

## Metaphor in the poetry of Imagists

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The early 20th century is usually characterised as the time of the emergence of a new literary response towards reality. There is a general agreement that the response was provoked by great changes in the social fabrics of individual societies, caused by the development of natural and social sciences, rapid progress in technologies, growth of the cities and corresponding loss of traditional values in the midst of “unnatural” urban settings, as well as by the progressing opening of traditional consciousness to all kinds of previously unheard of stimuli. To deal with, or depict, life in the changed conditions, literature responded by a variety of methods, most of them departing from the objectivity of the narrative modes of 19th-century prose or from the Romantic fusions of lyrical subjects wandering aimlessly amidst natural beauty. While in prose we get literary works like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, at least as far as the Anglophone literature is concerned, the poetic response ranged from the national symbolism of William Butler Yeats, through T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to the poetry of the artistic avant-gardes.

The Anglo-American *Imagists* were one such avant-garde approach attempting to poetically depict contemporaneous reality. What made them unique among other movements was their effort to distance themselves from the past through a new use of language (like Wordsworth before them), using words to create mental pictures, images – which was, in a sense, a proto-typical creative activity, *ut pictura poesis* – and seeing verbal meaning visually, figuratively. Such seeing has always been the domain of metaphor, for as W. J. T. Mitchell claims, “to compare poetry with painting is to make a metaphor” (1986, 49). The aim of the article is to draw attention to the metaphorical quality of the Imagists’ experimentation with the figuration of their deeply ontological and existential anxieties, resulting from the poets’ life in the changed world.

### WHAT IS METAPHOR?

Every discussion of metaphor should begin by pointing to a truth “universally acknowledged” not only in literary studies, but across the entire spectrum of human sciences, i. e. that it is one of the most common devices of figurativeness, if not the device of figurativeness, and that it is not used only in literary works, especially poems, in which figurativeness is essential, but that it occurs even in seemingly “non-figu-

rative” discourses, such as philosophy, sociology, social sciences as well as in everyday language. In them, however, metaphor is said to have lost its figurativeness and become part either of conceptual language, or common communication, though it is still frequently claimed that the “loss” is not total and that in many colloquial expressions one can still feel the original metaphoricity.

The history of the theorisations of metaphor is very long and individual theories usually draw on the specificity of a field within which they are produced. Despite the differences and variations in emphasis, there is one common ground in all of them, the perception of reality in terms of the opposition between the literal and the figurative. Metaphor is a master device able to move, “carry over”, or transfer the perception from one to the other. This is its basic ability, role or task. The principles upon which the transfer is carried out are varied, and there are many of them. However, the traditional and most frequent theories of metaphor claim that metaphorical effect is a result of two denotations – or verbal images, since metaphor, unlike metonymy, draws its tropological power from the appearance of the compared objects – called tenor and vehicle, whose proximity to each other produces a connotative meaning that shares in the qualities of its components. The tenor is a denotation whose meaning gets carried over, or changed, by the vehicle. Although there are theories which might use different terminology to name the constitutive parts of metaphor, for example, frame and focus (Black 1962), it is always this basic division between the literal and the figurative which seems to lie at the heart of the Western critical tradition (Punter 2007). While the concept of the literal is relatively unproblematic, there are different types “and valuations of the figurative”, resulting not only in further subdivisions into different kinds of metaphorical expressions (with metaphor meant in its broad meaning), such as symbol, allegory, metonymy, synecdoche, etc., but also into different values attributed to metaphor, considering it either as simply an adornment or elaboration, or “the basic structure of language, according to which representations offer ‘versions’ of referents and thus inevitably imply an ‘originary’ process of metaphorisation” (11).

Since the division into the literal and figurative is primarily characteristic for the artistic handling of reality, metaphor is there on its firmest ground. This does not mean, however, that one cannot find it in other discourses. One can, but it is viewed in them differently, either as foreign or inferior, and therefore avoided, or, paradoxically, as an essential language-constituting device establishing the general relativity of human condition. Max Black, for example, in his influential discussion of the philosophy of language, reflects on what metaphor traditionally means for philosophers:

TO DRAW attention to a philosopher’s metaphors is to belittle him – like praising a logician for his beautiful handwriting. Addiction to metaphor is held to be illicit, on the principle that whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all. Yet the nature of the offence is unclear. I should like to do something to dispel the mystery that invests the topic; but since philosophers (for all their notorious interest in language) have so neglected the subject, I must get what help I can from the literary critics. They, at least, do not accept the commandment, “Thou shalt not commit metaphor”, or assume that metaphor is incompatible with serious thought (1962, 25).

