# The image complex: challenges to the Imagist hegemony in contemporary American poetry

Katherine Bone

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2019

Full metadata for this thesis is available in
St Andrews Research Repository
at:
http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/

Identifier to use to cite or link to this thesis:

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17630/10023-17628

This item is protected by original copyright

This item is licensed under a
Creative Commons License

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

# Abstract

Reviewing the second instalment of Amy Lowell's anthology series *Some Imagist Poets* in 1916, the *Times Literary Supplement* declared that 'Imagist poetry fills us with hope; even if it is not very good in itself, it seems to promise a form in which very good poetry could be written.'[1] This study aims to dismantle this common assumption about Imagist verse. Although many commentaries have acknowledged Imagism's far-reaching impact upon American poetry, few have treated its theoretical premises with the scepticism it deserves, traced the movement's pedagogical legacy, or acknowledged the importance of contemporary poets who have challenged the pervasive influence of Pound's Imagist tenets. In Chapter One, I discuss the privileging of the image in modern poetry and criticism from the original *Imagistes* to Robert Bly's mid-century 'Deep Imagism'. Chapter Two explores the critical tendency to misread William Carlos Williams as a poet of the concrete image, before exposing the tangible effects of this skewed reading in the verse of his disciple Denise Levertov. Chapters Three to Six are made up of author studies, analysing the poetry of Charles Simic, C.K. Williams, Louise Glück, and Robert Hass, to illuminate the various aesthetic strategies by which they challenged Imagism's authoritarian precepts. In Chapter Seven, I discuss Rae Armantrout's *Money Shot* (2010) and Timothy Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation* (2010) as critiques of the Imagist emphasis on 'the part rather than the whole,'[2] while in the final chapter, I analyse Ocean Vuong's debut *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (2016) as evidence of the survival of the Imagist hegemony into contemporary practice.

---

[1] *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1916, cited in *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (London: Penguin, 1972), 14.

[2] In 'A Note on Poetry,' (1940) Randall Jarrell noted 'typical modernistic poetry' as displaying an 'emphasis on details, on the part rather than on the whole,' in *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 49.

## Candidate's Declaration

I, Katherine Bone, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of PhD, which is approximately 80,647 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

I was admitted as a research student at the University of St Andrews in September 2015.

I received funding from an organisation or institution and have acknowledged the funder(s) in the full text of my thesis.

Date 16/04/2019 Signature of Candidate

## Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of PhD in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Date 16/04/2019 Signature of Supervisor

## Permission for Publication

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews we understand that we are giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulation of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright invested in the work not being affected thereby. We also understand, unless being exempt by an award of an embargo as request below, that the title and the abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker, that this thesis will be electronically accessible for personal or research use and that the library has the right to migrate this thesis into new electronic forms as required to ensure continued access to the thesis.

I, Katherine Bone, have obtained, or am in the process of obtaining, third-party copyright permissions that are required or have requested the appropriate embargo below.

The following is an agreed request by candidate and supervisor regarding the publication of the thesis:

## Printed Copy

Embargo on all of print copy for a period of 5 years on the following ground(s):

- Publication would preclude future publication

**Supporting statement for printed embargo request**

I hope to get the thesis published by an academic press.

**Electronic copy**

Embargo on all of electronic copy for a period of 5 years on the following ground(s):

- Publication would be commercially damaging to the researcher, or to the supervisor, or the University

**Supporting statement for electronic embargo request**

I hope to get the thesis published by an academic press.

**Title and Abstract**

- I agree to the title and abstract being published.

Date 16/04/2019 Signature of candidate

Date 16/04/2019 Signature of supervisor

**Underpinning Research Data or Digital Outputs**

**Candidate's declaration**

I, Katherine Bone, hereby certify that no requirements to deposit original research data or digital outputs apply to this thesis and that, where appropriate, secondary data used have been referenced in the full text of my thesis.

Date 16/04/2019 Signature of candidate

# Acknowledgements

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my supervisor Professor Don Paterson for his advice and encouragement over the last three years. His meticulous reading of draft chapters and insightful (often highly amusing) feedback has been invaluable in shaping the thesis, and I could not have asked for a more generous and inspiring mentor. Thanks also to Dr Anindya Raychaudhuri for always offering words of wisdom when they were needed most.

I am grateful to Francesca Bratton, Rosa Campbell, Patrick Errington, Helen Feord, and Éadaoín Lynch for the countless discussions of contemporary poetry and plentiful offerings of gin. My sincere thanks, as always, to my parents and brother for their unwavering support, general enthusiasm for my project, and for the lively conversations about Brexit that have kept me sane during the more difficult stages of research.

This work was supported by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

# Contents

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction 1

Chapter I
From Imagism to Deep Image: The ‘problem of the image’ in Twentieth-Century Poetic Theory 22

Chapter II
‘Reduced to an eye’: Misreadings of William Carlos Williams 58

Chapter III
‘The riddle comes with no answer’: Charles Simic and the Poetry of Indeterminacy 90

Chapter IV
‘Making room for consciousness’ in the Poetry of C.K. Williams 120

Chapter V
‘I cannot go on / restricting myself to images’: Acts of Mind in Louise Glück 139

Chapter VI
‘Brooding on the form / of things’: Robert Hass’s *Time and Materials* 157

Chapter VII
‘Does the part represent the whole?’: Synecdoche in Rae Armantrout and Timothy Donnelly 180

Chapter VIII
‘To be lost / in an image’: Ocean Vuong and the Limits of Neo-Imagism 205

Conclusion 229

Bibliography 239

# Introduction

In a letter to Amy Lowell dated December 7 1914, British poet Richard Aldington wrote enthusiastically of the change in the group's name from *Imagistes* to 'Imagists', dropping the 'e' and its now-toxic association with Pound in the hope that it would spearhead a new dynamism and popularity for the school:

