

Rereading the Imagist Poetry in the Light of the Deconstructionist

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Abstract

Imagism is probably the most important single movement in English-language poetry of the twentieth century. Hardly any prominent poet in that generation went untouched by imagist theory and practice. It emphasized a romantic return to origins, a simplification of needless complexities, a zealous Puritanical stripping-away of the excrescences which had attached themselves to the art of poetry like barnacles to a clean hull. Among the luxuries to be relinquished were traditional meter and rhyme, artificial poetic diction, superfluous verbiage, rhetoric, philosophizing and editorializing, and transitional filler. The poem was to be made as economical and functional as possible, and it chiefly present images unmediated without authorial commentary. However the Imagist poems turn out to be obscure and largely inaccessible to common public due to the focus on the immediacy of time, impersonality of viewpoint and irregularity of form. It is because, on the one hand, the imagist poets innovated boldly, to free the poetry from the shackles of old conventions, on the other hand, the imagist poets depicted the apprehensive inner world and the crisis of belief after the World War I, instead of the traditional abject of loyalty and perpetuity. However the sensational, chaotic and elusive form of language in the Imagist poems may obtain its justification in the Deconstructionist doctrine of human language which is characterized with a revolt against logocentrism and phonocentrism and which attempts to restore the prototype of language that was sensuous, intuitive and metaphorical in essence.

The paper falls into two parts. It begins with a basic introduction of the Deconstructionism. Next, it endeavors

to unfold the nature of the Imagist poetic language in the light of the Deconstructionist interpretation of language, which is conducted through a meticulous investigation of the Imagist poetry in terms of its instantaneity of emotion, fragmentation of structure and multiplied explications of the metaphorical language

Key words: Imagism; Deconstructionism; Images; Intuitive language

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1. THE DECONSTRUCTION INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE

Deconstructionism is basically a Western philosophy which began with Friedrich Nietzsche and ran through Martin Heidegger to Jacques Derrida. The line of thought is characterized by a radical repudiation of platonic philosophical doctrine which has deeply rooted in the western ideology ever since the ancient Greek. The deconstructional re-reading of the western philosophy, however, built its starting point on the deconstruction of the medium of the philosophy—language.

Deconstructionists have its basis on the structural notion that everything is a text and accepted that language is the site of meaning. They argued, however, that the structuralist project does not go far enough in its study of language—which it fails to examine the “structurality of structure”. Deconstructionists viewed the structuralist goal of discovering the rules by which signifiers encode reality as futile and they try to restore the link between the language and the external commonsensical experience by tracing back to the infancy of human language. Their chief assumptions on language lie in three aspects.

1.1 Criticism of Phonocentrism

This seemingly scientific view of language and culture posited a systematic “center” that organized and sustained an entire structure. This historical attack against this central premise of structuralism is usually traced to a paper entitled “*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*”, delivered by Jacques Derrida. In his essay, later collected in his influential book *Writing and Difference* (1978), Derrida criticized the Western “Logocentric” notion of an ever active, transcendent center or ground. He said, “It was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of no locus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play (Derrida, 1966). Since language does in fact lack such a center, said the Deconstructionist critics, language is therefore inherently unstable and fraught with ambiguity and “slippage,” with the result that meaning is indeterminate.

In placing speech in the privileged position, phonocentrism of structuralist treats writing as inferior. However, historically, the discovery of hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms indicated that the writing system can possibly become a method of conveying directly things or ideas without the intervention of speech. The triumph of speech over writing rooted in the western civilization has shaken off. For Derrida, writing is not subordination of speech, and the traditionally linear and coherent writing only existed metaphysically away from the “truth”. The real writing is never a good duplication of the sound; instead, Derrida expressed his affectionate admiration for the proliferating, the elusive, and the allusive. He saw these features as exemplified in writing better than in speech—thus reversed Plato’s preference for the spoken over the written word.

This being so, Derrida then challenges western philosophy’s concept that human consciousness gives birth to language. Derrida’s *Grammatology* disrupts the hierarchical opposition between speech and writing by speculating on the possibility of approaching language through a science of writing. Speech is to be understood as a form of writing, an instance of the basic linguistic mechanism manifested in writing. This gives us a new concept: “generalized writing”, which is generated from the unconsciousness beyond the predominance of the rationality. Derrida saw signifying force in the gaps, margins, figures, echoes, digressions, discontinuities, contradictions and ambiguities of a text. By concerting a heap of terms like “difference”, “trace”, “dissemination”, “under erasure”, etc., Derrida described the “general writing” as a disarranged, center less, open system of trace, erasing any established form.

1.2 Language Is Being

In the Western metaphysics, language has long been considered to be an arbitrary process of adding name to the pre-existing phenomenon without bestowing any essence of being to the named objects. The disparity of words, spoken or written, from being could be felt from Platonism up to structuralism, in which language forms a closed semiotic system, independent from external world and meaning is created through difference of linguistic signs. However, the Deconstructionists such as Martin Heidegger argued that primordially language is being and being is language.

