

# Postgraduate English

[www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english](http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english)

ISSN 1756-9761

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Issue 16

September 2007

Editors: Ollie Taylor and Kostas Boyiopoulos

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## *Ezra Pound and the Romantic Ideal*

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Postgraduate English, Issue 16, September 2007

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When we consider the poetic ideas of Ezra Pound, we can discern something of their similarity to those of William Wordsworth. Indeed, it would not be outlandish to suggest that Pound's poetic aesthetic is a partial reformulation of those aspects of Wordsworth's ideas, that are now considered as bearing some relation to seventeenth-century philosophical empiricism. Therefore, before looking at Pound's theories, I will examine those of Wordsworth in order to contextualize Pound's aesthetic more fully.

It is becoming increasingly recognized that one of the most dominant aspects of Wordsworth's influence is that which derives from the philosophical empiricism upon which part of his poetic aesthetic was based. Wordsworth used this empiricism mainly as a rationale to champion a more descriptive and discursive poetry than arguably had been formerly the case. However, Wordsworth is not consistently empirical in the way a philosopher might aspire to be, and there is room within this argument for the recognition of his transcendentalism.

The claim that Wordsworth is an "empiricist" poet depends on selecting certain features of his work, whether ideas or stylistic qualities, which co-exist with other features of a different tendency, features, which, in their strongest form, merit the description "transcendentalist". Of course, Wordsworth is a poet, and although he may be a philosophical poet, he is not an academic philosopher; consequently, these two seemingly unrelated aspects in his work might be difficult to reduce to a cohesive conceptual system. In any case, the separation between the "empiricist" and the "transcendentalist" has long been recognised as by no means complete.

W. J. Bate, in *From Classic to Romantic*, demonstrated the links between empiricist ideas and Romantic theories of imagination not only in Wordsworth but

also in Coleridge and Keats. Consequently, all that can be claimed for here is to recognise and isolate a tendency, rather than to make a claim about the essential character of Wordsworth's work. However, it remains true to say that, even when "empiricism" ceases to have much relationship to Wordsworth's central purposes, he is still a poet who displays deference for things as they are, and who is relatively opposed to the fantastic.

Before I continue, I think it necessary to explain the way that the term "empiricism" will be used in this essay. The term is to be understood in its relation to the philosophical empiricism of Berkeley, Locke and Hume, which can be stated as the doctrine that all knowledge derives from experience. Anthony Easthope defines empiricism as "the epistemological belief that the real can be experienced and understood more or less directly by the unprejudiced observer"<sup>[1]</sup>. He identifies empiricism as functioning "in a scenario with three terms, these governing the object, the means of representation and the subject"<sup>[2]</sup>. He then elaborates upon each of these terms:

- (1) The object is assumed as existing in a real which is supposedly pre-given.
- (2) In principle, discourse is transparent so that the only problem for knowledge is, as it were, to go and look and see what things are *there*.
- (3) subject and object are joined reciprocally, so that the [...] subject and the [...] real correspond to each other. In that the [...] subject is [...] not constructed but always already merely there as the subject of or for knowledge/experience.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although there are philosophical niceties in the work of Berkeley and Hume that might lead one to object to the use of the word "real", Easthope's description is fair to the practical affects of empiricism.

That Wordsworth is a poet in whose work visual precision and description is of fundamental importance can no longer be held in doubt. In *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach*, Melvin Rader says of him:

His mind was distinguished by the combination of very sharp perception and very intense subjectivity. [...] But no less remarkable was the acuteness of his sensory perceptions. In his old age he remarked with justifiable pride: "I have hardly ever known anyone but myself who had a true eye for nature". This minute accuracy of his visual and auditory impressions was preserved by a most retentive memory.<sup>[4]</sup>

