A Comparative Study on Ezra Pound’s and Robert Frost’s Poetic Aesthetics

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Abstract

Ezra Pound and Robert Frost are two leading roles of American poetry in the 20th century. Though both of them lived in the modern era, they show great differences in poetic aesthetics. The Imagist Movement launched by Pound paved the way for the development of modern poetry and served as a rebel against the traditional poetic aesthetics. However, Frost cut a unique way of his own. He played the traditional poetic aesthetics in full swing. The conventional subjects and poetic forms are perfectly embodied in his poems. The thesis probes into their differences in language, poetic forms, and ways of conveying themes. Though the two poets’ aesthetic theories and practices are totally different, they both have achieved great success. And their achievements illuminate that the charm of a poem lies in its power to arouse echo in readers’ heart, in its power to endow people with spiritual enjoyment and inspiration, no matter whether it is conventional or innovative.

Key words: Pound; Imagism; Frost; Poetic aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

As the most distinguished twentieth-century American poets, Ezra (1885-1972) and Frost (1874-1963) turned out to be competitive rivals who subscribed to different, or even, opposing poetic aesthetics, which left not only an intriguing but also a revealing legacy. Since the beginning decades of the 20th century witnessed great political, economic, and military upheavals, which jointly produced a peculiar mood of the age, thinking minds in the field of literature initiated poetic movements, which aimed to revolutionize the conventional ideas and forms of poetry. Among them, Ezra Pound served as a presiding figure. He brought the Imagist Movement into full play by endorsing three principles for Imagism, which played a crucial role in defining and promoting modernist aesthetics in poetry.

As a contrast, Robert Frost adhered to conventions. He was unwilling to “run wild in the quest of new ways to be new” (Lathem, 2002, p.59), but remained content with “the old-fashioned way to be new” (Frost, 1995, p.75). In terms of both meter and subjects, Frost stuck to the conventions. As a New England farmer poet or “Nature Poet”, Frost absorbed Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and Symbolism into his poems. In fact, his adherence to the American and British literary tradition was at the center of his major poetic achievements, as he once admitted.

Though it seems paradoxical, both Pound and Frost have achieved great success and won high reputation. With regard to Pound, his theory of poetic composition widens the poetry expression. As for Frost, however, people are impressed by his pastoral subjects and philosophical thoughts underlying the plain language. The comparison of their poetic ideas would reveal the rules for both poetry composition and appreciation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Reviews on Ezra Pound

Being the founder of modern American poetic innovation, Pound is referred to as “the poet’s poet”. He launched the
movement of Imagism, striving to eliminate the decadent poetics of late Romanticism and open up a path for the development of modern English poetry. There has long been a great enthusiasm for the study of Pound. Besides the biographical and documentary studies, critics have combed the ideas in Pound’s *The Cantos*. Pound’s political, economic, and philosophical ideas also have triggered keen interest among critics. Moreover, many Chinese researches have been carried out from the perspectives of translation, cultural communication, and aesthetics.

In terms of study on Pound’s poetic aesthetics, the image exploration serves as the core. The image, as T. E. Hulme once said, must enable one “to dwell and linger upon a point of excitement, to achieve the impossible and convert a point into a line” (Chang, 2003, p.159). Furthermore, He Qing’s *Pound’s Imagistic Theory and Imagistic Doctrine in Chinese Traditional Aesthetics*, Li Youba’s *The Aesthetic Interpretation of Ezra Pound’ Poetry*, and Gong Yan’s *Image Research under the Aesthetic Vision*, have also been devoted to the study of images.

1.2 Reviews on Robert Frost

Perhaps no American poets of the 20th century have received higher honors than Frost did. In 1957, he was awarded two especially coveted honors from Oxford and Cambridge. He has received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times. Along with Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, Frost is now firmly regarded as one of the undisputed masters of modern American poetry (Layman, 1989, p.71).

For a long time, critics have been enjoying the absolute freedom of comprehending Frost’s poetry in different ways. Some focus on the discussion of the relation between man and nature, while others pay much attention to his capacity to voice symbolic meaning in naturally portrayed scene and action. Comments on Frost’s poetry mainly concentrate on the following aspects: the themes and images, the structure and rhetorical devices, the deceptive simplicity, and the artistry of his poetry such as “the sound of sense.”

