

Crossing toward Imagism:
Emily Dickinson to Hilda Doolittle (*H.D.*)

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“Imagism” is one of those literary terms often easier to grasp and to recognize in a poem, than it is to explain or define. Coffman writes, “[I]t is possible to suggest certain characteristics of rhythm and style that occur regularly in Imagist poems,” but there are so many varied rhythms and styles seen in the work of poets who called themselves ‘Imagists,’ that one could only describe a particular poem as ‘Imagism *in the style of* (a certain poet).’ (3)

Nevertheless, one can say that it was a movement, purposefully formed, in 1912, by American and British poets as a reaction to what was found in much of the poetry of the 19th century in Europe and America: a genre overly-figurative and of elaborate romanticizing, moralizing, often steeped in allusion to historical myths and legends, with little interest given to regarding an object directly, eschewing direct observation and relying on mechanical rhythms closer to those of a metronome than to human speech. In an effort to better define Imagism, the poet Ezra Pound, one of the movement’s founders, wrote “An ‘image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Coffman 9). This presentation, he said, gives the reader “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” (Coffman 9). Though certainly not a new or unique posture to take toward poetry or any other art form—these likely were feelings experienced by readers of Wordsworth, Longfellow, Poe and Browning in the 19th century—we can yet see that this new batch of poets in ‘the new century’ were demanding something fresh from each other’s work.

The so-called Imagist Manifesto or doctrine, set out by Ezra Pound and included in Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, included the following points, which may help the reader grasp the character and intent of the Imagists and their new movement in poetry:

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
2. To create new rhythms —as the expression of new moods — and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon "free-verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as for a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry a new cadence means a new idea.
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly of aeroplanes and automobiles, nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.
4. To present an image (hence the name: "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.

Pound championed the work of many new poets in whom he saw a sympathy with the tenets held by Imagism. This group included Richard Aldington, T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint, Skipwith Cannell, Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams,

James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Allen Upward, John Cournos, and perhaps the foremost proponent of the Imagist style, Hilda Doolittle, who signed many of her poems simply as *HD*.

Antecedents (historical aspects)

It was also a movement of the times: the beginning of the new 20th century, and it reflected the great changes that were taking place in art, thought, and the sciences. One must recall that painting underwent a revolutionary change not many years before, when the artist decided to observe nature directly, and to paint not the theoretical construction of what lay before him, replete with classical perspectives and the apprenticeship approach to painting the way 'master' painted (what he *thought* he saw). Rather, it was a consideration of what impression the scene was making on the eye (and hence, the term Impressionism was applied to the style).

Lee, in his essay on Imagism, writes that Pound and T.E. Hulme were influenced to a significant extent by current French philosophical thought. He cites an essay titled "The Sources of the Imagist Aesthetic" by Wallace Martin, which he calls an illuminating essay dealing with the characteristics of the Imagist movement.

"By stressing the influence on Pound and Hulme of French psychological and philosophical thought, [Martin] provides a necessary corrective to the view of Imagism as a development of Symbolism. By comparing Imagist ideas with those of the empiricist-associationist psychological tradition, as well as with the organicist theory of the image developed by [Henri] Bergson, Martin argues convincingly that Imagism, rather than a culmination of Romantic aesthetic thought, was an attempt to bridge the nineteenth-century subject-object dichotomy in poetic theory" (Lee 43).

Thus at least in philosophic terms, Imagism was considered a radically new form, leaving the 19th century Romanticism behind.

In addition to the contemporary trends in painting and philosophical thought, many other influences provided catalyst to this new way of looking and writing.

Other early influences

Dijkstra demonstrates how the new painting styles of cubism (which grew out of impressionism), vorticism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, with their theories about the visual reconstruction of reality on canvas through direct observation—of reality and of imagination—gave the Imagists the impetus to develop this new style. Lee writes of how photographer Alfred Stieglitz is seen as central to the development of many of the Imagists, most particularly that of the poet (and painter, as well as physician) William Carlos Williams, because of his wide influence on Americans in assimilating the French advances in painting and thought, yet still returning to the object, rather than moving the image to abstraction. In short, it was the image of the object that was paramount.

In terms of poetry itself, Sergeant, in her article “Emily Dickinson: An Early Imagist,” credits the work of Dickinson as having been a significant conduit from 19th century Romanticism to pragmatic, 20th-century Imagism. (In fact a volume of Dickinson’s poems was found in H.D.’s book collection, with many of the poems annotated and a list of selected poems hand-written on the inside back cover (Gregory).)

In *Emily Dickinson, Perception and the Poet’s Quest*, Johnson writes of Dickinson’s dichotomy of her times, a struggle between religious devotion on the one hand that was pervasive in New England society, and the rise of scientific and rationalist thought on the other, compounded by the movement of free thought and the influences of the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. “The most

purely rebellious of the American Romantics, Dickinson found it necessary to remake the universe through the medium of her own seeing, her own perceived evidence" (1).

It would be interesting to look at an example of Dickinson's poems, mindful of the subsequent movement of Imagism (which indeed would not appear formally until 26 years after her death), with its eye toward direct observation of natural phenomena, and manifested with a great economy of word and sharpness of image. Let us consider her poem "A light exists..." (Note: Dickinson did not title or publish her poems, and the Roman numbering system was done after her death as a way to catalog her work.)