This aspect of his writing procedure is promoted in the titles of many of his poems such as: "Suggested by the view of Lancaster Castle", "Who fancied what a pretty sight", "On seeing a Needlecase in the Form of a Harp", "When looking at the present face of things", and *Descriptive Sketches*. Indeed, it was the visual precision and descriptiveness in Wordsworth's poetry that so enamoured Coleridge, in their early relationship. In *Coleridge's Philosophy of Nature*, J. A. Appleyard notes that while listening to Wordsworth's poetry a realisation that occurred to Coleridge was that, "it was possible to describe nature with a fresh simplicity and exactness that surpassed anything he had thought possible"<sup>[5]</sup>. This fidelity to nature was important to Wordsworth because for him nature was the interface between the material world and the spiritual, and he believed that by describing it accurately in poetry two things would be possible. The first would be, as Robert Langbaum says in *The Modern Spirit*, to "show the spiritual significance of the world, to show that we evolve a soul or identity through experience"<sup>[6]</sup>. The second, because the mind that perceives nature is "itself part of the nature it perceives", it is possible for us to have confidence "in the reality of ourselves and the external world"<sup>[7]</sup>. These two beliefs formed the main thrust of his poetic concerns, and much of his writing and poetry can be seen as an apologia for them.

David Pirie, in *William Wordsworth: The Poetry of Grandeur and of Tenderness*, comments that “instead of concocting imaginary worlds for our diversion” Wordsworth “directs us back to the one world which is real”<sup>[8]</sup>. In “Techniques of Truth in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Ezra Pound”, Geoffrey Clifford Jaggs notes that “his interest is not in language for itself, but as a means to an end. That end is an irreducibly empiricist one: we are of the earth, our nature bound up in the larger nature that sustains us”<sup>[9]</sup>. Of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth writes, “I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject, consequently, I hope that there is in these poems little falsehood of description”<sup>[10]</sup>. In a letter to his sister concerning Dryden he writes:

That his cannot be the language of imagination must have necessarily followed from this. That there is not a single image from Nature in the whole body of his works; and in his translation from Vergil, whenever Vergil can be fairly said to have had his eye upon his subject, Dryden always spoils the passage.<sup>[11]</sup>

In the dedication to Robert Jones at the beginning of *Descriptive Sketches* Wordsworth writes:

You will meet with few images without recollecting the spot where we observed them together; consequently, whatever is feeble in my design, or spiritless in my colouring, will be amply supplied by your memory.<sup>[12]</sup>

The two key words here are “observed” and “memory”. For Wordsworth memory is accurate observation replicated in the present. He calls upon Jones to overlook any faults in the poetic structure and evocation of feeling confident that the accurate description of the natural settings will rekindle his memory.

The 1802 Preface and Appendix to *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1798 “Advertisement” for it are pregnant with instances of Wordsworth’s favouring of the capacity for describing things experienced. In the Preface of 1802, Wordsworth writes:

The principle object, then, [...] was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or *describe* them, [...] in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect. [Emphasis added]<sup>[13]</sup>

It is noticeable that he links the recording of sense-data with the act of “imagining” as if they existed in a natural syllogistic unity. This conception of the imagination is not what might seem to us the “common-sense” one: that imagination flourishes not because we have things (images, objects etc.) presented to us phenomenologically but, rather, because of their absence which forces us to imagine them in our mind’s eye. Here, Wordsworth is advocating the use of imagination to shore up reality to make more explicit what has been seen. This is a form of defamiliarisation, which is indicative of much descriptive poetry.

In *The Romantic Predicament*, Geoffrey Thurley says, “In Romantic art the motifs (things, people, houses) themselves stand forth as content: they do not ‘mean’ anything else, they are not in that sense symbolic or allegoric”<sup>[14]</sup>. Although Thurley is correct in regarding the paucity of connotation in Romantic semantic usage, it should not be overlooked that Wordsworth, in particular, did indeed think of phenomena as symbolic, in the sense that they represent objectively what exists spiritually. Like Coleridge, he regards phenomena as a veil that enshrouds a superior reality normally imperceptible. In this sense, his poetry can be seen as a mimesis of the “unseen”. Coleridge concedes as much in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”:

On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem  
 Less gross than bodily; and of such hues  
 As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes  
 Spirits perceive his presence.<sup>[15]</sup> (lines 40-3)

Wordsworth is advocating, not so much to obviate the need for symbolism altogether, but a new use for it. He wants to apply something equivalent to the old symbology: to travel in an indirect route to make objects emblematic. However, to do this he has to increasingly depend upon the particular, as this is the only gateway to the spiritual.

