

Sylvan Esh: On "In a Station of the Metro"

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 Provençal 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."

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