

The Influence of Pound's Imagism on James Joyce

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Abstract: As a famous writer of the Modernist literature, James Joyce's novels are said to be abstruse and obscure. By tracing Ezra Pound's influence on James Joyce's imagist writing techniques, we can better understand his writing methods that combine Imagism and Symbolism. Joyce put much emphasis on literary structure and an unusual awareness of the linguistic medium. His exploration of the artistic technique was reflected in the concern of people and the society. By decoding his works, not only the problems of the society at that time, but also the general psychological and philosophical thinking of human beings are profoundly reflected.

Keywords: Image; Imagism; Pound; Symbolism; James Joyce; Novel; Language; Influence

1. Imagist Movement

Imagism was a literary trend which was flourished in the early years of the 20th century and involved quite a number of Western writers and poets. The Imagism Movement gave impetus to Modernism in arts and concentrated on reconstructing the medium of poetry as opposed to Romanticism. The Imagist movement which was launched by Ezra Pound was a branch of the Symbolist Movement.

Ezra Pound was an American poet, literary critic and a leading spokesman of the Imagist Movement. His significant contributions to poetry began with his promotion of Imagism, a movement in poetry which emanated from classical Chinese poetry and Japanese Jaiku. Pound was fascinated by the idea that an alphabet was represented not only by sound, but also by images. He believed that it was possible to approximate the real thing in English language. Every word must be a visible image. [1] This type of poetry stressed clarity, precision, economy of language and traditional rhyme and meter. In Pound's words,

it should compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome [2]. His most famous masterpiece "In a Station of the Metro" is an example of his attempt to do so. Much of the meaning of the poem is buried in the dark closet behind it. These rich meanings have poetic, literary, aesthetic, sociological, cultural and philosophical significance. They are not as simple as the interpretation of works only from the aesthetic point of view. Therefore, Pound once said, "It is better to be able to describe one image in one's life than to write a lengthy book" [3].

Image actually is a specific and vivid scene depicted through the language of poetry. It is not only felt, but also formed through the poet's emotion, imagination and language processing. The harmonious combination of meaning and image enables the subject of creation and acceptance to obtain aesthetic freedom [4].

Imagism emphasized a return to more classical styles, such as the intuitiveness of expression and the indirectness of language. It advocated the experimentation with the unconventional forms of poetry. In the Imagist poetry, images were often used to express the poet's inner emotions and feelings, and could also be used to reflect social reality and natural landscapes. Imagists advocated the direct reflection of things. Pound and his followers believed that feelings should be generated by intentions, rather than the author telling the reader what they should feel.

2. Pound's Influence on Joyce

In modern poetry, the Imagist Movement was first announced to the public in 1913 by Ezra Pound. Its most important achievement was the formulation of certain aesthetic principles which were shared by a large number of contemporary writers and which were of far-reaching significance in the development of modern literature [5].

An American linguist Ernest Fenollosa once said that by using Chinese as a mode and as an instrument of real knowledge, the literati could remedy the shortcomings of the Western abstract languages. Fenollosa contrasted the concreteness of the Chinese character with the abstract nature of the Western discourse, and compared its immediacy with the discursive arguments of the Western prose. In Ernest Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese Whitten Character as a Medium for Poetry, Pound found support for his doctrine of the "Image". Pound summarized these distinctions in his ABC of Reading:

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, which is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction. Thus if you ask him what red is, he says it is a "colour". If you ask him what a colour is, he tells you it is a vibration or a refraction of light, or a division of the spectrum. And if you ask him what vibration is, he tells you it is a mode or energy, or something of that sort, until you arrive at a modality of being, or non-being, or at any rate, you get in beyond your depth, and beyond his depth [6].

However, Pound said that the Chinese employed a completely different method and communicated the concept "red" by juxtaposing the abbreviated pictures of four familiar sense-objects, they are rose, iron rust, cherry and flamingo [7]. Thus the concept was defined concretely and was apprehended in theory at least in an instant of time. The dimension of the Chinese character was spatial rather than flat, that is to say, it was an "Image".

