DOES 'IMAGISM' MEAN ANYTHING? EZRA POUND AND *DES IMAGISTES*

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'Why do we call ourselves "Imagists"?' Richard Aldington asks in his review of *Des Imagistes*. 'Well, why not?...It cuts us away from the "cosmic" crowd and it equally bars us off from the "abstract art" gang, and it annoys quite a lot of fools' ('Modern Poetry' 202). Imagism, one of the early schools of modernist poetry in the 1910s, has certainly 'annoyed' many readers due to its apparent lack of a concrete definition. There has been little agreement between critics or even the members of the movement about the motivations behind Imagism, and the boundaries between Imagist and non–Imagist poets remain unclear. Although Ezra Pound thought of himself as the leader and originator of the movement, other Imagist poets such as H.D., F.S. Flint and Amy Lowell had more democratic visions of its origins and its practice. Through close readings of five of the poems found in *Des Imagistes*, Pound's 1914 Imagist anthology, this essay will argue that Pound's selection of poems to represent the movement provides only a vague demonstration of the principles of Imagism and does not justify his claim that a selection process other than his own would 'turn "Imagism" into a democratic beer–garden' (qtd. in Monroe 367).

The basic principles of Imagism set forth by Pound can be summarized as the use of *vers libre*, the omission of all unnecessary words, and the accurate presentation of 'the thing itself' (Flint 199), but Pound also warns aspiring poets that these principles should be considered 'not as dogma...but as the result of long contemplation' ('A Few Don'ts' 201). Stylistically, then, Imagism is a somewhat elastic category. Comparatively little is said about the 'image', which seems to be deliberately constructed as a vague concept. In F.S. Flint's interview with Pound, all that is said of the image is that the Imagists 'held also a certain "Doctrine of the Image", which they had not committed to writing; they said that it did not concern the public, and would provoke useless discussion' (199). Of course, rather than forestalling useless discussion, this statement actively and intentionally encourages it. Pound goes a little further in providing a definition in 'A Few Don'ts By an *Imagiste*', but it is far from concrete: 'An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (200). By keeping the definition of an image vague, Pound opens Imagism to the

inclusion of any poetry he feels to be 'in accordance with the best tradition' (Flint 199).

Possibly as a result of the ambiguity surrounding Imagism, since the beginning of its critical reception *Des Imagistes* has often been interpreted as mere publicity mongering on the part of Pound. In Aldington's review of the collection, he directly states that he does not consider five of the poets represented to be genuine Imagists ('Modern Poetry' 202), and when looking back on the movement in his 1941 memoir, *Life for Life's Sake*, he expresses a degree of cynicism about Pound's artistic motivation: 'My own belief is that the name [Imagists] took Ezra's fancy, and that he kept it *in petto* for the right occasion. If there were no Imagists, obviously they would have to be invented'. He goes on to say that Pound 'never had any difficulty about finding members [for his movements]. He just called on his friends' (135).

Frank MacShane, in his 1965 biography of Ford Madox Ford, describes Imagism as 'something of a joke'. Of *Des Imagistes* he claims that 'the idea was that if several young poets...would band together and publish an anthology with a forceful enough "manifesto" of their aims and desires, their joint effort might pay dividends in the form of increased sales of the work of individual contributors' (101). If full credit is given to such accounts, *Des Imagistes* would appear to have been based purely on social and financial concerns, rather than on artistic ones.

Pound's version of Imagism is also called into question by closer examination of the roles of other poets involved in the movement. One alternative view to the Pound–centred account of the Imagist movement is to see it as centred around H.D. It is well–known that H.D. was named by Pound as the first Imagist poet, and her early poetry can be seen as the basis from which the principles of Imagism, as set forth by Pound, were derived. Aldington goes so far as to say that there is 'considerable support' for the assertion that 'the Imagist movement was H.D., and H.D. the Imagist movement' (*Life for Life's Sake* 136). Certainly her early poems exemplify both the stylistic ideals of the movement and the ability to treat human experience directly without sentiment.