When we examine the critical reaction to the Romantics in the wake of the growing acceptance of Modernism in the early twentieth century, we find that the majority of criticism is hostile to Wordsworth and many other romantic poets. This criticism is largely aimed at the transcendental and metaphysical aspects of Romanticism rather than its empirical dimensions. F. R. Leavis, for instance, criticised Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" for what he saw as its confused imagery due to Shelley's "weak grasp upon the actual"<sup>[16]</sup>. Edward Larrissy lists the romantic qualities deprecated by Modernists as being "discursiveness, the emphasis on personality, the use of the language of the emotions and the aesthetic ideal of organic form"<sup>[17]</sup>. In their place, Modernists privileged "impersonality, directness of presentation and [...] the analogy of mechanical or sculptural form, as opposed to organic form"<sup>[18]</sup>. Moreover, T. S. Eliot's mentor, Irving Babbitt, saw Romanticism's foregrounding of the spontaneous and the individualistic, coupled with its philosophical thought, as being negatively influential upon modern democratic society. In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, he says that these romantic principles lead "to an anarchistic individualism that tends in turn to destroy civilisation"<sup>[19]</sup>.

George Bornstein in his Introduction to *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition* explains the Modernist reaction to Romanticism thus:

Modernist criticism often conflated strong, early Romanticism with its later and weaker derivatives. Early twentieth-century writers understandably attacked the debased Romanticism around them and then read their objections to its tone, conventions, and world view back onto the high Romantics.<sup>[20]</sup>

The result of this was to create a false perception among Modernist writers and critics that there was a permanent fracture between Romanticism and Modernism. In reality, however, there was no such breach. The actual richness of description present in Wordsworth, for instance, was sustained through Symbolist poetry and into Modernist poetry. Although the ideas behind Symbolist poetry were born of mystical and spiritual concerns that had little to do with the empiricism (if not the transcendentalism) of Wordsworth, the sensuous aspects of Symbolist poetry itself (divorced from its theory) were much praised by Modernists such as Ezra Pound who said, “In Rimbaud the image stands clean, unencumbered by non-functioning words”<sup>[21]</sup>.

Pound who is often considered as important in advocating a break from the modalities of Romantic practice in actuality was more charitable to these modes. His real focus of attack was not so much aimed at Romanticism as at the stylistic flourishes of late Victorian poetry. Although it is certainly true that on many occasions he was critical of the Romantics, it should be noted that this was not because he disagreed with their poetical ideals and practice but, rather, because they typified for him establishment poetry. This is actually where the radicalism of Pound finds its voice. Hugh Witemeyer expresses this view in his essay “Walter Savage Landor and Ezra Pound”:

Pound reacted specifically to a late Victorian reading of the Romantics which enshrined Wordsworth and Keats with Milton and Tennyson in a pantheon of stylistic and social respectability. This ‘cult of the innocuous’ impeded the acceptance of the modern poetry which Pound’s circle was creating.<sup>[22]</sup>

Witemeyer further states:

Pound’s strategy was to offer a deliberately subversive reading of literary history intended to shock received opinion. [...] If Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson had been made respectable establishment figures whose



influence was grown oppressive, then they had to be undermined and blasted to make way for the new poetry.<sup>[23]</sup>

Of Pound's omission of any reference to Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake in his *The ABC of Reading* while giving space to Browning, Crabbe, Landor and Beddoes, Witemeyer says: "this emphasis is no mere Browningsque obsession with *scriptores ignoti*, the unknown secondary artists of the period. It is a revolutionary effort to establish a heritage for a literary counter-culture"<sup>[24]</sup>. That Witemeyer's analysis is reasonable is supported by Pound's respect for Wordsworth's poetic empiricism. Herbert N. Schneidau says that Pound, despite his, "dismissal of Wordsworth as a 'silly old sheep'" still grudgingly ascribed to him "an unquestionable genius, [...] for presentation of natural detail"<sup>[25]</sup>.

