is Pound's own, and it is one that enacts in miniature the wistful/tragic shift from Provence to London recorded at the heart of "In a Station of the Metro."

from "'In a Station': Provence, London." *Paideuma* 21: 1-2 (Spring and Fall 1992). Copyright © National Poetry Foundation.

Jyan-Lung Lin

A great deal has been written about Ezra Pound's discovery of a structural technique, "a form of super-position," in Japanese haiku and his first use of it in his "In a Station of the Metro."

[....]

However, it has seldom been noticed that when Pound first imitated Moritake's most famous haiku, he imitated not just its super-pository technique but its mood of Yugen, one of the four dominant Zen moods--Sabi, Wabi, Aware, and Yugen--often found in Japanese haiku and Chinese classical poetry.

The word Yugen actually represents two Chinese written characters . . . literally meaning depth and mystery.

[....]

Lucien Stryk in his *Encounter with Zen* more clearly defines Yugen as the sense of a mysterious depth in nature: "Yugen, most difficult of the dominant [Zen] moods to describe, is the sense of a mysterious depth in all that makes up nature" (Stryk 60).

[....]

First let me use the following haiku of Yugen as an example:

The sea darkens,
The voices of the wild ducks
Are faintly white

And this Yugen in the *Zenrin Kushu*:

Wind subsiding, the flowers still fail,
Bird crying, the mountain silence deepens

As the two preceding poems may show, in a typical Yugen the mood of a mysterious depth in each cluster of images is well balanced with and reinforced by the mood in the other. In Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" a similar use of parallelism to strengthen the mood of Yugen can be seen clearly.

In the first line of his poem, Pound uses the word "apparition" to mystify the visual yet unmetaphorical image "these faces in the crowd." As Hugh Kenner observes, "'Apparition' reaches two ways, toward ghosts and toward visible revealings" (Kenner 187). Indeed, Pound's use of the word "apparition" internalizes and at the same time externalizes his feelings about "these faces in the crowd." In other words, his use of the word "apparition" allows him and his reader to walk the edge between what can be seen and what cannot be seen, which not only mystifies the image "these faces in the crowd" but gives a depth to it. In the second line, by inserting the two adjectives "wet" and "black" in between the two flower images "Petals" and "a bough," the poet suggests that the "ki" or season, a basic component in a haiku poem, is between spring and winter and the time is probably the evening, which is between day and night. By allowing the season and the time to walk the line between spring and winter, day and night, which may represent life and death respectively, Pound succeeds in building up a mood of mystery. This mood of mystery is deepened particularly by the color "black," whose profound darkness points to an unfathomable depth.

As can be seen in a typical Yugen haiku, the mood of mystery and depth suggested in the dark, chilly "ki" in the second line of Pound's poem is parallel with the same mood suggested in the word "apparition" in the first line. Since the moods in both lines are well-balanced, no copula or adjectives such as "is" or "like" should be used between the lines so that the mood in each line would not be limited to a certain suggestion. Instead, the two lines should be juxtaposed as they presently are so that each of the two clusters of images, which, if viewed separately, is not deep and mysterious enough to be called Yugen, would produce a deeper, more mysterious mood. Moreover, a sense of distance or space between the two clusters of images can be built up, which allows the reader to associate, to imagine, to dive more deeply into what Watts calls "the unknown never to be discovered."

In fact, in a Yugen haiku like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" meanings are not so important. What is important is the effect, the mood of Yugen. This mood, as mentioned before, is identified by Zen people as an essential precondition of enlightenment. It produces and at the same time is produced by the image, which is not to be used as an ornament but to point at the Tao or self-nature, a mysterious totality of the inner and outer nature. This Zen mood may well be compared to the kind of mood Pound has written about in his *Gaudier-Brzeska*. It has something to do with "the image," "a radiant node or cluster"--"sea, cliffs, night"--, something to do with "a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing," something to do with "the equation," of which Pound's explanation sounds much like a Zen master's expounding of the Dharma: it "governs the circle. It is the circle. It is not a particular circle, it is any circle and all circles. It is nothing that is not a circle. It is the circle free of space and time limits. It is the universal, existing in perfection, in freedom from space and time" (Pound 9 1-92).

