

IMAGISM

“A particular convention or attitude in art has a strict analogy to the phenomena of organic life. It grows old and decays. It has a definite period of life and must die. All the possible tunes get played on it and then it is exhausted; moreover its best period is its youngest.”

T. E. Hulme (1909)

“As for the future, Les Imagistes, the descendents of the forgotten school of 1909, have that in their keeping.”

Ezra Pound
Ripostes (1912)

“The...starting point of modern poetry, is the group denominated ‘imagist’ in London about 1910.”

T. S. Eliot

“An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.... It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ simultaneously which gives 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.” [italics added]

Ezra Pound
Poetry
(March 1913)

“Some curiosity has been aroused concerning *Imagisme*, and as I was unable to find anything definite about it in print, I sought out an *imagiste*, with intent to discover whether the group itself knew anything about the ‘movement.’ I gleaned these facts. The *imagistes* admitted that they were contemporaries of the Post-impressionists and the futurists; but they had nothing in common with these schools. They had not published a manifesto. They were not a revolutionary school; their only endeavor was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time—in Sappho, Catullus, Villon. They seemed to be absolutely intolerant of all poetry that was not written in such endeavor, ignorance of the best tradition forming no excuse.”

F. S. Flint
Poetry
(March 1913)

“Objectivity, and again objectivity, and expression: no hindsided-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as ‘addled mosses dank’), no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—nothing that you couldn’t, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literaryism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader’s patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity. When one really feels and thinks, one stammers with simple speech; it is only in the flurry, the shallow frothy excitement of writing or the inebriety of a metre, that one falls into the easy—oh, how easy!—speech of books and poems that one has read.”

Ezra Pound
Letter to Harriet Monroe
(January 1915)

“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 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.”

Amy Lowell
Preface
Some Imagist Poets (1915)

“*Vers libre* does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *elan vital* and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion.... There is no escape from metre; there is only mastery.”

T. S. Eliot
 “Reflections on *Vers Libre*”
New Statesman
 (3 March 1917)

“Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this.” Wallace Stevens

“Imagism: poetic movement of England and the United States, flourishing from 1909 to 1917. Its credo, expressed in *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), included the use of the language of common speech, precision, the creation of new rhythms, absolute freedom in choice of subject matter, the evocation of images in hard, clear poetry, and concentration. Originating in the aesthetic philosophy of T. E. Hulme, the movement soon attracted Ezra Pound, who became the leader of a small group opposed to the romantic conception of poetry and inspired by Greek and Roman classics and by Chinese, Japanese, and modern French poets. In the U.S., the group was represented in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* by Pound, H. D., John Gould Fletcher, and Amy Lowell, and by such English poets as F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, and D. H. Lawrence. Pound collected some of their work in *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (1914), after which his interest began to wane; Amy Lowell then assumed active leadership, advocating that the group subscribe to a fixed program and hold together for at least three years. Under her guidance were published several anthologies, all entitled *Some Imagist Poets*.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
 (Oxford 1941-83)

“A theory of poetry adopted by a number of young radical poets, English and American, who followed the leadership of T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound (c.1910). The movement confessed to a number of predecessors—e.g., medieval philosophy, the aesthetics of Henri Bergson, Japanese poetry, etc.—but it was primarily a reaction against the stultified form and diction of Georgian verse. It demanded absolute precision in the presentation of the individual image; in metrics it proposed the cadence of ‘the musical phrase,’ by which was meant a controlled free verse. Generally speaking, imagist poems were short, pointed observations, often no more than four or five lines in length and usually balanced on a single radically original metaphor. All poeticisms were sedulously eschewed.

Pound and Hulme were joined by a number of other poets, notably Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington, William Carlos Williams, and, later, Amy Lowell. They called themselves *Imagistes*. In 1912 [1914] Pound edited the first imagist anthology, *Some Imagist Poets*. Meanwhile he and the others propagandized vigorously for their beliefs, and Pound, who had become foreign editor of Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* magazine, published therein a number of manifestoes as well as his own and his friends’ poems. Other writers, mostly inferior to the original group, were attracted to the imagist technique; within a short time imagist poems were flooding the American press.