Furthermore, H.D.'s role in the movement extended beyond writing Imagist poetry. Because of Pound's authoritative approach to movement–building (and building his own public image), many of the other Imagist poets took exception to his views and wished to have greater control over which of their works would be published in anthologies. Amy Lowell was influential enough to find a new publisher and to take over the organisation of the Imagist anthologies that followed *Des Imagistes*. In these anthologies, each poet was given equal space and

could choose which poems to contribute, with the aim of creating 'democratic forums based on the ideas of all contributors' (Taylor 37). It was H.D. who did much of the remaining editing work and who had the difficult task of corresponding with the contributors and smoothing over quarrels (Pondrom 44–45).

Unsurprisingly, Pound refused to contribute to these anthologies, claiming that any such endeavour that did not maintain his 'rigorous suppression of...faults' would destroy the 'critical standard' he had set up (qtd. in Monroe 367). The question is, did Pound truly have a unified vision to defend, or was he simply interested in control for control's sake? The most direct way to determine the extent to which Imagism can be seen as a cohesive artistic movement under Pound's editorship is through a close and comparative reading of poems from *Des Imagistes*.

Based on their placement at the beginning of the anthology and the high percentage of space allotted to them, Aldington and H.D. seem to best exemplify Pound's vision of Imagist poets. Through an examination of Aldington's 'Beauty Thou Hast Hurt Me Overmuch' (referred to hereafter as 'Beauty') and H.D.'s 'Priapus: Keeper of Orchards', some key similarities can be identified. The most obvious of these are the use of *vers libre* and the complete absence of rhyme. The diction of these poems is also very similar. 'Priapus' is characterized by the formal, high–register pronouns 'thou' and 'thee', along with refrains suggestive of religious liturgy as in lines 20–1: '(Son of the god)/ Spare us from loveliness'. 'Beauty' shares the high, formal diction of 'Priapus', using it to such an extent that it creates a sense of archaism, and is reminiscent of the King James translation of the Bible. The usage of words like 'wert' (l. 4) and 'consumest' (l. 6) contribute heavily to this effect. This Biblical diction stands in contrast to the simple and restrained language Aldington uses in his translations of Greek poetry (for instance in 'To Atthis'), making its use an arresting feature of the poem. H.D.'s use of language is more nuanced than Aldington's. Aside from the formal pronouns and one use of the verb 'hast', none of the individual words are distinguishable from the language of prose. The effect of reverence and worship results from the manipulation of syntax and the creation of compound nouns such as 'the honey–seeking' (l. 3). By using simple words, H.D. achieves a degree of immediacy and authenticity that is precluded by the frequent use of contrived archaisms in 'Beauty'. Both poems, however, are concise without seeming sparse in their language. The final stanza of 'Priapus', in particular, conveys a sensuous and visually rich image, despite the brevity of its lines and the simplicity of its vocabulary.

'Postlude', the only poem by William Carlos Williams included in *Des Imagistes*, is similar to 'Priapus' in its use of generally simple vocabulary manipulated into high–register syntax. Although Williams was not part of the Imagist circle, Pound had met Williams at the University of Pennsylvania and had taken an interest in advancing his poetic career. 'Postlude' is written in the formal and respectful language associated with Petrarchan–style love poems, the irony being that the speaker of the poem is in the act of leaving his already–achieved mistress: 'Oh, how shall I defy you/ Who wound me in the night' (ll. 16– 17). 'Postlude' also shares with many of Aldington and H.D.'s poems a heavy use of classical allusion which, based on the majority of poems in the anthology, can almost be seen as an unstated defining characteristic of Imagism. Williams presents the end of an affair and an accompanying sense of oppression in intellectualized terms, with the speaker comparing himself to Aeneas leaving Dido and to Jason leaving Medea, and their 'cooled' love to the last, but now deserted, pagan temple at Philae. In spite of similarities in form and diction, Williams's poem differs from Aldington's and H.D.'s in its treatment of such a conventional theme. The oppressive elements in the poem are fate ('stars...swarm to destroy us' [ll. 12–14]) and the woman whom the speaker is abandoning to find 'Calm in Atlantis' (l. 26). In 'Postlude' we find a traditional representation of the conflict between the sexes, and classical allusion used merely to aggrandize one mundane manifestation of this conflict.

