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Modernists' Images and Contemporary Deep Images

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Abstract

Imagism was a short-lived but influential movement in English and American poetry that favoured precision of imagery, and clear, sharp language. Influenced by the ideas of the poet and philosopher T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound and F.S. Flint first documented the theory of Imagism in London early in the second decade of the twentieth century. Their ideals for the new movement appeared in Flint's "Imagism", printed in the periodical *Poetry* in March of 1913, which became the manifesto of the fledgling group.

Keywords

Imagism; Amygism; Vorticism; Deep Images.

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and F.S. Flint first documented the theory of Imagism in London early in the second decade of the twentieth century. Their ideals for the new movement appeared in Flint's "Imagism", printed in the periodical *Poetry* in March of 1913, which became the manifesto of the fledgling group. Together Flint and Pound devised the three primary precepts of Imagism, calling for conciseness, musical rhythm, and "the direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective" (www.enotes/Imagism.com). These theories were soon after put into practice in the first Imagist anthology edited by Pound entitled *Des Imagistes* (1914).

Historically, Imagism is also significant because it was the first organised Modernist English-language literary movement or group. In the words of T.S. Eliot: "The point de repere usually and conveniently taken as the starting-point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imagists' (sic) in London about 1910" (www.imagists.org). Imagism called for a return to what were seen as more Classical values, such as directness of presentation, and economy of language, as well as a willingness to experiment with non-traditional verse forms. The focus on the 'thing' as 'thing' also mirrors contemporary developments in avant-garde art, especially Cubism. Although Imagism isolates objects through the use of what Ezra Pound called 'luminous details', Pound's Ideogrammatic method of juxtaposing concrete instances to express an abstraction, is similar to the way in which Cubism synthesizes a single image from multiple perspectives.

The origins of Imagism are to be found in two poems, "Autumn" and "A City Sunset" by T.E. Hulme. These were published in January 1909 by the Poets' Club in London in a booklet called For Christmas MDCCCCVIII. Hulme was a student of mathematics and philosophy. He is credited with creating the philosophy that would give birth to the Imagist movement. Although he wrote very little, his ideas inspired Ezra Pound to organise the new movement.

Imagism was too restrictive to endure long as a concerted movement, but it served to inaugurate a distinctive feature of modernist poetry. Almost every major poet from the 1920s through the middle of the 20th century, including W.B.Yeats, T.S.Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, manifests some influence by the Imagist experiments with the representation of precise, clear images that are juxtaposed without specifying their interrelations.

The Imagists stressed clarity, exactness and concreteness of detail. Their aims, briefly set out, were that: (I) Content should be presented directly, through specific images where possible, (II) Every word should be functional, with nothing included that was not essential to the effect intended, and (III) Rhythm should be composed by the musical phrase rather than the metronome. Imagism itself gave rise to fairly negligible lines like: You crash over the trees, /You crack the live branch… (Storm by H.D.) (www.enotes.com/Imagism/Poetry of Direct Apprehension)

The typical Imagist poem is written in free verse and undertakes to render as precisely and tersely as possible, and without comment or generalisation, the writer's impression of a visual object or scene; often the impression is rendered by means of metaphor. The famed example by Ezra Pound exceeds other Imagist poems in the degree of its concentration: The apparition of these faces in the crowd, /Petals on a wet, black bough (Pound). In this poem Pound, like a number of other Imagists, was influenced by the Japanese Haiku.

Pound, the first leader of the movement, was soon succeeded by Amy Lowell; after that Pound sometimes referred to the movement, slightingly, as 'Amygism'. Amy Lowell took over the leadership role of the imagists when Pound moved on to other modernist modes. She successfully endeavoured to bring more poets into the fold; including D.H. Lawrence, and to popularize Imagism across the Atlantic. Each year between 1915 and 1917 Lowell edited a volume of the anthology *Some Imagist Poets*. The Imagist proposals, as voiced

by Amy Lowell in her preface to the first of three anthologies called *Some Imagist Poets*, were for a poetry which, abandoning conventional poetic materials and versification, is free to choose any subject and to create its own rhythms, uses common speech, and present 'an image or vivid sensory description that is hard, clear, and concentrated' (Pound). After a period of considerable interest, the Imagist movement, as such, had run its course by 1917. Amy Lowell's most anthologised poems include "Lilacs" and "Patterns".

