

THE POUNDIAN IMAGE AND THE ROMANTIC SYMBOL

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Abstract: Critics since the 1960s have largely rejected Frank Kermode's view that Ezra Pound conceived Imagism as an anti-discursive mode of verbal pictorialism. Pound himself emphatically dissociated Imagism from Symbolism, which he regarded as cultivating vague semantic associations, and it is true that his poems of the early 1910s are concerned more with subjective juxtapositions of images than with their external referents. But recently Andrew Hay, drawing on my own *Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol*, has identified the Poundian Image with the Romantic concept of the symbol on the grounds that the former is supposed to represent both an object and the reader's response to it. Although this particular argument seems unconvincing to me, there is an affinity between Pound's Imagist programme and Romantic symbolist theory in two respects: an anxiety about discursiveness, which manifested itself in the claimed resistance of images to interpretation, and the paradoxical need for discursive statements of such resistance.

In his programme for Imagism, Ezra Pound asserted that a poem must embody «the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective» [POUND 2005, p. 286]. Arguing that this concept of the poetic image reflected a longstanding fantasy of a discursive liberation from discursiveness, Frank Kermode, in *Romantic Image* (1957), traced the concept's genealogy back through French *symbolisme* to Romantic symbolist theory, which claimed that a symbol's meaning inheres in its ontological content and therefore resists being reformulated in abstract terms (as in the interpretation of allegorical imagery). «What it comes down to in the end», Kermode concluded, «is that Pound, like [T. E.] Hulme, like Mallarmé and many others, wanted a theory of poetry based on the non-discursive *conchetto*. In varying degrees they all obscurely wish that poetry could be written with something other than words, but since it can't, that words may be made to have the same sort of physical presence (as a piece of string)» (KERMODE 1957, p. 136). From the 1960s the critical tide turned against Kermode's interpretation of Imagism as a naively conceived mode of verbal pictorialism, which sought to mitigate or repress the semiotic character of language. Herbert Schneidau and Donald Davie, followed by Marjorie Perloff, affirmed Pound's own dissociation of Imagism from Symbolism (as mediated through France). Imagism, Davie insisted, in fact constituted «a radical alternative to» Symbolism [DAVIE 1957, p. 43; see also SCHNEIDAU 1963, p. 14–15, 29–31; PERLOFF 1981, p. 159].

In his essay «Vorticism» (1914) Pound criticized Symbolism for its “mushy technique” and semantically associative use of imagery: «a sort of allusion, almost of allegory [. . .] a form of metonymy» [2005, p. 281]. Identifying Yeats with the French Symbolists, Pound contrasted the Irish poet's belief in «the glamour and associations which hang near words» unfavourably with the «exact rendering of things» by the nascent group of Imagists [1912/1913, p. 125–26]. However polemically reductive, this assessment of Symbolism sought to throw into relief the distinctiveness of the Image¹ as neither polysemous nor transparently mimetic, the latter term understood here to mean «pictorial»: «The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster [. . .] a VORTEX, from which and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing» [2005, p. 289]. Poetic symbols themselves were acceptable, Pound grudgingly conceded in his «Credo» (published in 1918),

¹ I shall capitalize the word when referring specifically to Pound's concept.

only to the extent that they approximated the Image in semantic untranslatability: «the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object [. . .] if a man use «symbols» he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense [. . .] is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk» [2005, p. 259].

Like Perloff and Daniel Tiffany [1995, p. 21], Hugh Kenner emphasizes the rejection of verbal pictorialism in the Poundian Image. Referring to «The Return», published in Pound's volume *Ripostes* (1912), Kenner observes that the poem's imagery is neither visual nor sculptural, but «wholly linguistic» [1972/1975, p. 191]. Here are the first and third stanzas [Pound 1990/2001, p. 69–70]:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
 Movements, and the slow feet,
 The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
 Wavering!

Gods of the wingèd shoe!
 With them the silver hounds,
 sniffing the trace of air!

Kenner's contention that the poem's rhythm rather than its imagery defines its meaning may be an overstatement, but it is true that the repetitions with slight changes and the absence of an overall syntax encompassing the individual syntactical units give the poem's purely linguistic dimension particular prominence. Our attention is directed less to the external referents of the verbal images than to the juxtaposition of those images. Therefore, as Kenner explains, «Words, without loss of precision, have ceased to specify in the manner of words that deliver one by one those concepts we call «meanings»» [1972/1975, p. 187].

Although outwardly directed referentiality is not absent in the Imagist poem—that is, the Image still refers to something existing outside itself—it is subordinated to an inwardly oriented sequentiality. The hawk that is «always a hawk and not any other thing» is already «a subjective mental object», as Pound's biographer A. D. Moody observes [2007, p. 225], no longer a bird in the sky but a bird in the mind. Thus when, in his famous distich «In the Station of a Metro», the poet presents the faces seen in the metro station as «petals on a wet, black bough» [POUND 1990/2001, p. 111], both the faces and the petals are in the mind, and «under the pressure of attention they become identified the one with the other in a further apprehension charged with unexpected significance» [Moody 2007, p. 225]. The ontological relation of the face in the mind to the face in the underground or of the petal in the mind to the petal on the bough is irrelevant.