From "Pound's 'In A Station of the Metro' As A Yugen Haiku." *Paidenma* 21:1-2 (Spring/Fall 1992). © National Poetry Foundation.

J.T. Barbarese

Imagism's enabling text, "In a Station of the Metro," appeared in the April 1913 issue of *Poetry* and in a slightly different form in *Lustra*. In the original version Pound spaces the words apart and stops the first line with a colon: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd." "In the 'Metro' hokku," he writes to Harriet Monroe, "I was careful, I think, to indicate spaces between the rhythmic units, and I want them observed." His directive is stark in its implications: the spaces between phrases are recovered as units of sound, the eye having first been persuaded that each (spatiotemporal) unit reposes in isolation from those surrounding it. The eye, in other words, and not the ear, governs meaning. But what is this poem supposed to *sound* like? The metrical habits we learn in school help us to assimilate poetry to familiar anticipatory patterns that yield means of enjoying or at least of analyzing what's new. Yet this two-line poem--decisively not haiku--comes without directions. Instead, it has a physical design that distracts from what one normally expects of poems--recurrent patterns of sound. Scanning the first line is useless because it yields either a line of dactylic trimeter (if the scansionist is ready to elide the first two words and swallow the last syllable of *apparition*) or some bizarre enforcement of the pentameter (if he is tone-deaf). Accepting either, moreover, what about

Petals on a wet, black bough,

a line clearly less dactylic than spondaic? Making the point this way (to borrow a phrase of Pound's) is like dragging your own heroic corpse around the walls. Each case cancels the next because the poem deliberately sets out to "break the pentameter" and disable the scansion routines learned in Latin class. Conventional strategies are useless because they are blind to a poem's physical shape---how do we scan the spaces?--yet the unconventional one demanded of us here is somehow too precious. Is it creditable to give a *sonic* value to the *spaces between the sounds* without defining the pause's duration? The "pause" can be in fact either one of vision or of hearing, Kenner's "perceptual units" and "speakable units" or Pound's "rhythmic units" at the same time.

What, moreover, about that hinted off-rhyme (*crowd* / *bough*)? And last, what about the tendency of the typology to blur syntactical assignments? After all, the most confounding element, the one that finally defeats traditional analysis, is that the poem has no verb. The action that takes place between the seeing of the crowd and the seeing of the petals is *unpredicated* in the two senses of the term. No one element *performs* in both lines to bind them: as with Pound's aphorism, agency (human or nonhuman) is suppressed. Nor can any element in the strict sense be *inferred* from the sight of the crowd to the petals: what is there about *apparition* to suggest "petals" rather than, say, "raindrops" or "ghosts"? There is no unific Blakean imagination at work: on one side of the ledger are the crowding "faces," on the other the "petals." What follows the colon is a configuration of objects physically and psychologically independent of what comes before. Not only is it difficult to describe what goes on but it is almost impossible to decide what the precise nature of *description* has come to involve. The destination or direction of what Philip Wheelright, compelled by this poem to neologize, termed its "semantic motions," is equivocal: the critic cannot say what the poem says because speech and ordinary telling seem to be but a part of its operations.

I mount this polemical analysis only to demonstrate the scale of real vexation that this two-line poem has provoked since it appeared. Aside from the wars undertaken by critics foxed in their attempts to find a place for it in the *materia* of tradition or the taxonomies of metaphor (the card includes Northrop Frye, Hugh Kenner, Philip Wheelright, Terrance Hawkes, and Aristotle: nobody's happy with "one-image poem"), there is the problem that the poem is obviously about something, though about what, none is dead sure. Kenner saw a classical *topos* in the juxtaposed interior (train station) and exterior (petalled bough), a vague fingerprinting of Persephone's

