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Constructed 'Images' and Mediated 'Reading': A Semiotic Analysis of Select Imagist Poems

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ABSTRACT

In this post-structuralist ethos, with the shift towards the context rather than the text, 'construction' in representation has assumed a special significance. With the advent of the theories of social constructionism during the early 1980s, the entire field of 'representation' might be seen as context-driven where discourses the authors/narrators subscribe to, take precedence. From day to day speech to scholarly enunciations of diverse fields of knowledge, these discourses mediate in the 'construction' of meaning for the recipients. The building blocks of these discourses are the signs/codes employed in the 'representation' of these discourses.

The present paper is concerned with the semiotic analysis of select Imagist poems where 'images' operate as signs/codes that go on to 'construct' a specific and distinctive 'reading' for the readers of these poems. This employment of 'images' is related to the discursive structures of early modernism prevailing during the first decades of the twentieth century in European literature. Select discursive blocks of this period as 'reaction to the preceding Victorian floridness', 'the First World War' and 'the City' is taken up for semiotic analysis in this paper.

Keywords: construction, images, semiotics, Imagism, representation

The concern of this paper is to study how the Imagists mediate/construct/condition a specific 'reading' for their readers by careful manipulation of 'images' in their poems that are basically 'signs' in the semiological context. As regards representation, the objectives of the 'Imagists' were very specific and stringent. It was in their 1913 article 'Imagisme' that Ezra Pound and H. S. Flint first drew up these objectives: 1) Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether objective or subjective. 2) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. In outlining such specificities of representation, the Imagists come close to the theoretical position that Stuart Hall maintains in his *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*:

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning... In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualise them, the values we place on them. (Hall 3).

This observation of Hall also has direct bearing on how poetry (or any narrative) is constructed – through language with the further implication that at a more fundamental level it is the signs/codes constituting the language that ultimately determine the representation. Paul Cobley in his *Narrative* makes a similar observation, "...narrative is a particular form of representation implementing signs..." (Cobley 3). The Imagist conception of the 'constructive' aspect of language was similar to these aforementioned positions as this correspondence (included in D.D. Paige (ed.) *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*) of Ezra Pound with Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine, in 1915 indicates: "Language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non-concrete terms are a laziness, they

are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act by the writer.” (D.D. Paige 49)

This paper contends that the Imagists’ conception of the ‘image’ was akin to the ‘signs/codes’ as Ferdinand Saussure and Roland Barthes understood them: “The sign is therefore a compound of a signifier and a signified. The plane of the signifiers constitutes the *plane of expression* and that of the signifieds the *plane of content*.” (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 39). Seen from this perspective, when Pound says of the image, “An image is that which presents an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time”, the ‘image’ becomes the signifier (the plane of expression) while the ‘emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time’ becomes the signified (the plane of content). It is these ‘images’ that form the basic building blocks of the Imagist poems. But, underlying the Imagists’ use of images, in their patterns of representation/construction, are the discourses that guide/modulate such exercises. These discourses are specifically related to the ‘avant-gardism’ that gained currency during the initial years of the twentieth century. As far as this paper is concerned, the term ‘discourse’ is used as Foucault used it. According to this usage,

A *discourse* refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light. (Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 74-75).

In other words, to examine how the Imagists mediate/construct a specific ‘reading’ for their readers, it becomes essential to uncover the discourse/discourses that involve the particular use of images/signs in specific and pre-determined ways.

For the purpose of this paper, three representative Imagist poems have been chosen: Δώρα [*Doria*] by Ezra Pound,

Searchlight by F.S. Flint and *The Unquiet Street* by John Gould Fletcher. They all display certain dominant discourses that underlie the cultural formations of avant-gardism and later modernism in general. The first poem Δώρα [Doria] by Ezra Pound displays one of the most prominent discourses that inform the 'construction' of Imagist poetry: 'direct treatment of the thing' emphasizing both precision and concentration in the use of images/signs. Andrew Thacker in *The Imagist Poets* collates this Imagist discourse from the various Manifestos the Imagists published after the 1913 'Imagisme': "...poetry must be close to speech; it should eschew 'book words', periphrasis and inversions; the language must be 'simple' and 'hard' with 'no words flying off to nothing'; abstractions are to avoided, as must clichés and journalese, and the way to escape from these faults is by concentration and 'precision'." (53).

Δώρα [Doria]

Ezra Pound

Be in me as the eternal moods
of the bleak wind, and not
As transient things are –
gaiety of flowers.
Have me in the strong loneliness
Of sunless cliffs
And of grey waters.
Let the gods speak softly of us
In days hereafter,
The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee.

