Daniel Tiffany: On "In a Station of the Metro"

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 tor 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]apanese 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 Johannae 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."

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