

something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick. Modern instruments of precision are being used to make things crooked as if by eye and hand in the old days.

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity. We prate of freedom. We call our schools free because we are not free to stay away from them till we are sixteen years of age. I have given up my democratic prejudices and now willingly set the lower classes free to be completely taken care of by the upper classes. Political freedom is nothing to me. I bestow it right and left. All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.

Scholars and artists thrown together are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work for knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. They stick to nothing deliberately, but let what will stick to them like burrs where they walk in the fields. No acquirement is on assignment, or even self-assignment. Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art. A school boy may be defined as one who can tell you what he knows in the order in which he learned it. The artist must value himself as he snatches a thing from some previous order in time and space into a new order with not so much as a ligature clinging to it of the old place where it was organic.

More than once I should have lost my soul to radicalism if it had been the originality it was mistaken for by its young converts. Originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. For myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.

1939

AMY LOWELL

(1874–1925)

The youngest of five children, Amy Lowell was born into an elite Boston family whose ancestors included nineteenth-century textile magnates and the poet James Russell Lowell. She grew up on her family's Brookline estate, Sevenels, which she inherited after her father's death in 1900. She was educated at home by governesses and then attended private schools; but, disdaining rote curriculum, she mostly pursued her own course of reading in her family's extensive private library. At age seventeen she entered Boston social life as a debutante, attending sixty dinners given in her honor. Entranced by the theater, she considered becoming an actress in her early twenties, but a severe weight problem that was glandular in origin made a stage career impossible.

Until 1910, Lowell engaged in activities typical of an upper-class woman—travel to Europe, projects for civic improvement, and party hosting at Sevenels. But she also devoted an increasing number of hours to writing poetry. In 1910, the *Atlantic Monthly* accepted four sonnets, and in 1912 she published her first collection, *A Dome of Mary-Coloured Glass*, whose poems reflect her immersion in the work of Keats and Shelley.

1912 was a landmark year for Lowell not only because of the publication of her first book, but also because she met the woman who became her life-long companion, Ada Dwyer Russell, a professional actress who gave up her career to live with Lowell at Sevenels. Lowell's prolific production over the next decade, in which she averaged a book per year, is due in part to her sustaining relationship with Russell, who helped manage Sevenels and offered supportive criticism.

The year 1912 was also important for American letters, for Harriet Monroe founded the journal *Poetry* in Chicago. Inspired by the magazine's advocacy of "the New Poetry," especially the poems of H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and the expositions of the new movement, Imagism, contributed by F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound, Lowell experienced a shift of sensibility as powerful as a religious conversion. In the summer of 1913, she traveled to Chicago to meet Monroe, then set off for London to introduce herself to Pound, H. D., Flint, and their Imagist cohorts. By the time she returned to the United States



PREFACE TO SOME IMAGIST POETS

In bringing the second volume of *Some Imagist Poets* before the public, the authors wish to express their gratitude for the interest which the 1915 volume aroused. The discussion of it was widespread, and even those critics out of sympathy with Imagist tenets accorded it much space. In the Preface to that book, we endeavoured to present those tenets in a succinct form. By the very brevity we employed has led to a great deal of misunderstanding. We have decided, therefore, to explain the laws which govern us a little more fully. A few people may understand, and the rest can merely misunderstand again, a result to which we are quite accustomed.

In the first place "Imagism" does not mean merely the presentation of pictures. "Imagism" refers to the manner of presentation, not to the subject. It means a clear presentation of whatever the author wishes to convey. Now he may wish to convey a mood of indecision, in which case the poem should be indecisive; he may wish to bring before his reader the constantly shifting and changing lights over a landscape, or the varying attitudes of mind of a person under strong emotion, then his poem must shift and change to present this clearly. The "exact" word does not mean the word which exactly describes the object in itself, it means the "exact" word which brings the effect of that object before the reader as it presented itself to the poet's mind at the time of writing the poem. Imagists deal but little with similes, although much of their poetry is metaphorical. The reason for this is that while acknowledging the figure to be an integral part of all poetry, they feel that the constant imposing of one figure upon another in the same poem blurs the central effect.

The great French critic, Remy de Gourmont, wrote last Summer in *La France* that the Imagists were the descendants of the French *Symbolistes*. In the Preface to his *Livre des Masques*, M. de Gourmont has thus described *Symbolisme*: "Individualism in literature, liberty of art, abandonment of existing forms . . . The sole excuse which a man can have for writing is to write down himself, to unveil for others the sort of world which mirrors itself in his individual glass . . . He should create his own aesthetics—and we should admit as many aesthetics as there are original minds, and judge them for what they are and not what they are not." In this sense the Imagists are descendants of the *Symbolistes*; they are Individualists.