The predominant mood in *Doria* is a desire for permanence in this world of flux. It is interesting to note how Pound has 'constructed' this desire with his meticulous arrangement of images/signs. The title *Doria* itself is one of the best signifiers of this Imagist discourse of concentration and precision. 'Doria' derives from the name of the 'Dorians' who lived in the ancient Greek city states of Sparta and Crete and who were known for their discourses of discipline, simplicity and strength. Pound's

use of this particular title for his poem situates *Doria* in an age-old austere tradition, of which Imagism is a particular manifestation.

Be in me as the eternal moods
of the bleak wind, and not
As transient things are –
gaiety of flowers.

The poem is in the form of an address (probably to someone beloved) and the poet's desire to have her permanently is presented/constructed by the use of two similes – the lover should be *as the 'eternal moods of the bleak wind'* and not *as 'transient things' like the 'gaiety of flowers'*. The signifiers 'eternal moods' and 'bleak wind' signify the morbid mood associated with bleak wind which is more permanent in the poet's psyche. Hence, the poet wants his lady to be associated with this permanence rather than the transience of gay flowers. The signifiers 'transient' and 'gaiety of flowers' also serve to position the poem in the long tradition of English poetry where short summer (along with its accoutrements as 'gay flowers') is associated with the brevity of the earthly life. But, this is not a one-sided story. The poet wants his lover also to accept him as he has done her:

Have me in the strong loneliness
Of sunless cliffs
And of grey waters.

The signifiers 'strong loneliness' and 'sunless cliffs' signify the same connotation that loneliness is more permanent in nature, the epithet 'strong' being more than suggestive. A further sign, 'grey waters' only reinforces the poet's contention. The poem that starts with 'land' signifiers now encompasses the 'sea' too. Having taken transience as a given, the signifiers /images shift towards a resolution of sorts.

Let the gods speak softly of us
In days hereafter,

The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee.

‘Let the gods speak softly of us/ In days hereafter’ connotes the expectation of the poet that such evocation of sadness, loneliness, and intimacy/permanence might be approved even by the gods, the sign ‘softly’ pointing ironically towards the harshness of divine judgment. The signifier ‘Orcus’ in the penultimate line posits the poem in the future when the lover will be dead (and also the poet, perhaps). ‘Orcus’, flowers found in the land of the dead, are ‘shadowy’. Firstly, this sign/image ‘shadowy’ is juxtaposed with the ‘gay flowers’ that were first negated by the poet as the basis of his relationship with his lover. Secondly, it forms the end-point of the chain of signifiers that construes the negatives as positives (claiming to be more permanent in nature) starting from ‘bleak’ (line 2) and passing through ‘loneliness’ (line 5), ‘sunless’ (line 6) and ‘grey’ (line 7). The poem ends with a hope that these ‘negative’ signifiers will be the basis of the poet’s relationship with his lover, the lover (and also their relationship) being remembered well after their death.

The next poem analysed in this paper relates to the discourse of the First World War that contributed significantly to the construction of the Imagist psyche. Peter Howarth has summed this up succinctly in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, “But the war is the unavoidable event of the early twentieth century, and its ‘perceptual habits’ are manifest in the mergers of the subject and object, mind and bodies or foreground and background in modernist art.” (18). F. S. Flint’s *Searchlight* is one of the representative Imagist poems that characterise this discourse of war in several aspects.

Searchlight
F. S. Flint

There has been no sound of guns,
No roar of exploding bombs;

But the darkness has an edge
That grits the nerves of the sleeper.

He awakens;
Nothing disturbs the stillness,
Save perhaps the light, slow flap,
Once only, of the curtain
Dim in the darkness.

Yet there is something else
That drags him from his bed;
And he stands in the darkness
With his feet cold against the floor
And the cold air round his ankles.
He does not know why,
But he goes to the window and sees
A beam of light, miles high,
Dividing the night into two before him,
Still, stark and throbbing.

The houses and gardens beneath
Lie under the snow
Quiet and tinged with purple.

There has been no sound of guns,
No roar of exploding bombs;
Only that watchfulness hidden among the snow-covered houses,
And that great beam thrusting back into heaven
The light taken from it.

The title of the poem 'Searchlight' acts as a signifier in the very first place and signifies the poem's concern about the effects of war on the psyche of the general populace of England. This concern of the poem is again 'constructed' by a careful manipulation of images/signs that in turn mediate the 'reading' of the readers. The core Imagist concern of 'direct treatment of the thing' and the use of visual concrete images/signs is implemented successfully in this poem. Andrew Thacker in *Imagist Poets* has made a similar observation regarding this poem: 'The visual concrete language of Imagist theory is here

put to excellent use, capturing both the subjective and the objective dimensions of the scene.’ (74)

There has been no sound of guns,
No roar of exploding bombs;
But the darkness has an edge
That grits the nerves of the sleeper.