Obviously, metaphoricity cannot be restricted only to the artistic field, and, if found in social or even hard sciences, it cannot be judged as denoting only an irrational, sensational or illogical process. Strong signs that metaphor is not the latter can be found in much of contemporary thought, for example, in postmodern, post-structural, postcolonial, or cognitive theories (Punter 2007) which are part of a “still in operation” general paradigmatic shift from the sciences of objectivity towards linguistic and cultural complexity and, essentially, indeterminacy. In this article, however, I will not be exploring the various fields in which metaphor occurs, or analyze its nature from divergent points of view, but stay in literary critics’ domain, concentrating on the discussion of the so-called poetic metaphor, especially in the texts of Anglo-American Imagists who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, brought fresh insights into the nature of poetry through their unique handling of the mentioned division into the literal and the figurative. Metaphor was a key literary device that they used, paradoxically, to challenge that division.

### IMAGE AND IMAGISM

The question of the nature of metaphor in the poetry of the Imagists cannot be fully addressed without a brief mention of the historical and artistic context in which the movement emerged. One must say that Imagism was an important Anglo-American contribution to the general change of values occurring in many fields of natural and, especially, human sciences, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. As mentioned above, it was one of the twentieth century’s modernist avant-gardes. Its beginnings can be traced to London’s artistic milieu of the early 1910s, in which several artists and intellectuals, some of whom later gained exceptional prominence virtually all over the world, began the discussions about the nature of modern art, especially poetry.

Although the exact time and place when Imagism originated, following these discussions, would be difficult to identify, there are many interesting stories about its supposed beginnings – the activities of the Poets’ Club, Ezra Pound’s meeting with Hilda Doolittle and calling her first “imagiste”, Amy Lowell’s famous “imagists’ dinner”, etc. Its most intensive presence, however, came with the publication of four Imagistic anthologies. The first of them, *Des Imagistes*, also containing the poems of other writers who later became famous – William Carlos Williams and James Joyce – was published in 1914 under Pound’s editorship. The next three were published in 1915, 1916, and 1917 under the title *Some Imagist Poets* and contained the poems of the core authors from the *Des Imagistes* (Richard Aldington, H. D., Amy Lowell, and F. S. Flint) as well as the poems of John Gould Fletcher and D. H. Lawrence. While *Des Imagistes* was prepared by Pound, the other three anthologies were published under the guidance of Amy Lowell, following Pound’s ostensible leaving the movement and founding another of his projects – *vorticism*.

Even though Amy Lowell’s editorial role may seem to have been very significant, it was undoubtedly Ezra Pound who was the “mastermind” behind the movement. Although he later left the group to pursue his own aesthetic goals, he never really abandoned the Imagistic creative principles which he had first helped to define. At

the very beginning of the theory of Imagism, however, it was the aesthetic philosophy of T. E. Hulme (1883–1917), which provided Pound a much-needed starting point for his later definition of the Imagist principles. In his essay “Romanticism and Classicism” (1998), Hulme claimed that “beauty may be in small, dry things” and that poetry “always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing.” Romantic poetry was for Hulme typical by its “metaphors of flight”, while “[i]n the classical attitude [one] never seem[s] to swing right along to the infinite nothing”. In other words, Romantic poets are obsessed with something beyond the real, the figurative, the poets of the coming Classical age (which can be loosely associated with what was later called Modernism) with the material, non-figurative, the literal.

Hulme’s urge for the new poetry was followed by the statement of the three principles of this poetry in the article by F. S. Flint published in the journal *Poetry* in 1913: “1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective. 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” (199). Although the article was signed by F. S. Flint, the principles are considered to have been formulated by Pound himself, as he later claims in his “A Retrospect and ‘A Few Don’ts’” (1918) that they agreed upon them together with R. Aldington in 1912. Flint’s article was followed by Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (1913a) in which he elaborates on them, specifying especially his understanding of the concept of the “image” as well as the use of language, rhythm and rhyme. Another statement on Imagistic principles also appeared in the anthology *Some Imagist Poets* of 1915 as a preface to the poems. It is in a way a variation of what has been stated so far – to use the exact word, create new rhythms, be free in the choice of the subject, present an image, produce hard and clear poetry which should be a result of concentration. The preface to the 1916 anthology does not bring any new “tenets” of Imagism, but explains the misunderstanding that the public had about such concepts as the image, rhythm, cadence, vers libre, etc. The 1917 anthology was published without any preface whatsoever.