chthonian and ouranean natures. Davie rises to another level of ingenuity with the idea that the two lines deliberately transpose technical strategies, making the poem be about its own technique. Distressingly, however, Pound had none of the devices of poetry, speech, rhythm, or measure in view when he experienced his "metro-emotion." Or so he admits in the passage in *Gaudier-Brzeska* that has become Modernist homiletic, where he recounts his reaction to getting off the Paris train one day in 1912 and stepping into the steamy crowd of "beautiful" faces. "I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation *not in speech, but in little splotches of colour*" (my italics). The emotion, he goes on to explain, required over a year to discover its proper verbal shape. To describe the shaping dynamic, he fetched out the term "super-position," again from graphic art. To risk putting too fine a point on it, this slide show of visionary *mattes* had no literary precedent and apparently translated so directly from inspiration into visual form one wonders what "reading," here anyway, amounts to.

From "Ezra Pound's Imagist Aesthetics." In *The Columbia History of American Poetry*. Ed. Jay Parini and Brett C. Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Columbia University Press. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Daniel Tiffany

What difference would it make to the history of Anglo-American poetic modernism if we were to read Pound as a poet whose progress begins and ends in the realm of the dead, the author (and protagonist) of a literary odyssey culminating in a political *inferno* haunted by his earliest poetic principles? What if we were to read Pound essentially as a poet of mourning—not elegiac precisely, but fetishistic and transgressive. . . .

[. . .]

Pound is unable to part with the "cadaverous dead," to complete the task of mourning. The poet's lost male companions become remote and inexorable *fathers* to his writing. In a very real sense, death both quickens and captures Pound's writing. "The work of the phantom," Nicolas Abraham writes, "coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death-instinct" ("Phantom" 291). Haunted by a series of ghosts, Pound continually seeks to return to a place he has never been, to converse with the dead. His experience of the dead (which is the experience of the unknown or the impossible) and his conception of memory converge with the poetics of the Image. If, indeed, Images and the phantoms of memory are analogous in Pound's mind (as in the phrase "resurgent EIKONES"), then we should view the poetic Image as the return of a lost or dead object, a moment in which the subject is *haunted* by reality. The Image is life imaged as death, a *living death* as the Egyptian Book of the Dead taught Pound and others (including Yeats and Wyndham Lewis) around the turn of the century.

[. . .]

Pound's infatuation with the dead was not lost on his contemporaries, or on his later critics. Wyndham Lewis, for example, wrote of Pound, "Life is not his true concern . . . His field is purely that of the dead . . . whose life is preserved for us in books and pictures" (Lewis, *Time* 87). Elsewhere, Lewis described Pound as "a bombastic galleon" with "a skull and crossbones" flying from its mast. Richard Aldington's parody of the famous "Metro" poem also registers Pound's necrophilic bias:

The apparitions of these poems in a crowd:
White faces in a dead black faint. (SC 191)

As for Pound's critics., Hugh Witemeyer has described "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" as all "elaborate autopsy" (*Poetry of Ezra Pound* 162), and Humphrey Carpenter describes Pound's fifth volume of poetry, *Canzoni*, as "the last twitch of a poetic corpse, the body being recognizably that of the Pre-Raphaelites" (SC 157).

[. . .]

Distilled to a handful of syllables, the Imagist poem derives its power from its resistance to language, from the perilous condition of its own medium—a form that is inherently self-destructive. Thus, the influence of Japanese haiku on Imagism, for example, can be understood as an exotic means of formalizing and dignifying a poetic suicide. The remains of Victorian poetry assume the haiku form as a cipher of ritual death (hence the arduous and protracted deletion of "In a Station of the Metro"—reduced over a period of six months from thirty lines to fourteen words).

[. . .]

Imagism's entanglement with the idea of death portrays allegorically the mortality of poetry itself, as well as the essential negativity of the Image: language is consistently deployed against itself in the name of the Image.

[. . .]