With regard to the theme, Chinese critics have probed into Frost’s abundant use of figures of speech and symbols that contain a profound and meaningful philosophy and his unique way of passing his thoughts to the readers. Another vehemently-discussed topic of Frost is whether he is a traditional poet or modern one. Critics generally agree that Frost’ poetry is traditional in Modernist standards, more often using traditional rhyme and meter instead of the free verse. In “Frost and Modernism”, Robert Kern expresses that Frost is a poet, for whom the pressure or “chaos” of history is less a determinant of poetic form than a provocation to reproduce it in its more or less established modes (Kern, 1998, p.2). “Although Frost’s career fully spans the modern period and it is unreasonable to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet,” said Huang Zongying, a professor of English and American literature at Peking University, “but it is also difficult to place him in the main tread of modern poetry” (Huang, 2000, p.42).

To sum up, the criticism on the two poets, from Pound’s poetic innovation, his Imagistic views to Frost’s poetic subjects, thought and style have been almost exhausted. However, the comparisons of the two poets that are of the same fame but different views are left not fully explored. Hence, the author of the thesis carries out an analysis of point-to-point comparison, with the aim to make the conventional and modern poetic aesthetics more clearly and to reveal a rule of poetry creation and appreciation.

2. DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE

2.1 Pound's Compressed Words

Ezra Pound protests against the conventional poems with its verbosity as well as extra-poetic padding, and aims instead at a new clarity and exactness of the language. Pound advocates that any linguistic form that may distract the reader from the image is unnecessary, such as the artificial poetic diction, superfluous verbiage, rhetoric, explicit philosophizing, and editorializing, and transitional filler. He brings forward the requirement of the language in composing a poem, namely, to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. To Pound, any unnecessary word represents a loss of precision and a moral and artistic defect. Therefore, the precise word should be used to convey the exact meaning—this is Pound’s criterion of poetry:

> Poetry must be as well written as prose. Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. economy). There must be no book words, no periphrases, no inversions. It must be as simple as De Maupassant’s best prose, and as hard as Stendhal’s. (Herbert, 1969, p.36)

The idea shown in this statement is that poetry should be hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite, that concentration is the very essence of poetry, and that there must be no clichés, set phrases, stereotyped journalese. The language should be of economy, precision, concision, and be characterized by absence of pretension, abstraction or didacticism. It should be of the right words in the right place and at a minimum of rhetoric. Consequently, Pound’s compressed words hinder some readers from full understanding.

In his famous “In a Station of the Metro,” Pound excellently puts the theory into practice. Pound recorded how he came to write this poem. On a visit to Paris, in the metro he

> saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then other and another, and then another beautiful woman, and I 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 (Kenner, 1971, p.184).
The words were slow in coming. Pound said that he first wrote a thirty-line poem, which he destroyed. Six months later, he produced another shorter poem, which he also discarded. Then a year later, he completed the twenty-word poem. In the process of continuous modifications, Pound left out all the redundant words and used the fewest possible words to convey two accurate images, showing his insistence on the economy of words.

In addition, his poem “The Encounter” can serve as another example to illustrate his view of concision of words:

All the white they were talking the new morality
Her eyes explored me.
And when I arose to go
Her fingers were like the tissue
Of a Japanese paper napkin. (Chang, 2003, p. 201)

Pound is conscious of stripping the poem of inessential details. There is no superfluous ornamental adjective and all is a loyal record of the physical experience.

In conclusion, Pound’s poems are characterized by the neatness and economy of language.

2.2 Frost’s Colloquial Diction

During the beginning decades of the 20th century, many poets were intent on the poetry reform. T. S. Eliot began to apply allusion, legend, and ironic language in his poems, putting obstacles to the readers’ understanding. Pound tried to render his words as exactly, and compressed as possible, making his poems composed by some noun phrases. As their contemporary, Frost, however, kept himself away from the innovative vortex. Influenced by the romantic predecessors, Frost is featured by plain and colloquial words. “I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am that the national is the root of all thought and art...” asserted Frost, in North of Boston, “One half of individuality is locality, and I was about venturing to say the other half was colloquialism” (Paton, 2003, p.113). Echoing with the concept of colloquialism, Frost uses vernacular, plain, and daily speeches. Thus, Frost’s poems enjoy more popularity with people of all walks, while Pound’s poems are more embraced by intellectuals.