As one could infer from what has already been said, of central importance in all the mentioned theoretical statements is, naturally, the concept of the image. It is in fact that what defines Imagism as a movement. Traditionally, image is characterised as a verbal device which evokes sensual effects (Pokrivčák – Pokrivčáková 2006, 59). According to M. H. Abrams, images are “used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by *allusion*, or in the vehicles (the secondary references) of its similes and metaphor”, but “should not be taken to imply a visual reproduction of the object referred to” (1999, 121). The visual image, however, has not always been valued in literary criticism. As Daniel W. Gleason claims, it “was practically banished from several powerful twentieth-century academic movements in psychology and literary criticism” (2009, 424), after it had enjoyed a short period of high status at its beginning. Because of the relatively large amount of subjectivity coming into its making, it was neglected in most objectivist text-based theories in literary studies, such as Russian Formalism, American New Criticism, Czech and French Structur-

alism, cognitive studies, even deconstruction. Its revival can be witnessed with the emergence of the theories shifting the creation of the meaning of the literary work from the linguistic structures of an individual text to the subjective imagination of its readers (cf. 425–427).

Despite its subjectivity, the visual image can also be discussed through Peirce's theory of signs where it can represent through a mode of the icon, such as a photograph, or index, for example a guidepost (1998). Verbal images, that is the images made up of words, would be included into Peirce's category of symbol, since he claims that

[a]ny ordinary word, as "give", "bird", "marriage", is an example of a symbol. It is applicable to whatever may be found to realise the idea connected with the word; it does not, in itself, identify those things. It does not show us a bird, nor enact before our eyes a giving or a marriage, but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them (4).

Peirce's understanding of the concept of symbol is different, however, from what is understood by this term (as well as other related terms, or "images") in literary studies, where we speak about a symbol when one image stands for something else, about allegory when one image stands for a clearly determined meaning, and metaphor when a third, connotative meaning is created by a juxtaposition of two denotative images, not to mention metonymy, synecdoche, personification, etc. While traditional literary criticism thus understands the verbal image as a sign pointing beyond itself, most usually to re-present emotions, the Imagists tried to escape the re-presentation and took pains, in theory as well as in practice, to find images which would be clear presentations, without any semiotic quality, of something what Peirce defined as feeling when he described a person in a "dreamy state":

Let us suppose he [the person] is thinking of nothing but a red color. Not thinking about it, either, that is, not asking nor answering any questions about it, not even saying to himself that it pleases him, but just contemplating it, as his fancy brings it up. Perhaps, when he gets tired of the red, he will change it to some other color, – say a turquoise blue, – or a rose-color; – but if he does so, it will be in the play of fancy without any reason and without any compulsion. This is about as near as may be to a state of mind in which something is present, without compulsion and without reason; it is called Feeling (4).

For the Imagists, this was exactly the position they wanted to achieve. They may have been successful to present it theoretically, but the practice was much more difficult, available, if at all, only through extreme cases of what I would call the non-metaphorical metaphor in case of Pound, or the Stevens's impossibility of metaphor. Both positions, however, force the complexity into the literary meaning to the extent of its nullification.

The theory of Imagism emerges most clearly through two statements prefaced to their anthologies. Thus they claim that they are not "a school of painters, [though they] believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous" (*Some Imagist Poets*, 1915, vii), or that their movement is not about "the presentation of pictures. 'Imagism' refers to the manner of presentation, not to the subject" (*Some Imagist Poets*, 1916, v). To avoid the simplicity of a mechanical transfer of meaning by analogy E. Pound stressed com-

plexity and instantaneity, characterising the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” For Pound, this can best be achieved by metaphor, that is “the most compressed form of image” (Juhász 1974, 15) able to “conjoin the dualities” (13). It involves, however, the awareness of a constant tension between presenting the mental images of concrete things, as if seen directly in the essence of their thingness, and as being “under [constant] pressure from meanings beyond them” (Miles 1965, viii), which is a perfect image of human existence.

## POUND AND STEVENS

The four Imagists’ anthologies provide many examples of the existential struggle to break free from the duality of seeing things of the world. Metaphor is a perfect witness to as well as an obstacle in that struggle. Thus, as an example of “very little metaphor”, i. e. of a poem in which the poet wanted to get rid of this duality, Gleason (2009, 442–443) quotes F. S. Flint’s *Easter*:

### FRIEND

we will take the path that leads  
down from the flagstaff by the pond  
through the gorse thickets;  
see, the golden spikes have thrust their points through,  
and last year’s bracken lies yellow-brown and trampled.  
(*Some Imagist Poets*, 1916, 51)

Even if the poem is not metaphorical, but rather narrative, one can find here images which, though their being poetically focused on outside a more determining context, may evoke a hint of a potential “beyond”.