Pound abandoned the movement, saying it had become ‘Amy-gism,’ and with Wyndham Lewis went on to Vorticism and the publication of the magazine *Blast*. Amy Lowell carried on for a few years and published three more anthologies, but by 1917 or 1918 the movement, as an institutional device, had expired. It had, however, exerted an enormous influence on the development of modern poetry and had provided the main break with the immediate past, which was necessary before a new literature could appear. Some of imagism’s most enduring monuments have been translations, such as those made by the English poet Arthur Waley from Chinese poetry and by Francis Densmore from American Indian poetry.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
 (Crowell 1962)

“The first clearly defined development in experimental literature has been classified in literary histories as Imagism. It began as Imagisme, and the first collection of poetry illustrating its principles was called *Des Imagistes* (1914). There were two important divisions in the career of Imagism: the ‘Pound Period,’ from 1909 to 1914, which began March 25, 1909, and featured informal supper meetings in Soho and in Regent Street, and occasional lectures by Pound and Hulme; and ‘Amygism,’ as Pound scornfully called it when he ‘turned it over’ to Amy Lowell, from 1914 to about 1920. The most important document of the second phase was *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), edited by Miss Lowell and Richard Aldington, with a new ‘statement of principles’ by both.

Of this second stage Pound said (*Poetry*, April 1916): ‘At present its chief defects are sloppiness, lack of cohesion, lack of organic centre in individual poems, rhetoric, a conventional form of language to be found also in classical textbooks, and in some cases a tendency more than slight towards the futurist’s cinematographic fluidity.’ The first phase concentrated on essentials, on the absolutely necessary objectives and disciplines; the second, while repeating the objectives of the first with some variation, allowed for a considerable expansion of the original assumptions, a loosening of the lines of demarcation, and a much freer range in the adaptation of ‘new ideas.’

The first phase of Imagism received its most cogent definition in a statement of three principles agreed to by Pound, H. D., and Richard Aldington in the spring or early summer of 1912. Since this statement, while frequently repeated and adapted, was never improved upon, it may serve as a basis for discussion of the aims and achievements of Imagism. The first of these principles advocated ‘direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.’ This urged a basic economy of poetic expression. The ‘thing’ was to be considered not a physical object, but a complex of emotional and intellectual details united in the imagination and as nearly identical with the artist’s preconception of them as possible. Pound defined ‘an Image’ (*Poetry*, March 1913) as the means by which the ‘thing’ is represented in art, as ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’

This was an absolute minimum of art; anything not crucially related to the ‘complex’ was considered irrelevant, dishonest, false (or at any rate marked an inferiority of perception and talent). Several critical metaphors were used to indicate the nature of the directness, the degree of subjectivity and objectivity involved in creating the image. Not the least of these was found in Hulme’s essay, ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ (written in 1913 or 1914), his most important contribution to the critical background of Imagism. Speaking of ‘accurate, precise and definite description,’ Hulme employed a metaphor of curve to define that precision: ‘Now the state of tension or concentration of mind, if he is doing anything really good in this struggle against the ingrained habit of the technique, may be represented by a man employing all his fingers to bend the steel out of its own curve and into the exact curve which you want. Something different to what it would assume naturally’....

This metaphor and the first principle of Imagism (‘direct treatment’) try to probe the genuine mystery of ‘exactness’—the word ‘direct’ indicates a desire to make the expression resemble the ‘object’ as closely as art can make it. Hulme’s view of poetry is almost entirely visual, pictorial; Pound’s includes and often emphasizes music, rhythms learned from poetries of languages other than one’s native tongue, and sculpture. Perhaps the best illustration of this first principle and its implication is Pound’s two-line poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (*Poetry*, April 1913): ‘The apparition of these faces in a crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.’ [Compare Impressionism in American fiction since 1893.]