Despite being so short-lived as a movement, Imagism was to prove to be deeply influential on the course of modernist poetry in English. Aldington, in his 1941 memoir, writes: "I think the poems of Ezra Pound, H.D., Lawrence, and Ford Madox Ford will continue to be read. And to a considerable extent T.S.Eliot and his followers have carried on their operations from positions won by the Imagists".*6 Wallace Stevens on the other hand, voiced his shortcomings in the Imagist approach; he wrote, "Not all objects are equal. The vice of imagism was that it did not recognize this" (www.Imagism.com/chap.Imagism). The influence of Imagism can be seen clearly in the works of the Objective poets, who came to prominence in the 1930s under the auspices of Pound and Williams. The influence of Imagism can also be seen in a number of 1950s poetic groups and movements, especially the Beat generation, the Black Mountain poets, and others associated with the San Francisco Renaissance. In his seminal 1950 essay, "Projective Verse", Charles Olson, the theorist of the Black Mountain group, wrote, "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" (www.Imagism.com/chap.Imagism), a credo that derives directly from the Imagists. Among the Beats, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg in particular were influenced by the Imagist emphasis on Chinese and Japanese poetry. One poet associated with the objectivist group, Louis Zukofsky, was a major influence on the Language poets, who carried the Imagist focus on formal concerns to a high level of development.

In a 1928 letter to the French critic and translator Rene Taupin, Pound was keen to emphasise another ancestry for Imagism, pointing out that Hulme was, in many ways, indebted to a Symbolist tradition, linking back via W.B. Yeats, Arthur Symons and the 1890s generation of British poets to Mallarme. In 1915, Pound edited the poetry of another 1890's poet, Lionel Johnson. In his introduction he wrote, "no one has written purer Imagism than [Johnson] has, in the line 'Clear lie the fields, and fade into blue air'. It has a beauty like the Chinese" (www.Imagism.com/ chap.Imagism). However, for all its importance to modern poetry, the Imagist movement led to a dead end. Almost every poet of stature involved in it was forced to transcend Imagism, though all profited by the association. T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, in different ways, "turned the Image into the Symbol, buttressed by a surface of wit and irony" (www.imagism.com).

Eliot borrowed the metaphysical conceits from Donne and his contemporaries. "The Love Song of Prufrock" stands as a pertinent example. He has used a number of conceits which take the form of symbol-images, suggesting a lot more than what is actually described. For example, the 'fog' is compared to 'cat'. Similarly Prufrock's mind is compared with a patient on the operation table. He is conscious but conscious of nothing. His mind is a kind of vacuum. Most of Eliot's poems contain symbols which partake both of imagery and symbolism. What however strikes us most in Eliot is that his images are quite precise and accurate, though they convey 'an intellectual or emotional complex'. Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, however, moved beyond Imagism through its own dynamics, through the tensions created by juxtaposed images. If the poem is to be limited to a single perception, to a single intellectual or emotional complex, it is clear that although the poem's image may be resonant, it cannot carry the full weight of a comprehensive view of reality. Pound's early Imagist poems, however, had tested the possibilities of images in juxtaposition.

What Pound suggests, in his essay "A Retrospect", as a means of this direct communication is the Image - "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application" (Karl 338). Pound relies for his effects on the juxtaposition of two images to form his Image: the 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'. Significance resides neither in one image or the other, but in the tension between the two. Pound's definition of Image comes very close to what is now commonly accepted as a definition of a literary symbol: something concrete and definite used to represent something abstract and indefinite. And yet, Pound himself was often critical of symbolism. Quoting Eliot, Pound pointed out, "No verse is libre for the man who wants to do a good job'. On the last matter, he said; 'I believe in 'absolute rhythm', a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (Karl 6).