Although Aldington makes extensive use of classical allusion in many of his other poems, in 'Beauty' this characteristic is at its most subtle. The Biblical diction of the poem is complicated by two indirect references to classical mythology, at once raising the status of ancient pagan art and questioning the status of Judeo–Christian culture. The reference to the 'toothed wind of the seas' in line 8 brings to mind the myriad of references to the winds in Homer's poetry, where they were often used by the gods as instruments either to help or to hurt mortals. This rather vague classical reference is followed by a more direct allusion to the myth of Zeus and Ganymede in lines 10–11: 'As a bird with strong claws/ Thou woundest me'. This refers to the abduction of the young man, Ganymede, by Zeus in the form of an eagle. According to the myth, it was Ganymede's exquisite physical beauty that inspired Zeus to abduct him and bring him to Mount Olympus. Here the subject and object of the myth become compressed and conflated, so that beauty becomes the cause and the source of pain, rather than pain simply being inflicted on an object of beauty. The use of this myth also suggests that the pain inflicted by beauty comes with its own compensation, as the sufferer may be swept up to the realm of the gods. As in Williams's

poem, it is difficult to identify a single image central to the poem, which instead relies on the indirect suggestion of various images from classical mythology.

In 'Priapus', H.D. uses a similar strategy of combining classical and Christian mythology to the one seen in 'Beauty', but intensifies its effect. In her poem it becomes a method of condensing many conflicting emotions into a single word or phrase, creating a super–saturation of meaning. For instance, the single word 'flayed' in line 9 invokes mythological images from both the classical and Christian traditions. Flaying figures in both the myth of Marsyas, flayed alive as punishment for losing a musical contest with the god Apollo, and in the flaying of Christ before the crucifixion. To complicate matters further, Christ was also frequently identified with Apollo in medieval Christianized readings of pagan mythology, leading to conflicting implications of the speaker as both worthy and unworthy, punished and (self–)punisher. The super–saturation of meaning feeds back into the initial image of the over–ripened pear just on the point of falling from the tree. The image of ripened fruit corresponds with a specifically feminine beauty in contrast to the grotesque masculinity of Priapus, who is traditionally portrayed with an enormous erect phallus. The mention of fruit and trees in such an allusively rich context suggests the idea of forbidden fruit and thus an illicit attraction on the part of the speaker to specifically feminine beauty. As in 'Postlude', myth magnifies the minuscule, and the source of oppression in the poem is feminine ('loveliness'). The difference lies in the interplay of classical and Christian mythology which provides a complex and innovative exploration of the cause of oppression, ultimately identifying the self as both oppressed and oppressor.

One of the few poems in *Des Imagistes* that does not make use of references to either classical or Chinese culture is 'In a Garden' by Amy Lowell. According to a 1918 letter to Margaret Anderson, Pound only wanted to associate with Lowell in order to 'see her milked of her money' in some later project (*Pound/ The Little Review* 178). In letters written before she assumed responsibility for publishing the subsequent anthologies, however, Pound does not openly convey this attitude. Lowell first sought out the London–based Imagist circle because she identified her own style with that of H.D.

In terms of form and diction, 'In a Garden' demonstrates some degree of similarity to H.D.'s poetry, but Lowell's writing is less concise; for example in lines 6–7: 'The water fills the garden with its rushing,/ In the midst of the quiet of close–clipped lawns'. These lines, taken out of context, could easily pass as prose, and lack the intensity and layered meaning found in H.D.'s verse. The diction is rich in sensory

language depicting sounds, smells and movement. The syntax is not as elevated as in H.D.'s, Aldington's and Williams's poems, but it is decidedly 'poetic', particularly due to the repeated use of inversion. In most cases, these inversions do not seem to achieve any specific effect, and so may fall under the heading of unnecessary ornament. In line 21 Lowell also violates Pound's warning to avoid 'mix[ing] an abstraction with the concrete' ('A Few Dont's' 201): 'And the scent of the lilacs was heavy with stillness'. This mixing achieves nothing more than would be expressed with the more concrete phrase 'heavy *in the* stillness' and simply makes the line sound contrived and conventional.

