

*The Imagist School And It's Pioneers  
An-Approach To Amy Lowell's Poem:  
"Patterns"*

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There is much dispute and very little agreement about the definition of imagism as a literary school, its founder and its date of birth. No clear cut and exact phrases could give the accurate meaning and principles of this school which has been described as “the grammar school of modern poetry.”<sup>(1)</sup> Its role in modernizing the English poetry is indisputable, and nobody ever denies the fact that it exhilarated the poetic sensibility of the English and American poets of the first two decades of the twentieth century. The name of the founder of this school is not agreed upon. Yet, it is one of such names as Hulme, Pound, Flint, Aldington and Amy Lowell, who all, each in a certain way, laid the basis and developed this school which “profoundly altered the course of English verse.”<sup>(2)</sup>

A literary dictionary may give Imagism the following definition “a movement of English and American poets who, between 1909 and 1917, concentrated on the piece image as being central and essential in their verse,”<sup>(3)</sup> and adds that the imagist poetry should employ the language of common speech, create new rhythms, have absolute boredom in subject matter, and present image with hardness and clarity. Names of

influential Imagist poets and anthologies are mentioned, too. But as a matter of fact, it is not easy to define Imagism, while it is possible, as Stanley K. Coffman states, to suggest certain characteristics of rhythm and style that occur regularly in the imagist poem.<sup>(4)</sup> Neither possible it is to name the founder and the birthday of Imagism. However, the present paper follows a scheme to trace the beginning and development of this movement in relation to the poets mentioned above, respectively. T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) had an undeniable role in establishing the theoretical basis on which Imagism was built early in 1908. Hulme, dissatisfied with the poetic trends of the then period, relying much on his philosophical interest, delivered his “Lecture On Modern poetry” in 1908, at the Poet’s Club which used to meet weekly, including Pound, Flint, Francis Tancard, Edward Stoner, Joseph Campbell and Athens. In that lecture he asserts that the modern attitude towards form is different because “we no longer believe in absolute truth or lasting perfection of form.”<sup>(5)</sup> Philosophers no longer believe in absolute truth, likewise, poets no longer believe in perfection, neither in verse nor in thought. They acknowledge the relative, “in all the arts we seek for the maximum of individual or personal expression rather than for the attainment of any absolute beauty.”<sup>(6)</sup> This belief of Hulme is carried out practically by the imagists who look for expression as large

ideas and emotional states as possible with the fewest number of words.

The modern poet does not deal with heroic action but with “momentary phases in the poets’ mind.”<sup>(7)</sup> Hulme makes explicit parallels with the Impressionist school in painting,

We can’t escape from the spirit of our times, What has bound expression in painting, as Impressionism will soon find expression in poetry as free verse. From this standpoint of extreme modernism that the essential feature of the new poetry is that It is read and not chanted. This new verse resembles sculpture rather than music; it appeals to the eye rather than to the ear. It has to mould images, a kind of spiritual clay, into definite shapes .. it builds up a plastic image which it hands over to the reader.<sup>(8)</sup>

Imagism, in this sense, found its first expression in the theory of Hulme who also believes that the imagist poetry should have no moralizing tone; no reflection on human experience; no striving for the spiritual, no fixed meter or rhyme, but rhyme organic to the itself; no narrative-because it does not need it, no vagueness of abstractions, because it would destroy the image.<sup>(9)</sup> For Hulme poetry is not a counter language, its rather a visual concrete one which always endeavors to arrest the reader and make him see a physical thing, to prevent him from gliding through an abstract process. Hulme, also, distinguishes between prose and verse as follows: “prose in fact, the museum where the dead images of verse are

preserved. Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language.<sup>(10)</sup>

The image is the essential and most central point in the doctrine of imagism, so there should be a flexible form of verse appropriate to relate the far-reaching image. Verse Libre (free verse) is recommended as the most suitable one, in addition to many other experimental poetic forms devised by some imagists, Hulme asserts that poetry must be precisely phrased and the essential means to precision is “metaphor” and he advocates the development of free verse and the rejection of the traditional poetic diction and “rhetoric” along with the cultivation of the idiomatic and the colloquial. Hulme’s role in establishing imagism is given detailed discussion by Stanley K. Coffman in his *Imagism* where the latter concludes that Imagism owes much to Hulme for its appearance and to Pound for propagandizing it through poetry magazine.<sup>(11)</sup>

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) has a great contribution to Imagism and is considered by many critics as the father or leader of this school. The name (imagiste) was first invented by Pound in 1912 to describe some imagist poems written in 1908 by a very minor poet, Edward Storer in the latter’s volume **Mirror and Illusion**, the first poem of which is entitled **(Image)**:

*Forsaken lovers  
Burning to a chaste white moon  
Upon strange pyre of liness and drought.*

Pound also applied the name to Hulme's poems **Sunset**, **Autumn** and **A City Sunset** in 1908. In 1912, he informed two young poets, D. H. and Richard Aldington that they were Imagistes. In October 1912, Pound's **Ripostes** appeared including as an appendix to **The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme's** five poems with a note by Pound entitled **Les Imagistes** claiming that the future of poetry would be in such writings. In January 1913, five poems of H. D. were printed in poetry with a note by Pound which reads:

*The youngest school here [in England ] that has the never to call itself a school – is that of the Imagistes,....One of their watch words in Precision, and they are in opposition to the numerous and unassembled writers who busy themselves with dull and interminable effusions.<sup>(13)</sup>*

Thus, Pound endowed Imagism with a distinctive program, and he clearly defined the Imagist in his essay. **A Few Dents by an Imagiste**, March 1913 which consisted of recommendations for the inexperienced poets.

*An (Image) is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term (complex) rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologist, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application. In the presentation of such a complex instantaneous which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of boredom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.<sup>(14)</sup>*

Pound's doctrine of Imagism is stated here in the same working of the author since no other words could express it more sufficiently. This doctrine is the most reliable one in comparison to others which will be discussed later. Here, the image as being an intellectual and emotional complex prevents it from dwindling to the level of the mere description or the common place. It should transmit in terms of pictorial objects some complicated and other wise inexpressible, currents of inner feeling, and this will be exemplified by Amy Lowell's "**Patterns.**" (see p.10II)

Moreover, Pound, in the same essay enumerated some other instructions which can be summed up as follows: (a) Use no superfluous word, no objective which does not reveal something, (b) Go in fear of abstraction (here he copes with Hulme's note (see p.2), (c) Let the candidate fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover (this point does not agree with Hulme's which the latter ignores the musicality in verse (see p.2), (d) Don't be (viewy) – leave that to writers of pretty little philosophic essays and (e) Don't chop your stuff into separate iambs.<sup>(15)</sup>

Another doctrine of Imagism was stated by F. S. Flint (1885-1906) who claimed to be the founder of Imagism. In March 1913, he wrote an article in which he reported the principles of Imagism as Pound had stated them in a certain occasion.<sup>(16)</sup> Here are Flint's principles:

- (1) Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective.
- (2) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
- (3) As regarding rhythm: to campus in sequence of musical phrase, not in sequence of metronome.<sup>(17)</sup>

Flint also stunted the Imagist's relation to the past saying that they had nothing to do with the post-impressionists and the futurists although they were contemporaries. They endeavored to write in accordance with the best tradition as they found it in the best writers of all time.<sup>(18)</sup> Also he announced that the three rules (direct treatment, economy, rhythm of the musical phrase rather than of the metronome), mentioned above, should never be ignored by any poet who wanted to be an outstanding imagist. It is worth mentioning that Flint's principles were derived from those of Hulme and Pound. Richard Aldington (1892-1962) also tried his hand at writing rules to the imagists school and published them in June 1914 in **The Egoist**<sup>(19)</sup> and in **Some Imagist Poets** (1920).<sup>(20)</sup> His rules included six principles head ascribed as being the essential of all great poetry, and of all great literature as well. In summery, they called for:

*(1) The language of common speech, and the exact rather than the decorative words, (2) New rhythms as the expression of new modes; (3) Absolute boredom in the choice of subject, whether modern or old; (4) To present an image ..We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly; (5) To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite, and (6) Most of us believe that concentration of this the very essence of poetry.<sup>(21)</sup>*

Here, Aldington brought nothing new, and his attempt was not fruitful. All what he did was restatements of the views Pound mentioned earlier, especially with regard to precision, exactness, clarity of language, and concentration which were all recommended by Pound in his **Few Donts**. (see p.5) Pound's concept of the image as being)) an intellectual and emotional complex was more vital than Aldington's who tended to give a simpler one.

Then came Amy Lowell (1874-1925) to add her contribution to Imagism and, after many quarrels with Pound, seceded from his group, to establish another group and to publish an Imagist anthology in 1915. There was a quarrel with Pound about the title and the latter suggested, as a compromise, that she might call her book **Some Imagist Poets** to avoid the implication that her anthology included all the imagists, and by dropping the (e) her own school would be distinguished from his.<sup>(22)</sup>



She was able to win the approval of the London Imagists and her anthology appeared successfully in 1915, 1916, and 1917. She really established Imagism as a movement, organized it like a political campaign and brought it before the public. She presented Imagism as the literary counterpart of a European revolution in music and painting exemplified in the work of Debussy, Stravinsky and Mallarmé.<sup>(23)</sup> Lowell, well equipped to do so by her money, confidence, practical savoir faire, and genuine talents, took over the leadership of the school.