Here are the minimal necessities stressed in the Imagist statement. The object is an observation that must be rendered exactly: faces in a Metro station turned variously toward the light and the darkness. The ‘image’ used to support and intensify the impression is that of flower petals which are half absorbed by, half resist the texture of wetness and the darkness of a bough. The word ‘apparition’ clearly binds the two aspects of the observation—in its being both an appearance (a thing to be observed) and an experience not quite real (that is, not sharply outlined, the darkness of the scene partly dulling and shading the scene observed.) The second of the three principles in the 1912 statement served primarily to reinforce the first: ‘To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.’ This phrase contained the essence of the Imagists’ urgent appeal for concentration and economy of expression. It was stimulated chiefly by a strong reaction against late nineteenth-century verse, what was variously called ‘cosmic utterance,’

'Tennysonianness of speech,' philosophical 'padding' to meet the needs of both the meter and the genteel reader. In accepting his position with Harriet Monroe's magazine, Pound put the phrase in another way: 'Can you teach [the American poet] that it is not a pentameter echo of the sociological dogma in last year's magazines? Maybe. Anyhow you have work before you.'

Any unnecessary word, whatever the incentive (metrical, sentimental, or otherwise) for including it, interfered with the 'directness' of the 'treatment' and was by that much a loss of precision, a moral and artistic defection. Finally, 'As regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.' Whatever Pound may have meant by this, he did not mean wholesale sponsorship of 'free verse'; nor did Eliot believe that there was such a thing as *vers libre*, in spite of the fact that the most lively controversy in modern poetry had to do with the question of free verse....

Pound made his position on the matter clear: 'Any work of art is a compound of freedom and order. It is perfectly obvious that art hangs between chaos on the one side and mechanics on the other. A pedantic insistence on detail tends to drive out "major form." A firm hold on major form makes for a freedom of detail.' Pound did mean, however, that poetry ought not to be a result of mere accent counting, a tick-tock rhythm in the adjustment of individual detail. He was much interested in the interrelationships of verse and music and maintained that thematically and texturally poetry had much formally to learn from musical composition—as indeed it did from the practice of translating, adapting from, or merely reading verse written in foreign languages. These were the beginnings of the 'new poetry,' and *a genuine attention to their full meanings marked the beginnings of the 'new criticism'....* [italics added]

A great variety of changes were rung upon these original statements: by F. S. Flint, John Gould Fletcher, May Sinclair, Ford Madox Ford, Amy Lowell, and others. From precisely stating what poetry should *at the least* aspire to do, Imagism moved into a kind of competition regarding the varieties of 'new poetry' that might be admitted and allowed.... In general, all critics agreed with Aldington's remark (*Little Review*, 1915) that 'French poetry is the foremost in our age for fertility, originality, and general poetic charm.' The major nineteenth-century French poetic development, *symbolisme*, had little specifically to do with Imagism, strictly defined; in a sense it was really opposed to it. Symbolism did, however, influence a wide range of American poets in one way or another: Cummings, Stevens, Crane, Miss Lowell, Fletcher, among them. At least in its first stages, Imagism was at an opposite pole from the *symboliste* objective, especially in Mallarmé's formulation of it: 'To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which comes from the pleasure in understanding it little by little, in thinking of it for what it suggests of the dream. The ideal practice of this mystery is the essence of the symbol.'

In spite of the differences, French symbolism was not a negligible influence in the formation of modern American poetry. Both symbolism and Imagism were concerned with a poetry that vividly expresses states of consciousness; both were variously opposed to the idea that literature gains its value only as a servant of other disciplines; both were inspired by the belief that the artist is a significant, responsible, and valuable member of a community. As Imagism expanded, as the influence of French poetry and poetic increased, the two came closer together; and in individual cases certain French poets had significant roles in the formation of certain American poets. Supplementary influences were those of Theophile Gautier, whose *Amaux et Camees* was of great importance for Pound's early work; and Tristan Corbiere and Jules Laforgue, both of whom helped to influence the special kinds of irony found in the early verse of Pound and Eliot.... Fundamentally the lesson of modern poetry was one of restoring the communicative varieties and precisions in the language. T. E. Hulme had advocated that poetry be rewritten entirely every twenty years, so that it avoid the danger of complacency and the sentimental stock response."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 197-203

"So far as the public could know, with Eliot's earliest work still unpublished, the Imagist movement initiated Modernism. As a poetic 'school,' Imagism was at once, paradoxically, short-lived, and in its emphasis on concreteness, the most lasting feature of Modernist poetry. Insignificant in the number of memorable poems it produced that really exemplify its principles, it yet had an enormous influence which

in some respects is still discernible today. It was in 1912, Pound has told us, that he and H. D. and the British poet Richard Aldington decided that they were agreed on the following principles:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.

