Geometrical Art Vs Vital Art: A Critique of the Modernist Abstract Art

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Experimentation with form, during the Modernist period, by disrupting the continuity between the subject and the object, the world and the canvas, by adopting unusual and multiple points of view, by smuggling ugly and strange themes instead of standard and socially accepted material into the artistic world, and by abandoning all linear sequences in distorting accepted modes of communication, exhibited a new kind of art in style, content, form, and medium. This kind of interrogation of the notions of artistic value called for a reconsideration and revaluation of the values previously accepted as standard by society.

The Modernist experimentation with form foregrounded and focused on the text. Through the advocacy of impersonality and objectivity, the author abstracted himself from the work, thereby making the work independent. This made the work open to the reader. A Modernist text obviously presupposed a group of elite, educated and active individuals as the reading community. It was not open to everybody as in the case of the Romantic text ("[Poet] is a man speaking to men"[1]). Only a well-read, intelligent, and insightful reader would be able to find relations and produce meanings. Thus the seemingly open and ideology-free Modernist text became more and more opaque and part of ideology by separating a group of educated middle class for its readership. Once the text was cut off from the control of the author, it became responsible for its own existence. The text now had to find strategies to ensure its readership. This resulted in a very self-conscious mode in the presentation of the text. The extreme experimentation with form questioned the viability of the representational medium itself. In the visual arts this resulted in collage, in which the artists smuggled the external world itself onto the canvas. In literature and poetry this exhibited two types of consciousness. The first group believed that language still retained its representational ability, though ages of misuse had rusted its power to incarnate the world that it wanted to call forth. But this could be rectified. So they ventured on purifying "the dialect of the tribe" (Eliot, "Little Gidding" 272). This group comprises the Modernist conservatives such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot who believed that language could still invigorate meaning and represent the object. The other stream of thought was supported and postulated by the Dadaists, Surrealists, and women writers such as Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. They believed that language had lost all its ability to contain the world outside. They saw language as a medium which is autotelic, which can only represent its own self. They celebrated the potential that language possessed, to generate meaning through prattling as if out of play. In their use of language it was a helpless medium which could be turned and twisted in any manner possible. This took language to the extreme ways that were not sanctioned by the norms of society. Often this type of writing coincided with a strong and fundamental critique of patriarchy and capitalist bourgeois society. The syntactic disruption using fragments, juxtaposition, and the use of free verse resulted in forming a critique of a society which still insisted upon syntax and privileged wholes, sequences, order and coherence. Since this kind of play with language did not intend any representational object, we can see this as what Roland Barthes called the "intransitive mode," which means that language did not move towards any definitive object in the world. Because of this tendency of language to poise itself as self-projected, it was often confused with nineteenth century aestheticism. Here I try to argue that unlike nineteenth century aestheticism, which was escapist, experimentation with form in the twentieth century conceives of itself as

The Modernist works should be analyzed as taking

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up the challenge of social critique while at the same time struggling to protect meanings from changes and transformation. Thus Modernism values transparency and literalism. The literal is that which has no history, whose meanings do not exceed its surface significance. In the literal therefore, there is a denial of history as well as a confining of meaning to what is universally and transhistorically true. The reactionary and revolutionary experimentalism in the art of the Modernist period ran the risk of denying its own history. Once art denied its own history, it was now capable of following its own intrinsic laws. The extreme form of this kind of freedom took art to two extremes: non-objective abstraction and the 'readymades' in which art does not distance itself from the familiar world of objects, but literally borrows them. In Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades such as the *Fountain*—a urinal turned upside down and signed "R. Mutt," which was presented for an art exhibition—the fact that the artist selected it and signed on it itself was enough to make it an art work. This means that art is now putting into question artistic production in relation to social production. It now 'uses' the products of social labour in a way that foregrounds its own labour. Thus art appears as that which is in excess of the literal. On the one hand the Modernists wish to access the realm of the universal, while on the other they are afraid of being detached from the particular experience and thereby losing legitimacy and transparency. The task for them is to see the present as the meaning and density of historical experience. Thus they have to make a show of the literal as subscribed by an excess of meaning. Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative," Ezra Pound's imagiste principles and his theory of "absolute rhythm," Joyce's "epiphanies," and the "things" themselves of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, are all attempts to designate atomic facts as always already capable of "unconcealing" a hinterland of obedient and dedicated meanings. The paradox of Modernism is that the seemingly literal is very deceptive. It is only the tip of an iceberg which has a large part hidden and submerged. The literal is only a kind of metonymic representation of a cluster of related and whole meanings.

Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry" is a good example for the Modernist insistence on both the literal and the figurative.[2] A short analysis of this poem would substantiate all the above assumptions about Modernist poems in general. This thirty seven lined poem is a prose piece with six sentences cut and pasted onto the page in the format of a poem with more or less regular arrangement in the number of the lines in each stanza and the number of syllables in each line. The lines are conceived as time units. The language of the poem is deliberately colloquial, and this is emphasized by expressions such as "however," "in the meantime," and "after all." The theme of the poem presents a pragmatic situation, and the careful placing of the punctuation marks and pauses enhances the tone of an open discussion. It begins in the form of an argument presenting one's personal opinion ("I, too, dislike it"), and concludes with the hope that this situation can be improved ("then you are interested in poetry"). The poem explicitly articulates the dangers of literalism by instituting a response to the crisis of legitimization in poetry, and by itself forming an apology for poetry. In the capitalist society of the twentieth century, the existence of poetry also can be ensured only through an economy of profit and gain. Thus the values recommended by the poem are 'genuineness' and 'usefulness.'

A closer inspection of the poem shows that the surface features as seen above are only virtual, and that it is full of particulars. Under the cover of the literal the poem exhibits an extreme nostalgia for method. The explicit articulation of the dangers of literalism is a confession of its own inner misgivings. In the arbitrary stanzaic arrangement and the syllabic distribution on the page, the experience of freedom (arbitrary stanzaic pattern) is severely qualified by method (syllabic verse). The question here is of the literal and the figurative. The Modernists privilege a mixture of both: "'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.'" The poem exhorts poets to choose useful materials for poetry:

> Hands that can grasp, eyes
> that can dilate, hair that can rise
> if it must, these things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful.

Again, in the choice of materials for poetry, the poem turns to the organicity and the pragmatism of the biological world:

> [. . .] the bat holding on upside down or in quest of something to
> eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
> a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea [. . . .]

According to the poem, though these things are important for their organicity, one can accept materials from the inorganic world too without making any discrimination even against "'business documents and/ schoolbooks.'" With a "perfect contempt" for triviality in writing, the poem invites the new generation to be

"literalists of/the imagination" and to present "the raw material for poetry in/all its rawness."

It was such a belief in the rawness of the material for poetry and the genuineness of presentation which forced Ezra Pound to found the Imagist movement,[3] the first of the Modernist 'isms' in 1912. Pound was instigated to see the beauty of prose, for the first time through Ford Madox Ford, at the publication of his third volume (*Canzoni*). It is possible to see the influence of Ford in the principles of Imagism that Pound expounded:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome [Pound, *Literary Essays* 3].

These three principles deal with two main concerns: content and form. While the first principle cautions the poet about content, and how this should be treated in a poem, the second and third warn about the form in relation to content. According to these principles form is discovered by the elaboration of the content. Pound calls this "significant form." Pound later in the "A Few Don'ts" published in *Poetry* in 1913 gave young writers a few more instructions:

> Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something[. . . .] Go in fear of abstractions. Do not tell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose [. . . .] Use either no ornament or good ornament [*Literary Essays* 4-5].