The Image or the symbol, is ahistorical; it shifts man's attention to aspects of his experience that are independent of time and place. It does not deny subjective experience, though in truth it de-emphasizes it, but it begins to treat the inner world as if it were a manifestation of the outer. Amy Lowell and her followers practiced what Pound called 'Amygism'; they emphasized the pictorial aspects of Imagism and for them the term seemed finally to encompass almost any short poem in free verse. To dissociate himself from the Amygists, Pound formed his own school, Vorticism. In his essay "Vorticism", Pound summed up: "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which ideas are constantly rushing" (Karl 6). Imagism or Vorticism, for Pound was not a matter of picture; it was a question of energy, of tension between inner and outer worlds.

The next formal attempt to prevent good Imagism from being driven out by bad Amygism was made by William Carlos Williams. For him, as for Pound, the final purpose of art was liberation from conventional worlds of perception, the transcending of the ego by experiencing the ways in which the self participates in the universal – not necessarily through mysticism, but by seeing man himself as an object in the natural universe. And like Pound, Williams is most interested in that "moment of tension and interaction between inner and outer worlds" (Karl 6).

The poetry and poetics of Wallace Stevens are not generally thought of as being in the tradition of Pound and Williams. Stevens was at the start of his career an Imagist poet. He realised the limitations of Imagism and moved beyond it. He relied too much on wit, irony, and the French Symbolists to utilize open verse. Poetry, Stevens said, is "an interdependence of imagination and reality as equals" (Karl 7-8).

Thus, the movement called Imagism began under the influence of T.E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound became its chief exponent. It may be treated as a part of the modernist movement which reacting against the sentimentality and moralising tone of the 19th century Victorian Poetry, looked to other sources to help them create a new poetic expression. The focus of the movement was more on the treatment of the subject than the subject itself – 'conciseness', 'musical rhythm', 'the direct treatment of thing', and 'the desire to experiment with non-traditional verse forms'. Therefore, critics see in their typically spare poems a prefiguring of the high modernist verse of Eliot, Pound and other modernists as mentioned earlier. In order to make a true assessment of the Modernist poets, we cannot ignore the all important influence of the imagists from whom they received not only broad hints for their images, phrases and poetic structure but also freed themselves from the conventional worlds of perception.

The poetry of Deep Imagism surfaced in America only after modernism had run its course. The term 'deep image' was coined by Robert Kelly in an

essay published in 1961 which referred to a new movement in the post-modern American poetry. Robert Bly is considered its chief exponent. The term 'Deep Imagism' grew in popularity despite the critical disapproval of it by the group's leading theorist and spokesperson, Robert Bly himself. Speaking with Ekbert Faas in 1974, Bly explains that the term deep image 'suggests a geographical location in the psyche', rather than, as Bly prefers, 'a notion of the poetic image which involves psychic energy and movement'. In a later interview, Bly states:

> Let's imagine a poem as if it were an animal. When animals run, they have considerable flowing rhythms. Also they have bodies. An image is simply a body where psychic energy is free to move around. Psychic energy can't move well in a non-image statement. (Karl 9)

Such vague and metaphorical theoretical statements are characteristic of Robert Bly. Therefore, the image, for Bly, is not what we mean by the images of Imagist poets. In the essay "A Wrong-Turning in American Poetry", Bly openly criticizes the poetry of Pound's Imagist movement. The only movement in American poetry which concentrated on the image was Imagism, in 1911-13. But 'Imagism' was largely 'Picturism'. An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like Bonnefoy's 'interior sea lighted by turning eagles', it cannot be seen in real life. A picture, on the other hand, is drawn from the objective 'real' world. 'Petals on a wet black bough' can eventually be seen. "We do, therefore, mark a shift in emphasis between the subjective manipulation of objective materials in the Modernism of Pound and Eliot, and, as Dennis Haskell has described the Deep Image technique, the rational manipulation of irrational materials" (www.enotes.com/ Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading). The irrational materials, according to Robert Bly, are donated to

the poem by the imagination, which in his aesthetic becomes synonymous with the unconscious.

