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Visualising Form and Meaning: Bridging Connections Between Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Imagist Poetry, and Modernist Art

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The creative vision 'demands the most complete detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances' (Fry)

The preoccupation with the visual in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and the Imagist poems of Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and H.D. points to a clear and even fundamental connection between modernist visual art and literature. Just as Lily Briscoe articulates a Post-Impressionist position when attempting to resolve the formal difficulties in her painting, Imagist poetry seeks to present an instant in time, a crystallised 'image', thus reflecting in literature the hard lines of Vorticist painting. Ostensibly, the formal concerns of Woolf and the Imagists differ dramatically; Woolf's stream of consciousness is characterised by soft subjectivity and fluidity, whereas Imagist poetry insists upon hard objectivity and clarity. However, a closer examination reveals that the formal boundaries between hardness and softness are more unstable than they initially appear, and that Woolf and the Imagists in fact share a mutual interest in unifying form and meaning.

Lily's alignment with Post-Impressionist principles is best illustrated in the passage where she discusses the formal dynamics of her painting with Mr Bankes. When Mr Bankes puzzles over her decision to render Mrs Ramsay and James as a 'triangular purple shape' and not a 'human shape', Lily answers that 'she had made no attempt at likeness', instead introducing mother and son in her composition to create balance, since 'in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need for darkness' (Woolf 61). Her painting demonstrates the formal concerns of Post-Impressionism; as John Hawley Roberts observes, she discusses her 'technical puzzle [...] in the very language of Roger Fry' (845), the most significant proponent of Post-Impressionist thought in England. In his essay 'The Artist's Vision', Fry argues that the creative vision 'demands the most complete detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances' (49), and that in such a vision objects 'tend to disappear, to lose their separate unities' (50). Similarly in Lily's painting, '[m]other and child then — objects of universal veneration [...] might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence' (Woolf 61); Mrs Ramsay and James lose their individual

identities. After all, ‘Lily’s demonstration, her explanation, her concern with colour, with shapes, with lines, masses, space, light and shadow arranged in the right relation, mark her as a Post-Impressionist’ (Proudfit 33). Her work bears comparison to that of Cézanne, whose achievements in painting Roberts likens to those of Woolf in prose (836). Lily’s abstracted ‘triangular purple shape’ arguably references Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (see fig. 1), in which the planes of cool purples and blues constituting the mountain contrast with the warm oranges and greens in the foreground. Just as mother and son become indistinguishable in Lily’s painting, the country houses and foliage represented by planes of orange and green similarly merge in Cézanne’s composition.

Furthermore, Lily’s insistence on moving ‘the tree to the middle; that matters — nothing else’ (Woolf 99) evokes *The Big Trees* (see fig. 2). Here, Cézanne introduces a centrally positioned trunk to connect the interlocking branches of the larger trees, which flank the trunk on each side. By marking the centre of the composition in lighter blue tones, Cézanne draws the viewer’s eye to the central trunk, which emerges as a unifying presence. Both Cézanne and Lily attempt to ‘connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left’ (Woolf 62) to achieve structural unity. In contrast to the Impressionist Ponceforte, who pictures ‘everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent’ (Woolf 23), Lily ‘saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral’ (Woolf 56-7). While Woolf’s language emphasises Fry’s ‘architectural’ focus (Quick 567)—‘framework of steel’, ‘arches of a cathedral’—her hard forms are tempered by her highly fluid stream of consciousness, representative of inner subjectivity. This moderation is syntactically reflected in Woolf’s use of the semicolon, which softens the hardness of ‘steel’ by connecting it to ‘the light of a butterfly’s wing’. In *To the Lighthouse*, there is a dynamic interplay between Woolf’s objective material reality and the subjective inner reality of her characters.



Fig. 1. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902-4)



Fig. 2. Paul Cézanne, *The Big Trees* (1902-4)

Just as Lily is concerned with the painter's process, Marianne Moore's speaker also engages with the act of creation in 'He Made This Screen'. The title syntactically flows into the opening lines: 'not of silver nor of cord / but of weather-beaten laurel. / Here, he introduced a sea / uniform like tapestry' (Moore 91). It is significant that Moore refers to her poems as 'observations', privileging the act of seeing and encouraging her reader to treat her work like visual art (Paul 423). Moreover, the presence of multiple textures—'silver', 'cord', 'tapestry'—augments the visual quality of the poem. Its textural nature resembles the application of layers of paint, a technique which Woolf also attempts in her ekphrastic passages: Lily's 'mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues' (181). However, where Woolf's polyphonic accumulation of nouns mimics the movement of the painter's brush, adding 'greens and blues' stroke by stroke, Moore's language is more minimalist, stripped back to only 'the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word' ('Preface' 269), as stated in the Imagist manifesto. By employing heptasyllabic verse and a largely regular rhyme scheme, Moore maintains an even formal structure. Her line 'here a fig tree; / there a dragon circling space—' (91) echoes Lily's discussion with Mr Bankes, where she explains 'there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness' (Woolf 61); both writers construct formal balance through deixis. Woolf uses deictic language to break down the composite elements of a whole, whereas Moore juxtaposes seemingly disparate images to produce an intense image, in line with Imagist aims of presenting an 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (Pound, 'A Retrospect' 374). Although both writers demonstrate visual engagement in their work, Woolf does so through layering her language, Moore through sparse and intense syntax—their practices are fundamentally different. Moore's poem can be read, or rather viewed, as a form of collage, a modernist

technique used by the Cubists to break down the boundaries between life and art (Macleod 200). Post-Impressionist and Imagist attitudes to form, expressed in Woolf's and Moore's writing respectively, are therefore not wholly opposing, as they initially may seem, but their strategies ultimately produce differing effects.

