

Waltz at the Metro: The Craft and Rhythm in Pound's in a Station of the Metro

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Abstract

*This essay seeks to understand the intersection of Form and Content in Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*. Pound's poem succeeds in presenting an intimate look into the fast, indifferent yet ephemeral urban life through a peculiar collision of two images, which though seemingly unrelated, contribute to the production of new meaning. However, perhaps the most significant site of investigation in Pound's poetry is the underground railway station, a space that is both artificial and primeval. Ultimately, through the work of select scholars, this essay investigates Pound's poetry as an analysis of the atomistic experience of the cityscape and its transformation into a poetic text.*

Keywords

Urbanity, Imagism, Underground Railway Network, Photography, Form, Content.

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"One is tired of ornamentations, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them"

Ezra Pound

"il miglior fabbro"

T.S. Eliot

While traveling in the Parisian underground metro network, Ezra Pound encountered a barrage of unknown faces amidst the crowd. This fleeting, ephemeral brush with the ineffable elements of the city had a lasting impact on the poet. In an attempt to articulate this experience, Pound ended up crafting, now arguably considered his tour de force, *In a Station of the Metro* (1913).

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough."

In a single poem he managed to touch upon the different strands of modernist thought in the pre-war years. He moved away from lofty and verbose lyrical poetry, instead he searched for a new template to depict one's fraught position in the modern world. His poem is often considered as the figurehead of the Imagist Manifesto, a rallying cry to 'make it new'. His focus is on the banal, everyday aesthetic of modern urban life, the inescapability of the city, the exhilarating speed and plurality of stimulus and amidst all this the precarious self, assaulted incessantly by a vast uncontrollable tsunami of fleeting information. He accomplished this feat in a meager fourteen words. This essay hopes to do a thematic and formulaic analysis of Pound's jewelled work, while attempting to understand the harmony between the two.

As we begin reading the poem, the first thing that strikes us is its sheer simplicity. Let us look at the first line, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd:". Three distinctive words emerge, 'apparition', 'faces' and 'crowd'. 'Apparition' creates an aura of transitoryness. Of what? The poem immediately supplies the answer, 'of these faces' and where? in a crowd at the metro. In a stroke of brilliance, Pound has presented the modern urban life. The crowd is like a cauldron from which the ghostly faces emerge, as if we are witnessing a conjurer's trick. But before one could grasp their presence, they dissolve back into the incongruous multitude. Faces are primarily the first identification markers whenever we meet someone new. By effacing their distinctiveness, Pound subtly hints at a complete lack of any individuality. Each individual is indistinguishable from the other. The reader then moves to the final line, "Petals on a wet, black bough". We are transported to a

completely new space. A setting not in an underground musty tunnel, but in the bosom of nature. One immediately connects the second description with the first. Just like the faces, the petals are indistinguishable from each other. The black tree is synonymous with the dark underground metro (no natural light), and both have branches. Clear meaning emerges. But how?

Something extraordinary has happened here. In his poem, Pound nowhere asserts any relation between the two descriptions. What he presents are two distinct *images*, which have no direct correlation. He uses no simile or metaphor anywhere; the faces are not 'like' the petals. How did the reader emerge with the meaning? More importantly where does the meaning-making process take place?

As one image is superimposed over the other, meaning is produced. The meaning is not inherent in any one image, but it is by their coming together that a third dimension emerges. The newly produced meaning does not emerge in the poem, instead it is created in the mind of the reader. The technique of cinematic montage is apparent here. Pound's poem uses images as two distinct shots (here images), where the meaning is produced in the viewer's (here reader's) mind. The poem presents a mental process of connecting unrelated images within the inner world. The meaning produced is not cumulative or linear, instead it is spontaneous and arbitrary. Pound moves away from the conventional understanding of poetry, where the reader has to pause and reflect in the midst of his reading to gather the meaning. Here the reader is offered no time to rest.

While describing his initial attempts at recapturing the specific encounter, Pound describes all he achieved were 'splotches of colour'. This suggests a poet's inability to extract a coherent meaning out of an experience. He further says, "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." Pound is concerned not with the outer terrain, but how it plays back on the self. A relation between the visual reality and its effect on the intimate self. Pound's use of images presents a snapshot view of the city. Instead of a coherent whole, he delivers atomistic and explosive encounters. The poet is almost like a photographic plate, upon whom the city keeps recording these *apparitions*. This recording never stops, the assault is relentless. The images are almost haunting, suggesting a difficulty of communion between one's inner reality and the world out there. Notice the use of the word 'itself' in the above-mentioned phrase. The poet does not make this conscious transformation from the outward to the inward reality. It is as if the self of the poet is no different from the objects, he observes out there. In another poem he says,

“How will this beauty, when I am far hence,
Sweep back upon me and engulf my mind”.

As if exemplifying his inability to distinguish himself from what he observes. It is not just the poetic eye seeing the world, but the world throwing the sight back at him. He is not separate from the crowd. He does not gaze at the faces from a secure distance. Instead he himself is another face, lost in a sea of apparitions.

Perhaps as important as the poet's self, the setting of the poem demands our equal attention. Exiting a train at the La Concorde station, the underground ambiance enhanced Pound's surreal encounter. The underground network was literally constructed out of nothing by excavating the earth, it contains the essence of a modern city. The individual has to descend into the bowels of the earth, almost entering a mechanistic rendition of Hades' underworld empire. One might argue that Pound enters the unconscious of the city itself, leaving behind the outer reality. What he encounters in this unconscious realm is extremely fascinating.