The ancient Greeks defined man as “zoon logon Echon”—animal capable of “logos”. Conventionally, the understanding of “logos” as synonymous to logical thinking, or rationality is actually, according to Heidegger, inappropriate. Heidegger continuously redefined and translated logos, keeping it clearly apart from the reading of logos as the basis of the logocentric tradition. He understood “logos” as discourse, the determination of the essence of language. “Logos” lets something be seen “phenomenally”, that is, as it shows itself in itself and from itself, it means therefore “letting seen”. When being showed and letting themselves be seen by human beings, they also “say” themselves. Heidegger understood the showing saying as “soundless word”, and humans are the ones who endow language with voice.

Heidegger went on to relate “logos” to “legein” or “laying”. He understood “legein” in its original sense of the overall “gathering”—the gathering manner in which beings are laid open and let be seen. Defining “legein” as the gathering laying, Heidegger remarked that the most significant moment of this laying is between hearing and speaking, not the hearing in the empirical sense but hearing in the fundamental sense, where proper hearing means the hearing that goes toward the “logos”, the hearing that happens within “legein” as “legein” itself. And Heidegger put the responsibility of hearing on poets, for as he asserted, the primeval language is no less than poetry. Here Heidegger echoed Emerson’s account of primitive language of natural signs:

As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages. The etymologist finds the most dead word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is a fossil Poetry. (Xie, 1999)

On this reading, language is in its origin creative and metaphysical, composed of pre-grammatical signs in direct reference to intuitive sensations.

1.3 Differance

Derrida coined a new word and concept: *differance*. Understanding what Derrida means the difference is one of the basic keys to understanding deconstruction.

Since Western metaphysics holds that presence is supreme or privileged and absence is unprivileged. Derrida suggests that we temporarily reverse this hierarchy, making it now absence / presence. With such a reversal, we can no longer posit a transcendental signified. No longer is there an absolute standard or coherent unity from which knowledge proceeds and develops. All human knowledge and all self-identity must now spring from difference, not sameness, from absence, not present.

When a reversal of this binary operation occurs, two dramatic results follow: First, human knowledge becomes referential; that is, we can only know something because it differs from some other bit of knowledge, not because we can compare this knowledge to any absolute or coherent unity (a transcendental signified). Human knowledge must now be based on difference. By the reverse, nothing can be studied or learned in isolation, for all knowledge becomes context-related. Second, we must also forgo closure; that is, since no transcendental signified exist; all interpretations concerning life, and knowledge are possible, probable, and legitimate.

Once we do away with the transcendental signified and reverse the presence /absence binary operation, texts can no longer have present in isolation, and texts cannot possess meaning. Since all meaning and knowledge are now based on differences, no text can simply mean one thing. Texts become intertextual. The meaning of a text can not be ascertained by examining only that particular text; a text's meaning evolves from that derived from the interrelatedness of one text to an interrelatedness of many text, like language itself, texts are caught in a dynamic, context-related interchange. Never can we state a text's definitive meaning; for it has no one correct or definitive interpretation. No longer can we declare one interpretation to be right and another wrong, for meaning in a text is always illusive, always dynamic, also transitory.

2. THE ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGIST POETRY IN THE LIGHT OF THE DECONSTRUCTIONIST INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE

2.1 Poetry Revolution

Imagism was a short-lived yet far-reaching poetic movement in the second decade of the twentieth century. It is declared that human nature underwent a fundamental change "on or about December 1910 (Virginia, 1934)". It was an era then major artists were fundamentally questioning and reinventing their art forms.

The poetic movement, known as the Imagist movement, marked a new code of poetic statement to break away with the careless thinking and romantic optimism prevailing in the Victorian age. A group of English and American poets writing from 1909 to 1917 was united by their revolt

against the exuberant imagery and diffuse Sentimentality in the nineteenth century poetry. Ezra Pound, as head of the group, edited the anthology *Des Imagists (1914)* and gained control of *the Egoist (1913-1919)*, which became the principle Imagist journal. Influenced by classicism, by Chinese and Japanese poetry, and by the French Symbolists, the Imagists stated that poetic ideas should be best expressed by the actual rendering of concrete images without superfluous commentary. They held that the poet must embody his feelings in specific physical analogies that exactly convey his meaning. He must produce a hard, clear, concentrated poetry, free of stilted and artificial vocabulary, meter and imagery. Meanwhile the Imagist poetry represented a diminished aesthetic, radically condensed to avoid breadth of moral preaching or outflow of feeling.

All in All, Imagism posed as an absolute revolution, the newness of which broke with the past and established a poetic realm that was radically different from the previous ones. In its general liberating effect on literature, Imagism has been an important influence on the twentieth century poetry. Almost all major modern poets are in one way or another associated with it and benefit from it in a significant way. It is the movement that helps to open the first page of modern English and American literature.