...Pound, by far the most intelligent and crafty of the Imagists, gave the best definition of the only part of the Imagist credo that made the movement distinctive—its concentration on the *image*, clearly and precisely rendered.... Two years later Pound attempted to illustrate the kind of writing such principles would produce by editing an anthology he called *Des Imagistes*.

Then, for reasons partly having to do with personalities and partly related to his own changing ideas of where poetry should go, he broke with the 'movement' and relinquished the leadership of it to that 'demon saleswoman,' as Eliot somewhat later called her, Amy Lowell. He began to speak of Imagism contemptuously as 'Amygism,' a set of principles not broadly enough conceived to hold a developing poet. Pound's 'Amygism' resulted in three more anthologies, all called *Some Imagist Poets* and edited by the movement's new leader in 1915, 1916, and 1917. Then the publication of Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 effectively put an end, for young poets, to Imagism as a movement, by incorporating all that was meaningful in Imagist principles while at the same time relating the image to human experience of the image... 'Prufrock' seemed no less 'objective' than the Imagists wished to be, but quite clearly it could not be described as just a 'picture'....

As Pound said...in 1913, 'The arts, literature, poesy, are a science, just as chemistry is a science... The ideal model becomes a chemist watching chemical 'forces' produce chains of chemical 'effects' in a laboratory. For the Imagist, the 'laboratory' would be his own sensibility. Imagist poetics grew out of scientific positivism. All of this is implicit in Pound's early definition of the image... Hulme would probably have flatly denied it if asked whether he was taking his cue from technology or the sciences. All he wanted to do, he repeatedly said, was to destroy liberalism and Romanticism; but this, he realized, meant getting rid of the Romantic or transcendental person and the associated concept of personality. Hulme's 'classic' and authoritarian ideals coincided with the 'objective' kind of poetry Pound wanted and was explaining by use of a 'scientific' term.

But Hulme...did not speak for many of those we call Imagists. For them, Imagism had no philosophic underpinning of which they were aware and contained no philosophic implications. It was just an anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, a 'clear' and 'hard' and 'unillusioned' way of writing, the poetry of the 'real,' in short. 'Free verse,' most of them thought, was normally desirable if one wanted to avoid both the sound and the sense of the illusioned fathers, but even Amy Lowell, who elaborated Pound's three principles into six without saying anything new, said it was only desirable, not essential; and if she had been a clearer thinker she might have gone on to say that it could not be used to distinguish Imagism from other kinds of poetry....

The two hard-core Imagist ideas are these: first, the idea that the poet's work is essentially the recording of observation, with 'observation' conceived as a completely objective, nonpurposive process; and second, the idea that the poem should present what is being observed, the 'thing,' 'directly,' which we are now in a position to understand as meaning 'without interpretation or comment' of the poet as person. The poet should present, in short, as Miss Moore said, 'the raw material of poetry in all its rawness.'

These two ideas imply a third, which characterized not just Imagism but Modernist poetry in general. If the personality of the poet is irrelevant to his work, and his strictly poetic function is limited to neutral observation, what is there left for him to do, besides *versify*—and versifying in *free* verse is really not difficult. He can design, as Marianne Moore would say, imaginary gardens for real toads—imaginative shapes for the facts his poetry will be made up of. This, it was supposed, would require not insight or vision, passion or pity, but simply and exclusively *craftsmanship*. The poet, as Amy Lowell said in a preface, is exactly like a carpenter: he has a *skill*....

Choosing an analogy from chemistry, Eliot explained his desire for impersonal poetry by elaborating his famous catalyst theory. The poet's mind, he said ["Tradition and the Individual Talent"] is like the filament of platinum that, when it is immersed in two elements, causes the creation of a third without being itself in any way affected. Remaining totally inert, inactive, it still, simply by being there, brings about the creation of the third element—the poem... Poetry, Eliot continued, has nothing to do with the poet as person. The man who writes the poetry has only his skill. He intends nothing, chooses nothing, is responsible for nothing. Poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality.