In place of classical mythology, Lowell employs the traditional dichotomy of nature versus culture. In the first three stanzas, nature, represented by the water in the fountain, is full of irrepressible movement and vitality. It is curbed by the man–made limits of the fountain, representing the restrictions of culture and society, but it is not subdued by those limits. It 'gushes' out of the restrictive 'mouths of stone men' (l. 1), it stains the marble (l. 10), and disturbs the unnatural 'quiet of close–clipped lawns' (l. 7).

Compared to the energy and movement of the first three stanzas, the fourth stanza is surprisingly still and lifeless. While the water in the first part of the poem can be read as a symbol of desire, the final stanza is focused on the object of the speaker's desire. The sudden 'stillness' creates an atmosphere of unreality, emphasizing that this second image is merely a fantasy or memory. The nature/culture dichotomy is abandoned as the speaker becomes fully absorbed in the imagined fulfilment of her wish, and the poem fails to provide either a resolution of or a unified position on the two value systems it invokes.

Lowell's poem is by no means the least similar to H.D.'s and Aldington's in terms of form and diction. Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford's 'In the Little Old Market–Place' (hereafter referred to as 'Market–Place') stands out both in its verbosity and its use of rhyme. Ford was already an established literary figure when *Des Imagistes* was published, and had a strong influence on Pound, which must have been why Pound chose to include his work. Despite injunctions to 'use no superfluous word', 'Market–Place' occupies over three pages and yet deals with only one central image. Ford's use of irregular end–rhyme sounds immature and grating compared to the elegant unrhymed lines of the other poems in the collection. Lines 47–48 provide an excellent example of Ford's almost ludicrous use of rhyme: 'Where the spindrifty *haze is*/ That he *gazes*' [emphasis mine]. The diction and syntax of the poem are primarily conversational with the addition of 'poetical' flourishes such as inversion, repetition and unusual words such as 'spindrifty' or 'driblets'.

Like H.D., Ford makes use of Christian allusion, but his technique is much less sophisticated. He takes one figure from Christian mythology, St Michael, and reduces myth to mediocrity. The 'poor saint', his name ostensibly forgotten and his myth devalued, must stand in the rain in the empty square, his gaze redirected from the mountain (a heavenly subject) to an unnamed girl sewing (an earthly subject). The repetitive rain (the word is repeated eight times in the course of the poem), the restriction of the town by the mountain on one side and the river on the other side, and the sheer mundane detail of daily life, as represented by the 'fire–hooks' stored in an archway in line 83 and the girl's sewing, create an atmosphere of stifling oppression that denies the possibility of spiritual transcendence. The only possible relief from this boredom is 'the ease of a yawn' (l. 90), which the saint/statue cannot access. It is the girl's humanity that affords her all of the freedom that is to be had within the world of the poem.

In addition to the use of *vers libre* and concise composition, Pound emphasises the importance of 'direct treatment of the thing' (Flint 199). This quality is difficult to define, but if we take H.D.'s and Aldington's poems as key examples, it would appear to mean the depiction of a single emotion or experience with clarity and objectivity. 'Beauty' expresses an intensely painful emotion, yet the speaker is distanced from it through the elevated diction. It is not a complaint, but an analysis. 'Priapus' is even more concrete in its expression of a single moment in time and the emotional response it evokes. Again the speaker is distanced by the formal register from her emotions, which lends a sense of objectivity. Williams does not fully achieve the clarity found in 'Beauty' and 'Priapus' because he juxtaposes too many comparisons without fully integrating them. There is no single image or emotion that emerges from his list of allusions. The first stanza of 'In a Garden' could function on its own as a concrete and objective response to a fountain. The second and third stanzas elaborate on this image, but the fourth stanza shatters the objectivity by introducing a specific personal desire. Ford's treatment of the image of the statue in the market square is anything but direct, and the conversational tone of the poem interferes with any sense of objectivity in the depiction.