She summed up the Imagist principles as: simplicity and directness of speech, subtlety and beauty of rhythms, individualistic freedom of ideas: clearness and vividness of presentation and concentration.<sup>(24)</sup>

In her doctrine we find generalization and, again repetition of what had been said by Pound in a more clear manner. Her stress on rhythm is against what Hulme called for, as he recommended that modern poetry should be sculptural not musical. (see, p.2)

Aldington and Miss Lowell suggested that the basic features of the simple notion of the imagist poem are that it should be clear, quick and direct. Their suggestion caused the school many attacks and then it lowered in scale. The imagist, as Conrad Akin remarked, began to give as frail pictures, whiffs of windy beaches, marshes ...etc. Such pictures pleasant, but

seldom was any of them more than “a nice description, coolly sensuous, a result to the ear, a ripple to the eye, of the organic movement there is none.”<sup>(25)</sup> Thus, the Imagist poem was no longer an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.

Although Amy Lowell’s doctrine was not as sufficient in conveying the imagist concept of the poem as those of her contemporaries, her poetry reveals a perfect observance of the rule of this school as stated by others. Lacking accuracy in her rather general view of the school never means that her poetry is an inaccurate product. On the contrary, it serves as a good example of the practical application of the imagist theory. Her poem “**Patterns**” may be called in to optimize almost all the points of the doctrines of Hulme, Pound, Flint and Aldington which were mentioned earlier. This poem communicates a personal experience in terms of a pictorial outline. No moralizing, or preaching, no fixed meter, no vagueness ..etc are to be found in this poem in which “the maximum of individual or personal expression ‘as Hulme recommended (pp.2-3), is expressed.

The poetess introduces herself as the protagonist of the poem who struggles against a variety of inner feelings; of loneliness, of alienation, of boredom, melancholy and remorse which are all depicted in terms of concrete images. “I walk down the garden paths,” she says, “with her powdered hair and

jeweled fan”, wearing her “brocaded gown”. As she walks in the garden paths, she keenly observes the daffodils, the blue squalls, the patterned paths and portrays them vitally, to conclude the first stanza with an unexpected conclusion “I too am aware / Pattern, As I wander down / The garden paths”.

Here, the process patronization is extended to over whelm her. She is involved, as anything else in a vast state of bedroom. The theme of this poem is typical of the modern age, the sense of alienation and bedroom and fear from the coming future. The setting in which the protagonist has been introduced is rather aristocratic, and this may be described to her own personal upbringing as she is a well-to do woman. The large garden with paths and marble fountains, and her own jeweled fan and over ornamented gown, along with whalebone, the boatman ..etc, are all reminiscent of a gothic medieval place or castle. This may be safely described to Miss Lowell’s own, and the common Imagist’s, interest in the Middle Ages and the fertile Mediterranean soil of romance and myths.

The poem is a panorama of images of light, colour, brightness, shadow which are not mere descriptions, but rather they serve to communicate the intellectual and emotional complex the poetess feels at this particular instant of time in Pound terms.

*For my passion  
Wars against the stiff brocade.  
The daffodils and squalls  
Flutter in the breeze  
As they please*

The effect of the interaction of colours and their reflection severs as parallel to her inner feelings of loneliness, “Not a softness anywhere about me, which leads to an increasing tension of motions. While the daffodils and squalls dance indifferently, she weeps. She weeps simply because the line tree is in blossom / and one small flower has dropped upon my bosom”. No clear reason is given to justify her weeping. But it seems that she has been prepared by a prior accident to weep and the immediate reason, the fall of the flower on her bosom, is no more than an emotional climax. The flower may signify her own absent lover whose death will be announced soon.

The inner currents parallel the external concrete objects which serve as an adequate objective correlative to her intensive feelings. Moreover, another effect participates in visualizing the sense of utter loneliness and remorse; the effect of sound. Words like tripping, plashing dripping, flutter, sliding water, plopping, which can be seen all along the poem, all suggest that no other human being is there except the poetess who could see the sound associated with such words and they also enhance the sensuous effect of the images by mating them lively. Her loneliness is not romantic in mood, it is a sense of

alienation. The poetess is alienated in time and place. The place is empty from non-human things with which she tries to identify herself. In time, she does not belong to the modern age, as mentioned earlier. She yearns to, and dreams of a medieval time and a knight who returns to her from his glorious wars; “I should see the sun flashing from his sword-hilt / the buckles on his shoes”. This lover is highly – ranked; a Decker, a colonel, but unfortunately, he will never come, as the messenger tells her.

