

Translation and Transcreation in Ezra Pound's One-Image Poem

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Abstract: This article tackles Ezra Pound's one-image poem "In a Station of the Metro" as an epitome of the modernist *Zeitgeist*. Being essentially a reaction to the cultural tenets and philosophical underpinnings of Victorianism, which saw reality as material and objective, modernism sought to develop aesthetics rooted in a completely new model of reality. William James anticipated the modernists' interest in "the stream of thought," Henri Bergson looked into time and consciousness and discovered "duration," Sigmund Freud focused on dreams and the unconscious. Very early in the 20th century Max Planck and Albert Einstein formulated their quantum theories. Thus, the late 19th and early 20th century psychology, philosophy and physics countered Newton's neat model of an orderly reality with one governed by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The arts contributed to the new *Zeitgeist* by rendering reality as abstract, eerie, flickery and "spiritual": a reality of the mind and soul. In 1910 Wassily Kandinsky painted his "First Abstract Watercolour" and in 1911 he published his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Reading it, Ezra Pound found a "language in colour" to which he added the Japanese hokku aesthetics, and those led him to his one-image poem. I argue that Pound's creative process was translational and transcreational, cutting across the arts, their aesthetics, and across languages and cultures.

Keywords: one-image poem, "superposition," "sudden emotion," translation, transcreation

INTRODUCTION

Peter Childs (2017, 2) pins down modernism as "experimental, formally complex, elliptical." He also contends that modernism "tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster" (Ibid). Indeed, modernism was seismic in the sense that it systematically broke with a long line of tradition, ultimately rejecting

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European culture, which the artists felt was materialistic and too marred by stifling norms and conventions. Consequently, they turned to non-European cultures and aesthetics, where they found sincerity, a sense of freedom, spirituality and a geometry of abstraction.

The modernist arts and their aesthetics as reactions to realism were formulated at the same time as revolutionary discoveries were being made in the sciences. Newton's positivist model of a universe governed by predictability and lending itself to precise measurements, characterised by a spirit of order captured by William Blake in his painting¹ (Figure 1), had shaped the world's notion of scientific knowledge for two centuries and a half. What William James, and then Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud discovered about the human mind in the late 19th and early 20th century countered Newton's neat model. The fact that, as William James (1890, 505) argued, "thought is in constant change", that intuition and the unconscious may be more important for us than rationalism blurred the deep-seated sense that the human mind is a neat territory that can be charted infallibly. While Freud focused upon his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Planck looked into the concept of quantum. Both psychology and physics found that reality is not solid and objective but rather messy, evanescent and subjective instead.

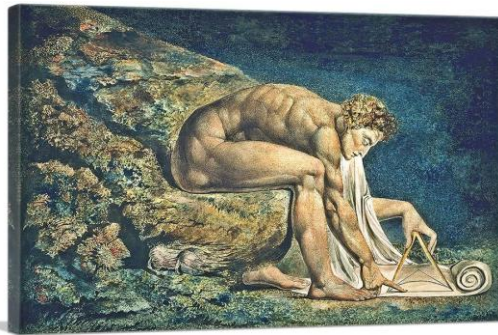


Figure 1

¹ In William Blake's painting Isaac Newton is sitting naked (which reveals the flawless anatomy of his muscles), and leaning over a scroll on which he draws a diagram with his compass. Blake, an artist of mystical and spiritual visions, opposed the positivistic spirit of the Enlightenment. This particular painting suggests his critical attitude to Newton's scientific materialism, which Blake considered sterile. In Blake's painting, Newton is not only emblematic of this model of knowledge but more importantly he is the mind that created its blueprint.

As Rebecca Beasley shows, Pound gave six lectures at the London Polytechnic in 1909, rewritten as his first prose work, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), and in 1911 he published a series of articles, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris' in the periodical *The New Age*, to which he contributed extensively over the next decade. In these works, Pound aimed to establish a 'New Method in Scholarship', inspired in part by conversations with Hulme about Bergson and the revelatory power of the visual image. This 'method of Luminous Detail,' as Pound called it in 1911, would later be renamed 'the ideogrammic method,' in reference to Pound's erroneous belief that the Chinese ideogram literally pictures its meaning, thus enabling a direct correspondence between word and meaning. (Beasley 2007, 5-6)

WASSILY KANDINSKY'S "FIRST ABSTRACT WATERCOLOUR" (AROUND 1910): A MODERNIST WAY OF TACKLING THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE NEW CENTURY

The year 1910 was sensed as a turning point. In her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Virginia Woolf heralded that "On or about December 1910 the human character changed" (Woolf 2020). What Woolf meant was a radical shift in sensibility brought about by the "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" Exhibition organised by Roger Fry at London's Grafton Galleries, which ran from 8 November 1910 to 15 January 1911.