According to Pound, the essence of the image was simultaneity of effect. Such simultaneity was usually regarded as the property of the visual arts. The emphasis on instantaneous perception which was central to Pound's theory manifested itself in his "Imagist" verse. Pound suggested that the readers must reconstruct. The process of apprehension was almost instantaneous, but there were still discernible stages in our progress toward total awareness. The linear movement of language which was similar to the melodic line in music prevented an instantaneous "pictorial" grasping of the poem. Another characteristic that one should be reminded of is Pound's

treatment of sound and rhythm, as shown in *Cantos* which was published in 1933, and the symbolic verse attempted by the Imagist poet as well. The realm and grammar of this poem echoed the meaning and rhythm of Xiaoxiang Eight Scenes and Poems which belong to classical Chinese poetry.

Although Joyce was never a part of the Imagist Movement, his early experiments in writing technique and his wide reading of literary works led him to many of the conclusions reached by Pound. His use of images could not be considered as a theory, but he was deeply influenced by Ezra Pound who had developed the theory of Imagism.

The poems of *Chamber Music* (1907) exhibited "imagist" qualities, as Pound had acknowledged when he published his Poem XXXVI (I Hear an Army) in the *Des Imagists* anthology. These affinities justify his Imagist position as a starting point in examining one phase of Joyce's writing technique.

For Pound, "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree".

[8] As for Joyce, the prime fact was not to express a personality, but a particular medium, in which impressions and experiences combined in a peculiar and unexpected way.

In fact, Joyce's *Ulysses* suggests a new departure in taste and a close relation of theory and practice. It is likely that the distinctive spirit of the literature, both in theory and in practice, will be found to mainly depend on two factors: the emphasis on literary structure already mentioned and an unusual awareness of the linguistic medium itself. The preoccupation with the medium is actually prior. Critical analyses of structure and creative experimentation with language are characteristic of the time because critics and writers tend to conceive of the literary work by residing primarily in language. So the strategy of Joyce is to give "language" a kind of autonomy by conceiving it as a realm of meaning, and the structure explored is discovered in the language, not behind the literary work in the writer's mind or in front of the literary work in an external world.

3. Joyce's Symbolist Imagination

To some extent, to consider a literary work is to regard it as a symbol. It is autonomous in the sense that it is quite distinct both from the personality of the author and from any world

of pure objects. Besides, it is creative in the sense that it brings its own meaning into existence. This is obviously a formula which all the modern theorists and writers, even the most determined critics, would subscribe to without any reservation.

The modern creative process is greatly influenced by this new stream of writing technique in literature. For Joyce, "his writing is not about something; it is that something itself". [9] Words bring meaning to birth in the imagist manifestation.

Ulysses is an attempt to give words their meanings and to make the most of the path they follow. This conception is growing upon Joyce quite early in his career. For instance, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "birds" has several images and meanings. At first it appears in Dante's words as an eagle meaning punishment. Then it changes into a bat suggesting the cricket bat. When Stephen's glasses are broken, he becomes blind like a bat. His classmate, Heron's bird-like face and the bird-like name seems a threat to him. All these remind Stephen of his unforgettable fear and implied the unfavourable conditions. After refusing the director's offer, Stephen realizes suddenly the prophetic meaning of his name. So the bird changes into a character with wings. Stephen's position has changed from the passive bearer to all active actor. In the final chapter, the image of "birds" appears many times, they remind Stephen of the symbol of departure or loneliness as swallows. Following the symbol, Stephen decides to use the ways of silence, exile to express himself.

Dubliners seems to be independent, but it constitutes a set of systematic logical relations. It takes the author's hometown as the background and reproduces the living state of the Dublin people at that time with the combination of realism and symbolism. The fifteen short stories describe the growth process of *Dubliners* from childhood to youth, and then to the society, revealing the moral indifference, confusion, disappointment and numbness of the middle and lower classes. It also shows the painful entanglement between traditional culture and foreign culture. These short novels reflect the desperate situation of the Irish people at that time, and the political and spiritual paralysis of the society.