The 'how' of a poem by another deep imagist poet James Wright is intrinsic to the 'what'. The participation of Wright in the 'deep image' movement is important. His mind is not operating in the usual logical and rational way but is dreamlike and given to random associations. Images in particular lead him inwardly toward moments of sudden self-revelation as illustrated in the following lines:

Flayed without hope,
I held the man for nothing in my arms. (Saint Judas)

I am lost in the beautiful white ruins
Of America. (Having Lost My Sons)

The work of James Wright is thought by many to be the most genuine, most ground-breaking poetry to come directly from the Deep Image School. Whereas Bly's poems often assert their connections, assuming that the reader, like himself, is starting at the brink of an inward place, Wright must find his way inward, which he does helplessly yet gracefully, without apparent knowledge of where he will end up. His images thus become profoundly alive as the only clues he, as well as the reader, can hold on to as he progresses.

Wright, as David Ignatow has said of him, has "made an organic graft of the surrealist technique upon the body of hard reality, one enhancing and reinforcing the other so that we have a mode as evocative as a dream and as effective as a newspaper account" (Stauffer 377). It is, therefore, clear that the sources of images in these poets is unconscious – the rational manipulation of irrational material.

Although Mark Strand is not associated with Deep Imagism, this tendency can be traced in Strand in the extreme personalization in his poetry. This personalization in Strand, especially the early Strand, occurs as a result of

the exploration of and response to the inner most reaches of the poet's self below the conscious and rational level. Poems grow out of images discovered in the depths of human darkness; they are spoken by the most profound silence in a man. It would be pertinent here to quote a few lines from Strand.

A train runs over me.
I feel sorry
for the engineer
who crouches down
and whispers in my ear
that he is innocent. ("The Accident", Strand 51)

It is autumn. People are jumping from jetliners;
Their relatives leap into the air to join them.
That is what the shrieking is about. Nobody wants
To leave, nobody wants to stay behind. ("The Door", Strand 51)

The term 'deep image' is also associated with two New York poets, Jerome Rothenberg (b.1931) and Robert Kelly (b.1935), who have described deep-image poetry as a pattern of associations that emphasizes the subjective as opposed to the objective image of Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky. "Poetry", writes Kelly, "like dream reality, is the juncture of the experienced with the never-experienced. Like waking reality, it is the fulfillment of the imagined and the unimagined" (Stauffer 401).

The two most prominent poetic modes that flowered between 1960 and the mid-seventies, Confessional poetry and Deep Image poetry, were likewise part and parcel of American poetry's democratization and industrialization. The 'archetypal' dream materials that were the subject matter of poems in the Deep Image mode were not only ahistorical but were also open, literally, to everybody, regardless of intellect, caste, education or geography.

The Deep Imagist 'school' of poetry, more than any of the others, proved to be both a watershed and catalyst for the diverse energies suddenly appearing in literature and the culture throughout the decade. It gave rise to a poetry whose characteristics recombined elements offered by other groups with a new energy source, Spanish Surrealism, to produce what two of its central apologists, George Lensing and Ronald Moran, define as a poetry of 'the emotive imagination'. The base element of this poetry is the image, and its 'form' is a dreamlike rather than objectively recognizable progression of images whose aim is not to dismantle the reader's sense of self and the world but to startle one into quiet, unwilled acts of recognition. The poet's inner self and the outer world become "landscapes described and fused by images that treat both as physical, yet associatively charged, phenomena" (George, S. Lensing and Ronald Moran).

Although this 'new' poetry historically is not so radical a departure, it marked a significant change in the approach taken by North American writers, critics, and readers to poetry in the twentieth century. The deep imagist poetry highlighted the associative possibilities generated by well-chosen concrete imagery and insisted on the involvement of the reader in the poet's act of self-discovery. In this way it "sensitized readers to a resonant and shareable subjectivity evident in much of the poetry being written within and outside the major movements" (*A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* 204).

The Deep Image movement, although it arose somewhat in response to the spirit of the decade, nevertheless came about largely through the singular energy of Robert Bly, who promoted it as an antidote to Modernist aesthetics. His and William Duffy's magazine the Fifties, which began in 1958, and soon became the Sixties, flourished throughout the decade as the showcase for writers they felt would steer contemporary American poetry in the direction it needed to go: inward, toward and the underexplored regions of the psyche, by means of startling but rightly intuited images.

