

“Sniffing the Trace of Air”: The Creativity of Influence in Ezra Pound’s “The Return”

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring the concept of influence in modernity, based on Ezra Pound's perception of composing modernist poetry. Pound insightfully regards modernist poetry as connected to other previous texts due to the poets' entangled web of ideas inspired by their readings. The study focuses on Pound's poem "The Return" (1912), which consciously imitates "Medailles d'Argile," (1900); a poem by the French symbolist Henri de Régnier. The study proves that this technique is intentional, as it enriches the poem by returning readers to previous works. It also affirms that Pound's influence is a process of creativity rather than "anxiety" as Harold Bloom suggests. This creativity is realized because Pound alters the impact of the French poem from a symbolist to an imagistic one through the uncanny use of imagery and rhythm, as well as presenting an image that amalgamates the abstract and the concrete, rather than representing an abstract thought.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, Imagism, Symbolism, Influence, Henri de Régnier, "The Return"

1. Introduction

*“Be influenced by as many artists as you can, but have the decency
either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it.”*

Ezra Pound/ A Retrospect (Pound, 1954, p.5).

Modernist poetry is replete with examples of overt and covert influence. Techniques such as allusion and intertextuality are omnipresent in modernists' writings, as they portray the influence either by previous or contemporary works. The concept of *return*, therefore, is an intricate one that is not merely grasped through its denotative meaning; it is rather pregnant with connotations that refer to the zeitgeist of the era of modernism as a whole, since modernism emphasizes re-employing the previous archetypes in new texts. Jeffrey Perl clarifies that while “[t]o some critics, modernism was a massive cultural deconstruction; other scholars have argued that modernism was entirely a creative phenomenon” (Perl, 1984, p. 12). The idea of the return, therefore, can be perceived as a deconstructive process of texts to come up with new ones imbued with influence. Perl also argues that “[f]or the modernists, the process of *return* was not only a means of understanding history and not only an artistic technique, it was a condition of the psyche and perhaps (the same thing) a world view” [emphasis added] (ibid, p. 14). That is to say that the term has value as it becomes an approach to writing modernist texts.

The psychological aspect of the return is investigated profoundly in Harold Bloom's theory of “the anxiety of influence,” which argues that poets are haunted by the works that they read, and that the sediments of such an influence can be found in their poetry. The last Chapter of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety: A Theory of Poetry* (1973) is titled “Apophrades: Or the Return of the Dead,” which stresses the idea of the psychological influence by previous works on modernist poets. This highlights that the return in modern poetry is a well-grounded basis that characterizes the literature of the era.

As a prominent figure who has shaped the major tenets of modernism in English poetry, Ezra Pound calls modernists to “make it new;” a call that encourages writers to renew the past. Remarkably, this call or motto is a translation from an “inscription on an ancient Chinese emperor's bathtub” (Pratt, 2000, p. 2), which implies that authors are allowed to reveal their influence by others, and to re-contextualize their ideas and phrases. In the manifesto of *Imagisme*, Pound encourages artists to be inspired by others' works, whether diachronically or synchronically, i.e. by previous works, or the contemporary works of other cultures. Pound himself is influenced

by several sources, such as classical mythology, French symbolism, Japanese haiku and the Chinese characters. He, however, emphasizes that such an influence should not "mean merely that you mop up the particular decorative vocabulary of some one or two poets whom you happen to admire"(Pound, 1954, p. 7), but rather to recreate new texts skillfully out of this influence.

Unlike Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, Pound suggests either to "acknowledge" the influence or "conceal" it (Pound, 1954, p.5); and thus, to leave readers space to find the implied references. This concealment does not happen due to the poet's anxiety; it rather makes reading the poem more challenging, since it becomes "writerly" rather than "readerly" to use Roland Barthes's terms (Barthes, 1970). T. S. Eliot's article "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) reveals that his idea of influence conforms to Pound's dictum. Eliot argues that talent is sharpened by previous readings, which should not, however, obliterate the creativity of the individual. Thus, Eliot believes that the influence by previous works adds to the writer's creativity instead of hindering it.

This study aims at analyzing Pound's uncanny influence in his poem "The Return" (1912) by "Medailles d'Argile," a poem published by the French symbolist Henri de Régnier in 1900. Through this analysis, the study suggests that Pound's Imagisme can transgress "the anxiety of influence" to a point where influence is a creative process. This elevates Imagisme as a movement that absorbs other trends, such as symbolism; as the former has the capability of reshaping the latter and adding to it. The study shows that Pound aims at shifting his readers' attention to other works, as he believes that any successful work of art should be rich enough to open up several associations to the reader. Influence, hence, demands readers to be knowledgeable enough to make such associations; it, moreover, adds to their knowledge, as it urges them to return to other works in order to realize a more profound understanding. Pound presents the concept of influence, or returning to other works, as an essential characteristic of modernism, embodied by modernists through some techniques, such as intertextuality and allusion. In his poem "The Return," Pound presents a good example of influence which is not merely an imitation or representation of the original work, but rather a presentation of a new creation from a different perspective. He, therefore, presents the symbols of de Régnier's poem as an imagistic poem, rather than a symbolist one. The study, therefore, proves that Pound's imitation of Henri de Régnier's poem "Medailles d'Argile" is a creative process rather than an anxious one, as it concludes that the creativity rather than the anxiety of influence is what makes a modernist poem successfully composed.

