



Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

In a Station of the Metro (c. 1910)

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

#### ANALYSIS

“Suppose Pound had written:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Dead leaves caught in the gutter's stream.

Or:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Dry leaves blown down the dry gutter.

What would be the difference? We cannot say that there would be any loss in logic or common sense. The comparison--for the poem is based on a single metaphor, a comparison in the form of an identification--of the faces in the crowd to leaves caught in the water in a gutter or blown down a dry gutter by a gust of wind has just as much basis as does the comparison of the faces to white petals on a bough.

The subway station does bear a certain resemblance to a gutter--more, in fact, than it bears to a bough. And the stream of people hurrying down bears likewise a resemblance to a stream of water, as the ordinary use of the word *stream* in this connection indicates. Or we might say that the roar of the subway train and the gust of its passing remind one of the wind; and the comparison of the faces to leaves is as 'reasonable' as the comparison to petals. In a subway station, too, we expect the confusion of the crowd, people apparently being driven here and there by forces over which they have no control, perhaps a sense of unreality.

What, then, do the revisions lose? They lose the shock of surprise, the suddenness of the perception. The comparisons in the revised versions are, we may say, too logical, too commonsensical, too reasonable, too literal. They are *merely* comparisons, with no inner significance, and when we encounter them we say, 'Sure--and what of it?' There has been no leap of the poet's imagination, and therefore there is nothing to stir the reader's imagination.

In the original version of the poem, however, we observe that a new and surprising comparison is exactly what Pound gives us. The petals on a wet black bough, the white faces against the dimness--the comparison does embody a leap of the imagination, a shock of surprise. And yet, in the midst of the novelty, we sense that it, too, has a logical basis. The poet has simply focused upon the significant quality for the comparison, discarding other qualities, more obvious qualities. And the shock of surprise takes us to the poem's meaning. A new and surprising interpretation is exactly what Pound's new and surprising comparison gives us. Even in this most unlikely place, we catch a glimpse of something beautiful, fresh, and pure, and in that momentary lift of the heart, sense an interpretation potentially applicable to a great deal of experience."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren  
*Understanding Poetry*  
(Holt 1938-61)

#### RESPONSE TO ANALYSIS

It is surprising that Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and Hyatt Waggoner (below) call the petals in the poem "white" and refer to "white faces." Pound calls neither the petals nor the faces white. Perhaps his calling the bough "black" elicited an unconscious projection of its opposite. This subjective error by three influential specialists, two of them prominent New Critics, illustrates the need for even more careful objective analysis—the method of New Criticism.

Pound was influenced by the Japanese *haiku* and by Chinese poetry translated by Ernest Fenollosa that he put into final form. He was chosen by the widow of Fenollosa because she thought his poetry was similar to the Chinese, in spirit if not in form. The influence of *haiku* no doubt brought to Pound's mind the image of white cherry blossoms on a bough, common not only in Japan but in Washington D.C., where they are televised every year as a sign of Spring. Apparently the two professors also were influenced by that image unconsciously, since they do not mention it, whereas Pound consciously chose not to use the modifier white. Pound's version, again, is preferable to the alternative versions by the professors--more egalitarian, true to life, open and beautiful--making it possible for readers to project their own faces. As a Modernist, Pound wanted his art to be universal. All white faces would be unreal, polarized and spooky.

Also, it does not occur to Brooks, Warren or Waggoner to imagine that it is raining outside, making both the people and the metro wet and sticky like a bough--not to say a *branch* of the *transport* system in the *underground*, as in the unconscious. The poem is more than a mere 'comparison,' more even than a vivid metaphor. It is an *epiphany*--as in Joyce--a spiritual insight that comes through a union of disparate as he glimpses the commonality of human faces--all equally part of Nature, soft and lovely like petals. The metro, too, is seen as natural, like a bough. This integration of the technological with the natural and spiritual is an exception among Modernists, especially contrary to the agrarians like Frost and Faulkner. Pound and Stephen Spender are in a minority of urbanites in their affirmations. T. S. Eliot, for example, laments the "Unreal City" in "The Waste Land."

