

## Explication: "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound

Without having much knowledge of Pound's other works, my feeling is that this poem is probably the most successful in terms of his own rules for imagism. The synergism of using THE precise word; using no excess words; creating a rhythm which mimics common speech, yet at the same time, a rhythm germane to the subject; together with freedom of subject matter produces in this poem a singular example of his manifesto. The poem itself, seems to become a living object in itself, gleaming brightly through a dark fog of reality, transcending the words which bring it life.

The poem-object brings with it no text to explain itself—which is how it transcends its word units—like any object found in nature. Since no word exists without contributing to its overall image, they function together so tightly that they become the object. No word could be removed without destroying the image, or seriously flawing it. Even the simple articles and prepositions, "the," "a," "of," "in," and "on" function just as crucially as the nouns and adjectives. For example, 'The apparition' is a solid unit. "The" points to a definite apparition which emerges from the "faces" in the crowd. 'The' crowd also points to a particular crowd to rivet the reader's attention as if the crowd actually exists before the reader's eyes. The use of "a" would not have the same power since "a crowd" could be anywhere, therefore, not before us now. "The" crowd makes the idea of a crowd real.

On the other hand, "a" bough suggests the idea of a bough. The actual bough isn't real, the faces don't actually exist on the bough. But, the idea of them could exist on any bough, therefore, Pound uses the indefinite article "a." "A bough" is a crucial unit. It can't be "the bough," because it doesn't matter which bough is suggested. Changing to a definite bough would materially change the content and suggestion of the entire poem. As an indefinite, the bough remains within the realm of the universal, unlike a definite bough.

Pound masterfully uses a pronoun to refer to faces, rather than saying "the faces." By using a pronoun, he personalizes them and makes them real. It seems as if he's embracing them or gesturing with his hands showing us which faces he means. The definite article "the" when referring to people becomes as indefinite as "a" does to objects. A pronoun must be used to make the faces exist in the eternal moment of this poem.

So, Pound's use of precise words applies as much to articles and prepositions as it does to descriptors. This is why "apparition" works so well with "these faces." The word "apparition" suggests ideas like lifeless, floating, impersonal, even invisible. Thus, the faces he makes personal and real to us, the word "apparition" does something to them—they're transformed and made uniquely different. It's interesting to note that Pound uses no verbs in this exquisitely short poem. But, the word "apparition" functions like a verb, in a sense. Though the apparition itself didn't change the faces, the faces became an apparition. The two are inextricably linked in a way that implies action of some kind.

This same connection exists between crowd and apparition, since the faces are "in" the crowd. We can't know if the crowd causes the transformation of the faces, but the suggestion is there. Although, the pronoun mitigates against that suggestion since there could be other faces the poet doesn't include for our view. So, we really can't know the exact cause of the transformations of these particular faces, but we are guided to consider "the crowd" as a culprit when we apply Pound's strict rule of using only the precise word. Thus, "crowd" takes on unusual importance.

What I've said so far about articles and prepositions holds true for the title as it does for the actual poem. In fact, the title is a crucial element of the poem. "Metro" is already a specific place, requiring the definite article "the." "A Station" becomes a universal element. It doesn't really matter which station, just as it doesn't matter which bough. The fact that the speaker doesn't mention which station adds to the mystery of the image created by "apparition." The station becomes as allusive as all the faces do and loses its

identity just as the faces do. Since the speaker is there, it seems he's also in danger of becoming lost or an apparition.

The objects in each line become progressively smaller in each successive line. For instance, the size of "station" and "Metro" are larger than the next series in the following line, "faces" and "crowd," which is larger than the final series of "petals" and "bough." This progression of large to small significantly adds to the total image. The central element, "these faces," are at once diminished in importance since they follow the enormous Metro system, as well as by the actual physical placement of them in the poem, *beneath* the Metro. They are in reality inside the Metro, and so they are in the poem, as well, because they are sandwiched between lines one and three. They are further diminished by the capitalization of Metro and Station. Words in capitals imply importance in relation to those which aren't. Words in a title also signify importance. So, by the time "faces" appear in the poem, they have lost significance, even though they are the central element of the poem. Of course, this adds to the image of faces lost within a crowd. But even more significant, they are lost within a man-made structure: the Metro. The faces are lost altogether by the third line when they become merely an idea of petals clinging to a wet bough. "These faces" are also swallowed up within one large, floating "apparition" before we even get to them on the page.

Use of precise words becomes most evident in the last line. The faces become petals stuck on a wet tree limb. The combined images of "faces" and "apparition" easily translates to petals. Visually, the relationship of faces and petals come from their similarities of roundness and color. Most often when one thinks of flower petals, especially those stuck on a bough, one thinks of fruit blossoms which are generally pale, pinkish-white. The naturally delicate image of petals transfers to the faces. That the petals are stuck to a "wet" bough connects with the image of the "apparition," since wet petals would tend to be transparent in quality. Thus, the word "petal" intricately connects "faces" with "apparition."

So, we begin to see how this poem wonderfully complies with his rule to use crystal clear images, and not general images. These petals aren't stuck to just any tree limb, rather to "a wet, black bough." This image can't escape anyone old enough to recall the way trees look after a rain storm. Especially at night, the boughs look dark—or black—and they shine from the wetness. The use of two very common, simple terms, "wet" and "black," create a clear, stunning image, a mark of Pound's genius. Note, too, how the word "bough" is the correct word here, rather than limb or branch, which I'll explain later.