> The change of title will rid us of Ezra, and after that "Pride's Purge" the remaining band of us, loyal, open and disinterested, as I believe we are, should not only make a stir in the world but, what is more important, produce work of first-rate quality.[1]

Aldington would no doubt have been dismayed by the subsequent trajectory of this 'loyal band' of poetic brothers, however. As is by now a familiar tale, Pound rapidly lost interest in his Imagist project in favour of the more energetic 'Vorticism', which led to the hasty dissolution of the original school – that 'loud-voiced little mutual-admiration society,'[2] as Conrad Aiken famously called them – who dispersed after the third and final instalment of *Some Imagist Poets* made its appearance to the same lacklustre reviews as its predecessors.[3] Far from ridding themselves of Ezra, moreover, the Imagists would have to watch as the label 'Imagist', alongside the very concept of the poetic 'image', would remain synonymous with Pound – and it would be to him that those younger working in the Imagist model would express their loyalty.[4] Perhaps the only accuracy in Aldington's prediction is his charming understatement that Imagism would 'make a stir in the world', for the Imagist tenets – the need for a 'direct treatment of the 'thing'',[5] to 'Go in fear of abstractions',[6] the authority of the natural object as the symbol *par excellence*,[7] and, most of all, the primacy of the concrete 'image' – would extend far beyond the parameters even of modernism and become a way of thinking about poetry whose effects can still be felt in contemporary American verse. In his 1976 study *The Situation of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky noted that Imagism's 'special, perhaps even tormented premises and ways of writing have become a tradition: a climate of implicit expectation and tacit knowledge.'[8] More than this, Imagism became a hegemony: a set of ideas asserting the primacy of compression, immediacy, concreteness, objectivity, and, by extension, the inferiority of abstraction, hypotactic syntax, narrative, the metaphysical and the discursive, that became so deeply ingrained in twentieth-century poetic theory that we no longer bat an eyelid at the notion continually espoused by poets and critics that (to use Graham Hough's formulation) 'the substance of poetry is the image and its resonances.'[9] This thesis analyses the Imagist hegemony in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the ways in which some of the most important figures in contemporary American poetry sought to challenge it.

---

[1] Richard Aldington, Letter to Amy Lowell, 7 December 1914, first published in Stanley K. Coffman, *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 27.

[2] Conrad Aiken, 'The Place of Imagism,' *The New Republic* 3, no. 29 (1915): 75.

[3] See O.W. Firkins, 'The New Movement in Poetry: The Self-Exposure of a Reactionary Critic of the Imagistes,' *The Nation* 101, no. 262 (1915): 458-61; Lewis Worthington Smith, 'The New Naivete,' *Atlantic Monthly* 117, no. 4 (1916): 487-92.

[4] Particularly the 'Objectivist' poets George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, whom I discuss in chapter one.

[5] Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect,' in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London; Boston: Faber, 1954, reissued 1985), 3.

[6] Ibid., 3.

*

In his seminal study *Institutions of Modernism* (1998), Lawrence Rainey argued that

> Imagism, in short, was a movement to end movements: informal, antitheoretical, absorbed in matters of writerly technique, and averse to more global programs that linked poetry to contemporary social transformations or posed questions about the status and functions of art. Though Imagism is commonly treated as the first avant-garde in Anglo-American literature, it was really something quite different – the first anti-avant-garde.[10]

Like the contemporaneous 'war to end wars' that would hasten the demise of the original Imagists, the notion of Imagism as a 'movement to end movements' sounds like wishful thinking on Pound's part considering the many 'isms' that were to follow in its wake:

---

[7] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 9.

[8] Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 3.

[9] Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Gerard Duckworth & Co., 1960), 17.

[10] Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), 30.

Dadaism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Objectivism … But there is a degree of truth to Rainey's seemingly hyperbolic statement, and to the bold claim made by Stanley Plumly in a 1978 essay that 'the history of the Modernist movement in poetry is a history of the image.'[11] In *The American Moment: American Poetry at the Mid Century* (1977), Geoffrey Thurley declared that Imagism became 'a complex tradition of free verse that left few poets untouched,'[12] remarks echoed by Hugh Witemeyer when he made the bolder pronouncement that 'Imagism is probably the most important single movement in English language poetry of the twentieth century. Hardly any prominent poet, in Pound's generation and the next two after it, went untouched by Imagist theory and practice.'[13] Even in a study highly sceptical of Imagist principles such as Hough's *Image and Experience* (1960), we find the declaration that

> Imagism as a centre and an influence is not small. It is the hard irreducible core of a whole cluster of poetic ideas that extend far beyond Imagism as a movement. Imagist ideas are at the centre of the characteristic poetic procedures of our time, and there is a case for giving the word a wider extension.[14]

Despite the rapid dissolution of the school in its original form, then, nearly all accounts point to Imagism as having had a widespread influence every bit in keeping with Rainey's label of the Imagists as the 'the first anti-avant-garde.' And Hough is not alone in suggesting that Imagism continues to dictate the 'poetic procedures of our time': in the introduction to his influential anthology *Imagist Poetry* (1972), Peter Jones noted that despite agreement that much of the poetry in the Imagist anthologies is 'weak by any standards … The truth is that imagistic ideas still lie at the centre of our poetic practice.'[15] Jones appeared wholly untroubled by this observation, ending his essay by quoting with approval a reviewer of the 1930 retrospective Imagist anthology who championed their 'pioneering work … in the discovery of new forms and rhythms.'[16] But there are some unfortunate and under-interrogated consequences to having Imagist *dicta* remain 'at the centre of our poetic practice,' as is evident from a sampling of poems from J.D. McClatchy's anthology *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (2003), arranged here in the chronological order in which they appear:

---

[11] Stanley Plumly, "Chapter and Verse," *The American Poetry Review* 7, no. 3 (1978): 27. Bonnie Costello made similar remarks in an essay on Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, arguing that 'the most significant project of modernist poetry was the renovation of the image.' (Bonnie Costello, "US Modernism I: Moore, Stevens and the modernist lyric," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 169.

