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Masterpiece

'In a Station of the Metro' (1912) by Ezra Pound

A Poem Distills Life and Death Into Two Lines

Changing the way poetry worked.



Photo: Ryan Inzana

by Willard Spiegelman

It is the most anthologized “Imagist” poem, written in 1912 by Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and published in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* in 1913. It began life as 30 lines; then it became two, after Pound tossed the original away and started again. It is “In a Station of the Metro”:

*The apparition of these faces in the
crowd;*

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Before he went certifiably mad, fulminating with anti-American, anti-Semitic rants during World War II, Pound was among the major poets of modernism. He worked as W.B. Yeats’s secretary; most famously, he helped T.S. Eliot whittle “The Waste Land” down to half its original size. Before he became an avatar of bigness with his sprawling, multipart “Cantos,” he was a master of minimalism.

But big things often come in small packages. If you include, as you must, the title, the poem has three lines. Together, they suggest a loose version of a Japanese haiku (with 6-8-6 words per line, in place of the classic classic 5-7-5 syllables). If you consider only the actual poem's two lines, you have 14 words, and therefore a thing that maintains, owing to its 8 and 6 combination, a resemblance to another short form: the Italian sonnet. The numbers dazzle.

The words themselves dazzle even more. Nothing could be simpler, or more complex. We know the backstory. Pound was at the Metro stop at Paris's Place de la Concorde. He saw some people. His vision inspired a response. This took the form of a metaphor, a poet's essential tool: X "is," or "is like" Y. Pound's is not only a comparison; it's also an equation. Pound makes pairings. Line 1 shows us people, almost ghostly, and Line 2 what they resemble, petals.

We can go more deeply. "Apparition," the poem's longest word, implies otherworldliness, even deadliness. Living people have become unreal. They also become examples of nature's fragile beauty. Rain has polished the petals, which have fallen from their stems and attached themselves to the boughs of the tree from which they will soon drop, farther, to the ground. Transience, mortality and ghostliness come together.

Pound aimed to do away with late Victorian poetic folderol and verbiage. His flowers are mostly unembellished. They are petals, not even entire flowers. (And his people are mere faces. Parts stand for wholes.) The poem is adjective-light. Aside from the neutral "these," we have only the strong, simple "wet" and "black."

He also wanted to change poetry's sounds. No more rhyme, no more lilting rhythms: instead, easy, free verse. But wait: The little couplet has its own music. "Crowd" and "bough" make a partial rhyme; "black" and "bough" are linked by alliteration. There's even a rhyme hidden in the first syllable of "petals" and "wet." Pound was a sly versifier.

His poem is like a snapshot in its seeming offhandedness. It freezes its two images, stimulus and response, into a single frame across its two lines. The break between them is the poem's most tantalizing element. The central equation is unstated yet strongly present. You might call it "apparitional."

Any English teacher trying to drum into his students the importance of punctuation will have a field day with that semicolon at the end of line 1. We would expect a colon, which equates what comes before with what comes after. A semicolon normally divides two clauses, each with a verb—two halves that could stand as complete sentences. Pound must have made a mistake. His lines are phrases; they contain no action. The poem has no verbs.

Not so fast: By using the semicolon, Pound both separates and unites his two lines. It is as if he is saying "I'm seeing these faces here at the subway; they remind me of nature's delicate, transient beauty." Or, more simply, "faces are like petals." He tightens, minimizes and condenses. His two thoughts come both sequentially and simultaneously. The first thing precedes and is identical to the second.

All good poetry combines concision and suggestiveness. One other suggestion in this poem returns us to the “apparition” and a rich, indeed epic, poetic history of people and leaves. In book 6 of Homer’s “Iliad,” the Trojan ally Glaucus confronts his Greek foe Diomedes, who asks him about his lineage. He replies (my translation): “The lives of men are like the generations of leaves; one comes, another dies.”

This is one of the most fruitful images in Western literature, siring its own progeny. Virgil repeats it in book 6 of the “Aeneid”; Dante uses it in his “Inferno,” and Milton in “Paradise Lost.” It is the trope of the fallen leaves.

Homer’s successors, however, place their men, and their metaphorical leaves, in an underworld. Things go by different names in different languages or places. In Paris, there’s the Metro. Americans have the subway. In London, they call it the Underground. In all cases, it is the place beneath, the border between the living and the dead.

Pound knew what he was doing.

—*Mr. Spiegelman’s most recent book is “Senior Moments: Looking Back, Looking Ahead” (Farrar Straus Giroux).*

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