The revolutionary change in sensibility brewed in all the big cities of Europe, which were centres where not only new ideas, theories and aesthetics were taking shape, but also cosmopolitan centres, hubs of a new culture where artists would travel or settle for a while and gather in transcreative groups. It was in Munich and other European cities that Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian painter, crystalised his modernist art and aesthetics.

Around 1910, Kandinsky painted an untitled watercolour known as "First Abstract Watercolour" (Figure 2), which epitomises the theories he formulated in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. The English translation of the book is prefaced by its translator, Michael T. H. Sadler, who introduces us to Kandinsky as "one of the leaders of the new art movement in Munich" and explains that "the group of which he [Kandinsky] is a member includes painters, poets, musicians, dramatists, critics all working to the same end – the expression of the SOUL of nature and humanity, or, as Kandinsky terms it, the INNERER KLANG" (Kandinsky 2008, 5). Since "the innerer Klang"

– an inner sounding – is the core of Kandinsky’s philosophy of art, Sadler calls the Russian painter a “visual musician” (Ibid, 17).

Kandinsky’s huge contribution to the modernist arts and their aesthetics consists in a spiritual approach to reality and its reflection in art, for which, as Sadler argues, he drew on “the Primitive Italians [who], like their predecessors the Primitive Greeks, and, in turn, their predecessors the Egyptians, sought to express the inner feeling rather than the outer reality” (Ibid, 7).



Figure 2

In its splotches of variegated colours and lines of various shapes, none of which hardens into an identifiable object, against a light brown background, Kandinsky’s “First Abstract Watercolour” translates emotion and a mood of a spiritual nature into vibration. By spreading the colours across the whole surface, the painter suggests something evanescent – a state of mind – which cannot be represented. The effect, which is a far cry from representation, is comparable to vibration in music – the colours resound. What reinforces this effect is a sense of boundlessness and abstraction, which accounts for the name by which the artifact is known. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky (2008, 57) contends that “to let the eye stray over a palette, splashed with many colours, produces a dual result. In the first place one receives a PURELY PHYSICAL IMPRESSION”. However, Kandinsky’s modernist sensibility sought an effect beyond and deeper than the purely physical impression, which he called “psychic” – “a corresponding spiritual vibration” (Ibid, 59). In accounting for this effect, Kandinsky translated the language of painting into the language

of music, thus making a clean break with the approaches and rhetorical practices of the 19th century art theory and reinforcing a modernist way of tackling the visual arts in the new century: "Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul" (Ibid, 61-62).

KANDINSKY'S "REJECTION OF THE THIRD DIMENSION" AND POUND'S "SUPER-POSITION"

Maybe never had the "colours" of the arts run into each other so arduously as they did in the early 20th century, when the artists' aim was, in Ezra Pound's words, "Make it new." Two new arts had appeared, i.e. photography and cinematography, which offered the artists new techniques and inspired them to experiment across their arts. Virginia Woolf admired her sister Vanessa's paintings and in her letters she said she wished she were a painter, which indeed she was, by translating Vanessa's language into the language of her poetic novels. The sisters engaged their two arts in a dialogue many times when Vanessa designed the dust jackets of Virginia's books, or in "Kew Gardens" (1919), where Virginia's words and Vanessa's drawings interlace in an artifact that defies the borders separating their arts. One of Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), explores a painter's struggles with the novelty of her art. Likewise, suggesting an association between novel writing and the art of painting, James Joyce titled his Künstlerroman *A Portrait* (1916). By using the technique of counterpoint, yet another novelist of the early 20th century, Aldous Huxley aspired to a "pure novel." In her essay "The Cinema" (1926) Virginia Woolf argued that the cinema alters our sense of perception and reality, and in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) she used the cinematic time and space montage to give her readers a sense of simultaneity, which was crucial to the modernists. Huxley and Joyce also used cinematic techniques to create this impression.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky spoke about the alteration of perception. That psycho-aesthetic phenomenon had been anticipated in poetry by Arthur Rimbaud in his derangement of the senses meant to express one's own sense of reality, and by Impressionism in painting, which focused on the process of perception (which is subjective, psychic) rather than the thing perceived (which is objective, material, palpable). Kandinsky (2008, 94) argued that "one of the first steps in the turning away from material objects into the

realm of the abstract was, to use the technical artistic term, the rejection of the third dimension, that is to say, the attempt to keep a picture on a single plane.”