[12] Geoffrey Thurley, *The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 110.

[13] Hugh Witemeyer, "Early Poetry, 1908-1920," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48.

[14] Hough, *Image and Experience,* 9.

The moon drops one or two feathers into the field.
The dark wheat listens.
Be still.
Now.
There they are, the moon's young, trying
Their wings.[17]

(James Wright, 'Beginning')

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.[18]

(Gary Snyder, 'Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout')

Clear night, thumb-top of a moon, back-lit sky.
Moon-fingers lay down their same routine
On the side deck and the threshold, the white keys and the black
keys.
Bird hush and bird song. A cassia flower falls.[19]

(Charles Wright, 'Clear Night')

---

[15] Peter Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1972), 13,14. Peter Nicholls made a similar argument more recently, noting that 'the Imagist poems may be limited achievements in themselves, constrained by a too refined and fragile decorum, but their partial disembodiment and resistance to conceptualisation are features which would govern modernist poetics henceforth,' in "The Poetics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, 57-58.

[16] Jones, *Imagist Poetry*, 42.

[17] James Wright, 'Beginning', in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd ed., ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 290.

[18] Ibid., 359.

[19] Ibid., 393.

The kale's
puckered sleeve,
the pepper's
hollow bell,
the lacquered onion.[20]

(Mary Oliver, 'Rain: 'The Garden')

In this blue light
        I can take you there,
snow having made me
        a world of bone
seen through to.[21]

(Jorie Graham, 'San Sepolcro')

They lie in parallel rows,
on ice, head to tail,
each a foot of luminosity

barred with black bands,
which divide the scales'
radiant sections

like seams of lead
in a Tiffany window.[22]

(Mark Doty, 'A Display of Mackerel')

a star

a dog with torch in its mouth

a finger ring   but no finger
broken cup   what is lonely
the single breast the beehive resembles
a pair of breasts on a dish[23]

(Carl Phillips, 'The Compass')

Imagism's 'chief *raison d'être*', Witemeyer observed, 'was to present images unmediated by authorial commentary.'[24] And so it is with these contemporary examples. Although the poets quoted above are from varying generations (the oldest, James Wright, born in 1927; the youngest, Carl Phillips, in 1959), their verses display a remarkable degree of similarity in foregrounding visual experience rendered in the present tense (‘The dark wheat listens’, ‘Pitch glows on the fir-cones’, ‘A cassia flower falls’, ‘They lie in parallel rows’, ‘this blue light’), a commitment to Pound’s belief in the natural object as ‘the adequate symbol’[25] (‘The moon’, ‘feathers’, ‘rocks and meadows’, ‘snow’, a ‘beehive’), an adherence to ‘concentration’ as ‘the very essence of poetry’[26] (Across rocks and meadows / swarms of new flies’, ‘Clear night, thumb-top of a moon, back-lit sky’, ‘a finger ring but no finger / broken cup’); a focus on visual comparison (‘like seams of lead / in a Tiffany window’, ‘the beehive resembles / a pair of breasts on a dish’); as well as a suppression of narrative, the foregrounding of quotidian detail, and a general preference for a paratactic syntax over a hypotactic subordination of clauses. As with the original *Imagistes*, there are obvious variations of tone here: Wright’s nostalgic, neo-Romantic vision of ‘the moon’s young’ stands in marked contrast to Oliver’s homely, ‘realist’ rendering of ‘The kale’s / puckered sleeve’. But there is nevertheless an astonishing homogeneity to the way these contemporary lyrics give pride of place to vivid ‘images’ – as Marjorie Perloff noted of James Wright: ‘the poet never doubts their validity, their ability to signify.’[27] In a 1932 letter to Louis Zukofsky, British poet Basil Bunting noted that ‘Pound has … developed a pervading stress on the immediate, the particular, the concrete; distrust of abstraction; shrinking from even the suspicion of verbalism,’[28] and these Poundian biases, building as they did upon a tradition of American pragmatism, a growing distrust of rhetoric, and a long-standing association of images with ideas of immediacy, continued to dictate the terms of much poetic practice well into the late twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

---

[20] Mary Oliver, 'The Garden', in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 411.
[21] Ibid., 550.
[22] Ibid., 565.
[23] Ibid., 586.
[24] Witemeyer, 'Early Poetry 1908-1920,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, 48.

---

[25] Pound, ‘A Retrospect,’ in *Literary Essays*, 9.

[26] In the preface to the 1915 anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, Amy Lowell outlined six points of principle on which the Imagist poets agreed, ending with the declaration: ‘Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry,’ cited in Coffman, *Imagism*, 29.

[27] Marjorie Perloff, ‘From Image to Action: The Return of Story in Postmodern Poetry,’ *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (1982): 420.

[28] Basil Bunting, Letter to Louis Zukofsky, 1932, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 122-3.