These poets after modernism have consciously or unconsciously been influenced by surrealism. In the surrealist's manifesto of 1924, Breton defined Surrealism as "pure psychic automatism whose intention is to express verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought and thought's diction, in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic and moral preoccupations" (Breton 26). Surrealism, then, in its original manifestation, attempted to come as close to a documentation of the unconscious mind through works of art. In Surrealism, it is believed that true poetry is that which comes from the unconscious mind. Surrealism springs out of Symbolism – Breton's great mentors were the main figures of the Symbolist Movement. However, Breton's Surrealism can be seen as a movement in reaction to the ideas of Symbolism. Surrealist poetry relished spontaneity, the unpredictable, the startling, and the never-seen before.

Breton asserted that the main carrier of the unconscious is the image:

> The image is a pure creation of the mind. It does not result from a comparison, but from bringing together two more or less distant realities. The image will be stronger, and will have a greater emotive power and poetic reality, as the relationships between the two realities are more distant and exact. (Silsbe)

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the idea of Surrealism had spread. Soon, poets of the Spanish tongue were experimenting with unconscious, intuitive, image-driven poetry just as much as the French. Probably, the most striking difference between the French and Spanish surrealists is the manner in which each group carried out surrealist activity. Bly contends that while both the French and the Spanish surrealists are invested in bringing the unconscious into their poetry, the French do not connect the unconscious with the emotional or the heart, whereas the Spanish find the heart undeniably tied to the unconscious.

As a concerted movement, surrealism was launched in France by Andre Breton's Manifesto on Surrealism in 1924. As M.H. Abrams points out,

> The expressed aim was a revolution against all restraints on the free functioning of the human mind. These restraints included the logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions, and the control of artistic creation by forethought and intention. To ensure the unhampered operation of deep mind, which they regarded as the only source of valid knowledge and art, surrealists turned to 'automatic writing', and to exploiting the material of dreams, of states of mind between sleep and waking, and of natural or artificially induced hallucinations. (Abrams 205)

Surrealism is, therefore, a fusion of the real and the irrational into a sort of absolute reality, which is surreality. What the surrealists do is to blend the perceptions of the unconscious mind with the external realities of phenomenal world. Therefore, Andre Breton urged writers to substitute irrational for rational visions and to search the unknown mind in an effort to express the real process of thought. The reality, as the surrealists believed, lay in the human consciousness which is available to man in the innocence of childhood and in dreams. Therefore, they often employed grotesque themes, dreams, hallucinations and sub-conscious visions in their writings. A recurrent device was the placing of the familiar objects in new or illogical relationships to stress the superficiality of conventional vision of reality. As a matter of fact, the basis of surrealism as a movement lay very much in Freud's method of psychological investigation which revealed to the artists and writers a new world of fantastic images drawn from the sub-conscious and from dreams.

Out of the surrealist movement emerged two very distinct styles, often referred to as 'Automatism' and 'Veristic Surrealism' was a technique used by the surrealist artist to elicit the unconscious. The artists would allow their hand to wander across the canvas surface without any interference from the

conscious mind, and the resulting marks, provided the basis for further elaboration, as can be seen in the work of Miro, Arp and Duchamp. All other types of surrealism such as Classical, Social and Visionary Surrealism fall into the latter category, as does the work of Dali, de Chirico, Magritte and Hanna.

The Spanish tradition offered poets of the sixties a means of grasping and transforming vital elements of modern life, through the poet's ability to descend into the subconscious and then rise to meet those elements from the depths of being. 'Inwardness', Robert Bly claimed in an important essay entitled "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry", was the alternative that the Latin American and European poets offered to the American imagination, which had allowed itself to be constrained by the Modernist tradition's myopic fixation on the outer world, the objective world.