Moreover, that Pound not only shared Wordsworth's fascination with objects but also his partiality towards prose as superior to poetic artifice is illustrated in the following: "In a curious extension of their parallel attacks on 'poetic diction', each [he and Wordsworth] offered prose as a model for good poetry"<sup>[26]</sup>. Schneidau then quotes the following lines from Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "There neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition [...] some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written"<sup>[27]</sup>. He then comments, "With this we may compare Pound's belief in the 'prose tradition in verse', his dictum that poetry must be 'as well written as prose', and so on"<sup>[28]</sup>. Indeed, Pound's comment in a letter dated 4 February 1913 to Alice Corbin Henderson (the Associate Editor of *Poetry*) on one of her poems is, "Your most obvious superficial fault is that you invert, and in various ways disturb the natural prose order of the words"<sup>[29]</sup>. Adding, "Every alteration of this sort, that is not made for definite and worthy reason weakens the impact"<sup>[30]</sup>. Moreover, to William Carlos Williams on the 19 December 1913 with regard to Williams's poem "La Flor" he warns, "Your syntax still strays occasionally from the simple order of natural speech"<sup>[31]</sup>. In a Preface (dated 1914) for Lionel Johnson's *Poetical Works* Pound writes:

Now Lionel Johnson cannot be shown to be in accord with our present doctrines and ambitions. His language is a bookish dialect, or rather it is not a dialect, it is a curial speech, and our aim is natural speech, the language as spoken. We desire the words of poetry to follow the natural order. We would write nothing that we might not say actually in life—under emotion.<sup>[32]</sup>

This advocacy of a style stripped of late Victorian artifice and geared towards a communicative functionality is similar to Wordsworth's plea for a plainer poetic language. Moreover, in his essay "A Retrospect", Pound echoes Wordsworth further, advising aspiring poets to: "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something. Don't use such expressions as 'dim lands *of peace*'. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realising that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol"<sup>[33]</sup>. Even W. B. Yeats saw some value in this approach when he said that Pound "helps me to get back to the definite and concrete, away from modern abstractions"<sup>[34]</sup>.

In "How to Read", Pound laments the advent of "the loose use of words"<sup>[35]</sup> that appeared during the Renaissance and which replaced what he saw as the more precise language of the medieval period:

What the renaissance gained in direct examination of natural phenomena, it in part lost in losing the feel and desire for exact descriptive terms. I mean that the medieval mind had little but words to deal with, and it was more careful in its definitions and verbiage. It did not define a gun in terms that would just as well define an explosion, nor explosions in terms that would define triggers.<sup>[36]</sup>

Furthermore, in the same essay, he writes:

One "moves" the reader only by clarity. In depicting the motions of the "human heart" the durability of the writing depends on the exactitude. [...]

It is as important for the purpose of thought to keep language efficient as it is in surgery to keep tetanus bacilli out of one's bandages.<sup>[37]</sup>

In *The A B C of Reading*, he writes: "Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear"<sup>[38]</sup>. In addition, in the same book he praises Homer's descriptive verity: "The sheer literary qualities in Homer are such that a physician has written a book to prove that Homer must have been an army doctor. (When he describes certain blows and their effect, the wounds are said to be accurate, and the descriptions fit for coroner's inquest.)"<sup>[39]</sup>. Additionally, he says that Catullus is in some ways better than Sappho is "for his economy of words"<sup>[40]</sup>. Whilst admitting Ovid's unevenness as a writer Pound, nevertheless, recognises that: "He is clear. His verse is as lucid as prose"<sup>[41]</sup>. In "A Retrospect", the first two of Pound's three principles of poetry are:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.<sup>[42]</sup>

These principles are echoed in his letters such as the one to publisher Harriet Monroe in October 1912: "This is the sort of American stuff that I can show here and in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination"<sup>[43]</sup>. In addition to his three principles of poetry in "A Retrospect" are his three categories of poetry in "How to Read". The first he calls Melopeia where the words are charged with a musical property "over and above their plain meaning"<sup>[44]</sup>. The second is Phanopeia, which corresponds to the commonsense notion we have of imagination: "a casting of images upon visual imagination"<sup>[45]</sup>. The third is Logopeia that "employs words not only for their direct meaning" but also for "ironical play"<sup>[46]</sup>. The first category relies upon sound (internal/external), the second on vision (internal), and the third on semantics. All three are essential to poetry. Yet, Pound seems to have reservations about the last when he calls it a

“most tricky and undependable mode”<sup>[47]</sup>. This is presumably because its possibilities for “ironical play” allow for a less precise hermeneutic.