As it stands, however, there is a distinct lack of scholarship detailing how contemporary poets have responded to the Imagist hegemony, particularly those sceptical of both the Imagist aesthetic itself, and of the questionable theory upon which it is based. In *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (1990), Edward Larrissy provided a valuable discussion of the way Pound's talk of a hard, objective verse – like the Italian Futurism from which it borrowed – is inextricably tied up with a gendered discourse that venerates masculinity, and denigrates the values of poetic subjectivity Pound saw as feminine.[29] Although Rainey was accurate in noting that the Imagists were ostensibly 'absorbed in matters of writerly technique,' specifically the means of throwing off the shackles of an etiolated Georgianism, to subscribe to the notion that Imagism failed to 'pose questions about the status and function of art' is to ignore its role in propagating outdated ideas about gender, the nature of mind, and (most problematically) of language itself.[30] As W.J.T. Mitchell has discussed in his important studies *Iconology* (1987) and *Picture Theory* (1984), *any* theory of the image is deeply tied up with ideology, and Imagism exemplifies the deeply-ingrained tendency to see images as a more natural, authentic, and immediate form of signification than that of words. [31] In *The Situation of Poetry*, Pinksy observed that the image was a technique inspired by 'modernist reservations about ornament, and indeed about words themselves,’[32] but Rainer Emig remains one of the few scholars to spell out this ‘mistrust’[33] in the boldest and most honest terms, declaring in *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures, and Limits* (1995) that ‘in the history of literature, Imagism deserves a special status, because its restraint is directed against the poetic nature of language itself. Imagism is a self-destructive, an anti-poetic poetics.’[34]

---

[29] See Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 30-50.

[30] Stanley Coffman was one of the first to note that Imagism was more ideologically-inclined that Pound would have us believe, remarking that the movement 'was not just a matter of technique. It was also an attitude toward the nature and function of poetry, an attitude whose significance extends beyond its use in explaining the formal qualities of a special kind of verse.' In *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 3.

[31] See W.J.T. Mitchell: *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

As a result, buying into the integrity of Imagism as an artistic movement is dependent upon accepting the ‘image’ as a valid category of poetic effect. Just as Pound’s conception of the image was notoriously vague (Coffman notes that Pound’s ‘Image may mean either the single verbal element, the metaphor which involves two images, or the total impact of the poem),[35] so contemporary definitions that have come in its wake remain hopelessly contradictory. In ‘The Origin of the Term ‘Image’’(1960), Ray Frazer observed that a poetic image ‘may be a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence – even a whole poem,’[36] in *Iconology* (1987), Mitchell noted that ‘verbal imagery … can involve all the senses, or it may involve no sensory component at all, sometimes suggesting nothing more than a recurrent abstract idea like justice or grave or evil,’[37]while even in a recent textbook such as Julian Wolfreys, Kenneth Womack, and Ruth Robbins’s *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2004), we discover that the editors have glossed the term ‘Imagery’ with the definition: ‘language that is usually, but not exclusively, visually descriptive or figurative; the use of language to signify emotion, or thoughts, actions or objects, but not necessarily referring to purely mental images; imagery may also evoke other senses.’[38] The predominance of conjunctions in this description is telling – it is as difficult to come to a satisfactory definition of the poetic ‘image’ as it is to define poetry itself, and Hugh Kenner's famous efforts to demystify the concept by claiming the image is simply 'what the words actually name'[39] has, unsurprisingly, failed to rid the term of its mystique. Even Peter Jones expressed his exasperation with the 'innumerable seemingly conflicted definitions of 'the image' [that have] proliferated over the years,'[40] and the critical tendency to reach for the term 'image' to designate any and all kinds of poetic form surely reaches its apotheosis when the editors of the *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012) were forced to close their discussion of the term 'image' with the injunction that 'future crit[icism] of the poetic image must, at minimum, take account of the historical variability of the concept and resist the temptation to dissolve poetic expression into the universal solvent of "the image".' [41]

---

[32] Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry*, 11.
[33] Ibid., 12.
[34] Rainer Emig, *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures, and Limits* (Michigan: Longman, 1995), 107.
[35] Coffman, *Imagism*, 161.
[36] Ray Frazer, ‘The Origin of the Term Image,’ *ELH* 27, no.2 (1960): 149.
[37] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 13.
[38] Julian Wolfreys, Kenneth Womack and Ruth Robbins, ‘Imagery,’ in *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 56.

Undoubtedly, the most important intervention in the field remains P.N. Furbank's *Reflections on the Word 'Image'* (1970). Dismantling the specious conflation of image with metaphor, Furbank observed that 'the word 'image', unlike 'metaphor', seems to suggest that the end result of what the author is doing is a picture ... A metaphor is not something heterogeneous in the texture of a poem, like a truffle in a pâté; the words composing it have all sorts of other functions as well – acoustic, rhythmic and associative.'[42] Nevertheless, critics would continue to readily conflate the two terms: in Veronica Forrest Thompson's otherwise-insightful study *Poetic Artifice* (1978), the author's notion of an 'image-complex' (distinct from my use of the term as both a cluster of related ideas and a psychological 'complex'), turns out to be just metaphor by another name: 'An image-complex', she argued, 'consists of a blending of two or more areas of extended meaning; like traditional metaphors, it brings various non-verbal properties together in a new verbal structure.'[43] As Furbank noted, however, metaphors are already endowed with ‘all sorts of other functions’ besides the verbal, and, more pressingly, besides the imagistic. In a paper entitled ‘Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force’ (1989), Richard Moran furthered the discussion by critiquing the conventional view of metaphor that sees the ‘image-making quality [as] what lies behind both the force and the unparaphrasability of poetic metaphor,’ noting that ‘a metaphor is semantically articulate in a way that a picture is not.’[44]As he admitted, ‘there’s no need to deny that uttering a metaphor may give rise to a play of images in the mind of the hearer; however, there is no reason to think that it must always be so, or that this is what constitutes the full understanding of metaphor.’[45] These efforts to put the focus back on the linguistic and semantic components of metaphor are in many senses analogous to the conflict in contemporary psychology between a ‘pictorialist’ view of mental imaging over those ‘descriptionist’ thinkers who see mental images as representing in the manner of language. Daniel Dennett’s critique of the notion of the mental image as being a pictorial entity, noting that ‘paintings and photographs are our exemplary images, and if mental images are not like them, our use of the word “image” is systematically misleading, regardless of how well entrenched it is in our ordinary way of speaking’,[46] is one that applies equally as well to the poetic image, and literary theory would do well to look to the ways in which both philosophy and contemporary neuroscience have complicated not only the concept of the ‘image’, but shown the processes of visual perception to be far more complex than earlier accounts would have us believe.[47]

---

[39] Hugh Kenner, *The Art of Poetry* (Holt, Reinhart and Winston: New York, 1959), 37.