Naturally, all the four Imagist anthologies provide more examples of non-figurative language, or at least, a language which the Imagist theorists wanted to be “direct”, non-figurative, depicting the Hulme’s “physical thing” to “present” the Peirce’s “Feeling”. The poems by H. D., for example, are such very clear visions, presentations of things. In “Hermes of the Ways”, she uses the following images:

Apples on the small trees  
Are hard,  
Too small,  
Too late ripened  
By a desperate sun  
That struggles through sea-mist.

The boughs of the trees  
Are twisted  
By many bafflings;  
Twisted are  
The small-leafed boughs.  
But the shadow of them  
Is not the shadow of the mast head  
Nor of the torn sails.  
(*Des Imagistes*, 1914, 22)

The poet visualises everyday objects through their physical qualities, not through their symbolic or abstract meanings. Their objectivity is only slightly “distorted” by a subjective touch of personification (“desperate sun”), which, however, does not diminish their objective thingness. The reader here is not aware of a comparison, of seeing one object in terms of another, as, for example, the metaphor in Richard Aldington’s poem “the light is a wound to me” (13), or William Carlos Williams’s “Your hair is my Carthage / And my arms the bow / And our words arrows” (39).

Undoubtedly, the most unique images/metaphors can be found in Ezra Pound’s poems. They range from clear presentations, “the petals fall in the fountain, / the orange coloured rose-leaves, / Their ochre clings to the stone” (46), to complex comparisons, “O fan of / white silk, / clear as frost on the grass-blade, / You also are laid aside” (45). But the nature of Imagism emerges most clearly in his famous short poem “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.  
(Pound 1913b, 12)

The poem can serve as an important representative text of Imagism for several reasons: 1. it uses concrete images (petals, bough, faces, crowd) without any abstract descriptions, 2. it is short, 3. it does not represent, but presents. The author explains its creation as follows:

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a “metro” train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion (Pound 1916, 100).

Then he continues saying that what came to him, instead of words, were the “splotches of colour” (cf. Peirce’s description of feeling above). He finished writing the poem, or searching for an appropriate form of expression of the emotion, only after a year when he cut the original thirty lines of text to the two lines.

The poem represents all pros and cons of poetic metaphor. Despite Pound’s claim that there may be no meaning in it, one is forced to search for it, and find it, since this is the force of its figurativeness. There are two images juxtaposed to each other – faces and petals, inviting immediate comparison, which is, however, not a simple one, since one of the images seems to consist of another comparison, “apparition of these faces”, comparing normal faces in the crowd to strange, ghostlike faces. The final image is metaphorical, for there is no “like” or “as”, as the simile would use. But what this image is of is the most difficult part of the metaphor.

There has been a history of the search for the poem’s meaning, from drawing critical attention to the word “apparition” as being an expression of suddenness (Bevilaqua 1971), visual beauty (Knapp 1979), mystery (Witemeyer 1969), or the Underworld (Kenner 1973), to the discussion of the way the two images are joined. Ellis, for example, claims that it is also important to pay attention to how the lines were “joined” together, since there were versions of the poem in which the first line

ended by a colon, semicolon, or even any punctuation mark. This, he claims, may tell us something about the equivalence or superposition of one line to the other, that is, about a crucial process in the creation of the final metaphorical effect. He refuses Earl Miner's claim about the *discordia concors* in the poem, stating himself that Miner neglected "to consider the care that Pound himself took to indicate to the reader how that gap should be 'imaginatively leaped'" (Ellis 1988).

A very important line of interpretation of the poem is based on Pound's Oriental leanings, especially his preoccupation with the Japanese haiku. Thus Jyan-Lung Lin interprets Pound's images as expressing the Zen mood of Yugen, that is, the sense of mysterious depth in nature. "This mood, as mentioned before, is identified by Zen people as an essential precondition of enlightenment. It produces, and at the same time is produced by, the image, which is not to be used as an ornament but to point at the Tao or self-nature, a mysterious totality of the inner and outer nature" (1992). This is in perfect accord with Pound's own comment on the nature of the poem, its images, and, by extension, the images of Imagism as such: "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (Pound 1916, 103), or, when we look at it from the other pole of the creative process, when "things internal are transformed, through art, into things external" (Juhasz 1974, 15).

The image plays an important role in the work of another American author – Wallace Stevens. Although he was not part of the "inner circle" of the Imagists, his close association with some of its members (especially William Carlos Williams), as Juhasz claims, "brought him near the vortex of Imagist theory and practice... [and] no doubt spurred his own experiments in this vein" (18 n). His poems are "speculations about the nature of man and of the world" (16), using metaphor both as the principal figure through which he aims to express it as well as, again, the principal "obstacle" (cf. Juhasz, 16).