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A light exists in Spring
 Not present on the Year
 At any other period--
 When March is scarcely
 here

 A Color stands abroad
 On Solitary Fields
 That Science cannot
 overtake,
 But Human Nature feels.

 It waits upon the Lawn;
 It shows the furthest Tree

Upon the furthest Slope you
 know;
 It almost speaks to you.

 Then, as Horizons step,
 Or Noons report away,
 Without the Formula of sound,
 It passes, and we stay:

 A quality of loss
 Affecting our Content,
 As Trade had suddenly
 encroached
 Upon a Sacrament.

The poet Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) published the following Imagist poem *Heat* first in 1919, (when it appeared in Rittenhouse's *The Second Book of Modern Verse*).

Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air--
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat--
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path.

Comparative close readings

It would be useful now to begin a brief yet close reading of these two poems, in light of the Imagist style. A comparison of the two titles is not entirely out of place here. One should note what the light is doing in Dickinson's poem, and the profound effect the heat has in H.D.'s poem. Both light and heat exist in palpable, tactile, physical senses for the reader. Dickinson's *Light* and H.D.'s *Heat* conjure up for the reader the exact word-images that Pound and H.D. called for in their new Imagist poetry. Clarity of perception of the experience is apparent in these words of

'light' and 'heat,' and gives the reader a direct connection to the phenomena being observed.

In "A light exists," we are told in its opening line that this is a unique light that only appears in a single season. Johnson, paraphrasing E.F. Perlmutter regarding the 'existential sentence,' clarified that "[t]he light in the first stanza is not distinguished from all other kinds of light; it is a unique, singular phenomena in itself" (Johnson 111).

The word *spring* itself draws up many images for us, and the two words, *light* and *spring* together act as a phrasal image to provide us with a unique feeling. Furthermore, it is a light, an experience if you will, that is unexplainable by science; yet it has a unique, singular palpability for us as a human feels it naturally. The light is elusive for us—it shifts horizontally from place to place as it moves away: the "domesticity" of the nearby *lawn* and *tree*, then the more agrarian *fields*, and finally, the *furthest slope*. It brings shape and form to the imagery of these various facets of landscape. By this, Dickinson suggests, we can appreciate the genuine nature of the light. We can also regard light as some agent or angel, as *lift waits upon the lawn* for us to discern the images revealed for our eyes.

In the fourth stanza, we are told of the absence of sound, so that the quality of light is even more clearly defined as an entity in and of itself. In the fifth stanza, light has moved away, resulting in a *quality of loss*, so degraded and base, as if something as contemptible as money has corrupted a thing held sacred. It is a powerful stanza, wherein Dickinson raises the imagery of light from some entity that colors and shapes what we see, to something spiritual which becomes tragically lost to us as though we have lost faith.

There is a clarity of expression that arises through the use of precise visual images in Imagism, and this is particularly apparent in H.D.'s *Heat*. It is also a very physical poem. There is no allusion to the spiritual; rather, the imagery is carried by a series of actions linked to the tangibles perceived by sight and by touch.

The wind is treated as a force, an active agent that can effect physical change. It is interesting that the title is *Heat*, but what the speaker addresses and orders, and prays to, is in fact the wind. The speaker can be seen alternately as a petitioner at prayer, and as a general giving attack orders to troops: an assault.

The first line opens very much as a prayer, with the call of "O wind" as a supplication by the speaker. This is immediately followed by a series of commands, a marching of verbs, carrying precise images of destruction: *rend open, cut apart*. The reader can see the results, were they to take place. In the second stanza, we hear the speaker sympathize with the effect the heat has on the hanging fruit, as the heat presses and misshapes the pears and grapes with such a force as to actually change their physical image. Here, the word *blunts* gives a feeling of ineffectuality, so that one can see and know that the fruit is rendered impotent as to its innate image of freshness and burgeoning vitality. In the third stanza, the speaker returns to the commands of *cut, plough through*, and *turning it*, as though digging a grave and burying it finally.

Summary

One can say that Imagism was started by a group of poets who were disenchanted with the tenets of Romantic poetry of the previous century. But it was more than such a simple rebellion against reactionary ideals steeped in myth, allegory and rhyming schemes. The practitioners of Imagism, in particular Ezra Pound and H.D., sought to seed the domain of poetic expression with a vitality that would free the poets and readers from Romanticism and Victorian restrictions and quash the very image of poetry seen as some elitist discipline only accessible to the well-educated. This democratization of the art by Pound, H.D. and others, was informed by the advances in the broader revolution of free thought, brought to the new century by the artistic, scientific and philosophical advances and discoveries. As for a primary influence on Imagism, we need look no further back than to the sense of imagery that Emily Dickinson brought to her poetry.

As Johnson wrote of Dickinson, “The poet’s quest, in its broadest context, represents [a] highly conscious and carefully constructed “ripening” of her sight” (188). And her ‘sight’ points to the *modus operandi* of Imagism. The link, from Dickinson to H.D. and the Imagists, gave a profound wealth of scope to the poetry that followed—short-lived as Imagism was (it only lasted a few years, until 1917). Imagism’s influence on what was to come, in terms of poetic style and new discoveries of verse structure, could not have resulted without ‘that certain light existing.’

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