However, it was not always this way with Pound, as the following passage from Paul Smith’s *Pound Revised* makes clear:

What I think principally emanates from late-nineteenth-century verse, and what Pound’s early work reduplicates, is precisely a concern for the artifice of poetic production and an ensuing respect for the autonomy of the language of poetry: both of these elements enter Pound’s writing in a much more solid and formative manner than do any of the superficial elements that the critics point to. Whereas these early stylistic and thematic influences have most often been extirpated (or considerably refined) by the time of the *Cantos*, what does remain as an upshot for Pound’s entire creative output is the question of the condition and status of autonomous poetic language.<sup>[48]</sup>

And he cites Pound’s “Cino” as “a poem overtly concerned with the terms of its own production”<sup>[49]</sup> saying that the poem’s language, “is allowed to be aware of itself and of its many layers and registers within the poem’s genesis—aware, indeed, of its whole role in the production of meanings”<sup>[50]</sup>. Smith points out that Swinburne’s “refusal to allow writing to be subservient to the expression of poetic reflection and impression”<sup>[51]</sup> was influential on early Pound:

What the young Pound learned from him, then, can be said to lie precisely in this trenchant attitude to the very materiality of writing, its activity.<sup>[52]</sup>

Pound’s lesson from Swinburne, then, far from being an overt thematic one, resides in the recognition of the materiality of language and its tendency to break the barriers of that view of poetry which wishes to see language as simply a vehicle.<sup>[53]</sup>

The reflexive strain in his early writings lays great emphasis on the particular qualities of poetic language and poetic technique—on the materiality of language and general poetic procedures.<sup>[54]</sup>

Smith's general contention is that by 1915 Pound suppressed his "recognition of the primacy of poetic materiality",<sup>[55]</sup> preferring instead to redevelop "a notion of the master craftsman (with both words of the phrase carrying their weight) in order to defuse the power of poetic materiality"<sup>[56]</sup> Smith says: "It is with the distinctions that this new category allows him that Pound begins to redefine poetry so that materiality will finally not distort substance—in other words, to build a stronger vehicle for whatever substance the poet might wish to communicate"<sup>[57]</sup>. Smith explains this sea change in the following way:

The early poems had obviously served as an arena for experimentation [...] But the fate of most of this early work was excision from the canon, on the grounds that such writing can say "nothing in particular". [...] And so in his Imagist and Vorticist periods he embarks upon a programme designed to efface the power of the signifier and replace it with a controlled and mastered language—one which supposedly can come into unambiguous contact with the truth of the world.<sup>[58]</sup>

In conclusion, he says:

Pound's Imagism, then, relies on a belief that a certain technique in language will allow language to embody the world and become efficiently denotative, capable of reproducing an external origin quite simply. As David Simpson puts it, this involves a "realist" poetry which "stands in an authoritarian relationship to its readers. It demands reception, it does not invite or necessitate interpretation."<sup>[59]</sup>

It would appear, then, according to Smith, that Pound's participation in "the revolution of the word" was motivated by a desire for his poetry to be accepted within the traditional literary canon of the day. Consequently, he abandoned his earlier mode of writing in favour of that which he recognised as more acceptable

to this literary establishment. Any such writing, of course, would have to deny the materiality of language, preferring instead to focus on language's denotative aspect—an aspect that, as Simpson infers, results in a poetics grounded in an autocratic denial of hermeneutic plurality.

Perhaps Pound's rejection of poetic artifice was also due to his reading of Ernest Fenollosa's *Essay on the Chinese Written Character*.<sup>[60]</sup> In *The A B C of Reading*, Pound says that Fenollosa was attempting to 'explain the Chinese ideograph [ideogram] as a means of transmission and registration of thought'.<sup>[61]</sup> In doing so he, "got to the root of the matter, to the root of the difference between what is valid in Chinese thinking and invalid or misleading in a great deal of European thinking and language"<sup>[62]</sup>. Pound expresses European thinking as follows: "In Europe, if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction"<sup>[63]</sup>.