Ezra Pound read Kandinsky’s study and, when he experienced the “sudden emotion” of seeing beautiful faces coming out of the “metro train at La Concorde,” he started to write a thirty-line poem that he destroyed because he felt it was “work of second intensity.” The solution to that impasse was a technique of “super-position” (Pound n.d.) very similar to that described by Kandinsky. The result of this super-position was his one image poem “In a Station of the Metro,” which reads:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough.

KANDINSKY’S “SECRET HAPPENINGS OF WHICH NO ONE KNOWS” AND POUND’S “SUDDEN EMOTION”

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky (2008, 91) looks into the elements and aspects that create what he calls a “spiritual atmosphere,” and so to “visible actions, thoughts and feelings, with outward expression” he adds “secret happenings of which no one knows, unspoken thoughts, hidden feelings [which] are also elements in it.” It was this interest in the unseen, the spiritual, the atmosphere and workings of the mind, the inner life, which is an impalpable and unfathomable realm, that characterised the international *Zeitgeist* in the arts and the sciences. Thus, both the artists and the scientists transcended and translated them across their arts and sciences. Kandinsky created across painting and music and translated the language of psychology into the language of the arts.

Having read Kandinsky’s book, which he references in his memoir *Gaudier-Brzeska*, and having had the intensely emotional experience of a flickering moment when he was assaulted by a shower of stimuli at La Concorde, Pound (n.d.) writes that he “tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.” The poet felt there was no language in the European tradition that could render what he meant to express: the impression that fleeting images in the eerie cityscape make upon the retina and the soul.

Both Kandinsky and Pound focused on the secret and invisible reality of emotions and feelings. In order to give it artistic expression,

Kandinsky translated the vibration and language of music into painting, and Pound translated the language of colours into poetry.

“THE EXPRESSION” FOR THE “SUDDEN EMOTION” – “A LANGUAGE IN COLOUR”

Kandinsky (2008, 90) insisted on transcreativity, arguing that “the actual expression of colour can be achieved simultaneously by several forms of art, each art playing its separate part, and producing a whole which exceeds in richness and force any expression attainable by one art alone.”

Responding to Kandinsky's idea, Pound invented the formula of “Imagism” to stress the visual force of the new kind of poetry he and his literary friends H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Richard Aldington wrote and published in four anthologies in the United States and in England between 1914 and 1917. The first announcements of this literary trend used French spellings “‘Les Imagistes’ and ‘Imagisme,’ to underline a comparison with contemporary French post-symbolist movements, such as *unanisme* and *impulsionnisme*” (Beasley 2007, 37).

Recalling the moment when he “found, suddenly, the expression” of an emotion that had struck him with urgency, Pound wrote about “an equation” coming to him “not in speech, but in little splotches of colour,” which was “the beginning, for me, of a language in colour.” Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska* is packed with references to new techniques in painting: “Kandinsky's chapter on the language of form and colour” and “the ‘ice-block’ quality in Picasso” are invoked as groundbreaking approaches to a new art of painting, which was already infused with music. What Pound clearly planned to do was to translate the modernist painters' new principles into his own new art of verse, which he infused with the musical vibration of colours and a new “arrangement of planes” that in his one-image poem became the technique of “super-position.” In these new aesthetic principles and techniques in painting Pound saw the solution to his own interest in capturing the intricacies of mental life beyond “the shells of thought.”²

TRANSCREATION

I use the term “transcreation” in a sense rooted in Roman Jakobson's notion of intersemiotic translation. However, in my approach Roman

² All the quotes in this passage were retrieved from <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/ezra-pound-station-metro>

Jakobson's intersemiotic translation as translation from language into non-verbal symbols (Jakobson 1959, 232-239) is twisted to accommodate the process described by Ezra Pound, which led him to the creation of a one-image poem.