The use of *vers libre* and the complete abandonment of rhyme are the only characteristics 'Beauty', 'Priapus', 'Postlude' and 'In a Garden' all share. 'Market–Place', although it has no regular rhyme or metre, differs significantly from the others in its use of language and its almost comic tone. 'Beauty', 'Priapus' and 'In a Garden' achieve 'direct treatment of the thing' to varying degrees of success, while 'Postlude' and 'Market–Place' contain a distracting quantity of competing images.

Generally speaking, then, the poems in *Des Imagistes* are diverse and do not consistently demonstrate the main tenets set forth in 'Imagisme' and 'A Few Don'ts By an Imagiste'. It can therefore be concluded that outside factors such as the desire to promote the work of friends or to gain the financial support of wealthy poets were influential in the selection process.

In order to fully explore the limits to which Pound was willing to stretch the definition of Imagism, we must also examine work he chose not to include in *Des Imagistes*. Robert Frost is an example of a poet whom Pound wished to promote, but whose poetry does not appear in Pound's anthology. Like Williams, Frost was an American poet who was just beginning to gain recognition around 1912–1913. Unlike Williams, however, Frost was only a recent acquaintance of Pound's: they were introduced by Flint early in 1913. Pound approved of Frost's poetry, and though Frost grew to be ambivalent about receiving Pound's 'selfish generosity' (Thompson and Winnick 223), Pound began attempting to publicize his work, writing reviews of *A Boy's Will* (1913) for both *Poetry* and *The New Freewoman* in May and September of 1913 respectively.

Pound's praise of the poems in *A Boy's Will* is couched in the terminology of Imagism. According to Pound, Frost's language is 'without the wanton vagrancy of fancy' ('In Meter' 113). Frost himself 'has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it' ('A Boy's Will' 72–3). Non–ornamental language and strict adherence to a certain subjective realism are recurring themes in Pound's descriptions of the Imagist aesthetic. Based on this praise and on Pound's open desire to gain publicity for Frost, it is not unreasonable to wonder why he did not include a poem by Frost in *Des Imagistes*, which he began to compile in 1913. However, Frost's style is extremely different from that of the other poems included in the anthology. He does not write in *vers libre* and he makes extensive use of rhyme.

In the poem 'Stars', for instance, Frost uses alternating lines of four and three iambs and a regular a–b–c–b rhyme structure with additional rhymes between lines 1, 5, and 9. On the level of allusion, his mention of 'Minerva' in line 11, 'fate' in line 5, and the general subject matter of stars aligns him with the classical references of many of the Imagists. Frost's use of myth is more superficial, however, being used in similes rather than in integrated metaphors. In terms of 'direct treatment of the thing', Frost presents a clear and focused response to the night sky, and this response is made to seem all the more dispassionate through the use of images of cold (snow, wind, whiteness and marble). Nevertheless, Frost's use of rhyme and regular meter disqualify him as an Imagist poet.

Even for those whom Pound considered as pet projects, the use of *vers libre* proved the definitive boundary of the definition of Imagism.

To quote Sarah Davidson, 'in addition to the desire for publicity, [Pound] was serious about reforming poetry' (150–51). He believed that the principles informing Imagist poetry would 'prevent...many a crime of production' ('A Few Don'ts' 206). In gaining publicity for Imagism, he was not only spreading these ideas, but helping to financially support those poets whom he considered to be writing good poetry. His praise and support of Frost demonstrates his recognition that not all good poetry had to conform dogmatically to these ideas. Pound wished to make the Imagist movement as viable as possible, making certain tactical exceptions for poets who could bring recognition or funds to the group while maintaining some semblance of stylistic cohesion.

His desire to see good poetry flourish, however, was counterbalanced by his desire to be the sole arbiter of poetic taste. He alone, in his opinion, had the authority and judgement to stretch the rules when necessary. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, Pound claims that his chief criticism of the anthologies organised by Lowell and H.D. was that they took the use of *vers libre* as the only qualification for inclusion (qtd. in Monroe 367). In practice, his vision of Imagism appears no more coherent than theirs.

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