In contrast to this, "Fenollosa emphasises the method of science, 'which is the method of poetry', as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion', and is the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing"<sup>[64]</sup>. The Chinese ideograph unlike the Egyptian method of using "abbreviated pictures to represent sounds"<sup>[65]</sup> uses

abbreviated pictures AS pictures, that is to say, Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It *means* the thing or the action or the situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures.<sup>[66]</sup>

In this way Fenollosa, "was telling how and why a language written in this way simply HAD TO STAY POETIC; simply couldn't help being and staying poetic in a way that a column of English type might very well not stay poetic"<sup>[67]</sup>. An obvious objection to Fenollosa's theory is that it is truer of visual art than literature. Pound unwittingly hints at this when he writes: "This is nevertheless

the RIGHT WAY to study poetry, or literature, or painting. It is in fact the way the more intelligent members of the general public DO study painting”<sup>[68]</sup>.

However, another objection can be found. G. C. Jaggs draws our attention to Smith’s main criticism of Pound that he quotes from the same book by Smith to which I refer above:

Language for [Pound] has the innate ability to close the gap between its signifier and its signified and so refer directly to the referent [...] the fundamental Poundian metaphor [...] assumes that language is co-extensive, analogous and co-operative with the natural world. This [...] is thereby reductive of language and/or the natural world to a tautology: the signifier is limited, chained not to another signifier but to the functional expression of the natural world.<sup>[69]</sup>

In light of the foregoing examination of Pound’s poetic aesthetic, it is reasonable to suggest that Pound rather than being a progressive force in poetry was in actuality a rather conservative figure. This can be seen further if we look at his connection to the Edwardian poet Edward Thomas. Andrew Motion in *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* views Thomas’s as foreshadowing in a more discreet manner innovations made more explicit in Modernist works.<sup>[70]</sup> Motion sees Thomas as writing, “slightly to the left of centre—drawing much from the Georgians but also anticipating the Modernists in several important respects”<sup>[71]</sup>. He argues that, “the Imagists’ juxtaposition of miniature fragments, and the Modernists’ generous use of collage and montage, both find their discreet counterpart in his [Thomas’s] poems”<sup>[72]</sup>. Motion then analyses Thomas’s poem “The Long Small Room”, saying that it is “typical of the way in which he [Thomas] refers to a variety of objects with such quick clarity that orthodox pictorial and narrative techniques are replaced by what one of his earliest reviewers called “disconnected impressions”<sup>[73]</sup>

Here is the poem:

The long small room that showed willows in the west  
 Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,  
 Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed  
 What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse, and the sparrow peeped  
 In from the ivy round the casement thick.  
 Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep  
 The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow, and mouse  
 That witnessed what they could never understand  
 Or alter or prevent in the dark house.  
 One thing remains the same – this is my right hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,  
 Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,  
 Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.  
 The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.<sup>[74]</sup>

Motion notes that “the sense of insecurity and isolation conveyed here [in this poem] in visual terms appears elsewhere [in other poems] in linguistic ones”<sup>[75]</sup>. That the visual is foregrounded in this poem is obvious but he fails to direct us to examples of the latter (the linguistic terms) in Thomas’s other poems.

He also acknowledges the retrograde tendencies inherent in Modernist poetry—tendencies that arguably have their genesis in Romantic roots. Quoting Amy Lowell’s six attributes of Imagist poetry, listed in her anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, Motion writes:



The fact that these aims are sufficiently indeterminate to describe not only Thomas but a wide variety of authors suggests that strict Imagists were not espousing entirely new principles, but isolating a number of old ones and thereby making them seem unfamiliar. Imagism, in other words, is a matter of selection and amplification. The same can also be said of full-fledged Modernism, which shares many of its strategies.<sup>[176]</sup>

Indeed, Thomas approved of Pound's *Personae* because unlike the florid style of the late Victorians it contained "no golden words shot with meaning; a temperate use of images and none far fetched"<sup>[177]</sup>. Thomas's praise for what can only be described as a Wordsworthian plainness of speech contributes to a confirmation of the largely unbroken link between the old and the "new" poetic, which Pound and Lowell failed to recognise. It is appropriate that such praise should come from a poet whose poetic aesthetic prompted him to write in defence of it: "A poem of the old kind has a simple fundamental meaning which every sane reader can agree upon; above and beyond this each one builds as he can or must".<sup>[178]</sup> As we have seen, Pound would have agreed with such a view.