Due to his adherence to traditional meter and rhyme, Frost’s words are not totally of concision. In order to stick to the metrical pattern and rhyme scheme, now and then extra words need to be added. As a result, the effect of compression can not be achieved as perfectly as Pound does, as the latter adopts free verse.

In his well-known poem “The Road Not Taken”, Frost transfers a philosophical theme with the spoken words running through the whole poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference. (Chang, 2003, p.198)

The stanzas read like a man pouring out his personal experiences and emotions when looking back, since the words are colloquial and plain, not as oblique as Pound’s diction. Furthermore, contrary to Pound’s bias, this poem contains the explanatory and descriptive words, such as “because,” “though,” “far,” “equally,” and so on.

In conclusion, Frost and Pound are opposed to each other in words of selection in poems—one prefers succinct language and the other upholds plain language.

3. DIFFERENCE IN POETIC FORMS

3.1 Pound’s Free Verse

Ezra Pound, as the pioneer of the innovation movement, abandons the traditional poetic forms, which are characterized by meter and rhyme. He argues that rhyme which sticks to a restrict pattern prevents a poet from depicting the image. “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome”, said Pound (Chang, 2003, p.159). It means that no necessary words may be included in order to make a meter, and a poem should be composed with the phrasing of music. This principle concerns a breaking from conventional prosody and the interrelationship between music and verse. For Pound, an elementary tool in the handicraft of the poet is the mastery of both the natural melody and the cadence of language. He wrote in “Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch”:

Poetry is a composition of words set to music...The proportion of quality of the music may, and does, vary; but poetry withers and “dries out” when it leaves music, or at least imagined music, too far behind it...Poets who will not study music are, or become, bad poets...Poets who will not study music are defective. (Lander, 1971, p.16)

In fact, Pound’s natural bent has always been poetry should be sung rather than spoken. The music that Pound has in mind is real sounds in sequence, an actual melody. In order to achieve the effect of the musical quality of speech, Pound adopts the free verse, which is a form of poetry that refrains from rigid metrical patterns. For Pound, free verse is a poetic mode closely allied to the music. Practically speaking, this principle can be figured out from the poem “A Pact”

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman-
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root
Let there be commerce between us. (Hu, 2003, p.312)

This poem runs freely without considering either traditional meter or rhyme, but at the same time it attains a strong musical effect. His musical speech can also be found in the short poem “In a Station of the Metro”:

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Hu, 2003, p.312)

Being strongly influenced by Japanese haiku, the poem is also featured by its imperfect internal rhymes: station/apparition, metro/petals/wet, crowd/bough, and the consequent musically.

3.2 Frost’s Consciousness of Meter
When many poets plunge into the poetic reform, Robert Frost stands consciously aloof from the Modernist endeavor. He does not seem particularly enthusiastic in form experiment. “To be perfectly frank with you,” said Frost in a letter to his friend John T. Bartlett, “I am one of the most notable craftsman of my time. I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory of versification” (Thompson, 1964, p.79). Frost retains a faith in the traditional forms of poetry, which attaches much importance to meter and rhyme. He once said that writing without meter was like playing tennis without a net. Therefore, he employs traditional verse forms—sonnet, rhyming couplets, and blank verse instead of free verse, which is much typical of the 20th century.

Frost’s opinion of poetic forms can be revealed by his advocate, namely, “the sound of sense.” He said:

I alone of English writers have set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense… The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from the voice behind a door that cuts off the words… It is the abstract vitality of our speech… If one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the meter. (Thompson, 1964, p.79)

The theory of “the sound of sense” attaches great importance to the poetic meter and rhyme or the poetic prosody. As Frost said, his greatest difference from other poets is his adherence to traditional poetic meter and rhyme, and that the perfect harmony existing between meter and rhyme inspires readers to think and imagine. In his famous poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Frost clearly illustrates his opinion on poetic forms:

He gives his harness bells a shake,
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep. (Frost, 1961, p. 275)

The poem consists of four almost identically-constructed stanzas. Each line is iambic, with four stressed syllables. Within the four lines of each stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme. The third line does not, but it sets up the rhymes for the next stanza. Besides, in the poem “Acquainted with the Night,” Frost also adopts the traditional poetic forms:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain-and back in rain.
I have outwalked the further city light.
I have looked down the saddled city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat,
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (Frost, 1961, p. 324)

This rhyme scheme is like this: aba, bcb, cdc, ded. And each line is of iambic pentameter. Besides, “The Road Not Taken” consists of four stanzas of iambic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme abaab, which echoes with the traditional poetic form.