This revolution in the field of American poetry is, in a sense, similar to the revolution of Deconstruction. With the advent of Deconstruction theory in the late 1960s, the structuralist assumption that a text's meaning can be discovered through an examination of its structural codes was challenged and replaced by the maximum of undecidability: A text has many meanings and therefore, no definitive interpretation. From a structuralist perspective, all social and cultural practices are governed by rules or codes. Wishing to discover these rules, structuralists declare that the proper study of reality and meaning is the system behind such individual practices, not the individual practices themselves. However, the Deconstructionists give their attention to the marginal, supplement and individual, so that a marginalized figure, idea, etc., can be re-read as the center or controlling element.

2.2 Intuitive Language

In the Deconstructionist concept, the language, in the ontological sense, is derived from the unconsciousness. Language lays its foundation in human instinct and intuition in a vague and unstable state. The Deconstructionists severely criticized the dominant control of rationalism over man's feeling of the reality. The function of logic or ratiom, as they suggested, is to excavate and capture the hidden original language, that is, to present it as it occurs to one's mind in the first moment. The best thought is the first thought which is one's direct physical and sensual experience of the world. Ration is not used to repress passion but to expose it in

the upper consciousness. In consequence, language in its truest form is immediately linked with imagination, fantasies and even illusions. Such an intuitive language is exactly what the Imagists yearned for and practiced in their poems. What counts in their works is not a vivid narration or heroic moral lessons but an immensely intensified sensation darting from their immediate life experience. By applying “autonomic writing” or “psychic writing”, the Imagists spared no efforts to release their momentarily-grasped, huge physical excitement. Their images, being direct and sensory, are not mere ornaments, not just a verbal evocation of sensory experience, but the very essence of an intuitive language. Often spelled by Pound, it had a quasi-mystical significance as well. The Image conveys meaningful experience virtually without the mediation of language. It “presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” Pound said, it “gives that 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 fact, the imagist pursuit of spontaneity and sensuality of the poetic expression is toward a self-exploration of the state of the remotest inner-mind.

Let us read an example of the most representative Imagist, Hilda's, which comes from her portrayal of “heat” in “The Garden”:

O, Wind, rend open the heat
cut open the heat,
rend it to tatters
fruit cannot drop
through this thick air;
fruit cannot fall into heat
that pressed up and blunts
the points of pears'
and rounds the grapes.

The wind is solid, hard, only to be “cut apart” and “rendered”, it's so thick as to hold the dropping of fruit, and its very density leads power to “blunt” the pear and “round” then grapes. There is a suffocating intensity contained in the heat. Each of those lines is sharp, precise, “direct treatment of thing.” In this poem, there is a feeling of ache, oppressiveness—yet it is inextricable from delicacy, tenderness, even sweet surprise.

2.3 Fragmentary and Metaphorical Language

For the Deconstructionists, the form and structure of primordial writing spontaneously mirror the movement of unconsciousness rather than the predominance of rationality. In his *Grammatology*, Derrida formulated a “generalized writing” as the real base of written language, which follows the development of the inner mind, breaking away with the rules of grammar, and, signs are continuously disorderly pictures out of unconsciousness or sub consciousness, unbound with the grammar rules. He thus saw signifying power in digressive, discontinuous

and contorted expressions, regarding them as readable rather than merely nonsensical.

Imagists argued that the sensation in a poem is an outlet of emotion in an instant moment. It is meant to present an instantaneous complex by deliberately organizing or orchestrating disparate images. As a result, the language of imagist poetry is characteristic of the sabotage of language's instrumentality by means of derangements of image, contortions of syntax and disruption of logic.

Realizing language is the representation of the intrinsic connection between man and world, the Deconstructionists turned their eyes to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograph and pictograms, and speculated that these “saying languages” were closer to the archetype of language, which “metaphorically referred to man's experience of the world by a single or compound of images. Such a view of the linguistic world also attaches great importance to their statement that the signifier is never linked with the signified on the basis of one-to-one correspondence. So that Multi-interpretation is allowed.

Metaphor has long been regarded as an important rhetoric device and utilized as an ornament or ingredient for an effect of vividness in poems. Full of images, the Imagists called for a language arising from metaphor, that is, a compressed or elliptical expression of metaphorical perception. So that, the form of poetic language was used so freely by the Imagists that the Imagist poetry turned out to be a visual art form of language. It is also paved the way for different reading of the imagist poems.

The classic Imagist poem is the haiku-like “In a station of the Metro”

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

With it's epiphany of beauty in a crowded Paris underground-railway station, Pound's metaphoric leap from luminescent faces to “petals on a wet, black bough.” generates that sense of sudden liberation, that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits” to which Imagist revelation aspires.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the Imagist disregard of the shared convention of language form and meaning and their innovation of a variety of poetic tactics and devices demonstrate a perfect validation of the Deconstructionist supposition of language. Both Imagists and Deconstructionists challenged the stability of language structure as well as a closed one-to-one link between the signifier and the signified, language and consciousness, and thus re-established language as an open, free-floating semiotic system featured with an indeterminacy of meaning and the representation

of metaphor. Although both of their formidable content make few concessions to the common reader, they made prominent contributions to extend the potentiality of human language, greatly influencing the subsequent literature and art.

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