Tim Colney's essay, *City Transit Gloria: Mass Movements and Metropolitan Poetics*, describes the experience of urban locomotion as an integral part of one's experience of the city. The rapid metro offers an accelerated bombardment of stimuli, where one is rushed towards the next encounter in negligible intervals of time. One's propelled in a universe of fleeting vignettes and transitory sights. The world turns unreal, a flickering phantasmagoria, where a combination of real and surreal images envelop the poet's self. The incessant motion of the metro offers no respite, rendering one completely numb. The sensory overflow shocks the self to a torpid state, almost like Eliot's patient, who lies etherized upon a table. Colney writes, “The speaker of Pound's “In a Station of the Metro” is, by comparison, so serene as to seem nearly comatose” (94).

It's interesting to note the specific moment Pound chose to present in his poem – when he stepped *off* the metro and *onto* the platform. The platform is one of the hotspots where one encounters the *other* in a physical and a metaphorical sense (like a departmental store or a café). It offers a moment of temporary stasis, where one emerges from the crowd of a locomotive, and enters another crowd at the platform. It is a point where the self moves between multitudes, and is temporarily left bare. This momentarily naked self feels the intensity of the raw stimuli in the urban world, and is jarred by this contact. How does one present this shock in poetic language? How do you articulate the incomprehensible? The transit network offers a whole new set of sensory information. Sights, smells, and

sounds all converge upon the individual. One has to develop a new template to incorporate these phenomena. One cannot ‘recollect in tranquillity’, because there is no sphere left untouched by these sensory invaders. What template does Pound create?

Before its first publication, Pound gave explicit instructions on how this poem must be published. He asked the poem to be set in the center of the white space left on the page, and clearly defined the use of spaces. This was the result,

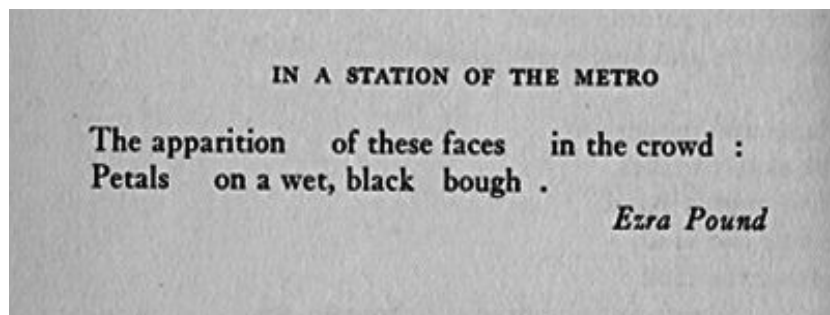


Figure 1. Pound’s poem in *Poetry* published in 1913

There is intricate design at work here. The appearance of the poem becomes as important as its content. When a reader encounters it, the poem *looks* like a printed image. The use of atypical typography, extra spaces and distinct punctuation seem to break the poem into separate individual units. Ways of *reading* intersect with ways of *seeing* in Pound’s poem.

Pound himself stated the influence of the Japanese haiku (hokku) in his poem. He remarked, “The Japanese have had the sense of exploration. They have understood the beauty of this sort of knowing. A Chinaman said long ago that if a man can’t say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the hokku”. The haiku is an immensely structured form of poetry, often superimposing two distinct ideas to produce a new meaning. Pound’s craftsmanship is aligned with the demands of the Imagist Manifesto.

Imagist Manifesto

- I. *Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.*
- II. *To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.*
- III. *As regards rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.*

Pound's condensed presentation and direct treatment of the thing are apparent in the poem. The poem employs no verb. The rhyme of crowd/bough, alliterative black bough and a descending pitch profile create an aural sensory ambiance. Critics have even presented the poem as a musical piece, owing to its interplay between spaces and words. Each individual unit is placed in a relation with others, and each unit demands our attention. Colney argues that the use of spaces is an attempt to describe the shock the self-experienced. He says, "We read that apparent serenity as an utter shock, marked by the halting spaces and displaced full-stop in the original version of the text". Pound uses absences to grasp the indescribable.

In the 1916 Pound made one final change in the poem, changing the colon in the first line to a semicolon. The final piece looked like this,

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

This semicolon is interesting. It presents a tenuous link between the two images, but does not cement their relationship. The colon in many ways sets the first line as subservient to the second, as if the meaning lies hidden only in the final line. Describing this change Steve Ellis argues that, "the relationship between them can be said to be not only more subtle but even more equivocal, and the cost of not foregrounding the "Image" is the possibility, that the semi-colon assists the first line in overturning its subordinate position and becoming foregrounded itself". The semicolon connects the two lines, but also keeps them at an arms distance. The two lines are brought together by the critical faculty of the poet, and he holds them together for us. The meaning is produced not on the page, but inside the reader's mind.

Pound's poem is a splendid example of how form and content come immensely close in modern poetry. The search for a new template is not merely an ornamentation, but an attempt to capture the speed and ephemerality of urban life. To capture this speed, he has to keep changing the images quickly to recreate a sense of urgency and acceleration. He expands the language of poetry to incorporate the new sensations. His poem holds together two different dimensions, the transient fleeting moment that affects the self and the rigorous craftsmanship required to articulate the experience. Pound sought to make it new, *it* being the aesthetics of what he is describing, and how he does so. The *what* and the *how* of engaging in a choreographed dance, and their rhythm capture the essence of the modern city.

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