Indeed, since 1959 when he launched it, Jakobson's definition of intersemiotic translation has undergone mutations to refer to translations across non-linguistic semiotic resources. In 1979, Umberto Eco focused on the process in the larger context of culture and argued that

culture continuously translates signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into propositional functions, propositional functions into exemplifying sentences, and so on (Eco, 1979, 71).

In the process of writing his one-image poem, Pound created across two codes (visual and linguistic), at least three arts (painting, poetry and music, if one considers the poem's irregular rhythm), two languages (English and French), and two literary traditions (European and Japanese) to express a fleeting moment of beauty as Baudelaire (1964) had defined it in *The Painter of Modern Life*³.

Pound's "super-position" is transcreational. As he accounts for it in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, his Paris emotion came to him in the form of images and colours, and so when he read "Kandinsky's chapter on the language of form and colour" the painter's ideas sounded familiar: "colour was the 'primary pigment'; I mean that it was the first adequate equation that came into consciousness" (Pound n.d.).

TRANSLINGUISTIC SUPERPOSITION

To give his readers a sense of the urban environment of Paris, the hotbed of modernity, with the intoxicating and electrifying energy of its crowds, Pound kept the French word "metro" in the very title of his poem, which must have been perceived as a rather unsettling foreignization of English. "Metro" is the first *frisson*, and maybe also a defamiliarizing linguistic warning that Paris was a new and eerie cultural environment, the culture of modernity. Thus, the foreignness of the culture is not related only to the otherness of the linguistic

³ In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire (1964, 13) memorably defined what he called "modernity" as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable."

environment (French) but also, and maybe of more significant import, to the otherness of the new culture of modernity and its modernist aesthetics.

“The apparition of these faces in the crowd:” – the first line - strikes a new and much stronger note of eeriness with the word “apparition” and its suggestion of ghostliness in English. As Ralph Bevilaqua shows, “apparition” is a false cognate: in French, it refers to the way something appears to a viewer at the precise moment it is perceived, while in English it means a ghostly figure, a specter; a sudden or unusual sight. What Pound did, in other words, was to play on the meanings of the word in both languages and on their translinguistic tension. Bevilaqua argues that “it [apparition] also enhances with its notion of suddenness that stimulus-response transferral suggested as objects perceived are metamorphosed by the creative imagination into their metaphorical counterparts. If we accept this sense of the word, then the poem seems to exemplify perfectly Pound’s notion of the Image (stated in *Poetry*, March 1913) of an “emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time” (Bevilaqua 1971).

TRANSLATIONAL / TRANSAESTHETIC “SUPERPOSITION”: THE JAPANESE HOKKU-THE ONE IMAGE POEM IN ENGLISH

Pound super-posed not just images (the “faces in the crowd” and the “petals on a wet black bough”) but also verse forms: the Japanese haiku (or hokku) verse form and visual style and his own Western idea of an Imagist poem, drawing on an old and “long European tradition of comparing souls to flowers, blossoms, or fallen leaves” (Lewis). In the process, Pound created across languages, cultures and codes. The elements involved are remote both in time and in space but that is precisely the modernist poet’s aim: to “make it new” by translating and transforming the old into the new, by bringing the far into the near, highlighting the tension between the intensification of nervous stimulation, which living in a big city always is, and a moment of epiphany when the city hustle and bustle lulls into the abstract design of “petals, on a wet, black bough.”

The natural image is also given a twist: the metaphoric transfer of the evanescent impression of the “faces in the crowd” onto the delicate impression of the “petals on a wet black bough” is a conflation that tricks the mind and the soul. “Faces” are “petals,” “the crowd” is “a wet black bough,” the flickeriness of the moment is captured into the

long-lastingness of the poem, the colours and the shapes are of a painting in words, and the language is “in colour” to express the subtlest and the most intense life of the soul.

Thus, “In a Station of the Metro” is the poem where Pound managed “to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (Pound n.d.). That was the essence of his new modernist aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

Relying on Kandinsky’s idea of “the spiritual in art,” Pound wrote a modernist (Imagist) one-image poem through a process of artistic transcreation, linguistic and cultural translation and transaesthetic “superposition” to achieve multiple effects of psychologic and “spiritual vibration,” abstraction and compression.

Pound’s one-image poem absorbed and crystalised the international culture of the early 20th century. Rebecca Beasley (2007, 39) contends that “what Pound designated the ‘Image’ is the effect that happens after the poem” in the reader’s mind and soul.

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