Pound worked on the poem sporadically from 1911 to 1913, a period of tremendous ferment and change in his poetry (and, incidentally, the period in which he produced his translations of Cavalcanti). Pound reprints the poem in his memoir of Gaudier:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough. (GB 89)

Bearing in mind Pound's affection for medieval concepts of memory, the "station" of the metro can be compared to the *locus* of memory in which the "apparitions" (*imagines*) appear. What's more, Hugh Kenner argues that the poem records a descent "underground," and recalls Odysseus' encounter with the souls of the dead in Hades. The "faces in the crowd," like the "EIKONES" of memory, are "apparitions": they emerge into visibility (as images), yet they are also phantoms. Obviously, this poem, which is cited by Pound (and everyone else) as a paradigm of the modern, formalist Image in poetry, is haunted by other conceptions of the Image. Indeed, Pound portrayed the "Metro" poem as a crucial turning point in his career, a work that forced him into an "impasse" (GB 89). He struggled during a period of a year and a half to complete the poem, and cut it down from thirty lines to a single sentence. Pound leaves no doubt that the "Image" of the poem is ultimately a product of shaping and carving resistant materials. The Image is made, not received. Yet the content of the poem alludes to the Image as phantom, even as its mode of creation identifies it as an artifact. Hence, we can understand the "Metro" poem as the moment in Pound's career when the Image as phantom begins to assume the artifactual properties of the formalist Image.

[. . .]

Images pieced together like mosaics, "in little splotches of color" (as Pound described the genesis of the "Metro" poem), arise from a place that hides its identity as an Image, a place that is no place: the crypt.

[. . .]

One discovers in Pound's "Metro" poem (the most famous of all Imagist poems) a striking illustration of the principle of sublimation informing the Image. In his "Vorticism" essay, published in the *Fort nightly Review* in September 1914, Pound offers his readers a detailed account of the origins and compositional history of the "Metro" poem, as an exposition of Imagism in practice. He dates the genesis of the poem to a moment three years prior to the writing of the "Vorticism" essay, which would be 1911—the same year he wrote "Silet," the opening poem of *Ripostes*. Following what Pound calls "the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion" (GB 89), he writes a series of drafts of the poem, each more condensed than the previous one. By eliminating what he calls material of "second intensity," Pound shrinks the poem from thirty lines to a single sentence. Clearly this process, whose principles Pound formulates during the "impasse" between 1911 and 1913, represents the essential negativity of the Image—that is, the regime of elimination and prohibition that I have described as fundamental to the "objectivity" of Imagist poetics.

The sublime aspect of the Image derives from its irrepressible "substance"; indeed, the negative practice of Imagism serves not to eliminate but to *preserve* the "life" of the crypt: its elegiac feeling, its eroticism, its fatality. The remains of language—the Image—render the volatile materiality of the crypt; the ascetic mode of the Image draws attention to the body by making it disappear. Though Pound presents the "Metro" poem as a paradigm of modernist practice, its reference to an apparitional event in an underground "station" quite obviously links it, as I indicated in the previous chapter, to the Decadent properties of Pound's crypt poetry. Indeed, the archaic dimension of the "Metro" poem is more pronounced than Pound suggests. He dates the origin of the poem to 1911, without indicating any possible precedent in his earlier published poetry. K. K. Ruthven has demonstrated, however, that the specific "image" of the "Metro" poem derives from a very early poem of Pound's, "Laudantes Decem Pulchritudinis Johannaë Templi," published in *Exultations* (1909). One section of the poem, addressed to "my beloved of the peach trees," describes "the vision of the blossom":

the perfect faces which I see at times
When my eyes are closed—
Faces fragile, pale, yet flushed a little,
 like petals of roses:
these things have confused my memories of her. (CEP 119)

The essential features of this vision" survive intact in the "Metro" poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
 Petals, on a wet, black bough. (GB 89)

It is essential to emphasize that the original "vision" occurs with *eyes closed*, and that the visuality of the Imagist poem must therefore be described as highly ambiguous, if not dependent on a kind of blindness.