Although Woolf's narrative strategy is largely characterised by interior softness, there are more prominent elements of hard objectivity in the 'Time Passes' section, of which Mrs Ramsay's and Andrew's deaths are two notable examples. Mrs Ramsay's death occurs in square brackets: '[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]' (Woolf 146-7). This notorious 'stumbling' sentence remains syntactically incomplete and structurally imbalanced, reflecting Mr Ramsay's movement in reaching for his wife only to find 'empty' space. Woolf records Andrew's death in a similarly brutal manner: '[A shell exploded. Twenty of thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]' (152). In contrast to her previous fluidity and interiority, Woolf demonstrates an almost Imagist sensibility here in her treatment of death—'A shell exploded' is as hard and direct an image as the opening lines of H.D.'s 'Hermes of the Ways': 'The hard sand breaks, / And the grains of it / Are clear as wine' (64). Although H.D.'s concentrated objectivity has accorded her a status among some critics as the 'perfect [...] and only true imagist' (Hughes 114), Glenn Hughes also points to legato movements in her poetry, identifying 'short lines [...] so softened by word-music and by carefully modulated cadences that all abruptness disappears' (115). In Part II of 'Hermes', '[a]pples on the small trees / Are hard, / Too small / Too late ripened / By a desperate sun / That struggles through sea-mist.' (H.D. 65); H.D.'s static apples are transformed through a process of late maturation, a movement which culminates in the fluid image of 'sea-mist'.

H.D.'s simultaneous focus on hard forms and rhythmic movement can be likened to Jessica Dismorr's, *Abstract Composition* (see fig. 3). Dismorr's strong 'architecturally-inspired forms' (Hickman 121) are rendered in pastel shades against a black background, blending tonal softness with material hardness. In contrast to the femininity associated with Woolf's soft subjectivity—although she diverges from this in 'Time Passes'—Dismorr's austere composition reflects her engagement with 'the gestures, perspectives and qualities associated with [Vorticism's] masculinity' (Hickman 121); formal engagement takes on a gendered quality in the context of male-dominated movements such as Vorticism. Similarly, Andrew Thacker contends that Pound's insistence on concrete things, objectivity, and precision implicitly genders Imagist theory by rhetorically linking it to a masculine perception of the craft of verse (49-50). In this context, Dismorr and H.D. engage with male-affiliated objectivity in unexpected ways. Hardness and softness, associated with masculinity and femininity respectively, are not binary but rather dynamic formal categories between which these female modernists navigate to produce different forms of image-making. Dismorr's overlapping arrangement of hard objects creates a dynamic tension; H.D.'s fluid rhythms transform her crystallised images. Both subvert the uncompromising masculine hardness associated with their respective movements of Vorticism and Imagism.



Fig. 3. Jessica Dismorr, *Abstract Composition* (c. 1915)

Pound employs similarly subversive strategies in his highly condensed ‘In a Station of the Metro’, supposedly the exemplary Imagist poem. ‘Metro’ captures an instant of experience: ‘The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough’ (Pound 95). Just as Moore considers her poems as ‘observations’, so too does Pound trace the origins of his composition in an explicitly visual manner: ‘I could get nothing but spots of colour. I remember thinking that if I had been a painter I might have started a wholly new school of painting’ (Pound, ‘How I Began’ 707). Although Pound insists on ‘direct treatment of the “thing”’ (‘A Retrospect’ 373) in Imagist poetry, his use of ‘apparition’ produces a paradox, since it suggests a double meaning. On the one hand, it stands for a visible presence, privileging the power of perception, on the other hand, it evokes a spectre, an abstracted and disembodied image. Stan Smith elegantly describes the paradox of ‘apparition’ which ‘stress[es] the abstractive power of perception’ (116). Pound moves from metonymical faces to abstracted petals, a collective ‘crowd’ to a monolithic ‘wet, black bough’; in ‘Metro’, ‘[t]he human has been translated into the impersonal’ (Smith 116) and the definite to the abstract, contravening Pound’s own principles of direct treatment of object. Therefore H.D.

and Pound, supposedly the most exemplary poets of Imagism, both uphold and subvert Imagist doctrine by renegotiating the formal boundaries between hardness, movement, and abstraction.

In conclusion, both Woolf and the Imagists engage with more complex formal strategies than initially ascribed to them, illuminated only through comparison to each other. Although Woolf's narrative is embedded in a layered and fluid stream of consciousness which seeks to illuminate inner subjectivities, she also reflects a Post-Impressionist intent to re-establish significant form and unite form and meaning: 'In the midst of the chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing [...] was struck into stability' (183). In a similar fashion, the Imagists Pound, H.D., and Moore, alongside the Vorticist Dismorr, eschew the rigid boundaries of pure hardness, instead integrating dynamism and juxtaposition in their compositions to produce formal unity. As Peter Jones writes of Imagist poetry, '[i]t is the whole poem that is experienced [...] The poem has become the unit of meaning' (32). Despite their different formal practices, both literatures are fundamentally hybrid forms—*To the Lighthouse* is a work of ekphrasis, Imagist poetry functions as visual imagery—and incorporate visual matter in significant ways. Woolf and the Imagists translate the texture of life into visual patterns; form embodies and produces meaning in their work.

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