[40] Jones, *Imagist Poetry*, 13.

[41] Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[42] P.N. Furbank, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), 1, 12.

[43] Furbank, *Reflections on the Word 'Image'*, 47.

In keeping with Imagism’s hegemonic place within American literary culture, however, attempts to bolster the integrity of the movement as the founding school of modernism are an enduring feature of literary criticism. In *Modernist Image* (2010), Ethan Lewis announced that ‘Imagism “made possible” the *Cantos*, and “opened the way”, additionally, to *Paterson, Maximus, The Bridge, A, The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets,*’[48] remarks echoed by the editors of the *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English* (2013), who stated that ‘the fulfilment of the Imagist promise may best be located in Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and H.D’s *Trilogy*, works which absorb some element of Imagist practice into effective larger structures.’[49] However, these texts cited as central to the modernist canon are dependent upon all of the features *outlawed* by Imagist doctrine; symbolism, abstraction, and Pound’s dreaded ‘ideas’, not the ‘direct treatment of the ‘thing’ instructed by Imagist credo. Similarly, in the preface to his hugely influential anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), containing the work of the Black Mountain School, the New York school, and the San Francisco Renaissance, Donald Allen declared the ‘new avant-garde’ to be ‘following the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.’[50] But it is the decidedly non-Imagist later works of these poets, namely the *Cantos* and *Paterson*, that would prove the important influence for the likes of Olson and Creeley, and the specious idea that Imagism ‘opened the way’ for the landmarks of high modernist practice only draws attention to how many of Pound’s *dicta* these later works successfully undermine.

---

[44] Richard Moran, ‘Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force,’ *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1989): 7, 10.

[45] Ibid., 92.

[46] Daniel C. Dennett, ‘The Nature of Images and the Introspective Trap,’ in *Imagery,* ed. Ned Block (Cambridge, MA.; London: MIT Press, 1981), 52.

[47] See V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain: Unlocking the Mystery of Human Nature* (London: Windmill Book, 2012), pp. 41-74; Samir Zeki, *A Vision of the Brain* (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1993); Richard Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Cary Nelson’s revisionist reading of Imagism in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2012) is equally as unconvincing. Citing H.D., Amy Lowell, and (bizarrely) Wallace Stevens as practitioners of Imagism, he uses their poetry as evidence that ‘in the case of Imagism … we have a founding movement in modern American poetry that is richer and more diverse than we have been inclined to think.’[51] But the diversity of those poets working under the Imagist label was never in question: no one could sensibly claim that Amy Lowell's Georgianesque free verse resembles Pound's hokku-like concentration, or that H. D's dramatic 'vortexes' are equitable to T.E. Hulme's sparse visual conceits. As Coffman noted as early as 1951, Pound's definition of the image 'seems specific and it is often quoted; but it is also elastic enough to allow such a variety of illustration and example that is could not have helped define the practice of a school.'[52] As befits the first 'anti-avant-garde', all those aspiring poets who could compose a compressed free verse with some vivid images thrown in for good measure could declare themselves an *Imagiste*, and Pound's lumping together of such varied figures as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ford Maddox Ford, and D. H. Lawrence under the banner of Imagism for his own marketing purposes is indicative of just how slapdash and opportunistic the school was in its original formation; a school initially designed 'to get H. D.'s five poem's a hearing,'[53] for all it would leave its indefatigable imprint upon American poetry.

---

[48] Ethan Lewis, *Modernist Image* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), xiv.

[49] Ian Hamilton and Jeremy Noel-Tod, eds., ‘Imagism,’ in *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 689.

[50] Donald M. Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York; London: Evergreen Books, 1960), xi.

[51] Cary Nelson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

Andrew Thacker's *The Imagist Poets* (2011) also centres upon the attempt to show the movement as being more complex than the poetry and theory would indicate. Insisting that 'their impact … deserves something more than cursory notes or summary chapters,'[54] his readings of Imagist verse nevertheless fail to expand upon the usual defences of the practice, namely that in such poems there is 'no authorial or subjective comment intervening', and that 'the treatment appears wholly objective.'[55] Thacker fails to elaborate on why it is that 'objective' lyrics should be more valid than those with 'subjective comment intervening,' or, for that matter, why 'concrete', compressed poems are more vital than those which are abstract and discursive. It says much of the limited enthusiasm that can be mustered for the early Imagist poetry that Thacker concludes his study with the anti-climactic statement that

---

[52] Coffman, *Imagism*, 142.

[53] Ezra Pound, letter to Harriet Monroe, 1915, cited in Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 177.

[54] Andrew Thacker, *The Imagist Poets* (Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2011), 1.

[55] Ibid., 103.

'for the many incisive poems they produced – Imagist poetry is still worthy of further attention.'[56] In the preface to William Pratt's *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (2009), we find the similarly self-justifying remark that Imagism articulates 'some perennially valid principles of poetry.'[58] But demands for objectivity, compression, and a 'direct treatment of the 'thing'' are not timeless rules for 'good' writing: they are historically-conditioned biases that have solidified into orthodoxy, and they remain woefully under-scrutinised in contemporary criticism.

