

“Little Dropping Rhythms, Unrhymed” English Imagist Haiku as *Vers Libre*

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To say that Imagism was inspired by French *vers libre* is, of course, nothing new: as long ago as 1929, René Taupin said so in *L’Influence du symbolisme sur la poésie américaine*; countless studies have followed suit. What this paper proposes, however, is that Ezra Pound’s “‘Metro’ hokku,” “In a Station of the Metro,” drew on a number of specific poetic techniques favoured by the French *vers libre* poets his fellow Imagist F.S. Flint introduced to him: assonant rhyme, the “rhythmic constant,” and accentual metre. It will explain how Pound’s poem employed these *vers libre* techniques. This will demonstrate how English Imagist haiku sprang from a complex network of international influences and can therefore be said to be, in the truest sense, “world haiku.”

Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” which appeared in the April 1913 issue of *Poetry*, was the first independently created published “hokku” by an Imagist poet:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough. (12)

Pound himself described it as his “‘Metro’ hokku” (Paige 53). As Pound himself acknowledged (Scott 155), Imagism was inspired by Flint’s August 1912 article on “Contemporary French Poetry” in *Poetry Review*. “In a Station of the Metro” closely adheres to many of the *vers libre* principles espoused in Flint’s August 1912 article on “Contemporary French Poetry” and the French treatises on *vers libre* poetics that it cites.

First of all, unlike traditional Japanese haiku, Pound’s “‘Metro’ hokku” contains an assonant rhyme: the vowel sound in “crowd” rhymes with that of “bough.” This accords with the *vers libre* principles of one of the treatises that Flint discusses in his article, Georges Duhamel and Charles Vildrac’s *Notes sur la technique poétique*:

But assonance is rhyme with a mute, having, moreover, an unexpectedness, nuances, and subtleties to which rhyme cannot attain; and the choice of an assonance is more difficult than the choice of a rhyme . . . (qtd. in Flint 361)

Duhamel and Vildrac thus counter the possible accusation that *vers libre* is easier because it does not employ full rhyme: it is actually more difficult because, as Flint adds, “to choose an assonance one must have a trained ear; to choose a rhyme one needs memory only.”

Duhamel and Vildrac’s *Notes* may also provide the reason for the divisions of the first published version of “In a Station of the Metro” into units on the page. “In the ‘Metro’ hokku,” Pound explained, “I was careful, I think, to indicate spaces between the rhythmic units” (Paige 53). These units appear to indicate two kinds of rhythm. The first may have been instigated by what Flint calls the “rhythmic constant” in his article (387). He paraphrases Duhamel and Vildrac’s explanation of it as follows:

The cadence of a strophe or poetical paragraph is due to the repetition in each verse of a fixed numerical quantity or *rhythmic constant*, which beats the time of the continuous melody. . . The rhythmic constant has no fixed place in the verse; it may begin it, suggest it in the centre, or terminate it.

Pound’s division of “In a Station of the Metro” likewise foregrounds the repetition of a “fixed numerical quantity” of syllables within lines of varying numbers of syllables:

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

The four-syllable “rhythmic constant” appears in the middle of each line. This use of a “rhythmic constant” accords with Duhamel and Vildrac’s observation that it can appear in the middle of a line. Without Pound’s division of the

poem into “rhythmic units,” this “rhythmic constant” would not have been as easily identifiable.

There may also, however, be a further justification for Pound’s “rhythmic units” in his “‘Metro’ hokku.” While the number of syllables in each unit varies (except for the “rhythmic constant”), each has one accented syllable:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

The number of accents per line is thus also regular, with three in each line. This interpretation of the number of accents is guided by Pound’s “rhythmic units.” Accent thus constitutes another feature of the poem’s melody foregrounded by Pound’s “rhythmic units.” A precedent for this can again be found in Flint’s article. “M. de Souza has established,” Flint writes, “that the rhythm of French verse depends on accent” (358).

Pound’s independent creation of “hokku,” then, owes far more to French *vers libre* techniques than to the Japanese poetic form. His “‘Metro’ hokku” is remarkable in the range of *vers libre* techniques it is able to incorporate into only two lines: assonant rhyme, a “rhythmic constant,” and accentual metre. In this way, it demonstrates how, as Pound claimed T. S. Eliot had said, “no *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job” (“Eliot” 269).

Works Cited

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