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NO “DIM LANDS OF PEACE” – A CASE FOR CLOSE READING OF POETRY¹

In 1914 Ezra Pound published his famous essay entitled “A few don’ts by an Imagiste”. This short but highly influential publication was intended to be a voice in favour of writing poetry which, unlike its blurred and indefinite Victorian predecessors, would be hard, exact, clear and concentrated. Pound’s essay was an important poetic manifesto of the new young poets for whom writing poetry represented a sophisticated process in which the poet *presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time* (cf. Pound (1914)). At the same time, in contrast to most other avant-garde movements, the Imagists were not indifferent to the reaction of their readers:

Don’t imagine that the art of poetry is any simpler than the art of music, or that you can please the expert before you have spent at least as much effort on the art of verse as the average piano teacher spends on the art of music. (Jones 1972:131)

As can be seen, for the Imagists both writing and reading poetry required a strict observation of rules, constant intellectual agility and plenty of practice – in short, a professional attitude to the text. The modernist revolt, like no other artistic revolution before, drew attention to language, or more generally speaking, to form, as a truly functional and meaningful element of a work of art. It was Imagism with its insistence on the conscious use of the rhythmical, metrical and lexical substance of poetry which made people aware of the primacy of the aesthetic function of poetry over all other more or less supplementary functions of a literary text. Roman Jakobson’s acclaimed diagram of the six functions of a communicative act with its special emphasis on considering the utterance as a structured object with a certain density or opacity was also the basis of such schools of interpretation as,

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for example, the New Criticism (cf. Scholes 1980:20). Although these structuralist approaches to the analysis of a literary text have been replaced recently by their more extravagant post-structuralist variants, nevertheless the original impetus for these later trends seems to have come from the Imagist revolt in the beginning of the century when they made people:

*[...] consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent of a new soap. The scientist does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has **discovered** something. He begins by learning what he has discovered already. He goes from that point onward. He does not bank on being a charming fellow personally. He does not expect his friends to applaud the results of his freshman class work. (Jones 1972:132).*

This passage from an early Imagist manifesto brings out the fundamental difference in attitude and actual artistic practice between, on the one hand, spectacular but impressionistic deliberations and, on the other hand, a sound, intellectual and scholarly stance. This is not to say that there is no mystery in poetry and that all the meanings of a poem can be easily deciphered once we apply the “proper” method and a set of rules. The good old days of such naive optimism are long gone. The acceptance of what Ezra Pound labels *the way of the scientist* with his call for *learning what has been discovered already* was meant to make the world of letters doubly conscious of the diversity of tasks which have to be accomplished in order to create (in the case of poets) or discover (in the case of critics) the composite meanings of poetry. But above all, the Imagist doctrine emphasized the need to infuse new life into the very medium of poetry – the language itself. *Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something [...] Go in fear of abstractions [...] Don't use such an expression as 'dim land of peace'* (Jones 1972:131).

These are but a few examples of the precepts in Ezra Pound's manifesto which warn the new poets against the application of spectacular, but meaningless and non-functional, language in their poems. If this is true of writing poetry, how much more true it is in the case of writing about poetry. Teachers and scholars know that in their interpretations of poems they should aim at employing *the exact word, not nearly-exact nor the merely decorative word* (Jones 1972:135). Put in slightly different terms, in our analysis of poetry we should try to avoid vague impressionism expressed in similarly “nebulous language”. Moreover, such intellectual laxity leads directly to the much more pernicious practice of what M.C. Beardsley called a tendency to superimpositions. They do not tell us anything about the meaning hidden in the text but rather use the poems as illustrations of the interpreter's preconceived set of ideas (cf. Beardsley 1964:44).

The fundamental error which is committed here is that such analyses do not activate sufficiently the texture of the poem and disregard its unique and deliberately organized structure. The simplest and most effective remedy for this type of intellectual abuse seems to be the acceptance of the principle that we

should always start our investigation from the text and prove our generalizations on the basis of a consistent close reading of all elements of the poem's structure. Admittedly, this is an arduous task, but at the same time it is the most essential activity which should be practised both in our study rooms and our classrooms. We all know how often scholars and students alike speak of "dim lands of peace" only because they are not humble enough to verify their interpretative ideas by consulting the actual text of the poem. Teachers, it seems, should encourage an attitude of modesty in approaching a literary text which should not be treated as a springboard for our intellectual feats. Otherwise we simply mutilate the original meaning of the poem. Our teaching experience confirms the fact that even if we are interested in the poem's functioning as a multiple intertext, the basic interpretative procedures should still include a close textual analysis and the discovery of the unique organizing supercode of the poem. Only then shall we not be reducing the poem to a convenient "carrier" of extratextual meanings which are piled onto the text with the sole intention of exemplifying our own ideas and outlook on life.

Characteristically, the Nobel Prize poet Joseph Brodsky referred to poetry as *the supreme form of human locution in any culture* (cf. J. Brodsky 1991/92). He was strongly aware of the unique role played by a good poetic text in the process of man's perennial search for the answers to the universal questions of his existence. He drew our attention to poetry's unparalleled and distinctive use of language as well as the profound impact it may have on a competent reader:

If nothing else, reading poetry is a process of terrific linguistic osmosis. It is also a highly economical form of mental acceleration. Within a very short space a good poem covers enormous mental grounds and often, towards its finale, provides one with an epiphany or a revelation. As a tool of cognition, poetry beats any existing form of analysis (a) because it pares down our reality to its linguistic essentials, whose interplay, be it clash or fusion, yields that epiphany or that revelation, and (b) because it exploits rhythmic and euphonic properties of the language that in themselves are revelatory. In other words, what a poem, or, more accurately, the language itself tells you is that your soul's got a long way to go. For at the moment of reading you become what you read, you become the state of the language which is a poem, and its epiphany or its revelation are yours. They are still yours once you shut the book, since you can't revert to not having had them. That's what evolution is all about. (Brodsky 1991/92)

Seen from this point of view, The Imagist manifestoes from the beginning of the twentieth century, although written with a different intention, seem to be an invaluable source of information on how to write and study poetry. These remarks are all the more precious as they were written by practising poets, those who know how to create and decipher meaning out of rhythms, sounds and words.²

² The characteristic distrust of the Imagists towards the "ignorant" readers may be exemplified by the following passage: *Pay no attention to the criticism of men who have never themselves written a notable work. Consider the discrepancies between the actual writing of the*

References

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Greek poets and dramatists, and the theories of Graeco-Roman grammarians, concocted to explain their meters. (Ezra Pound 1914:131).