By 1913 (if not from the outset) the "vision of the blossom" becomes associated in Pound's mind with Japanese poetry (haiku). Indeed, the "vision of the blossom " continues to circulate in his work in a manner that eventually discloses its specifically archaic, or nostalgic, dimension. An early

manuscript of Canto 4, composed in 1918, contains the following lines: "the thousand-year peach trees shed their flakes / into the stream, out of a former time." These lines suggest that the apparitional petals of the "Metro" poem should be viewed as drifting "out of a former time," as ghosts. The "peach trees in magical blossom" appear in yet another context, in Pound's essay on Remy de Gourmont, published in March 1919: "I do not think it possible to overemphasize Gourmont's sense of beauty . . . His *pays natal* was near to the peach-blossom fountain of the untranslatable poem" (L 343). The "vision of the blossom," which we now understand to be an apparition of the dead, is described here by Pound as "an untranslatable poem." Indeed, we could argue that the "*pays natal*" of the modernist Image is an "untranslatable poem"—a poem encrypted in the Image, a vision preserved and concealed by the negative praxis of Imagism. Yet the phantasmic "substance" of the "Metro" poem differs not at all from its antecedent, its forgotten ancestry, in *Exultations*. Thus, the "Metro" poem emerges as the nucleus of a constellation of apparitional poems spanning the entire Imagist period, from 1909 to 1919.

The figure of the crypt mediates the divergent symbolic economies that lay claim to the modernist Image. On the one hand, the crypt is the symbolic site of modern literary positivism, and the Image is what lies within the crypt: corpse, fact, word-thing, symptom. The irreducible materiality of the Image, in this case, poses a challenge to the hermeneutical concept of meaning itself, which is based on a distinction between surface and depth, the manifest and the latent, history and divination. Yet the Image, like the figure of the crypt, harbors figurative debts to this hermeneutical model, and must therefore also be understood as reviving the phantom of meaning from the dead letter of the crypt. That is, the Image, as an emblem of hermeneutical understanding, is not an inscrutable yet all-too-obvious "thing" in the crypt, but the crypt itself and its spiritual "content."

from *Radio Corpse: Imagism and the Cryptaesthetic of Ezra Pound*. Copyright © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. [Note: This little collage of passages is meant only to suggest the outlines of a more complex argument detailed in Tiffany's book.]

William Pratt

What Pound said he was attempting to make was a verbal equivalent for a moment of revelation accompanied by intense emotion: "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." Consciously or not, Pound here echoes the definition of sacrament in the Catechism of the English Book of Common Prayer as "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Thus, Pound's description of an imagist poem shows that it was an extension of religious symbolism, his modern counterpart for the moments of inspired emotion that had once resulted in Greek myths and medieval romances.

Of course, the image differs from myth and romance in being instantaneous, without story or sequence, seemingly independent of time and history. If it succeeds, it must make up in intensity for what it lacks in duration. Pound's "Metro" image consists of a single perception of beauty in the midst of ugliness; what makes it modern is the combination of the city as setting and the sense that it is a momentary experience, in the immediate present, now. In defining *image* in 1913, Pound added, "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." . . . This brief image, with its contrast of light and darkness, foreshadows the constant motif of the *Cantos*, where light and dark images are repeated in so many different forms that they become the equivalents of heaven and hell: "In the gloom, the gold gathers the light about it" of the

early Canto 17 contrasts with "First came the seen, then thus the palpable / Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell" in the later Canto 81.

from *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by The Curators of the University of Missouri.

Kenneth Lincoln

How do we think about this? The first step, after hearing the poem—seeing and registering its lines—would be listening for the *syllable*, the opening phoneme "In" joined with the following "a." We have some forty phonemes or pure sounds to work with as English syllables—a scale of notes half the range of an ordinary piano—composed of consonants, vowels, and double vowels called diphthongs (nineteen English vowels in all, compared with seven in Italian). These are the building blocks of language, some languages using fewer than thirty phonemes (eleven in Polynesian), others more than eighty (141 in Khoisan or "Bushman").