In this essay I have attempted to show that the poetic ideas of Ezra Pound have similarities to the poetic ideas of William Wordsworth, especially with regard to Wordsworth's advocating a naturalistic and descriptive mode of poetic writing that became the principal style of poetry for the rest of the nineteenth century and the greater part of the twentieth. Additionally, the essay has argued that the received opinion that Pound's poetical radicalism was largely motivated by his antipathy to Romantic poetry is somewhat exaggerated. Rather his radicalism was the result of his reaction to the stylistic excesses of late Victorian poetry, and as such can be paralleled with Wordsworth's reaction to the stylistic excesses of late seventeenth century poetry. To this extent, Pound's poetic ideas can be seen as a continuation of certain Romantic ideals in poetry; ideals primarily articulated by Wordsworth, having been developed from seventeenth century empiricist philosophy.

**Endnotes**

<sup>[1]</sup> Anthony Easthope, 'How Good is Seamus Heaney?', *English*, 46. 184, (1997), 21-36 (p.21).

<sup>[2]</sup> Easthope, p.21.

<sup>[3]</sup> Easthope, p.21.

<sup>[4]</sup> Melvin Rader, *Wordsworth: A Philosophical Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p.115.

<sup>[5]</sup> J. A. Appleyard, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature: The Development of a Concept of Poetry* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p.67.

<sup>[6]</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p.18.

<sup>[7]</sup> Langbaum, p.20.

<sup>[8]</sup> David B. Pirie, *William Wordsworth: The Poetry of Grandeur and Tenderness* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.1.

<sup>[9]</sup> Geoffrey Clifford Jaggs, 'Techniques of Truth in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Ezra Pound' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2002), p.121.

<sup>[10]</sup> Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 245.

<sup>[11]</sup> *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn, rev. by C. L. Shaver, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935-1939), p.641.

<sup>[12]</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by T. Hutchinson and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), Wordsworth Editions 1994, p.10.

<sup>[13]</sup> *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, p.123.

<sup>[14]</sup> Geoffrey Thurley, *The Romantic Predicament* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.69.

<sup>[15]</sup> *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by J. D. Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1938), p.93.

<sup>[16]</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), p.206.

<sup>[17]</sup> Edward Larrissy, 'Modernism and Postmodernity', in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.665-74 (p.665.).

<sup>[18]</sup> Larrissy, Roe, *Romanticism*, p.666.

<sup>[19]</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau & Romanticism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1919, 1947, 1977) p.280.

<sup>[20]</sup> George Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p.8.

<sup>[21]</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, [n.d.] ), p.33.

<sup>[22]</sup> Hugh Witemeyer, 'Walter Savage Landor and Ezra Pound', in *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*, ed. by George Bornstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), pp.147-63 (p.147).

<sup>[23]</sup> Witemeyer, Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, p.148.

- [24] Witemeyer, Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, p.148
- [25] Herbert N. Schneidau, 'Pound and Wordsworth on Poetry and Prose', in Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, pp.133-45 (p.134).
- [26] Schneidau, Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, p.134.
- [27] Schneidau, Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, p.134.
- [28] Schneidau, Bornstein, *Romantic and Modern*, p.134.
- [29] *The Letters of Ezra Pound to Alice Corbin Henderson*, ed. by Ira B. Nadel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p.29.
- [30] *Letters*, ed. Nadel, p.29.
- [31] *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. by D. D. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p.28.
- [32] Quoted in Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling: Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p.122.
- [33] *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, [n.d.] ), pp.4-5.
- [34] Quoted in Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962), p.272. Of Yeats's Romantic lineage Frank Kermode says, 'It is not really surprising that what is often regarded as Symbolist influences in Yeats can be traced to earlier Romantic thought'. See *Romantic Image*, p.107.
- [35] Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.21.
- [36] Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, pp.21-22.
- [37] Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.22.
- [38] Ezra Pound, *The A B C of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, [n.d.] ), p.32.
- [39] *Pound, A B C*, p.43.

<sup>[40]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.48.