2. Discussion

The suggestive title of Pound's poem "The Return" connotes multiple meanings of the concept of the 'return' not only in the poem, but also as a concept relevant to the spirit of the age of modernism that Pound has strived to convey through his poetry. Pound's poem is an attempt to transform poetry from the state of representation, which is the aim of symbolism, to the state of presentation, which is Pound's ultimate goal in composing an image, as he defines the image as "that which *presents* an intellectual and emotional complex in an instance of time" [emphasis added] (Pound, 1954, p. 4). Pound scrupulously portrays the image through presentation rather than representation, since there is no one-to-one correspondence in imagery as in the case of symbolism. Based on Pound's definition of the image, the image goes through a complex process of what is intellectual and emotional; therefore, representation becomes defective. This process implies that the produced image does not exactly mirror or represent the external reality, as much as it presents it in a new way that has tacit meanings read from various perspectives.

In his book *The Influence of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry* (1985), René Taupin argues that Pound's "The Return" is influenced by de Régnier poem "Medailles d'Argile," [Medals of Clay] (Taupin, 1985, p. 128), (See Appendix). Taupin states that:

In "The Return," Pound had sought to surpass the excellent title-poem of de Régnier's collection Médailles d'Argile. Pound's admiration for the poem made him wish to produce an equivalent in English, if possible one that would be better than the original. The rhythmical strength of the poem echoes that of de Régnier, and is obtained in the same manner: by frequent pauses and broken lines. (Ibid, p. 128)

Taupin's idea, that Pound's poem is inspired by the French one out of "admiration," recalls Bloom's definition of "influence simply as literary love, tempered by defense. The defenses vary from poet to poet. But the overwhelming presence of love is vital to understanding how great literature works" (Bloom, 2011, p.8). Shiva K. Srinivasan argues that "the aim of literary criticism in the Bloomian theory of reading . . . is not to "deconstruct or reconstruct [the text] as literary theorists usually do, but to express his notion of literary love" (Srinivasan, 2011, par. 4). Influence, then, for Bloom, is motivated by the energy of passion, rather than intellect, due to writers' love for specific texts that inspire them. It, therefore, does not have thematic or aesthetic purposes. On the other hand, one of Pound's objectives of establishing his movement, Imagisme, is to enrich the literary work

by urging readers to rummage through other works to grasp a meaning. Pound points out that "[t]he work of art which is most 'worth while' is the work which would need a hundred works of any other kind of art to explain it" (Pound, 1970, p. 84). Accordingly, for Pound influence could be an attempt to see previous works in new perspectives. His dictum about employing previous works in the writer's text is, in fact, different from that of Bloom, as the former perceives that influence is conscious and should be achieved to open new vistas to readers, while the latter thinks that it is an emotional response to the writer's passion towards certain texts. In Bloom's case, therefore, writers get anxious as they try to compose original texts. Whereas in Pound's view, they deliberately re-contextualize the previous thoughts without the angst of misinterpretation or plagiarism.

Based on Taupin's above-mentioned quotation, Pound's poem is an "equivalent" to that of de R gnier. I argue, however, that Pound's endeavor is closer to a fresh production than equivalence, since Pound attempts at transforming the symbolist effect of the poem to an imagistic one. William Pratt explains Taupin's idea by stating that Pound's image "is more concentrated to the eye and more consistent to the ear than the original" because he focuses on one god, Hermes, rather than several gods as in de R gnier's poem (Pratt, 2000, p. 6). Pratt thinks that "What Pound adds to de R gnier's rhythm is the motion of the gods in their hesitant return to the earth . . ." (ibid, p. 5). Consequently, Pound condenses de R gnier's poem and focuses on visualization, which is an essential tenet in Imagisme, as well as music which is crystallized by Pound's use of 'vers libre,' that grants the poet more freedom, and approximates poetry to music, or to what Pound himself refers to as "absolute rhythm," which he defines as that which "corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (Pound, 1954, p.9). To Pound, thus, the rhythm carries the thought of the poem alongside with its music; that is to say that music and thought become inseparable, as will be explained later through analyzing the Poem.