Just as the title ‘Searchlight’, the signifiers ‘sound of guns’ and ‘exploding bombs’ construct the war environs for the readers, but care is taken to depict the war only indirectly. Instead, what is foregrounded is the image/sign of an ‘edgy darkness’ that ‘grits the nerves of the sleeper’, a sign signifying insomnia, one of the many forms of civilian neuroses that the war had produced. This concern with civilian neuroses had been one of the dominant discourses in modernist literature with their thematic use of ‘shell-shock’ and other war-induced physical deformities of soldiers, a prominent example being the character of Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*.

He awakens;
Nothing disturbs the stillness,
Save perhaps the light, slow flap,
Once only, of the curtain
Dim in the darkness.

In line 5 a protagonist ‘He’ is foregrounded who would serve as the poet’s *medium* to construct the effects of the war on the English psyche. This protagonist ‘awakens’ even though ‘nothing disturbs the stillness.’ The dimness of the room is carefully constructed by evocative signifiers – *the curtain flaps only once, light seeps in only once to disturb the stillness, the curtain is dim in darkness*. Though the Imagists consciously eschewed symbolism for the sake of clear, hard images that said things directly, yet the use of these signs/images only reinforce the sense of gloom experienced by the poem’s protagonist, who in turn becomes a signifier for the entire shell-shocked/ insomniac generation of England.

Yet there is something else
 That drags him from his bed;
 And he stands in the darkness
 With his feet cold against the floor
 And the cold air round his ankles.
 He does not know why,
 But he goes to the window and sees
 A beam of light, miles high,
 Dividing the night into two before him,
 Still, stark and throbbing.

The searchlight is constructed as something mysterious by a manipulative use of signs/images. The signifiers '*something else*' that drags him [the protagonist] from his bed, makes him stand in the darkness; *the cold feet of the protagonist*; his sensation of '*cold air round his ankles*'; and his *not knowing the reason for these sensations* blow up/expand/transform the searchlight from the physical to a psychic/metaphysical plane. When the protagonist finally sees the searchlight – '*a beam of light*' – it is '*miles high*' and it '*divides the night into two*'. These signifiers continue the same process of expansion/transformation of the searchlight making it seem superhuman. The depiction of the searchlight as both 'still' and 'throbbing' serve to construct it again as something ambiguous and potently sinister. The underlying discourse of paranoia is not difficult to gauge. The three adjectives: 'still', 'stark' and 'throbbing' serve an additional function – they produce the onomatopoeic effect of flues of guns (*still*) and the sound of machine guns (*stark, throbbing*).

The houses and gardens beneath
 Lie under the snow
 Quiet and tinged with purple.

The gaze of the readers is turned away from the searchlight for the time being and the landscape is 'constructed' instead – the houses and gardens *lie* under the snow, the entire surrounding is *quiet* and the light from the searchlight has tinged the landscape in a purple haze. The positioning of these three lines, apart from turning the reader's gaze to the external

landscape, serves a complementary function – that of providing a pseudo-relief to the readers when actually there is none. The underlying discourse is that nature can no longer sustain the shattered sensibilities of the war-torn and it has become the grim reflector of temporal realities.

There has been no sound of guns,
No roar of exploding bombs;
Only that watchfulness hidden among the snow-covered houses,
And that great beam thrusting back into heaven
The light taken from it.

The repetition of the first two lines of the poem at the beginning of the final stanza seems to question the credentials of *Searchlight* as an Imagist poem as the trope of *repetition* is seldom used in this tradition. But these two lines, when repeated, highlights the fact that the 'war' is taking place in the minds of men and not in real battlefields – hence there is 'no sound of guns' and 'no roar of exploding bombs'. The signifiers 'watchfulness', 'hidden' and 'snow-covered houses' uphold the poem's basic concern of foregrounding the neurotic effects of war.

The final two lines again mediate the 'reading' of the readers and redirect it towards the searchlight – the visual signifier of the war seeping into the general psyche. The searchlight has now become 'that great beam' and this construction continues the theme of expansion/transformation of the searchlight to superhuman/mythic proportions, a process initiated in the third stanza. This 'mythification' is stretched further (another deviation from the Imagist discourse of concentration) as the searchlight is said to 'thrust back into heaven' the light that it primarily obtained from heaven itself. The searchlight transforms itself into an all-encompassing presence/experience.