The only reason that Imagism has seemed so anachronistic and strange to English and American reviewers is that their minds do not easily and quickly suggest the steps by which modern art has arrived at its present position. Its immediate prototype cannot be found in English or American literature, we must turn to Europe for it. With Debussy and Stravinsky in music, and Gauguin and Matisse in painting, it should have been evident to every one that art was entering upon an era of change. But music and painting are universal languages, so we have become accustomed to new idioms in them, while we still find it hard to recognize a changed idiom in literature.

The crux of the situation is just here. It is in the idiom employed. Imagism asks to be judged by different standards from those employed in Nineteenth-Century art. It is small wonder that Imagist poetry should be incomprehensible to men whose sole touchstone for art is the literature of one country for a period of four centuries. And it is an illuminating fact that among poets and men conversant with

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in midsummer, the conversion was complete: her new poems were spare and direct, written in end-stopped free verse whose lines were carefully aligned to match the clauses of her sentences. The next year, Lowell's new poems appeared in *Poetry*, the *Egoist*, and in Pound's anthology, *Des Imagistes*, as well as in her second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. But when she took a second trip to London in July 1914, Pound had christened a new movement, Vorticism. Lowell felt that in calling for a poetry of explosive energy Pound had abandoned the smooth perfection of Imagism. Concerned that the cause would lapse, Lowell decided to edit further Imagist anthologies herself. By the time she left England in September 1914, she had secured the support of the other Imagist poets—with the exception of Pound, who scoffed at Lowell's determination to promote a movement he considered moribund. Lowell went on to edit three more Imagist anthologies.

Through her poetry collections, anthologies, extensive public appearances, and two books of criticism, *Six French Poets* (1915) and *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), Lowell helped popularize the Modernist movement in the United States—so much so that by the late teens *vers libre*, or free verse, had become so commonplace that it could be found not just in bohemian literary journals but also in mainstream magazines. Although Pound disparaged Lowell's version of the movement as "Amygism," her advocacy made modern poetry palatable to large numbers of readers.

Despite her championship of Imagism, her nine books of poetry contain a wide spectrum of styles: narrative poems, experiments in the rhythmical prose that she called "polyphonic," haiku, long-lined descriptive poems in the mode of Whitman and Sandburg, and lyric monologues. Lowell's many evocations of female beauty place her in a tradition of lesbian love poems.

Despite the coded eroticism of some of her love poetry, her books were accessible to a wide audience, which set her work apart from the dense and allusive poetry that Pound, Marianne Moore, and other Modernists went on to write. By the early twenties, she and Pound had become such implacable foes that she automatically dismissed writers he supported, such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. By then she had turned her critical energy back to her first inspiration, John Keats, and wrote a two-volume biography of the poet based in part on an extensive selection of his manuscripts that she had purchased over the years.

At the time of her death in 1925 from a cerebral hemorrhage, she was recognized as an important woman of letters, a status she had achieved through a brief thirteen years of hard work and energetic self-promotion. In 1926, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously, for *What's O'Clock*. After her death, Lowell was remembered more for biographical details, such as her obesity and fondness for cigars, than for her poetry. By the close of the century, however, feminist scholars had drawn attention to her role in the development of modern American poetry, and some of Lowell's work was restored to the canon.

What follows is her preface to the second anthology of imagist poetry. It contains Lowell's argument for the continuing validity of the movement, including her response to criticisms that had been leveled against free verse.

many poetic idioms, Imagism is rarely misconceived. They may not agree with us, but they do not misunderstand us.

This must not be misconstrued into the desire to belittle our forerunners. On the contrary, the Imagists have the greatest admiration for the past, and humility towards it. But they have been caught in the throes of a new birth. The exterior world is changing, and with it men's feelings, and every age must express its feelings in its own individual way. No art is any more "egoistic" than another; all art is an attempt to express the feelings of the artist, whether it be couched in narrative form or employ a more personal expression.

It is not what Imagists write about which makes them hard of comprehension; it is the way they write it. All nations have laws of prosody, which undergo changes from time to time. The laws of English metrical prosody are well known to every one concerned with the subject. But that is only one form of prosody. Other nations have had different ones: Anglo-Saxon poetry was founded upon alliteration, Greek and Roman was built upon quantity, the Oriental was formed out of repetition, and the Japanese Hokku got its effects by an exact and never-to-be-added-to series of single syllables. So it is evident that poetry can be written in many modes. That the Imagists base much of their poetry upon cadence and not upon meter makes them neither good nor bad. And no one realizes more than they that no theories nor rules make poetry. They claim for their work only that it is sincere.

