

The Fragmentation of Imagism

It was 1912, and a new mode of poetry was taking root. Sparked by the ideas of T.E. Hulme and from distaste of the drippy sentimentalism of the Romantic era (Britannica “Imagist”), Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and H.D. literally wrote the rules of Imagism. Their dry, concise look at an image or “complex,” as Pound described it, helped lay the foundation for modernist poetry. However, the Imagists’ granite rules could not ensure strict adherence to their form, not even from founding members of Imagism themselves. As the years went by, the Imagists themselves grew weary of their own form by both their own admittance and through their later works.

Ezra Pound was the first leader of the Imagist movement, and his autocratic grip on the concept of Imagism may be partly to blame for the fragmentation of the movement. Pound makes it quite clear that, “At least for myself, I want [twentieth-century poetry] so, austere, direction, free from emotional slither (“A Retrospect” 23).” He carefully selected and edited poems for published volumes of Imagist poetry, but the appearance of the popular and wealthy poet heiress Amy Lowell swept in a new democratic format for the group’s publications. Authors were to select what they considered their best work, without the stamp of approval from Pound deeming it true to the Imagist credo (Bradshaw 159). Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound clashed quite famously over the direction Imagism would take, as seen in Lowell’s poem to Pound, harshly dubbed “Astigmatism.” The poem pulls no punches; the analogy is clear in Lowell’s image of the Poet smashing lovely flowers of all kinds, saying “They are useless. They are not roses (“Astigmatism” 28).” Pound’s frustrations at the misuse of the label Imagist are equally apparent; he sardonically tried to persuade Lowell to change the name of the movement to “Amygism.” Pound later abandoned his gone-astray Imagists in order to help found the more forward facing Vorticists.

Lowell was not the only poet who struggled under the burden of the Image. Hilda Doolittle, the woman behind the penname H.D., eventually abandoned the form in the post World War II era. H.D. biographer Barbara Guest describes the growing struggle to write in the isolating style of the image. Guest records that in a 1956 visit to Yale, H.D. describes Imagism as

“Something that was important for poets learning their early in this century. It is still important to any poet learning their craft. But after learning his craft, the poet will find his true direction, as I hope I have. (Guest 20)”

H.D. also wrote to fellow co-founder Aldington, who was equally disenchanted with Imagism, saying “How sad I am that you so dislike having to do with the Imagist sign. I have been bored with it, too. But at seventy-two it is part of my youth. (Guest 21)”

And so the Imagists, who gave the modern world fleeting images that captured what Pound called “that sense of sudden liberation (“A Retrospect”),” became another literary movement of the past. Beyond the personality conflicts of headstrong poets, Imagism fell at the hand of its own greatest strength—its own limitations. When the founding poets found themselves strangled by their own rules, what Barbara Guest dubs the “womb-like claustrophobia of the image,” the movement was doomed. Its accomplishment remains the tearing-down of conventional, sappy verse and the installment of principles subconsciously revered throughout Modernism, not to mention the haunting visions of wheelbarrows, metro stations, and fruit trees that it left planted in our minds.

Bibliography

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