The beginning of Pound's poem is so skillful that it immediately captures the attention of readers by triggering their imagination to visualize the scene or the image that Pound presents in the poem. The Poem starts with an imperative that urges readers to form visual images, it reads: "See, they return; ah, see the tentative/ Movements, and the slow feet." The repetition of the verb "see" is vital, as it motivates readers to transform the abstract language of the poem into concrete imagery created in the imagination. The verb "see" in the poem substitutes the verb "listen" in de R gnier's poem wherein he says in the second stanza:

Then I said: here are flutes and baskets,
sink your teeth in the fruit;
hear the bees droning,
the humble sound
of willows being braided and roses being cut,
and again I said: listen,
listen,
behind the echo
someone stands, a universal life
with double bow and double torch
that is
divinely us. . . (Pratt, trans., 2000, P.4)

It is obvious that de R gnier's poem is replete with auditory images through the words "flutes," "hear," "sound," "listen," and "echo." The poem is a correspondence between human beings and nature, which symbolizes the power of the divine. The "medals" in the title symbolize gods, while "clay" symbolizes mortals. These symbols are associations that help readers to connect the two axes of the symbolism; the symbolizer and the symbolized.

Though Pound affirms that Imagisme is influenced by Symbolism, especially regarding the use of free verse, he argues in his essay "Vorticism" that the two movements are dissimilar in many other regards. Pound emphasizes that:

Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in 'association', that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word, they made it a form of metronomy. One can be grossly 'symbolic' for example, by using the term 'cross' to mean 'trial'. The symbolist's *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1,2 and 7. The imagist's images have a variable significance like the signs *a*, *b* and *x* in algebra. (Pound, 1970, p.84)

In "The Return," Pound is obviously influenced by symbolism thematically and stylistically. The idea of the "return", for instance, symbolizes the ending of the Christian era; that is to say that it is abstract rather than concrete as imagist poetry suggests. Tackling such a theme seemingly swerves away from the principles of Imagisme. Nevertheless, the purpose of Imagisme is to present the abstract concretely as if the thoughts are painted. Pound lists "paint[ing] the thing as I see it" as one of the tenets of Imagisme (Pound, 1971, p.6). This makes the poem close to a painting that portrays the return of the gods rather than describing it. Pound's use of the word "paint" rather than "write" or "compose" opens different readings of the poem without limiting it to one symbolic meaning as in de R gnier's poem. In other words, Pound employs the symbolic idea of the return of the gods imagistically as he visualizes the scene.

The return in Pound's poem, contrary to that of de R gnier's, could refer to any other return or metaphorical resurrection. The poem, as Richard Gray describes it, "illustrates Pound's growing ability to write pieces that are not necessarily 'about' anything in any traditional sense but are, rather, equations for a mood or an emotion" (Gray, 1976, p. 77). The meaning in "The Return," therefore, is not stated in the words and their abstract signification, but rather in the musical pattern that is painted through language. Hugh Kenner argues that "'The Return' (1912), in which every line has a strongly marked rhythm but no two lines are alike, it is actually the rhythm that defines the meaning (Kenner, 1973, p. 189).

Based on Pound's above-mentioned excerpt, which explains the difference between Imagisme and symbolism, if one scrutinizes de R gnier's poem, they will find out that he refers to different gods through symbolism. For example, the "one winged,/ handsome and shy,/ a bare nude figure" in the first stanza symbolize Cupid, the god of love. The coming of the gods in the poem is a dream made up by the persona to represent their connection to dreamers to make them divine; and thus, those dreamers are unified with the power of the gods. Unlike de R gnier's allegorical poem, Pound composes a poem that presents one image of the return of the gods. Pound telescopes de R gnier's "great terrestrial dream" (stanza 3 of the poem) into the following concise vision:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
 Movements, and the slow feet,
 The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
 Wavering!

See, they return, one by one,
 With fear, as half-awakened;
 As if the snow should hesitate
 And murmur in the wind,
 and half turn back;
 These were the "Wing'd-with-Awe,"
 Inviolable.

Gods of the Winged shoe!
 With them the silver hounds,
 sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
 These were the swift to harry;
 These the keen-scented;
 These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
 pallid the leash-men! (Pound, 1975, pp. 39-40)

Though Pound attempts to alter the aura of the poem, readers can easily "sniff . . . the trace" of de R gnier's poem in Pound's "The Return." The winged gods and the silver color, for instance, are some traces that are redolent with the aroma of de R gnier's poem. The movement of the gods in Pound's poem is also similar to that in de R gnier's, since both portray it as tentative and gradual. It is noticeable that Pound uses the same expressions "one by one," which reveals the extent to which he is influenced by de R gnier. Readers, however, would not notice the influence had they not read de R gnier's poem, which is one of Pound's purposes of writing his poem. That is to say that Pound refers us to other works intentionally, so that that writing (or reading) a poem is a web-like, since it becomes connected to several other works. Pound, who is influenced by the French symbolism, also attempts to make his readers appreciate the value of symbolist poetry, which he himself is

influenced by. He, therefore, presents a poem inspired by a symbolist. Pound, nevertheless, does not imitate de R gnier poem, but rather re-produces it in an imagistic version.