Although this study builds upon the critiques of Imagist theory developed by Hough, Gage, Emig, and Larrissy, as W.J.T. Mitchell remarked, there is a strong need for criticism to 'move beyond '"what people say" about images toward the things they do with images in practice.'[59] As such, this study is primary concerned with Imagism's pedagogical impact upon American verse, and with the various ways contemporary poets have gone about challenging its limiting precepts. Over the course of eight chapters, this study aims to answer a series of questions: How did Imagism establish its hegemonic place in modern poetry? What are the various aesthetic strategies by which contemporary poets have countered this orthodoxy? How did they rehabilitate those aspects of form maligned by Imagism, namely syntax, emotion, rhetoric, and abstraction? In chapter 1, I discuss the privileging of the image in twentieth-century poetic theory, beginning with Imagism at the beginning of the century and extending to Robert Bly's 'Deep Image' poetry of the sixties. I offer a brief discussion of how the image has benefitted from being miscategorised as the foremost product of the imagination in Romantic thought, as well from a more general perception of a 'pictorial turn' in twentieth-century theory, before tracing the origins of Pound and T.E. Hulme's privileging of a 'visually concrete language'[60] in deep-rooted ideas regarding what

---

[56] Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, 100.
[58] Ibid., 18.
[59] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 154.
[60] T.E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*, ed. P. McGuiness (Manchester: Fyfield Books, Carnanet Press, 1998), 70.

Moran called the perceived ‘greater “imperativity” of pictures over that of words.’[61] Although William Carlos Williams maintained that the Objectivist poets provided ‘an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in prose,’[62] this chapter argues that the work of the Objectivist poets did not mark as radical a break from Imagism as many critics have claimed, before ending with a discussion of contemporary critical responses to the legacy of the Poundian image.

In chapter two, I trace the critical tendency to misread Williams (1883-1963) as a poet whose ‘most vital figure of contact’ was the ‘hard-edged image,’[63] in Sandra K. Stanley’s terms. Although his early work is marked by the Imagist attempt to isolate ‘particulars’, more often we find the poet prioritising notions of sound over questions of visuality, and his much-anthologised poem ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ has become a touchstone of Imagist practice based almost wholly upon a misreading of the text as an isolated fragment rather than as part of an integrated sequence within his highly experimental collection *Spring and All* (1922). Nowhere is the influence of this misreading more apparent than in the verse of his disciple Denise Levertov (1923-1997), a poet frequently placed alongside Creeley, Duncan, and Olson as a forerunner of the ‘new avant-garde’. Levertov is in fact far less radical than the categorisation would suggest, and her attempts to match Williams’s experiments with an Imagism-cum-Objectivism leaves her poetry in unnerving proximity to the simplistic treatment of perception we find in the verse of the original *Imagistes*.

Chapter three offers a new reading of Serbian-American poet Charles Simic (1938–). Much like Williams, the critical tendency has been to paint Simic as a poet preoccupied with the concrete image, but his ostensibly minimalist, elliptical lyrics are more concerned with questions of indeterminacy – and with what Williams called the ‘inventive imagination’–

---

[61] Moran, ‘Seeing and Believing,’ 89.

[62] William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), 256.

[63] Sandra K. Stanley, ‘The Link between Williams and Zukofsky,’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 17, no. 1 (1990): 58.

than with the contours of the image. To complicate matters, Simic's critical statements (like those of Williams) are often in direct conflict with his practice: his remark that 'Imagism is the epistemology of modern poetry'[64] bears little relationship to the way his verse dismantles Pound's authoritarian tenets, while his championing of the sentimental image-theories of Gaston Bachelard could not stand at a further remove from the uncompromising portraits of war-torn Europe evident throughout his oeuvre. This chapter aims to unravel these contradictions, shedding new light on Simic's early 'object' poems, as well as his most ambitious long poem *White*, for what they tell us of the poet's shifting stance towards Imagism's treatment of the 'luminous detail'.[65]

Chapter four provides one of the first chapter-length studies of C.K. Williams (1936-2015), a poet who worked as a psychotherapist for adolescents before going on to lecture in Creative Writing at Princeton University. While his earliest lyrics reveal the influence of a Blyean-inflected Imagism, ever since his transitional volume *With Ignorance* (1977), Williams became known for his very long verse line (or 'extended intellectual units',[66] as he called them) that enabled him to render consciousness with an analytic rigour impossible within the confines of Imagism's 'hard light, clear edges.'[67] And where Pound inaugurated an outlawing of 'emotional slither' that has extended into the twenty-first century, Williams gave pride of place to the role of emotion as he sought to examine its role within the wider phenomenon of what he called 'disjunctive consciousness'. Examining the poet's increasingly sophisticated representations of mind from his debut volume *Lies* (1969) to his mid-career collections *Tar* (1983*)* and *A Dream of Mind* (1992), this chapter examines Williams's dismantling of the Imagist calls for compression and objectivity, alongside his rehabilitation of a Coleridgean model of the poetic imagination as an entity that reveals itself in verse displaying a 'more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order.'[68]

---

[64] Charles Simic, *Wonderful Words: Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 94.

[65] Pound outlines his 'method of the Luminous Detail' in 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,' in *Selected Prose: 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber, 1973): 23.

[66] C.K. Williams, quoted in Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with C.K. Williams,' *Contemporary Literature* 29, no. 2 (1988): 165.

[67] In 1914, Pound wrote to Amy Lowell to protest her decision to allow the choice of Imagist poems in the anthologies to be subject to a 'democratized committee', declaring: 'I should like the name 'Imagisme' to retain some sort of a meaning. It stands, or I should like it to stand, for hard light, clear edges', in *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D.D. Paige (London: Faber, 1950), 38.

