'MIRRORING' IMAGES: A READING OF POUND'S "IN A STATION OF THE METRO" AND ALDINGTON'S "PENULTIMATE POETRY"

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Abstract: *This article attempts to offer a reading of "In a Station of the Metro" and "Penultimate Poetry", two poems written by two imagist poets, Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington, by drawing on the concept of 'mirroring' images, a concept I use to suggest an analogy between the optical effect of the mirror image and what it reflects and the two-line structure these poems contain. For their reading I draw extensively on a discussion of the hokku technique, which is used in Japanese poetry and which both poets liked, as a technique that allows for the recording of the instant emotion.*

Keywords: *image, Imagism, hokku/haiku, Pound, Aldington.*

Initiated by Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and H. D., Aldington's wife, and drawing primarily on T. E. Hulme's principles, Imagism as a poetic movement had in its focus insistence on precise images, "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" (Pound, 1935: 3), emphasis on clear and sharp language, which relied on the rhythms of everyday speech. My intention in this paper is not to discuss Imagism *per se* but to use its emphasis on exact image as a departure point to read two poems by two main representatives of Imagism, particularly in its early stage, Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington. The poems I will discuss are Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and Aldington's "Penultimate Poetry," a parody of Pound's poem.

Before discussing them, I would first like to expand a little bit on Pound's and Aldington's views on image and especially their connections to Japanese poetry, whose techniques, especially that of *hokku*, is thought to have inspired both poets. My idea is to first point out any difference in their approach to image and their reliance on Japanese poetry in order to focus next on their poems and read them in terms of what I call 'mirroring' images, a concept I have coined for this analysis and which I will refer to in detail in due course.

Pound's view of image developed as a result of his encounters with several cultures and the work of many poets, especially Japanese, from which he got his inspiration to use the *hokku*, a Japanese poetic technique, whose best illustration is his "In a Station of the Metro." In his essay "Vorticism," Pound recounts how he arrived at this *hokku*-like poem, an explanation often quoted by scholars as a reference for Pound's growth from Imagism to Vorticism.

At this point it is important to elaborate some aspects of the *hokku* in order to understand how it informs Pound's poetic principles of Imagism in general, more precisely his understanding of the image, and his composition of "In a Station of the Metro" in particular. In *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, Yoshinobu Hakutani (2009) provides substantial evidence to account for Pound's interest in haiku by trying to locate his source(s) of inspiration. From his analysis, of interest to this paper is how Hakutani elaborates on aspects of *hokku* that Pound's poetry reflects and which he adopted. Hakutani (2009, 77) tries to account for how Pound got from *hokku* poetry the

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inspiration for precision of language in poetry, for the elimination of words that do not contribute to meaning: "What appealed to Pound was the terseness and intensity of imagery in a *hokku*." To define the *hokku*, Hakutani (*ibidem*: 71) resorts to Noguchi's "What Is a Hokku Poem?":

> Noguchi first defined *hokku* as an expression of Japanese poets' "understanding of Nature," […]. Noguchi differentiated between the "suggestive" and subjective coloration of English poetry and the Japanese *hokku*, "distinctly clear-cut like a diamond or star." "[…] I value the '*hokku*' poem, at least some of them, because of its own truth and humanity simple and plain." […] the *hokku* poet expresses the spirit of nature, rather than the will of man or woman.

He also locates the source of Noguchi's definition of *hokku* in the Zen philosophy, a discipline of the mind: "Zen does not recognize human reality, the existence of good and evil, because this reality is the creation of human will rather than the spirit of nature." (*ibidem*)

In a more technical definition, haiku:

> is a Japanese lyric genre with seventeen syllables arranged in three units in a 5-7-5 pattern […] it must also include a *kigo* (季語), a word or phrase that indicates one of the "five seasons" (four natural seasons and the New Year's Month). In many cases it also has a *kireji* (切れ字), a "cutting word" that indicates a caesura. (Mi-Jung Jang, 2011: 236-37)

It has already been noted that in his "In a Station of the Metro," Pound, instead of the 5-7-5 syllable scheme, goes for a 17-19 syllable poem with a 'super-pository' structure. Pound "applied the principle of terseness and intensity to the construction of a single image in his poetry" (Hakutani, *op. cit.*: 77), which he resorted to see as "a form of super-position, that is to say […] one idea set on top of another" (qtd. in *ibidem*: 77).

Imbued with such ideas, Pound, in his essay "Vorticism," equates the image to a vortex, "from which, and through which, and into which ideas are constantly rushing" (1970: 92), whereas in "As for Imagisme" he called the image "a sketch, a vignette, a criticism, an epigram or anything else you like. It may be impressionism, it may even be very good prose" (1915: 349). He draws on another comparison to illustrate his idea, that between the painter, who uses colour "because he sees it or feels it" and the author who likewise uses images "not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics" (Pound, *op.cit.*: 86). Hakutani (*op. cit.*: 71) explains that Pound saw the image as "a seed capable of germinating and developing into another organism" and his *hokku*-like poem is an illustration of this.