With Pound's title, "In a Station of the Metro," the vowels hold sway. The inner sounds come forward along the roof of the mouth to peek: the first syllable seems to get more weight or stress, as we normally say "In a," so the phrase rocks down and forward, as might the rest of the title. This is not the way iambic English normally sways, but stress-slack trochaically, "In a Station of the Metro." Catchy as that close analysis may be, it's not poetic. Where's the dithyrambic variable? An alternative rhythm is set up through ordinary syntax in the sweep of the title—how we would normally phrase it, if asked directions, say, by an American tourist in Paris. "In a *Station of the Metro*," the vernacular cadence has it. Here *syntax* works through syllables gathered in sequence. These phrasings cadence minims, countering formal inclinations close-up with longer-range idiomatic patterns; and this cadencing leads quickly to a third variable, *structure*, in what versifiers call the poetic line (or sentence to a prose writer). Where the line ends is significant, at least where it seems to pause, visually, for beneath the voice the given course of the eye may be countered by the ear's vernacular norms. Syllable and syntax tense within structure, and a principle begins to emerge: stress and counterstress, form and usage, close look and perspective listening. This syncopation leads toward what we might call the periodicity of art, or patterned variation. Such internal sway makes it challenging and interesting and, for that matter, appealing.

So far we are still feeling for a drift in Pound's title, which seems to be approachable with at least two cadences: formally, a series of trochees falling in four beats, "*In a Station of the Metro*," and more informally, "In a *Station of the Metro*," two long anapestic phrasings that rise, cluster, and fall gracefully to the first line. The reverse cadences work with and against each other, creating a dynamic that makes for the tensile strength of the rhythmic line. As Boas speaks of literary style in all poetry, "repetition, particularly rhythmic repetition, is one of its fundamental, esthetic traits." Dithyrambic rhythm, stressed repetition with variation, holds sway, singing with a *different* heart.

Reversing metric tilt, the verse description thickens in the opening line: again, the syllables could group iambically in six-beat phrasings, "The *apparition of these faces in the crowd*," but this seems stiff, too formal. The idiomatic ear takes over to adjust the pattern to our liking, "The apparition of these *faces in the crowd*"—a lovely sprung rhythm, mysteriously cadenced, three extended anapestic phrasings with half the full stresses.

Is there an emerging fourth variable, one we could call *style*, everything from diction, to metrics, to shaped or formed structures, as well as the artist's personage in the wings? At first, with the title, the

style seems neutral, even a bit flat: a place, underground, of public transport, in diction and rhythm no more elegant sounding than pedestrian directions. But as the title flows haiku-like into the first line, we come up, metrically and etymologically, against the Latinate "ap-par-i-tion," which seems to pick up the diction and rhythmic pace, to pop up phonemically with the double *ps*. The buried off rhyme between "i-tion" and "*fac-es*," set against the compact density of "crowd," complicates and gives texture to the lines, all the while remaining relatively ordinary in setting, language, and technique. So the style is normative, even vernacular, but capable of opening up, thickening, deepening, as long as style never calls attention to itself over the terms of the poem itself—its own being, apart from the maker.

So far, so good, perhaps, but halfway in the couplet blossoms: "Petals on a wet, black bough." The poem turns radically on the semicolon; the line pause, or break, seems to twist everything around and back on itself, structurally causing us to read the apparitional faces as an image or *sign*, a simile (faces like petals) or symbol (petals of faces). Here the sounds-as- syntactically-structured-signs begin to make *sense*; that is, they move toward meaning. "The image is itself the speech," Pound insists. "The image is the word beyond formulated language." If "faces" may suggest "petals," and a metro station in a French (not too foreign to Norman English) city may occasion a poetic vision, what does it all add up to? Be patient, test the ear and eye: Is the syntax of the first word iambic, as ordinarily spoken ("Petals"? never in a hundred years), or trochaic, "*Petals on a wet, black bough*"? That's better, but seems still a bit too regular, too monotonous. The ear must override the routine mind's-eye and vary the stress, to adjust a formal mishmash, as so, "*Petals on a wet, black bough*." That's at least more metrically engaging, with the trochee-become-dactyl giving way, somewhere in the cluster of unstressed syllables, to the reasserted iambs in the second and third phrases.