<sup>[41]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.48.

<sup>[42]</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.3. Herbert Read says of these two principles that they ‘come from Hulme, almost in his own words’. He then quotes Hulme: ‘Always seek the hard, definite, personal word’ and ‘All emotion depends on real solid vision or sound. It is physical’. See *The True Voice of Feeling*, p.121.

<sup>[43]</sup> Pound, *Selected Letters*, ed. Page, p.11.

<sup>[44]</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.25.

<sup>[45]</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.25.

<sup>[46]</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.25.

<sup>[47]</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. Eliot, p.25.

<sup>[48]</sup> Paul Smith, *Pound Revised* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), p.8.

<sup>[49]</sup> Smith, p.8.

<sup>[50]</sup> Smith, p.9.

<sup>[51]</sup> Smith, p.10.

<sup>[52]</sup> Smith, p.10.

<sup>[53]</sup> Smith, p.15.

<sup>[54]</sup> Smith, p.15.

<sup>[55]</sup> Smith, p.17.

<sup>[56]</sup> Smith, p.17.

<sup>[57]</sup> Smith, p.17.

<sup>[58]</sup> Smith, pp.17-18.

<sup>[59]</sup> Smith, p.21.

<sup>[60]</sup> Read notes that Hulme's statement on thought and language ('Thought is prior to language and consists in the simultaneous presentation of the mind of two different images. Language is only a more or less feeble way of doing this'), 'anticipates Pound's "ideogrammatic method"', which he supposedly owes to Fenollosa. See *The True Voice of Feeling*, p 109.

<sup>[61]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.19.

<sup>[62]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.19.

<sup>[63]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.19.

<sup>[64]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.20.

<sup>[65]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.21.

<sup>[66]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.21.

<sup>[67]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.22.

<sup>[68]</sup> Pound, *A B C*, p.23. Read notes that in a letter to William Carlos Williams dated 21 October 1908, Pound says that the ultimate accomplishment of poetry should be: 'To paint the thing as I see it'. See *The True Voice of Feeling*, p.105.

<sup>[69]</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Clifford Jaggs, 'Techniques of Truth in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Ezra Pound' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2002), p.127.

<sup>[70]</sup> Interestingly, Edna Longley in 'The Great War, History, and the English Lyric', says that Thomas's poem 'Lob', 'preempts *The Waste Land*' when he writes lines such as: 'This is tall Tom that bore / The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall / Once talked'. See *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, p. 67.

<sup>[71]</sup> Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1980), p.2. It should be pointed out that it is important for us not to conclude from this analysis that Modernist and Georgian styles are to be equated.

<sup>[72]</sup> Motion, p.3.

<sup>[73]</sup> Motion, p.3.

<sup>[74]</sup> Motion, p.4.

<sup>[75]</sup> Motion, p.4.

<sup>[76]</sup> Motion, p.3.

<sup>[77]</sup> Quoted in Motion, p.2.

<sup>[78]</sup> Quoted in Motion, p.3.

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### **First Response**

Too often, Modernism is seen as a wholesale rejection of Romantic poetic precepts and aesthetic ideals, and as a principled return to a more impersonal, concrete and Classical set of artistic procedures. The virtue of this essay is that it challenges any easy separation of Romanticism and Modernism, and it encourages



a fresh look at the continuities in poetic theory from the late eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century. One vital continuity is found in the empirical grounding that seems to persist in poetry, despite the transcendental yearnings of a good deal of Romantic and Victorian lyricism. The essay also prompts a reconsideration of the role of Ezra Pound as a mediator, and perhaps even as a poetic conservative, in reformulating, rather than simply blasting away, inherited Romantic ideals. Pound is discovered to have more positive and considered views on the work of Victorian poets such as Algernon Charles Swinburne than many readers might expect. The common ground between Pound and Edward Thomas likewise suggests that accounts of Modernism as a radical departure from earlier literary ideals are sometimes overstated. At the same time, other Modernist poets, including T.S. Eliot, clearly did see themselves working in opposition to some of the basic formulations of Romantic theory, including the notion of poetry as ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’. This essay opens up new paths of investigation and calls for a new enquiry into the origins of Modernism and its complex relations with Romanticism.