The bough's image also mimics the nature of a subway system. That is, a subway is long and tubular, full of trains which are long and somewhat tubular, similar to the general image of a bough. So, the visual image of the bough reinforces the initial image of the subway, tying the elements together even tighter. Further, the wet bough also takes on similar qualities of trains since both are dark in color, and a train's paint tends to have a sheen. The petals on the bough, then, resemble the faces in the window of a train.

There is nothing abstract about the images Pound creates. An apparition is abstract-like, but this quality he specifically wants. Every word contributes to the total visual image, combining and connecting each other into a unified whole. The resulting image emerges as an object.

Pound stresses that the rhythm of poetry should reflect common speech. The two lines of this poem and title comply to that rule, with one exception: there is no verb. The verb "to be" is implied, however: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd *are like*/Petals on a wet, black bough." The words create the rhythm which conforms to speech, and more importantly, that rhythm contributes to the image. The sound of the words "The apparition" is soft, airy, and light, like the meaning of the word. The rest of the line continues with a similar sound, the harshest sound coming from the hard "c" and "ow" sound in "crowd," and to a lesser degree, the long "e" in "these." That 'crowd' should be the first truly harsh sound adds to the idea that "crowd" is implicated somehow in causing the transformation of the faces into an apparition.

Also, the four syllables in "apparition" perpetuate the soft sound inherent in the word because of the length of time it takes to say it. On the other hand, the short monosyllable words which follow appropriately speed up the tempo, producing a feeling of rushing forward. The word 'Petals' almost explodes from the mouth after the end stop of the first line. This explosive sound is almost startling contrasted to the softness of the previous line. The word "petal" forces a brief hesitation before reading on. Then the mutes, or hard consonants such as p, t, b, and k, in "wet, black bough." forces specific vocal

emphasis of each word, slowing the reader down when speaking them. This harsh, staccato-like speech of the last line clashes considerably with the soft, flowing sound of the preceding line. The contrast, then, generates a threatening feeling as the words seem to spit out. So, the combination of the word's sounds and the staccato rhythm color the 'black bough' as something bleak or ominous. In addition, the end sound of 'bough' trails off in the breath, falling off with nothing to stop it or bring it to an end. It suggests, then, that the bough is unstable and will fall from the tree. This adds to the ominous image of the black bough, suggesting death.

"**The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter**," while quite a different kind of poem, subtly contains some of Pound's rules. The poem is written in a narrative style, reflecting common speech and is free from any regular meter. The images are clear, changing distinctly with each stanza. For example, the first stanza suggests the playfulness of childhood and innocence. The girl's bangs are cut "straight across [her] forehead." This hair style clearly suggests a female child since it is a common way to cut little girl's hair. This image is enhanced by the boy on stilts, playing with plums, and the girl playing about the front gate.

The second stanza abruptly changes tone from playfulness to seriousness. The speaker admits her shyness saying that she never laughed, kept her head lowered, and looked at the wall. Her image here contrasts markedly with the image of playful children. Then, again, in stanza three the tone changes. The speaker exhibits a newly acquired passion and sexual desire. She stops "scowling" and desires to be mingled with him forever.

A dramatic turn comes in stanza four, introducing agitation and turmoil. Nature reflects and intensifies the speaker's anxiety through the monkeys making "sorrowful noise overhead," and the river full of swirling eddies. She notices the "paired butterflies." She feels disconnected since she's no longer coupled. The metaphor of butterflies "yellow with August" is exquisitely simple, yet effective, and reveals the speaker's concern of growing old and possibly barren. Simply stated, short phrases like, "They hurt me. I grow older" emphasize her internal pangs at being alone, unable to fulfill her role as a woman.

Although this poem is considerably longer than "Metro," Pound draws clear and crisp images using precise words and eliminating extraneous words. The uniquely long lines of the first stanza contain five to eight stresses, unlike the rest of the poem, emphasizing a playful nature. The remaining stanzas predominately contain four or five stresses, adding a more serious note. The shorter lines also suggest that one can never return to the innocence of childhood.

## **EZRA POUND'S "RULES GOVERNING THE POETIC RENAISSANCE"**

1. Use precise word—not decorative. For example, the most appropriate word, thus doesn't have to conform to metrical rhythm. Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
2. Use crystal clear images, not general images. "Be Dante-esque, not Miltonic." Dante created horrifying images, clear and vivid--VISUAL. Milton wrote abstract and philosophical, contorted syntacs, vague Latinate words. "Go in fear of abstractions."
3. Poet must have absolute freedom of choice for subject matter (Victorian era still lingered then and he wanted to break from this. (But it was more tastefully done then, unlike now)
4. New forms for new subjects. Get rid of old ways: "They're all handcuffs and chains that disallow poet to say what he wants to say." Ginsburg said, "First thought, best thought." Don't be encumbered by the thought process.
5. Create new rhythms. Compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. "I think one should write vers lebre (free verse) when one "must," that is to say, only when the "thing" builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set meters, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the "thing," more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse; a rhythm which discontents one with set iambic or set anapestic."