One of his first, and perhaps most famous, poems that deal with the essentiality of reality is the frequently anthologised "The Snow Man":

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
  
And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
in the sound of a few leaves,  
  
Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place  
  
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.  
(Stevens 1990a, 9–10)

The poem is a simple and clear, almost non-figurative, depiction of the reality of winter and the (im)possibility of human perception of it. On the one hand, there is nature, winter with its images (the frost, boughs, pine-trees, snow), on the other one the mind – man, separated from and foreign to nature, facing loneliness and misery. Their point of contact is their point of departure – from oneself to the other, expressing the difficulty of figuration: “One must have a mind of winter”, if one wants to “behold” it, in the light of its “distant glitter”, which is the light of their essence. The metaphor of such beholding is the snowman, the snow and the man, the man of snow. It is a non-representational trope, a human thing, balanced between the two worlds, striving to express the sensation of their unity, to unite the thing external with the thing internal. According to Perkins, it is “a metaphor of a metaphor [...] a metaphor of a ‘mind of winter’, and this, in turn, is a metaphor of something even more abstract: a mind that entertains nothingness”. But since nothingness is ultimately un-metaphorical, un-figurative, “The Snow Man” is also “a radical critique of representation [...] bound to compete with theology and other, ritual or clinical, modes of purification” (Hartman 1980, 15), the critique through which he hoped to defy the commonly known fact that “things stand over against us” (Bottum 1995, 214). Stevens himself makes it very clear in his other poems – “The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it” (1990a, 465) as well as in various occasional statements – “A poem is like a natural object” (205). But what is important here is the “like”, an indication of the metaphoricity of perception, since if it were not for the “like”, we would have no means to know it.

While “The Snow Man” is a figurative image of the looming non-figurativeness, a glimpse of the perceived nothingness, the poem “Of Mere Being” is tense with the poetic suggestion of utmost strangeness – a silent and artificially fragile epiphany of being:

The palm at the end of the mind,  
Beyond the last thought, rises  
In the bronze decor,  
  
A gold feathered bird  
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,  
Without human feeling, a foreign song.  
  
You know then that it is not the reason  
That makes us happy or unhappy.  
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.  
  
The palm stands on the edge of space.  
The wind moves slowly in the branches.  
The bird’s fire-fangled feathers dangle down.  
(Stevens 1990b, 141)

Like the “The Snow Man”, the “Of Mere Being” shows a division and a unity. The division between the world of “human meaning” and “human feeling” and the realm

of the other where such qualities are absent. The otherness is suggested by a metonymical image of “A gold feathered bird” that “Sings in the palm”. The bird sings, but the song is not human, it expresses neither a meaning nor a feeling, as the world “at the end of the mind” may not bear such qualities. But “[i]s this not to prove the ultimate creativity of self, of the mind which must always conceive a reality beyond form or metaphor, beyond thought, but nevertheless at the end of, not outside, the mind?” (Riddel). A reality which would be playful, arbitrarily colourful, non-referential, the result of the mind’s loss in itself, but despite its effort to show the beyond, still only an absolute opposite of the “physical thing”, the other extreme of metaphor towards which image always gravitates, pulled by an irresistible force.

Despite their differences, in the work of both writers it is metaphor which is the substance of their imaginative creativeness – constantly trying to search for the fullness of sense, as well as avoiding the dullness of it. Although the remaining Imagists never reached such fame and complexity of imagination as Pound and Stevens, their role in the rise of modern consciousness, so different from the nineteenth century’s “romanticising and socialising”, is not negligible either. The turn of their poetic “look” from great objects of admiration towards small everyday things, and from interpretive robustness towards emotional metaphoricality, threatened by the ever present opaqueness of the things, those are the issues which they tried to grasp. For all of them, metaphor was an important instrument in their efforts.

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## Metaphor in the poetry of Imagists

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Metaphor. Symbol. Modernism. Image. Imagism. Figurativeness. Ezra Pound. Wallace Stevens. Being.

The article discusses the role of metaphor in the new poetic response to reality which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in the work of some Anglo-American poets and critics, known as Imagists. The new trends, which the poets were part of as well as helped define, drew on the philosophy of T. E. Hulme who claimed that the future poetry will consist of dry and sophisticated images, which is in striking contrast to rich romantic imagery. The interpretive part of the article draws attention to imagistic anthologies in which the poets expressed the new sensibility through several visually striking poems, most of them forgotten by now, as well as to the handling of metaphor in some poems by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens.

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