It was not the poet's subjectivization of objects, however, but the reader's that Andrew Hay addressed when, in 2012, he proposed a revisionary account of the Image, identifying it anew with the Romantic symbol, although not for the same reasons that Kermode had advanced. Referring to my *Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* [HALMI 2007, p. 1–4], Hay proposed an analogy between the purported fusion of contrary states in the symbol and that of objective image and subjective response in the Image. That is, the Image is supposed to represent not only an object, but the reader's response to that object: «Just as the Romantic symbol necessitates a union—whether it is the contingent and the absolute, or the temporal and the trans-temporal—Pound's poem works through a yoking together of different contingencies: the reader and the image» [HAY 2012, p. 314].

Now I find this argument unconvincing for two reasons. First, if the Image proleptically incorporates its own reception, then it assumes, if only implicitly, that it will be recognized as an image. In contrast, Romantic theorists expressly dissociated symbolic character from symbolic function. Because its meaning is supposed to inhere in it, the symbol need not be perceived as such: its meaningfulness is ontological. Lecturing on the concept in

Jena in 1802–1803, F. W. J. Schelling elaborated, «Meaning here is simultaneously being itself, passed over into the object and one with it» [1856–61, p. 411]. Thus whereas the Image, in Hay’s account, anticipates its recipient, the Romantic symbol remains serenely indifferent to whether it has one.

Second, whereas the poetic image as conceived by Pound is a representation of something real and specifiable—even the hawk in the head presupposes what Eco would call a cultural encyclopedia (i.e., extralinguistic knowledge), in which the word «hawk» is understood to designate a kind of bird—the symbol as theorized by the Romantics was not. Indeed a central claim of my study is that the Romantic symbol was not and could not have been a semiotic phenomenon itself, but was always a purely theoretical construct, the purpose of which was to condition the perception of objects. If Pound’s concept «represents a *naturalizing* of the poetic sign» [LEVENSON 1984, p. 150], then the Romantic one constitutes a naturalizing of the symbol for the sake of making nature appear to be symbolic. Once the symbol had been adequately theorized, symbols themselves would become visible, their significance intuitively evident but irreducible to discursively specifiable meanings.

Recognizing the contingency of the poetic imagination, Imagism could not have accepted the metaphysics of ontological participation on which the Romantic concept of the symbol had been founded. The inherence of significance in natural objects is the very subject of Baudelaire’s sonnet «Correspondances» (1857), which is less a Symbolist poem itself than a versified statement of the Romantic *Naturphilosophie* that attributed to discrete phenomena the resonances of a underlying order by which all are related harmoniously to one another, like echoes heard from afar and merging in an obscure and profound unity: «Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent / Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité» [BAUDELAIRE 1975, I, p. 11]. While assuming a correspondence between word and object, the sonnet declares a correspondence between physical phenomenon and metaphysical order. When, in the first quatrain, we are informed that nature is a living temple in which living pillars sometimes release mysterious words, and that we pass there through forests of symbols that watch us with knowing looks, the verbal images are supposed to direct our attention beyond themselves to the phenomena they interpret:

La Nature est un temple où vivant piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
 L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

[BAUDELAIRE 1975, I, p. 11]

Yet the poem’s deictic purpose undermines its claim for nature’s symbolic action, for how would we know that we were walking through a forest of symbols if Baudelaire did not warn us?

Just here, in the inescapability of discursiveness, an affinity between the Romantic symbol and the Poundian Image reveals itself. In his anti-Romantic essay «Romanticism and Classicism» (c. 1912) T. E. Hulme insisted that “[i]mages in verse are [. . .] the very essence of an intuitive language» [1994, p. 70], and this was a tenet that Pound shared: «An *image* [. . .] is real because we know it directly» [2005, p. 283]. But intuitive, non-discursive apprehension of that kind is, as Kermode recognized, a fantasy that Pound, in spite of himself, shared with the Romantic theorists of the symbol. Behind that fantasy, I suggest, was a hermeneutic anxiety that originated in Enlightenment semiotics and resulted from an insistent doubt about the grounding of semiosis in an extra-semiotic reality [see HALMI 2007, chap. 2]. In these circumstances, the epistemological reliability of semiosis could be guaranteed only by its self-referentiality. Hence the appeal to an authority—by the Romantics to the order of nature, by Pound to the individual mind—in which the communicative act was supposed to be wholly contained, and the need for interpretation was thereby eliminated.

Paradoxically, however, the possibility of the posited intuitive representation had to be revealed discursively to others if it was to be known at all. For otherwise, in the case of the Image, the radiant node of rushing ideas might be indistinguishable from a mere opacity of meaning. Pound's petals on the wet, black bough could no more speak for themselves, as the realization of the Imagist programme, than could Baudelaire's forest of symbols, as the confirmation of Romantic *Naturphilosophie*. Thus the Imagist poem required its theoretical correlate, the Imagist manifesto, which for all its anti-Symbolist posturing continued the futile Romantic symbolist project of liberating us discursively from discourse.

NOTE

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