Although Aldington shared Pound's interest for Japanese art, he seems to have been more "interested in the color prints by Utamaro, Hokusai, and others found in the British Museum than in Japanese poetry" (*ibidem*: 75). Ewick (1996: 241) does not deny the fact that Aldington got inspired by Japanese art and poetry, but explains that in defending Imagism, he, unlike Pound and Flint did not resort to "Japanese verse for justification." Nevertheless, he adds that Aldington "incorporated into his own work Pound's technique of super-position; […] patterned poems on ukiyoe in the British Museum Print Room, copied and kept translations of Japanese poems and songs, and according to Miner (17) carried to the battlefields of France a notebook for recording his own 'hokku'" (Ewick, *ibidem*).

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Despite their shared interest for imagism, both poets engaged in a binary rhetoric, which Diana Collecott (2000) explains in terms of Hellenism and anti-Hellenism, with Aldington taking sides with the first and Pound with the second and which some other scholars have read in light of Aldington's reported disapproval of Pound's imposing manner of his ideas.

In this article I will discuss Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro," which exemplifies his theory of image as a vortex and Aldington's "Penultimate Poetry," a parody of the first. I will discuss them in terms of what I call 'mirroring' images, a concept I use to draw an analogy between the optical effect of mirroring surfaces and the lines of these poems. By that I want to demonstrate that the two lines in Pound's poem are like mirroring images that work by reflection but unlike real objects in which it is the optical effect that creates the idea of one mirror image generated out of an object/image and reflected on a mirroring surface, in Pound's poem this effect owes much to the use of the *hokku*-like form.

Before discussing Pound's poem in these terms, I would like to expand a little bit on the optical effect that is created when the mirror image is merged with the object it mirrors. It is an effect that creates impressive pictures or landscapes especially near water surfaces. Here the water surface serves as a boundary line that optically separates the object/image from its mirror image, which is identical with the object/image except that it appears as the object's reversed form. But when you look at it, beyond the beautiful effect, you get the idea of a whole despite of the two parts contained in it. The same effect is created by Pound in "In a Station of the Metro." This explanation is very much in line with Pound's description of his poem:

> The 'one image poem' is a form of super-position, that is to say it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion. (Pound, *op. cit*.: 89)

Pound's poem reads:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals, on a wet, black bough. (Pound, 1957: 35)

The 'mirroring' interpretation is sustained by several elements in the poem as well as several readings and interpretations by critics and scholars. I will take them one by one. First of all, the form of super-position, which Pound literally explains as "one image on top another" is to be found in mirroring images as well. In Pound's poem the image that is mirrored is "these faces in the crowd," whereas the mirroring image is "Petals, on a wet, black bough." The word "apparition," a form of appearance, despite its ghostly connotations, reinforces the references to the 'mirroring' interpretation.

One other element that sustains this interpretation is punctuation. In "Pound's "'Metro' Hokku": The Evolution of an Image Poetry," Randolph Chilton and Carol Gilbertson (1990) argue about the poem's important place in the realm of modernist poetry and imagist poetry in particular. By drawing on the several revisions and printings of the poem, they try to point out how this poem has evolved. Originally published in 1913 in *Poetry*, the poem was published again in 1916 in *Lustra*. The authors observe that between the two publications there is a slight difference, the colon in the first one has been replaced, probably due to the printer's neglect, by a semicolon. Despite this intentional or unintentional error, Pound never changed it in subsequent

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publications. The authors argue about how the changed punctuation further separates the images. By definition, a colon "a punctuation mark (:) used to precede a list of items, a quotation, or an expansion or explanation," whereas a semi-colon is “A punctuation mark (;) indicating a pause, typically between two main clauses, that is more pronounced than that indicated by a comma" (*Oxford Dictionary* 2015). A semicolon can be used between two closely related independent clauses, provided they are not already joined by a coordinating conjunction. Semicolons can also be used in place of commas to separate items in a list, particularly when the elements of that list contain commas. Such a separation can also be inferred by the lack of the copula *be* or the preposition *like* in the poem. Thus punctuation in this case plays the role of a mirror that produces two images, the image and the mirror image.

In poetry, these features correspond to a *hokku*, which Pound adopted for this poem:

> Pound seized on the unique form of "super-position" which, he observed, constitutes a *hokku*. To him, the *hokku* often consists of two disparate images in juxtaposition, and yet it appears as a single image. Lacking the copula *is* or the preposition *like*, the image cannot be metaphoric or analogical. (Hakutani, *op. cit.*: 83)

The use of semi-colon plays the role of the mirroring surface or of the dividing line in this case, which separates the two images and dismisses the possibility for a metaphorical reading of the mirrored image:

> The poem’s structure tempts us to read a metaphorical connection between the first picture and the second – between the faces and the petals. But the semicolon prevents an explicit connection, and as soon as we try to specify or paraphrase a connection, it disappears. (Chilton and Gilbertson, 1990: 229)

By analogy, when an image is mirrored on a surface it produces another image, its own reversed image. Both images are by effect brought together as a whole, as one single image that leaves one spellbound when looking at it. Similarly,