These three poems, with the harmonious balance and unity between poetic meter and rhyme, give the reader a sense of rhythm and progress and illustrate Frost’s prosody. It can be inferred from the poems that Frost’s poetic forms are contrary to the modern poems, which stress the absence of poetic meter and rhyme.

4. DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY OF VOICING THEME

4.1 Pound’s Juxtaposition of Images
Ezra Pound’s most prominent poetic feature lies in his focus on the image. Although many poets prior to Pound had employed images in their poems, none of them had regarded images as an important or even the only means of poetic creation or presentation. For Pound’s part, image is the dominant factor of poetry.

Like many intellectuals of his generation, Pound endeavored to get away from the heavy, ponderous logic of the 19th century and to find a new way to voice his emotions and ideas. He brought forward his theory of direct treatment of “the thing,” whether subjective or objective (Chang, 2003, p.159). He argued that the expression should resemble the “object” as closely as an art can make it. “Direct” means no fuss, frill, or ornament. Without rhetorical description and logical explanation, Pound conveyed his ideas and feelings by making use of the juxtaposition of images. In 1911, in his first series
of images for the *New Age*, where he had described the artist’s instinctive preference for “Luminous Detail” over abstract argument. Pound asserted that the artist must not try to analyze a phenomenon or explain it in abstract terms, but should merely present it in a series of pictures. Later on, he formulated his Ideogramic Method. It means to do away with abstract argument, or any other obviously rational process, and instead, to present first one facet and then another for the reader to contemplate and meditate on. In Pound’s opinion, poetry should be rooted in images rather than ideas. He insists on a reflection through the precise, concrete images and warns against the use of explanatory statements or abstract, rhetorical descriptions.

Nevertheless, how can the juxtaposition of images uncover the theme? The image, as Pound defines, is that which presents an intellectual and economical complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously that gives a sense of sudden liberation, a sense of freedom from time limits, and a sense of sudden growth (Knapp, 1979, p.59). It is a concrete expression with abstract meaning. It is not an ornament of the language but speech to voice one’s feelings and thoughts. Therefore, by the juxtaposition of images, Pound successfully delivers his subjective thoughts to the reader. In his most well-known poem “In a Station of the Metro,” Pound brilliantly combines a sharp visual image or two juxtaposed images “Petals on a wet, black bough” with an implied meaning. Superficially, the poem is a description of a moment of sudden emotion at seeing beautiful faces in a metro. He saw the faces, turning variously toward light and darkness, like flower petals that are half absorbed by, half resisting the wet, dark texture of a bough. Yet, it is just by juxtaposing the two images that abstruse meanings are implied. Therefore, contrary to the traditional way of logical argument, which goes like following a thread, Pound adopts the technique of the parallel of two images to uncover his concern.

Pound’s another poem “Ts’ai Chi’h”, also illuminates his concept of indicating the theme with the juxtaposition of images:

The petals fall in the fountain,
The orange-colored rose-leaves,
Their ochre clings to the stone. (Pound, 1975, p.216)

In this poem, Pound does not use rhetorical or logic methods to pour out his emotions. Instead, he conceals his emotions among a series of images. Ts’ai Chi’h is compared to the orange-colored rose-leaves, which are a symbol of blight, implying this brilliant Chinese poet’s final pathetic fate. Meanwhile, the fountain reminds the reader of Ts’ai Chi’h’s innocence. Finally, the image-stone transmits the reader a sense of perseverance and eternity. Hence, these images naturally bring out the poem’s theme to the best advantage. Though Ts’ai Chi’h lives a short and tragic life, his spirit remains forever, and his marvelous works will always linger in the readers’ heart.