These also emphasize the necessity for brevity, clarity, and precision. According to Pound language has to be calcined in order to achieve this. Proper chiselling and burning up of the impurities of the language are the basic requirements for such condensation and to achieve transparency between form and content. Here the tendency is to bring poetry in the direction of minimalist representation, in which word and thing are fused together. Arbitrariness of representation is to be reduced to the minimum through the exact correspondence between language and the thing represented. There were other contemporary Modernists also who shared Pound's ideas and publicized similar re-presentative methodologies. Joyce's concept of "epiphany" is a parallel type of thought, and it also gives prominence to a new presentational strategy:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.[4] In its principle "epiphany" credits individual fragments and particulars with the capacity to reach the universal. Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative" also belongs to the same family of concepts. By this phrase Eliot means that,

> [. . .] a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked [. . . .] The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion [. . . .] (Joyce 216)

Eliot also emphasizes it as an "inevitability" that the form and the content, the external and the internal world will coincide.

In his theoretical formulations Pound is deeply indebted to T. E. Hulme, with whom Pound came to be acquainted in 1909, in the 'Poets' Club,' which conducted weekly meetings on Thursdays. It was when Pound was working on his article on the luminous detail that he attended, unwillingly, one of Hulme's lectures on Bergson. Carpenter notes that Pound was attracted by Hulme's words:

> [. . .] but he woke up when he heard Hulme saying that the artist does not *create* a truth but *discovers* it, picks out 'something which we, owing to a hardening of our perceptions, have been unable to see ourselves.' The real challenge to a poet [. . .] was to satisfy this 'passionate desire for accuracy.' (Carpenter 170)

Pound's call to make the language of poetry "harder and saner," and to achieve presentational immediacy by exploiting the evocative power of words to the maximum can be seen as a direct influence of Hulme. The similarity with Hulme's argument is striking in Pound's use of a mathematical metaphor to insist upon poetry's ability to provide concreteness of reference. Hulme wrote in *The New Age* in 1909:

> In prose as in algebra concrete things are embodied in signs or counters, which are moved about according to rules, without being visualized at all in the process [. . . .] One only changes the x's and y's back into physical things at the end of the process. Poetry, in one aspect at any rate, may be considered as an effort to avoid this characteristic of prose. It is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily [. . . .] Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language (Hulme 134).

Influenced by Hulme's concept of such a scientific language, Pound wrote in 1910: "Poetry is a sort of

inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres and the like, but equations for human emotions" (Pound, *Spirit of Romance* 14). Pound also wanted poetic language to be as precise and clear as the language of science. By advocating such a scientific precision in language Pound seems to be promoting literalism.

Hulme's influence on contemporary artists, poets, and philosophers was remarkable. This young philosopher cum poet had put his indelible imprint on the Modernist avant-garde revolutions before his death in the First World War. Appearing as "the antenna of the race" Hulme impressed upon the young activists that the immediate necessity of the time was to destroy the conception of "*continuity*" (Hulme 3) [italics Hulme's] that was handed down from the nineteenth century. He could sense that the "Renaissance attitude" has been decaying, and that a new sensibility had been evolving during the early phase of the twentieth century. Hulme analyzed Modernist art in terms of Primitive art and Renaissance art, and borrowed Wilhelm Worringer's ideas to demonstrate his understanding. Worringer qualified Primitive art as geometric art and Renaissance art as vital. The classification was in terms of the difference in human nature during primitive and later times. During the early stages of civilization and during the classical times, man was aware of his finitude, and he perceived nature as a controlling power over him. He had a sort of awe and reverence before these powers. He found himself to be an alien in nature, and he was distanced from the processes of nature. This kind of respectful and reverential attitude towards nature made early man abstract the essential forms and characteristics of natural objects in their works rather than presenting them as they were seen. Thus according to Hulme "[t]he first gods were pure abstractions without any resemblance to life" (Hulme 89). Worringer christened this art as "geometrical art" because here the tendency was towards abstraction. According to him Egyptian and Byzantine art are examples of this kind of art. In geometric art we find nothing reccognizable in nature, but only abstract figures and forms, whereas the counterpart of this—"vital art"—was mimetic. In this art the world is more realistically and naturally represented. This kind of art is seen in Greece and in the Renaissance world and later. Mimetic or realistic art presents a man who is more akin to nature, and there is a kind of complete identification with nature. This gives preference to organic forms and natural shapes. Such a naturalistic art results in a "happy pantheistic relation between man and the outside world," (Hulme 86) and Worringer names this tendency "empathy." This quality is a characteristic of Romantic art (which Hulme hated!).