The shift from representation in symbolism to presentation in Imagisme, thus, adds to Taupin's dictum that "between the 'image' of the Imagists and the 'symbol' of the Symbolists, there is a difference only of precision" (Taupin, 19985, p. 93). Pound conceives this presentation through rhythm, visual, and the kinetic imagery that make the total image of the poem alive. Kenner argues that the use of different tenses as well as the use of rhythm make readers envisage the return of the gods as if it is real. He says that an explicit statement that the gods, returning now, do so in unstable meters. The poem is about the mode of divine apparitions in poetry. Not only the sharp meters but the sharp images, the winged shoe and the silver hounds, belong to their past state. Yet the past state is itself being recreated now, and the final lines though they specify slowness and pallor, are both imagistically sharp and metrically cut (Kenner, 1973, p. 190).

The rhythmical effect is, therefore, emphasized not as part of the image, but as the image itself. Kenner also argues that "every line [of 'The Return'] has a strongly marked expressive rhythm but no two lines are alike, it is actually the rhythm that defines the meaning" (ibid, p. 189). He adds that the "unstable meter" of the poem reflects the instability of the whole image of the return of gods (ibid, p. 190). This makes the rhythm of the poem in harmony with the image that readers visualize of the movement of the gods. Words like "tentative", "movement", "slow", "swift", "pace" and "wavering" are functional in painting the picture in the minds of readers. It is noticeable that in de R gnier's poem, words have fixed values, i.e. each phrase symbolizes a certain god, while in Pound's poem there is variety of possibilities for the equivalence of the image in the minds of readers. That is to say that in the image that Pound presents, he uses visualization to invoke a metaphysical content, which makes the image a complexity of the concrete and the abstract altogether.

In the second stanza, however, words like "half-awakened", "hesitant" and "half turn back" give the impression that the return of the gods is hidden and hesitant because it secretly conjures up de R gnier's poem. Pound also refers to the Greek god Hermes (Mercury in Roman) who is the god of transitions, when he says "Gods of the Winged shoe." This god is also mentioned in de R gnier's poem, which reveals Pound's own transcendence of the boundaries to be directly influenced by another work of literature in his poem. The mentioning of Hermes, furthermore, suggests movement and transition which are vivid in the poem as a whole. The "silver hounds," therefore, can be perceived as the act of tracing the hidden seeds of influence that Pound conceals in the poem.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pound's Imagisme proves that influence is an intentional and conscious technique that poets use to open their texts for different perceptions. Thus, instead of making the poet anxious, influence becomes a creative process that enriches the poem, and presents it with a different array. Pound attempts to alter the impact of de R gnier's "Medals of Clay," by writing an imagistic poem that absorbs the French one. He does not only succeed in composing a more precise poem with a remarkable musical effect, but he also remolds the poem to make it an imagistic one. Yet, readers can follow the traces of "Medals of Clay" in Pound's poem; traces that Pound conceals among his lines, and leaves it to his readers to probe deeper into the references and their novel contextualization.

4. APPENDIX

Medals of Clay

Translated by William Pratt

I dreamed that the gods had spoken to me:

one streaming with seaweed and brine,

another heavy with grapes and wheat,

one winged,

handsome and shy,

a bare nude figure,

another veiled,

and still another

sang and plucked hemlock

and thoughts

and wreathed about his golden thyrsus
two serpents on a caduceus,
and another yet. . .

Then I said: here are flutes and baskets,
Sink your teeth in the fruit;
hear the bees droning,
the humble sound
of willows being braided and roses being cut,
and again I said: listen,
listen,
behind the echo
someone stands, a universal life
with double bow and double torch
that is
divinely us. . .

Unseen face! It's you I engrave
on silver medals, sweet as pale dawn,
on golden medals. Sombre as night,
something in all metal;
shines clear as joy,
sounds deep as glory,
as love, as death;
the most beautiful things of fine clay
I have made, dry and fragile.

One by one, you counted them, smiling
and said: how cunning,
and passed on, smiling.

Yet none of you could see my hands
trembling with tenderness
that all the great terrestrial dream
lived in me to live in them,
and I engraved in sacred metal,
my gods,
who are the living face
that we smell in roses.
in the water, in the wind,
in the woods, in the sea,
in all things,

In our flesh –
and that are
divinely us. (Pratt, 2000, pp.3-4)

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