

## A Brief Guide to Imagism

### In a Station of the Metro

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

—Ezra Pound

Imagism was born in England and America in the early twentieth century. A reactionary movement against romanticism and Victorian poetry, imagism emphasized simplicity, clarity of expression, and precision through the use of exacting visual images.

Though Ezra Pound is noted as the founder of imagism, the movement was rooted in ideas first developed by English philosopher and poet T. E. Hulme, who, as early as 1908, spoke of poetry based on an absolutely accurate presentation of its subject, with no excess verbiage. In his essay “Romanticism and Classicism,” Hulme wrote that the language of poetry is a “visual concrete one....Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence.”

Pound adapted Hulme’s ideas on poetry for his imagist movement, which began in earnest in 1912, when he first introduced the term into the literary lexicon during a meeting with Hilda Doolittle. After reading her poem “Hermes of the Ways,” Pound suggested some revisions and signed the poem “H. D., Imagiste” before sending it to *Poetry* magazine in October of that year. That November, Pound himself used the term “Imagiste” in print for the first time when he published Hulme’s *Complete Poetical Works*.

A strand of modernism, imagism aimed to replace abstractions with concrete details that could be further expounded upon through the use of figuration. These typically short, free verse poems—which had clear precursors in the concise, image-focused poems of ancient Greek lyricists and Japanese haiku poets—moved away from fixed meters and moral reflections, subordinating everything to what Hulme once called the “hard, dry image.”

Pound’s definition of the image was “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” He said, “It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.” In March 1913, *Poetry* published “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.” In it, imagist poet F. S. Flint, quoting Pound, defined the tenets of imagist poetry:

- 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 regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

In 1914, *Des Imagistes* (A. and C. Boni), an anthology assembled and edited by Pound, was published; it collected work by William Carlos Williams, Richard Aldington, James Joyce, and H. D., among others. By the spring of that year, however, disputes had begun to brew among the movement regarding leadership and control of the group. Amy Lowell assumed leadership of the movement and from 1915 to 1917 published three anthologies, all called *Some Imagist Poets*, but by then Pound had dissociated himself from imagism, derisively calling it “Amygism”; Pound instead appropriated his imagism into a new philosophy, vorticism, claiming that “the image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; ... a VORTEX.”

By 1917, even Lowell began to distance herself from the movement, the tenets of which eventually became absorbed into the broader modernist movement and continued to influence poets throughout the twentieth century.

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