The Unquiet Street

John Fletcher Gould

By day and night this street is not still;
Omnibuses with red tail lamps,
Taxi cabs with shiny eyes,
Rumble, shunning its ugliness.
It is corrugated with wheel ruts,
It is dented and pock-marked with traffic,
It has no time for sleep.
It heaves its old, scarred countenance
Skyward between the buildings
And never says a word

On rainy nights
It dully gleams
Like the cold tarnished scales of a snake:
And over it hang arc-lamps,
Blue-white death-lilies on black stems.

The city has been one of the most prominent discourses in modernist literature. The works of modernist stalwarts like Eliot, Joyce or Virginia Woolf bear testimony to this. But, this discourse of the city had been a marked feature of Imagist poetry even before High Modernism took off in Europe and North America during the 1920s. This poem 'The Unquiet Street' by John Fletcher Gould, published in *Some Imagist Poets 1916*, is a representative example of the Imagist tradition that foregrounds a singularly urban experience. Andrew Thacker's observation on this poem is illuminating: "Formally, the free verse here employs short, often end-stopped lines, to a good effect, emphasizing a set of disjointed fragments in a modernist metropolitan moment." (*Imagist Poetry*, 76). As an Imagist poem too, 'The Unquiet Street' stands out as a fine example of the use of 'image' corroborating Pound's dictum: "An image is that which presents an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time." But, the 'images' in the poem also act as signs and in the process mediate the 'reading' of its readers in significant ways.

The title of the poem with its use of the signifier 'unquiet' sets the tone of its urban experience. 'By night and day this street is not still' – the entire line becomes a metaphor of the city. The signs that follow, '*omnibuses with red tail lamps*', rumbling '*taxi cabs with shiny eyes*', the street '*corrugated with wheel ruts*', and '*dented and pock-marked with traffic*' reinforce this discourse of urban experience. Interestingly, the city thus *constructed* is animated (and fragmented as well) – omnibuses have 'tails' (line 2), taxi cabs have 'eyes' (line 3), the face of the street itself is 'dented' and 'pock-marked' (line 6), it lays with old 'scarred countenance' (line 8) and 'It has no time to sleep' (line 7). At the same time, the street is also presented as an *object* – with no agency of its own – through the signifier 'corrugated with wheel ruts' (line 5), signifying the immensity of urban existence. This melding of the subjective and the objective, a blending of perspectives, is an aspect of modernism, where experiences cannot be 'framed'. Peter Howarth emphasizes this very point in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* when he says, 'Without a 'frame', what is being seen, and the way it is being seen, are parts of one reality; inside and outside, subject and object, have become continuous.' (Howarth 6). This discourse of the city, an urban experience conflating the subjective and the objective, is revealed in such constructions as:

It heaves its old, scarred countenance
Skyward between the buildings
And never says a word

The construction of the street in the second and final stanza of the poem only reinforces this subjective/objective combine – the following section being one of the finest specimens where an image/sign signifies 'an emotional and intellectual complex':

On rainy nights
It dully gleams
Like the cold tarnished scales of a snake:
And over it hang arc-lamps,
Blue-white death-lilies on black stems.

The street, drenched in rain, gleams in the night 'Like the cold tarnished scales of a snake'. The use of this simile (one of the most common tropes used by the Imagists) combines in it the objective aspects of the street and the subjective connotations that it arouses in the poet. The signifiers 'cold', 'tarnished scales', 'snake' serve to construct the street (and by extension, the city) in all its impersonality and its sinisterness. The signifier 'tarnished scales' is particularly significant given the city's predilection of renewing itself ever anew. The images/signs in the last two lines of the poem – 'arc-lamps', 'Blue-white death-lilies' and 'black stems' mediate the readers to see the street and the city as a realm of the dead where there is no spiritual core foreshadowing in the process the later modernist concerns of spiritual vacuity expressed in such works as T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* or Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*.

The Imagist poets, in their use of images/signs, act as intermediaries between the readers and the subjects they work upon in their poems. In other words, they mediate the *ways of reading* of their readers by using images/signs in a particular way. Their basis for this form of expression was the discourse of direct treatment of the subject in a visually concrete manner. Pound, in an article 'Vorticism' that he wrote in 1914 for *The Fortnightly Review*, defined Imagism as that "sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were 'just coming over into speech'". This definition focuses on the pictorial/sculptural qualities of an 'image'. But, there is also a mathematical aspect of the 'image', as the Imagists used it. Natan Zach sheds light on this particular aspect: "The *Image*...thus envisages a fusion of spontaneity, intensity and critical discipline. It is also...an 'equation' for an emotion. The image-equation inheres in a relation between things, and is not the verbal snapshot of a thing." ('Imagism and Vorticism', *Modernism*, 234-235). The Imagists, in their works, tried to mediate the 'seeing' of their readers towards the flux of their times by means of these image-equations/signs in a pictorial/sculptural manner.

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