In the novel *Sisters* a priest named James Flynn who is so unhappy because he broke a

holy grail that he dies of paralysis. But the readers may finally find that he did not die of physical paralysis, but a spiritual zombie. This is the novel's first introduction of mental paralysis. It is not difficult for the readers to find that the spiritual image runs through the novel. Besides, before and after the death of the priest, the author's description of the lamp has profound symbolic significance. It is clear that the author compares the light to the signal of life, dim but not flickering, and it is a sign of life.

The *Dead* is the final chapter. It is a microcosm of the Irish life. As the climax and summary of the whole novel, although Joyce is unwilling to admit, he cannot avoid an ending, that is, the nation is dying, and the spiritual death is the root of Dublin's pathology.

On the basis of resisting paralysis, *An Encounter* and *Araby* have added a distinctive theme image: the escape complex. In these novels there are some sober people in the paralyzed country. In order to escape from the difficult and boring life, they begin to doubt their own culture and come up with the ways to escape. In these two novels, a spiritual and physical experience is carried out by skipping classes for an outing and by going to an Arab market respectively, which shows the complex of the people who want to escape from the current situation at that time. For instance, Gabriel usually dreams of travelling to France, Belgium and Germany because his home country has bored him. However, this is just a fantasy, which exists in people's minds. In the end, people can only compromise with the society, continue to survive in cowardice, thus making the society paralyze permanently.

Joyce's work on *Ulysses* is characterized by a growing conflict between his aesthetic ideal of simultaneity and the consecutive nature of language.

As *Ulysses* develops, Joyce moved further and further the conventions of sequence and order established by traditional fiction. In pursuit of his goal of putting all space and all time in the world of his own, he abandoned consecutive narration in favour of a pictorial or spatial method. Once the events and themes of *Ulysses* have become familiar, the entire work stands before the readers as a vast static "Image". When the book is re-read with this complex in mind, each succeeding passage yields a set of relationships. And the demands

upon memory and imagination are large and impressive, but they are much more rewarding. The readers can recreate in their minds the approximation of the total design that Joyce has conceived in the process of composition.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Ulysses* is a museum of literary techniques, and these particular methods exhibit most of the methods used by the nineteenth and twentieth-century writers in their search for musical form. Under the influence of Pound, Joyce went beyond his Irish contemporaries in exploring the possibilities of adapting music to his literary works. Joyce's attempt to capture the advantages of musical expression for literature is closely connected with the Imagist movement toward simultaneous presentation. Actually he strived to find a successful compromise between the literary forms and the musical forms,

Ulysses makes use of some musical means that are most literary and that can be adapted to his novels without radically altering its structure. Counterpoint and leitmotif are the two musical means that Joyce used most. In using these techniques Joyce followed the example of Pound, but he surpassed Pound in his determination to make full use of the musical possibilities of language. *Ulysses* contains hundreds of leitmotifs, ranging from important associations to distinctive phrases which are repeated, amplified and transformed in order to create a feeling of musical development. Besides, Joyce greatly delighted in a contrapuntal arrangement of the themes. He relied on repetition and counterpoint to make his work advance. He also made full use of onomatopoeia to create the effect of tonalities. He thinks that the use of these techniques is the first step toward aesthetics...the utmost realm of art. [10]

4. Conclusions

Joyce's obvious fascination with the reality

that the artists at once made and found in language may seem rather a special case. He was between the deterioration of romantic sentiment and of realism. Pound once praised the unconventional style of Joyce's writing. In his writing practice, Joyce attempted to find a feasible way to portray the real life of Ireland and became aware that there survived one certain mediator, the proving discipline of technique, that is, the employment of the imagist and symbolist techniques.

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