Pound's perception is simple, beautiful and inspiring--but also brief, a momentary transcendence. He sees an "apparition," a manifestation of spirit, defining the perception as spiritual. This experience has traditional characteristics of literature in the *transcendental mode*, as expressed by Pound in his definition of an Image: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.... It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of *freedom from time and space* limits; that sense of sudden *growth*, which we experience in the presence of the greatest art." His poem emphasizes the brevity of the experience in being

short, like a Japanese *haiku* or the Chinese poetry he helped translate. This influence informed the Imagist Movement in poetry of the early 20th century, led by Pound and then by Amy Lowell.

In the Romantic tradition, people are frequently compared to flowers, evoking the brevity and sweetness of life. Pound makes the metaphor more poignant by extending it to petals separated from unity in flowers, or families--by all that is implied by "metro"--yet still unified in the all-inclusive human family. The poem expresses a mystical perception of total unity comparable to moments in Asian poetry and in Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and James Joyce. Asian philosophies and aesthetics have influenced American literature since Emerson and the other New England Transcendentalists in the early 19th century.

Michael Hollister (2015)

"The best-known Imagist poem, kept alive by anthologists and literary historians chiefly to illustrate what Imagist poems ought to be like, is Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro.' It is very short, and very simple—and would long since have been forgotten if it were not so convenient and brief an illustration of all three Imagist principles as enunciated by Pound. Tested by each of Pound's three principles, the poem is found to be a faithful example of the Imagist credo. It treats directly, without comment or interpretation, both an 'objective' and a 'subjective' 'thing'—the faces, and what *perceiving* them causes to happen in the mind of the poet; or, as the psychologist Hart would have put it, the stimulus and the inevitable mental response.

It would of course not be fair to this poem, but it would be fair to a poet who wrote a good many such poems, to ask why the speaker never moved close enough to the faces to see them as the faces of *people*, of individuals, not merely as blobs of white [It would be fair to ask this critic why he never moved close enough to the poem to see that the word *white* does not appear in it and that an "apparition" connotes more than a "blob of white."] against a black background in static arrangement. The people behind these faces were going somewhere, as we would never guess from the poem. But to move on to the other two Imagist principles: The poem obviously does not waste words, and it is not written in syllabic feet; so that it passes these tests, too. But of course Whitman's 'A Sight in Camp' also does not waste any words, and is not written in syllabic feet, so that these two principles tell us nothing about whether this is an Imagist poem or not. What does tell us something is the difference in the way the speakers in the two poems look at the faces they see.

The faces in Whitman's poem literally are those of dead men, but the speaker in the poem moves close, looks at each face in its full particularity and potential expressiveness, recognizes the faces as belonging to men like himself, and tell us what they mean to him. As a result, he 'brings them to life' for himself and the reader, and, in a deeper sense, at the same time wills their lives for themselves, independently of any purposes of his. The one thing the faces are not, in the end, is 'apparitions' existing only in and for his experience. Thus, though 'A Sight in Camp' is short and pictorial, though it is composed almost entirely of images, and though it is in free verse, it is not in any sense an 'Imagist' poem. The dead soldiers in Whitman's poem are not viewed as objects of his experience, *data* in the mind, to be observed and recorded. Compared with Pound's poem, the anthologists' other favorite illustration of the practice of Imagism is both a more attractive and interesting poem and considerably less 'pure' as an example. Williams' 'The Red Wheel Barrow' treats 'things,' but treats them as though the speaker *is* and the reader *ought* to be related to the things because they contain intrinsic values... This poem does not fit Pound's first principle of Imagism nearly so well as 'In a Station of the Metro,' especially if that principle is interpreted in the light of Pound's definition of the image."

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 341-42

Michael Hollister (2015)