Something is still amiss, the pattern is not quite taut. What if the regular expectations of one pattern repeating another slough off, and we hear normative voice emphasis, against drilled image closure, weighting all three last syllables?—"Petals on a wet, black bough." It's irregular, but arresting, powerfully sprung into place. The line seems to hang petal-like, about to fall; on a syllabic or phonemic level, the last vowels moan, "eh" "ae" "ow" and the dental *t* clangs off the labial *b* as the plosive *k* cuts off before the second labial *b*. This is the musical equivalent of thirds, fourths, fifths, and diminished sevenths chorded into an arrhythmic cadence. The last word, "bough," hangs there, suspended, no consonant to nail it down, unforgettable. All this is achieved by reversing the iambic expectation with a trochee, "*Petals*," then reversing that with an anapest, "*on a wet*," trying to right the line's rhythm, then drilling the eidetic image to a close, "*black bough*." The imploded spondee fairly crackles at the edges and vowels out woefully in the middle of words. The syllables pace sequentially together through space, measured in the time it takes to read them, and at the same time the sounds radiate larger and smaller fields of energy, three-dimensionally, like tiny fireworks shooting off in the sky. It feels like connecting the dots of a child's coloring book, only to find Van Gogh's *Starry Night* bursting off the page. Minus the closing dental, "bough" almost rhymes with "crowd," positionally above it. This creates a couplet effect, an attempt to couple, at least, against the dissonant tension working the lines. Pound tries to explain by analogy, "my experience in Paris should have gone into paint. If instead of colour I had perceived sound or planes in relation, I should have expressed it in music or in sculpture."

Beyond a native poetics, there's something Eastern behind the Western surface of all this. Structurally, a proportional metric cadences the lines, beginning with the title, syllabically 8-12-7, supra-metrically 4-6-4, and metrically normative as 2-3-3. Haiku syllables run 5-7-5, more or less proportionate to Pound's freer construction. So Confucius complements Homer, *The Analects* adds to *The Odyssey*, something deeper in the human psyche circles the globe. The near couplet draws all poetry closer, aesthetically, in a manner of speaking, ethnic or our own. Pound stands somewhere in the middle as global translator. A Westerner born in Hailey, Idaho, graduate of Penn with Williams

and Hilda Doolittle, expatriate back to the European classics, highbrow to the art of London, Paris, and Venice; then in the middle of his life, an alleged war subversive, convicted of lowly treason, imprisoned for twelve years in a Maryland mental institution, released to return to Italy, where he lived out his life twenty more years, writing cantos in silence. Such is the man behind the near couplet.

What can we say about early-twentieth-century American verse, by way of Pound's example, and ethnopoetics? "I think these examples demonstrate," Boas admits, "that it is not easy to discover from published material the stylistic pattern of primitive narrative. Sometimes the rendering is bald and dry owing to the difficulties of expression that the interpreter cannot overcome; sometimes elaborated in a superimposed literary style that does not belong to the original." Yes, the crossover difficulty is immense, but let's hazard some provisional guidelines about modernism, as Boas does about oral translations into print. Rejecting a "rather smarmy" Victorian aesthetics, the new American poetry is microsyllabically concise, even minimalist—*cut* in Fenollosa's term for ideogrammatic diction, *sprung* in Hopkins's term for meter, even thrust past conventional rhythm, as Pound argued the vortical trochee's *heave* against built-in iambic conventions—but still patterned in its own native poetics. Modernist verse is sometimes near-rhymed, as in Dickinson's "success in Circuit," slant telling; almost pairing, the near verse remains startling, arresting, thoughtful, though shy of "visionary" in the Romantic sense. Formally, Pound's two lines break into a hexameter-tetrameter couplet, neither heroic nor coupling, but appositional, the images of faces and petals working by analogy. "So we get mimesis without the cosmic designs that once made it meaningful," Donald Wesling concludes of modernist "organic vitalism" in *The Chances of Rhyme*. "The artist imitates that which is within the thing, not, as in a copy, in the spirit of idle rivalry, but, *natura naturans*, grasping the process of the thing through sympathetic identification. Thus the writer will convey to us his sense of order through the order of his syllables."