Hulme says that in the modern world the tendency is towards abstraction. This is not due to the awe or fear it has of nature, but is a reaction against the Romantic vital art. In the modern world abstraction is employed in order to capture the universal in the particular. Thus Modernist abstract art becomes a protestant reaction against the realistic and mimetic tradition. During the nineteenth century, when all modes of production had turned into the assembly line mode, art alone remained in the handicraft mode. In a fast-moving technological society art was alienated from mainstream production. Art responded to this alienation in a revolutionary manner. It became more and more introspective. Its purpose was not to reflect socially sanctioned experiences, but to experiment with modalities germane to itself and achieve its own unique social legitimacy. As a result, art became a critique of society, and it began to free itself of all ideological bondages. Once art was severed from social control it started claiming its own ontological space by following new modes of presentation. In the twentieth century the development of abstract art can thus be seen as an ontological necessity. Abstract art can be considered to be one of the symptoms of art's critical attitude towards society. By deconstructing the mimetic tendency in art, the canvases began to present distorted and dismembered objects for viewing. The German Expressionist painter Franz Marc wrote in 1912:

> Do people seriously believe that we new artists do not take our form from nature, do not wrest it from nature, just like every artist that has ever lived? . . . Nature glows in our paintings as it does in all art. . . . Nature is everywhere, in us and outside us; but there is something which is not quite nature but rather the mastery and interpretation of nature: art. In its essence, art has always been the boldest removal from nature and 'naturalness.' The bridge across to the realm of the spirit, the necromancy of humanity [. . . .] We no longer cling to reproduction of nature, but destroy it, so as to reveal the mighty laws which hold sway behind the beautiful exterior (Marc, 132).

In one mode of abstraction the real world was still available in its traces and memories. A famous example for such a canvas is Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* which was painted in 1911. This canvas experiments in the exploration of a "sophisticated union of the phenomenon of movement and the immobile surface of a canvas on which it is portrayed" (Tisdall 54). In this painting the action and the perception are split into time units or, in other words, it spatializes time. It is not the desire to watch a nude which is being fulfilled here. In non-objective abstract art, all recognizable forms

vanish from the canvas. It becomes a representation of its own self. In Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition*, for example, the colours and forms do not remind us of anything in the external world. This work of art is itself a new object which is capable of generating new ideas that are not necessarily conditioned by society.

In this paper my attempt has been to prove that the Modernist experimentation with form led to the production of works which elicited modes of desire that in turn, required active human subjects to experience it. I have tried to prove that such manoeuvres presuppose an interest in human emancipation that would at the same time legitimize aesthetic production. My analysis of poems from a wide range of Modernist sources proves that in all these cases the 'literal' is both privileged and feared—privileged because it is prime raw material for art, and feared because it tends to obliterate the imagination if used indiscriminately. Thus the Modernist seeks to reconcile the literal with the figurative by permitting chance and serendipity to configure determinate meaning, and by bestowing upon the creative human artifact the ability to concretize the possibility of order in an essentially chaotic and contingent world.

Notes

1. William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," p.163.
2. Moore, pp.649-650.
3. For an important early study of Imagism, see Glenn Hughes, *Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (1931; Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1960). Another important study of the movement is Stanley K. Coffmann, Jr., *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: U of Oklahoma P, 1915). For a more recent study, see John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981). For a good treatment of the influence of the ideas of Ford Madox Ford on Pound's Imagism, see Herbert N. Schneidau, *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969) pp. 3-37. For a useful discussion of the use of metaphor in Imagism, see Suzanne Juhasz, *Metaphor and the Poetry of Williams, Pound, and Stevens* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1974). For a discussion of the contemporary backdrop of Pound's Imagiste theory and practice, see William Pratt, "Ezra Pound and the Image," in *Ezra Pound: The London Years: 1908-1920*, ed. Philip Grover (New York: AMS Press, 1978).

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