Eliot's 'impersonal' theory of poetry might better have been called 'antipersonal.' Resting on an intense revolt against Romanticism, it could draw upon some apparently 'obvious' evidence to make its case: A great many artists have been 'bad' men; what society calls 'good' men do not necessarily produce 'good' art. 'Man' and 'artist,' then, must be entirely separate... Randall Jarrell made one of the most perceptive comments on this Imagist-Impersonal theory. Discussing what he called the 'odd climate of poetic opinion' that was Williams' Imagist background, he said that in Imagist theory, 'The subject of poetry...changed from the actions of men to the reactions of poets'.... Persons, insofar as they are sane, are not mere passive 'receptors' or automatic 'reactors.' To consider the poet as simply a neutral observer of a train of mental and emotional events that take place within him as a result of a stimulus, a passive watcher of something that happens to him, is effectively to separate the poet from his own experience....

The idea of man implicit in such poetic theory is the materialist one that he is like the Pavlovian dog whose mouth waters when a bell rings. Whether we call Imagist-Impersonal poetic theory 'Behaviorist,' or 'mechanical-materialist,' or 'positivist,' it is clear that this earliest poetics of Modernism was not philosophically neutral. The poets generally talked only about 'craft,' to be sure; this poem was thought to be 'expert,' that one not 'expert.' But behind the talk about techniques lay a new conception of man—as a 'thing' like the 'things,' whether subjective or objective,' that Pound had insisted the poet should write about. Eliot gradually, over a number of years, gave up this theory, but Pound never did....

What Imagist-Impersonal poetic theory amounts to in the end is a translation into poetic terms of what may be called positivistic 'scientism' and this in turn amounts to an ultimate denial of responsibility.... Imagism is the poetic equivalent of fictional Naturalism.... [On the contrary, or at the same time, Imagist aesthetics make it the poetic equivalent of fictional Impressionism.] Imagism is the poetic response to the anti-humanistic and antipersonal implications of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific philosophy—its mechanism and materialism... For a mechanist, a *machine* offers the best model of reality. For a materialist, *things* are more real than persons or thoughts or processes. Thoughts themselves are best understood on the model of *things*... For the attitude that accepts these supposed implications of scientific knowledge and adds to them positivism, the notion that only scientific method gives any valid knowledge of external or objective reality, I use the word 'scientism'...

If there had been no 'scientism,' there would have been no Imagism.... The pure Imagist poem...starts from an acceptance of the 'neutralization of nature' and makes no claim to any sort of truth that needs verification. It says only, 'This is the way the "thing" looked—smelt, felt, sounded, etc.—to me, and this is what it made me think of or feel.' Its images are not symbols, for it knows that nature is not a 'picture-language,' as Emerson had thought it."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 333, 336-40, 344

Michael Hollister (2015)

IMAGIST POEMS

In a Station of the Metro

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

L'Art, 1910

Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries! Come, let us feast our eyes.

Ezra Pound

The Pool

Are you alive?
I touch you.
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you--banded one?

Oread

Whirl up, sea--
Whirl your pointed pines.
Splash your great pines
On our rocks.
Hurl your green over us--
Cover us with your pools of fir.

H. D.

Meditation

A wise man,
Watching the stars pass across the sky,
Remarked:
In the upper air the fireflies move more slowly.

Amy Lowell

Nothing to Save

There is nothing to save, now all is lost,
but a tiny core of stillness in the heart
like the eye of a violet.

D. H. Lawrence

The Skaters

Black swallows swooping or sliding
In a flurry of entangled loops and curves;
The skaters skim over the frozen river.
And the grinding click of their skates as they impinge upon the surface,
Is like the brushing together of thin wing-tips of silver.

John Gould Fletcher

Anecdote of the Jar

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Wallace Stevens

from *Ars Poetica*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

Archibald MacLeish

Evening

The chimneys, rank on rank,
Cut the clear sky;
The moon
With a rag of gauze about her loins
Poses among them, an awkward Venus—
And here am I looking wantonly at her
Over the kitchen sink.

Richard Aldington

The Fog

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

Carl Sandburg

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

William Carlos Williams