The six-four couplet structure tilts and rebalances, off and leaning back into pattern, completing the ten-stressed meter of an older, evenly accented and rhymed "heroic" couplet. Contrasts are key within the patterns. The artist places a natural, even classical, image of blossoms against obdurate urban modernity, a "station" of the "metro" (commuter station of the secular cross). Still, an ancient nature blossoms from the dank roots and rails of the city. The diction hovers in some middle range, not too fancy, never overstated, echoing voices of the people, yet concentrated into urgency, depth, intensity of feeling. Disillusion pitches against true illusion, skepticism against belief. Communal transcends personal. The upright lyric *I* is suspect: this is not the self-construct of Wordsworth, Emerson, Tennyson, or Hopkins, but *dramatis personae* or ironic mask (the dramatic monologues of Browning, Poe, and Hardy anticipate early modernists Frost, Eliot, and Stevens). The first-person eye dissolves into more inclusive consideration, an indirect, hard-worn aye, back to the masses, back to the common tribe.

"In a poem of this sort," Pound says, "one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." What does the poet mean by this, what does the poem signify, finally what's its sense? Perhaps something about the ghosts of people in crowds, dim-lighted, massed in public transit, going somewhere, but really nowhere, given the mortal condition. A minor epiphany springs back with nature's petals in season—set against the unseen trunk of a massive, rooted blossomer whose rain-soaked limb, dark against the darkness, backgrounds the lights of petaled faces, commuting to work, on the brink of war, anonymously together, going home. The fine points are crucial. "An epic diffusiveness," Boas discovers among swirling particulars, "an insistence on details is characteristic of most free primitive narrative." As Two Shields sang with a bear's heart, "a wind from the north comes for me."

Pound may have been thinking of Eurydice in hell, Kora underground (as was his rival-friend Williams at the time) , and the Orphic mystery cults that sprang up around loss and recovery. Early Greeks saw the elegiac celebration of gain-in-loss through the stories of Orpheus, losing Eurydice looking back, torn apart by jealous would-be lovers and thrown into the river, where his head kept singing of his beloved and charmed all the plants and animals to come down to the waters: Perhaps. Pound may have been foreshadowing Yeats's "O chestnut-tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" in "Among School Children." Or his moment may have been simply a vision of color, a preverbal insight, a visitation. That's one of the secrets of good literature: there's always more to be considered beyond the parsing, assumptions to be revised, mysteries.

from *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890-1999*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by the Board of Regents of the University of California.

Rachel Blau Duplessis

Female beauty; vulnerable beauty exert a magnetic force in another of the seminal poems of modernism. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), occurs, he explains, when in Paris he "saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another; and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to be worthy; or as lovely as that sudden emotion" (Pound [1918] 1970, 86-87). The terms of the inspiration are well within the foundational cluster beauty/woman/child/lovely/[poetry], plus the sentimental choking up at his inadequacy, but Pound resists and attempts to erode the tactic of "symbolist" and "representational" art and their gender ideologies by the invention of an abstracting tactic that resists the gender materials.

The poem from this struggle between realism/symbolism and abstraction is well known; in my analysis, the formal poise of the poem -- its haiku confrontation of one line against another, seen through the lens of social philology, is motivated by a dual answer to debates about the gender cluster in poetry.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd
Petals, on a wet, black bough.

The first noun, "the apparition" condenses the bidirectional tension of this poem; the word ranges between its transrealist meaning of specter or ghost (and the corresponding etymological charge from the abstraction—epiphany), and its meaning of a sudden or unusual sight, a realist observation. "These faces in the crowd" is a realist evocation of urban multiplicity. The symbolist or metaphoric leap is "Petals, on a wet, black bough" equated with faces. The word "Petals" may be said to deliver the "feminine"; at least it evokes all the loveliness and vulnerability of faces seen by chance. Two discourses -- documentary/social (which is abstract or realist) and lyric /poetic (symbolist) are brought into one configuration and are made to interact. "The 'one-image poem' is a form of superposition, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another" (89). One idea is that beauty /the feminine matters in the construction of poetry; the other is that it does not. Hence part of the force of the juxtaposition that constructs this brief work comes from the simultaneous affirmation and denial of the foundational cluster in a poised contradiction.

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