Chapter 5 reads the poetry of Louise Glück (1943–) as a direct challenge to Pound's instruction to 'Go in fear of abstractions'.[69] As with C.K. Williams, Glück grew increasingly sceptical of Imagism's treatment of concrete particulars, undertaking a radical departure from her early image-heavy lyrics towards a mode characterised by its proficiency with what she called 'large absolutes and their relation'.[70] In her fourth volume *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), Glück shifts the focus away from objective images and on to questions of subjectivity, adopting a more fluid verse line and an increasingly complex syntax alongside fine-tuning the austere, emotionally urgent 'voice' that would become her hallmark. Making some use of Valentin Voloshinov's conception of the dynamic nature of 'inner speech',[71] this chapter undermines one of the most common assumptions about Glück as a 'post-confessional' poet of solipsism and inwardness, showing how her renderings of mind take on a dialogic quality that dismantles the simplistic notion – at the heart of the Imagist hegemony – that art may constitute a 'thinking in images'.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the most recent volume from the Californian poet Robert Hass (1941–) for what it reveals of the poet's changed attitude toward the Poundian image. Hass is well known for his translations of the Japanese Haiku masters Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, and Kobayashi Issa,[72] and has discussed the pull towards what he called the 'icy taste' of the

---

[68] Samuel Tayler Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: London; W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 495.

[69] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 4.

[70] Louise Glück, quoted in Ann Douglas, 'Descending Figure: An Interview with Louise Glück,' *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 6 (1981): 124.

[71] See Valentin N. Voloshinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik, ed. with Neal Bruss (New York; San Fransisco, London: Academic Press, 1976).

[72] See Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku: Basho, Buson, and Issa* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2013).

'one perception per line poem' he found in William Carlos Williams and Robert Bly. But these poets have not always proved a fruitful influence on his own poetry – in his debut volume *Field Guide* (1973), we find the poet getting lost in sensuous detail, and he quickly came to recognise the need for a verse of greater emotional and moral integrity than that offered by Pound's instruction. Reading his later poems against his critical statements in *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (1984), and *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination and the Natural World* (2012), this chapter sees Hass's oeuvre as a prolonged wrestle with the very concept of the image, progressing from hokku-live brevity to the unwieldy, highly experimental work we find in *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005* (2007).

In the penultimate chapter of this thesis, I look at more recent challenges to the Imagist hegemony in the form of Rae Armantrout's *Money Shot* (2010) and Timothy Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation* (2010). Where the Imagist tendency has always been to focus on 'the part rather than the whole,'[73] as Randall Jarrell recognised, these poets follow the advice of William Carlos Williams in insisting that the part is always 'cognizant of the whole',[74] utilising the possibilities of synecdoche to ensure that 'particulars' are always framed within their socio-political context. In *Money Shot*, Armantrout (1947–) examines the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in elliptical, hermetic lyrics that foreground relationships between seemingly discrete entities as a means of scrutinising the elusive networks of power that characterise the age of the 'New Economy'. In a similar vein, throughout *The Cloud Corporation*, Donnelly (1969–) dismantles the Imagist treatment of concrete particulars divorced from time and history, stressing instead the importance of a verse that examines what Hart Crane called the 'metaphysical causes' of the poet's 'materials'.[75] Bringing a 'post-romantic' sensibility to his scrutiny of life in America post 9/11, Donnelly joins Armantrout in interrogating both the Objectivist model inherited from his forebears and the 'glimmery, complacent idiom'[76] of his neo-Imagist contemporaries.

---

[73] Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 49.

[74] William Carlos Williams, quoted in Peter Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

In the final chapter of this study, I discuss the critical and commercial success of Ocean Vuong's 2016 debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* as the most striking evidence of the continuance of the Imagist hegemony into contemporary practice. Despite the volume's evident difficulty in rendering its complex subject matter (life as an immigrant, the aftereffects of the Vietnam War and 9/11), with any degree of complexity, the widespread endorsement of Vuong's collection from readers and critics alike reminds us of the enduring appeal of the poetry that proscribes to Pound's 'doctrine of the image'. Though he has been lauded as bringing a 'new range of notes to poetry in English,'[77] Vuong's style is shown to bear an unfortunate resemblance to Bly's Deep Image poetry of the 1960s, and this chapter examines the parallels in a political climate that has encouraged critics to hail these styles as radically innovative rather than a regurgitated Imagism.

A more familiar account of poets engaging with the Imagist model initiated by Pound and Williams would chart a lineage from George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, and extend into the avant-garde 'Language' school of the seventies, but that is not the narrative I intend to trace here.[78] Oppen and Zukofsky were for the most part building upon what they saw as the success of the Imagist premise rather than challenging its limitations, which is the stance that concerns me in this study.[79] Moreover, I am primarily interested in poetic challenges to Imagism since 1960, rather than the immediate aftermath of Imagism's ascendancy or the more contemporaneous challenges to Poundian *dicta*.

---

[75] Hart Crane, 'General Aims and Theories,' in *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Waber (New York: Liveright, 1966), 220.

[76] Timothy Donnelly, quoted in 'Three Poets: The Halls of Aspartame,' *Harper's Magazine*, 24 January 2013, accessed 27 October 2018, https://harpers.org/blog/2013/01/three-poets/.

[77] Sarah Howe, quoted on the dustjacket of Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016).