> As Pound’s account of the composition of the metro poem shows, he had no intention of likening the image of the beautiful faces in the crowd to the image of petals on a wet, black bough or of making one image suggestive or representative of the other.20 If one image is used to suggest another or to represent another, both images would be weakened. But if one image is used to generate or intensify another, and the other image, in turn, intensifies the first one, then the whole poem as one image would be intensified. (Hakutani, *op. cit.*: 83)

This coalescence of two unlike images responds to Pound’s summing up of his feelings that day at the underground station and his subsequent thoughts, that moment when "a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (Pound, *op. cit.*: 89). Thus the two images should be read in relation to one another. Whether this reading alludes to a union of two worlds, ours with the underworld as suggested by some scholars or to the union of humanity ("faces") with nature ("petals") as proposed by others depends on the perceiver. Pound’s urge for the expression of instant emotion at the view of those faces and his initial frustration at the

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composition of this poem until he ended up with a two-line poem[68] should suggest that "[c]reating such an image needs no preparations, no explanations, no qualifications" (Hakutani, *op. cit*.: 83). This union of images, this emergence of one image from another is due to the *hokku* structure of the poem and the mirroring quality underlying it. For analogy, the two images in the poem when one reads it spring up instantly as reflections of each other, an effect one can easily note when looking at oneself in the mirror or when objects or images are reflected on a mirroring surface. It is this same effect that brings them together as a whole.

In its turn, Aldington's poem does not seem to feature the same effect. Published in 1914 in *The Egoist*, "Penultimate Poetry" in its parodic form is loyal to the formal features of the first printing of "In a Station of the Metro" and has retained the colon. The poem reads:

> The apparition of these poems in a crowd:
> White faces in a black dead faint. (Aldington, 1915: 36)

Aimed at ridicule, it goes without saying that one does expect this poem to be similar in subject matter as Pound's. Technically speaking, Aldington has retained some features of Pound's poem such as the use of the word "apparition," of the colon and the two-line structure. But the word "faces," which Pound uses in the first line, here appears in the second line with the word "poem' overtaking it. The mirror image is absent here. The use of the colon suggests expansion or explanation and not separation. What is more, in a *hokku* poem, the presence of elements of nature, of seasons, in particular, is important. This is missing from Aldington's parody. Although a parody, Aldington's poem has not followed the *hokku* conventions closely[69]. That he uses the word "poems" in plural should suggest that his irony is directed against several poems, not only this particular one. What is more, the word "apparition" in Aldington's version serves a different purpose from Pound's. In my view, it adds to the humorous element of his super-pository structure by connoting with the binary white-black in the second line and thus alluding to a ghostlike effect in rather comic lines. As Diepeveen (2014: 72) notes:

> "Penultimate Poetry" seems less directed at imagist poetry in general than at Ezra Pound: Pound's exoticism, diction, hortatory tone, rapid shifts in tone, and baffling Provençal. The immediate instigation for Aldington's parodies was not only Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," but a series of poems Pound published in the November 2013 issue of *Poetry*.

What can finally be said is that although Imagism informs the writing of both poets at least in the years when Imagism was most active and the poems under

[68] In his essay "How I Began" (1913) Pound explains how he wrote "In a Station of the Metro." At first he wrote "a thirty-line poem which he then cut in half, and then finally succeeded in compressing into one hokku-like sentence'." (Beach, 2003: 26).

[69] Hakutani explains that "Richard Aldington, who joined in 1911, was more interested in the color prints by Utamaro, Hokusai, and others found in the British Museum than in Japanese poetry.11 The fact that Pound was more seriously interested in Japanese poetry than was Aldington is indicated by a parody of Pound's metro poem that Aldington published in the January 1915 issue of *The Egoist*." (Hakutani, *op. cit*.: 75)

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discussion were written[70], the case of "In a Station of the Metro" and "Penultimate Poetry" testifies to the poetic 'disagreements'[71] between them. One might argue that "Penultimate Poetry" was intended as a parody of Pound's *hokku*-like poem and that it should be viewed merely as such. Nevertheless, even in its parodic form, Aldington's "Penultimate Poetry" fails to grasp all the elements in Pound's poem it proposed to spoof, namely the *hokku*. While Pound's poem follows the *hokku* conventions more closely, Aldington's poem is limited to an imitation of the two-line structure and, unlike Pound's poem, it fails to record the instant emotion, an important element for *hokku* poems.

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[70] Imagism was known as such upon Pound's announcement to H. D. and Aldington in December 1912 that they were Imagistes. After Pound's embrace of Vorticism, another term coined by him, the Imagists continued as a group under Amy Lowell's guidance until 1917.

[71] As mentioned earlier, evidence of these 'disagreements' is the fact that Aldington wrote several parodies of Pound's poems: "Aldington supplemented his broadside on 'Anti-Hellenism' with a spoof of Pound's contemporary poems, which drew attention to their range of foreign sources. Pound pronounced these parodies 'excellent': they were certainly more successful than the pastiche of Symonds' *The Greek Poets* with which Aldington's article culminated." (Collecott, 2000: 61)

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