To sum up, Pound’s technique of juxtaposing the images proves to be an effective way to set forth his thoughts to the reader.

### 4.2 Frost’s Logic Pattern

In his famous essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Frost demonstrates his views on how to transmit a poet’s emotions and ideas to the reader or how to construct a poem so that deep revelations are exposed. He said:

> It should be the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one really holds that the ecstasy should be static and stands still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the pulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not really a great clarification, such as sects cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and save the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad—the happy-sad blend of the drinking song. (Cox & Latham, 1968, p.19)

Frost’s preference for the traditional pattern of unmasking his poetic emotions and thoughts, instead of Pound’s juxtaposition of images is clearly shown in his remarks. For him, voicing profound ideas in a poem is just like solving a logical problem. It needs the poet to prove the final conclusion step by step, with each step paving the way for the next one. Moreover, his poems begin with a scene or an event and conclude with some philosophy. As a result, Frost’s poems seem like easy to catch at first glance, but as the reader goes on for the deeper, he may be exposed to incisive life philosophy or other profound themes.

As a regional poet, Frost is mainly concerned with the landscape and people in New England area. His poems, for example, “Pasture,” “Stopping by the Snowy Evening,” “Birches,” “After Apple-Picking,” show readers beautiful pictures, with villages far from the uproar of cities, with an original land without being polluted by the modern industry. These lovely sceneries contain peace, beauty, tranquility, and human feelings, in contrast to the highly developed modern and industrialized city life. At the same time, the poet also ponders eternal human problems which always exist no matter how social conditions change. Therefore, Frost, by following a thread or a logical inference, brings his themes and thoughts into the readers’ mind. In fact, Frost is plainly the most deceptive poet in the history of our literature (Parini, 2004, p.266).

A detailed analysis of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” will show Frost’s mode and idea of versification. The first three stanzas are intended to create a sense of brooding mystery as the speaker stops his horse in a desolate landscape between woods and a frozen lake. The speaker gazes into the woods, feeling the impulse
of losing himself in them. Then his horse shakes bells, reminds him to get on with the business of living. The first three stanzas are narrative about an experience on a snowy evening, and descriptive about the snow scenery before the poem discloses its implication in the last stanza. In conclusion, through gradual inference and step-to-step underlay, Frost embeds his authentic thoughts into the plain description.

CONCLUSION

Poetry, as a conventional and an effective vehicle for people to express their feelings, has been occupying a dominant position in literature. With the advent of the 20th century, poetic innovation and development have entered into a new stage. Many avant-gardes protest against the traditions of the preceding poetry and try to launch poetic reforms to express the temper of the age. Abandoning the tradition became a fashion. The imagists, led by Ezra Pound, challenged the conventional poetic aesthetics and managed to find a new way for English poetry by shedding away the shackles of metrical form. Pound initiated the Imagist Movement and brought forward three main formulas for poetry composition. Not only in the aspects of poetic language and forms, but also in the realm of thematic expressions, great differences from the traditional poetic aesthetics were manifested, greatly accelerating the development of the modern poetry. In addition, Pound’s concept of rendering the image as the core of a poem supersizes people overwhelmingly, as he fabulously injects his life philosophy into those simple visual pictures.

However, when Pound roams in the current of poetic innovation, Frost flies in the face of Imagism. He attempts to amaze his readers with the content of his poems, rather than with the experimental poetic techniques. Frost clings to traditional poetic aesthetics to reflect the modern spirit. Though Frost departs from the mainstream, he enjoys enormous popularity.

In spite of the fact that they stand for different poetic aesthetics, both have been crowned with marvelous success. Comparing their discrepancies in three aspects—language, poetic forms, and methods of voicing themes, the thesis comes to the conclusion. Pound explores valuable methods of imagery and free verse and enlarges the possibility of English poetry, while Frost proves the vitality and efficiency of traditional metrical form. And their remarkable achievements show the importance of both innovation and inheritance and convincingly demonstrate that true feelings and profound themes are more potent elements to touch the heartstrings of readers. Either old-fashioned or innovative, the beauty and value of a poem rests on its power to bestow spiritual cultivation on readers.

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