It is this very fact of "cadence" which has misled so many reviewers, until some have been betrayed into saying that the Imagists discard rhythm, when rhythm is the most important quality in their technique. The definition of *vers libre* is—a verse-form based upon cadence. Now cadence in music is one thing, cadence in poetry quite another, since we are not dealing with tone but with rhythm. It is the sense of perfect balance of flow and rhythm. Not only must the syllables so fall as to increase and continue the movement, but the whole poem must be as rounded and recurring as the circular swing of a balanced pendulum. It can be fast or slow, it may even jerk, but this perfect swing it must have, even its jerks must follow the central movement. To illustrate: Suppose a person were given the task of walking, or running, round a large circle, with two minutes given to do it in. Two minutes which he would just consume if he walked round the circle quietly. But in order to make the task easier for him, or harder, as the case might be, he was required to complete each half of the circle in exactly a minute. No other restrictions were placed upon him. He might dawdle in the beginning, and run madly to reach the half-circle mark on time, and then complete his task by walking steadily round the second half to goal. Or he might leap, and run, and skip, and linger in all sorts of ways, making up for slow going by fast, and for extra haste by pauses, and varying these movements on either lap of the circle as the humor seized him, only so that he were just one minute in traversing the first half-circle, and just one minute in traversing the second. Another illustration which may be employed is that of a Japanese wood-carving where a toad in one corner is balanced by a spray of blown flowers in the opposite upper one. The flowers are not the same shape as the toad, neither are they the same size, but the balance is preserved.

The unit in *vers libre* is not the foot, the number of the syllables, the quantity, or the line. The unit is the strophe, which may be the whole poem, or may be only a part. Each strophe is a complete circle: in fact, the meaning of the Greek word "strophe" is simply that part of the poem which was recited while the chorus were

making a turn round the altar set up in the center of the theater. The simile of the circle is more than a simile, therefore; it is a fact. Of course the circle need not always be the same size, nor need the times allowed to negotiate it be always the same. There is room here for an infinite number of variations. Also, circles can be added to circles, movement upon movement, to the poem, provided each movement completes itself, and ramifies naturally into the next. But one thing must be borne in mind: a cadenced poem is written to be read aloud, in this way only will its rhythm be felt. Poetry is a spoken and not a written art.

The *vers libristes* are often accused of declaring that they have discovered a new thing. Where such an idea started, it is impossible to say, certainly none of the better *vers libristes* was ever guilty of so ridiculous a statement. The name *vers libre* is new, the thing, most emphatically, is not. Not new in English poetry, at any rate. You will find something very much like it in Dryden's *Threnodia Augustalis*; a great deal of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is written in it; and Matthew Arnold's *Philomela* is a shining example of it. Practically all of Henley's *London Voluntaries* are written in it, and (so potent are names) until it was christened *vers libre*, no one thought of objecting to it. But the oldest reference to *vers libre* is to be found in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, where the Eagle addresses the Poet in these words:

And nevertheless hast set thy wyt

Although that in thy heed full lyte is

To make bookes, songs, or dytees

In rhyme or elles in cadence.

Commentators have wasted reams of paper in an endeavor to determine what Chaucer meant by this. But is it not possible that he meant a verse based upon rhythm, but which did not follow the strict metrical prosody of his usual practice?

One of the charges frequently brought against the Imagists is that they write, not poetry, but "shredded prose." This misconception springs from the almost complete ignorance of the public in regard to the laws of cadenced verse. But, in fact, what is prose and what is poetry? Is it merely a matter of typographical arrangement? Must everything which is printed in equal lines, with rhymes at the ends, be called poetry, and everything which is printed in a block be called prose? Aristotle, who certainly knew more about this subject than any one else, declares in his *Rhetoric* that prose is rhythmical without being metrical (that is to say, without insistence on any single rhythm), and then goes on to state the feet that are employed in prose, making, incidentally, the remark that the iambic prevailed in ordinary conversation. The fact is, that there is no hard and fast dividing line between prose and poetry. As a French poet of distinction, Paul Fort, has said: "Prose and poetry are but one instrument, graduated." It is not a question of typography; it is not even a question of rules and forms. Poetry is the vision in a man's soul which he translates as best he can with the means at his disposal.

We are young, we are experimentalists, but we ask to be judged by our own standards, not by those which have governed other men at other times.