The poetry of the sixties yielded many expressions of protest, some aesthetically moving, some simplistic, some satirical, some bitter, some hopeful, and many touching on other ills, such as the limited rights of women and blacks. Whereas the Jungian epistemology of Deep Image poetry had encouraged the cultivation by poets of a generic, archetypal persona speaking for all humanity for all time, the narrative, free-verse, conversation-poem that was the 'prose lyric' had, by definition, to be spoken by a particular individual from a particular historical moment.

An important critical survey of contemporary American poetry was Stanley Plumly's two-part essay Chapter and Verse, published in 1978 in the American Poetry Review. What is perhaps more significant, Plumly's justification for free verse as specially adaptable for individual 'voice' constituted the most convincing denial yet formulated for the implicit justification of free verse in Deep Image poetry, which had assumed that a poetry whose content issued directly from the unconscious could never admit to too much conscious craft and prosodic artifice. Deep Image verse had to look spontaneous, primitive, and crude. The mainstream of American poetry,

however – what Altieri calls 'the dominant mode' and what Bernstein dismisses as 'official verse culture' – has continued to be, whether narrative or meditative, in a Realist mode that is essentially egalitarian, university-based, middle-class, and written in free verse that has, by and large, vastly improved since the sixties, evolving into a flexible medley of older prosodies so rich in echoes that it bears out Eliot's famous dictum that 'no verse is ever really free'.

In an article, Robert Bly as much as admits to the charges:

> Time after time in my twenties, after typing up a group of poems hopefully, I would notice an absence. The poems seemed well written, and yet a psychic weight was missing, something imponderable, that I seemed not in control of. I think this weight…comes from opening the body to grief, turning your face to your own life, absorbing the failures your parents and your country have suffered, handling what alchemy calls 'lead'. (What the Image Can Do 39)

One poem which underscores a deeper value that points to a particular system of psychology is the most famous from The Man in the Black Coat Turns, and from which the volume takes its title:

> Snowbanks North of the House
> Those great sweeps of snow that stop
> suddenly six feet from the house…….
> Thoughts that go so far.
> The boy gets out of high school and reads
> no more books; the son stops calling home.
> The mother puts down her rolling pin
> and makes no more bread.
> And the wife looks at her husband
> one night at a party and loves him no more.
> The energy leaves the wine, and the

minister falls leaving the church.
It will not come closer-
the one inside moves back, and
the hands touch nothing, and are safe.

And the father grieves for his son, and will
not leave the room where the coffin stands;
he turns away from his wife, and
she sleeps alone.
And the sea lifts and falls all night;
the moon goes on
through the unattached heavens alone.
And the toe of the shoe pivots
in the dust.....
The man in the black coat turns, and
goes back down the hill.
No one knows why he came, or why
he turned away, and
did not climb the hill. (SP 148)

This poem opens with its central image of snow-banks stopping abruptly just a few feet from the house. This is immediately followed by a statement indicating the significance of this image for Bly: 'Thoughts that go so far'.

Summing up, a close scrutiny of these young poets reveals that these deep images "loaded with unconscious associations, leading to complex symbolic sequence and intrinsic structural patterns, indeed probe deeper into reality than mere naturalistic detail" (Kumar 4). The credo of these poets, therefore, was not entirely 'new': these poets have themselves admitted that they were palpably influenced by such surrealistic poets as Rimbaud, Lorca, Pablo, Neruda, Rene Char and Cesar Vallejo in restoring the psychological

resonance of deep imagery. But in addition to the influence of these surrealistic poets, mostly Spanish and French, the impact of Jakob Boehme's thought is unmistakably compulsive. Boehme's revolt against the empericism and rationalism of seventeenth century German philosophy, and his repeated emphasis on purely intuitive perceptions of the phenomenal world bears a peculiar relevance to the deep imagists who believe, like their German master, that 'the outward man is asleep, and that he is only the husk of the real inner man'. It may be interesting to recall here Bly's comment that American Poetry in the second quarter of this century made the wrong choice, moving in 'a destructive motion outward' rather than 'plunge inward, trying for a great (spiritual and imaginative) intensity'. So in Boehme's mysticism, these poets have discovered a perfect objective correlative, and their poetic creed emerges as a subtle synthesis of philosophical intuitionism and poetic subjectivism.

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