*Madam, we regret to inform you that lord hair Tele  
Died in action Thursday Sen. Night,  
As I read in the white, morning sunlight,  
The letters squirmed like snakes.  
Any answer Madam said my footman.  
No I told him.  
See that the messenger takes some refreshment.  
No, no answer.*

So, all her dreams of her knight are frustrated by such tragic news. The indifference of the non-human objects and of the footman are clearly shown. The blue and yellow flower stand up proudly in the sun, while she tries to repress her tears as she orders some refreshment to the messenger and reads “the letter squirmed like snakes”. Here, the poetess shows herself as a perfect imagist in her employment of the image to express an immediate intellectual and emotional complex by concrete and sensuous images which transmit that instant feeling. The image is precisely stated, five words to convey some far-reaching

sense of emotional alienation, as she is alone in her remorse, nothing and nobody else care for her.

By now, she has to go on her loneliness, her boredom and walk everyday in the patterned paths in her staff, brocaded gown to watch the squalls and daffodils, with no hope for the coming of her a waited lover. What aggravated the matter is the death of the lover. If he has returned safely, they would have broken the patronized like of boredom. All her dreams will never came true, and she will be alone forever after. She once dreams the knight to chase her in the garden merrily

*Till he caught me in the shade  
And the buttons of his waistcoat bruise my body  
As he clasped me,  
Aching, melting, unafraid  
With the shadows of the leaves and the sundress,  
And the plopping of water drops,  
All about us in the open afternoon  
I am very like to swoon.*

Another series of images unites the physical ache with the ecstasy of love and gives an accurate resemblance, not a description of the emotional experience in terms of both sound and visual effects. The buttons bruised her body, this sensual experience parallel the Sandra's in the shadow are a kin to her sparks of sensual love in her day-dream. The plopping of water drops goes in harmony with the pictorial image. All are stated with concreteness, accuracy and swiftness of comparison and

beauty of image. Colour, light, shadow are all associated with the ecstasy of love.

She is obsessed with her boredom, with the patterns which are not only in the objects (the paths, dresses ..etc), it is life which is also patronized; as her love is killed in a pattern called war; another pattern which dominates her dreams and life. The poem ends with a cry “Christ ! What are pattern’s for ?.” **“Patterns”**, in fact, is eloquently composed not only because of the images it hands over to her reader, as Hulme always calls for (p.3). The construction of the play, the form and the language used are all significant. Miss Lowell employs what she calls (the polyphonic prose language)<sup>(26)</sup> which uses cadence, assonance, alliteration, rhythm, echo effects, internal rhymes, conversational style. She avoided whatever unnecessary that adds no contribution to the poem.

Much is left unsaid about this poem which shows Amy Lowell best in her portrayal of colours, and sounds of physical perceptions rather than the reactions of inner experience as Louis Uttermeyer believes.<sup>(27)</sup>

## Notes

1. David Perkins, **A History of Modern Poetry**. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1976. p.329.
2. John Press, **A Map to Modern Verse**. London: Oxford University Press, 1964. p.30.
3. K. Backon and A. Granz, **A Reader's Guide o Literary Terms**. London: Thames and Hudson, 1960. p.75.
4. Monroe K. Spears, **Dionysus and The City: Modernism in Twentieth Century Poetry**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. p.116.
5. Hulme as quoted in Spears, p.116.
6. Ibid, p.116.
7. Ibid, p.116.
8. John Williams, **Twentieth Century British Poetry**. London: Richard Clay Ltd, 1987. p.17.
9. Spears, p.119.
10. Stanley K. Coffman, **Imagism: A Chapter for The History of Modern Poetry**. New York: Octagon Books. 1977. p.72.
11. Ibid, pp.47.
12. As quoted in John Press, p.30.
13. Ibid, p.30.
14. As quoted in Coffman, p.8.
15. As quoted in Coffman, p.9.
16. As quoted in John Press, p.41.



17. Perkins states that Pound had written those principles and Flint signed them, p.333.
18. As quoted in Coffman, p.9.
19. Spears, p.125.
20. Ibid, p.125.
21. Perkin, p.334.
22. Spears, p.128.
23. Coffman, p.28.
24. Akein as quoted in Perkins, p.336.
25. Quotations of the poem are taken from: Louis Untermeyer (ed) **Modern American Poetry**. New York: Harcourt, Brace of World Inc., 1958. Pp.156-58.
26. Untermeyer, p.154.
27. Ibid, p.154.

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