[78] The standard argument can be gleaned from Andrew Thacker's remark that 'a concern for formal experimentation can be traced from Imagism, via Objectivism, up to Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' and the Black Mountain Group, and into the latter part of the twentieth century with the *LANGUAGE* poets' – a teleology this thesis will sceptically reappraise. (*The Imagist Poets*, 107). Marjorie Perloff has also noted that it is 'usual, when talking of the Pound tradition, to draw a family tree that goes, by way of Williams, to Black Mountain, the Objectivists, and the Confessional Poets' (*Poetic License,* 121).

My contention that Imagism constitutes a hegemony within American verse is to say that every poet writing since World War II has had to acknowledge its influence, however implicitly; although these chapters do not intend to act as a comprehensive survey of every contemporary poet who has challenged its domination: key figures in post-war verse such as John Ashbery and Adrienne Rich are absent largely because these poets are not *centrally* preoccupied with the specific issues regarding the validity of the image, the sidelining of abstraction, and the distrust of the written word inaugurated by Imagism. As such, I am concerned with poets writing since 1960 who have *explicitly* challenged the Imagist orthodoxy in their practice (and often in their critical prose) as a means of undermining the reductive attitude toward poetic expression that lies at the heart of Imagist theory. 'What Imagism did to English poetry was no less than earth shaking', Pratt declared. 'It redefined what a poem is. It was no longer a series of verses in regular metre and rhyme but a condensed expression of imagery in free verse.'[80] For the poets in this study, dismantling the Imagist orthodoxy is about more than finding the means to render perception with a greater complexity – it is an interrogation of Imagism's definition of the 'status and function' of art: a means of exposing this deeply-ingrained notion of poetry as a 'condensed expression of imagery' to constitute a fundamental misunderstanding of 'what a poem is'.

---

[79] Charles Olson is commonly viewed as the 'heir and developer of Pound and Williams' (Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 89). In a letter to Elaine Feinstein, Olson's reverence for the image is evident in response to Feinstein's '1st question – "the use of the Image". "the Image" (wow, that you capitalize it makes sense, it is *all* we had…)' (May 1959), cited in Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry*, 339.

[80] William Pratt, *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature*, 3rd ed. (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2009), 20.

Considering the wealth of literature on the history of the Imagist movement, the various historical influences on Pound's 'doctrine of the image', and the critical wrangling over the minutiae of Imagist theory, there is a clear need for scholarship that sheds more light on Imagism's tangible effect upon *praxis*. As such, this study is first and foremost a series of author studies, and takes as its methodological approach a close reading from of a broad selection of poems drawn from each poet's respective oeuvre. Nevertheless, these chapters seek to attend to the various interconnections between the poetry that challenges Poundian orthodoxy and the turbulent socio-political context from which it emerged. As Louise Glück remarked in her essay 'Education of the Poet' (1989): 'all art is historical: in both its confrontations and evasions, it speaks of its period.'[81] Throughout, I focus on poets who came to maturity in the 1970s, a decade Piotr K. Gwiazda has described as a 'particularly unstable period in the country's history in which consequential shifts in global economy and politics were already underway.'[82] Alongside the struggles of the civil rights and women's liberation movements, America had to contend with the consequences of financial deregulation and deindustrialization, rising unemployment, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and an oil crisis that exposed the damaging effects of an emerging globalised economy. It is no coincidence that such a turbulent socio-political climate should be met with a similarly radical upheaval in American verse. But the decade has been considered something of an awkward one for American poets – for Geoffrey Thurley, by the 1970s, the 'American moment' of the Beats and Confessionals had come to an end: 'America produced good poets in the 1950s and early 1960s,' he lamented, 'now it seems to me that the exciting edge has gone, to be replaced by a cool cleverness.'[83] For Jed Rasula, too, the decade looked bleak: in *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990* (1996), he diagnosed the period as being characterised by the ‘mundane self-preoccupations’[84] of ‘Confessional’ and workshop poetry. But these are misleading caricatures, and the poets I address in this study represent an important and under-discussed countertradition to the dominant Imagistic mode – in all its ‘cool cleverness’ and ‘self-preoccupations’ – of much American verse in the mid- to late twentieth century.

---

[81] Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 7.
[82] Piotr K. Gwiazda, *US Poetry in the Age of Empire, 1979-2012* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.
[83] Thurley, *The American Moment*, 229.

Taken together, these chapters offer a new narrative of post-war American poetry, one that reveals some of the most important figures in contemporary verse as having successfully taken on the pervasive influence of Imagism’s demands for a ‘direct treatment of the “thing”.’ In *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993), Jerome McGann argued that ‘the astonishing inventiveness of early modernist writing marks the first phase of poetry’s own “linguistic turn” in this century.’[85] But the dominance of Imagist principles has continually threatened to overshadow the experimental, ‘linguistic’ strain of American verse. Far from producing ‘work of first-rate quality,’ as Aldington hoped, Imagism’s legacy has been to trivialize the ambition of poetry that modelled itself on Poundian instruction and undermine what Adam Kirsch noted to be ‘the immense resources of language modernism had opened up.’[86] This study thus serves as a sceptical reappraisal of Imagism’s legacy, and examines the work of those contemporary poets willing to challenge the ubiquity of Pound’s ‘doctrine of the ‘image’ by putting the emphasis firmly back on linguistic ‘inventiveness’ in American verse.

---

[84] Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990* (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 38.

[85] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 146.

[86] Adam Kirsch, *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 172.

# Chapter I: From Imagism to Deep Image: The ‘problem of the image’ in Twentieth-Century Poetic Theory

*Images are, images live, and everything becomes image.*

Paul Éluard

If the Imagist hegemony could be encapsulated in a single phrase, it is in C. Day-Lewis’s remark in *The Poetic Image* (1947) that ‘the image is the constant in all poetry, and every poem is itself an image.’[1] His insistence that ‘the idea that imagery is at the core of a poem, that a poem may itself be an image composed of a multiplicity of images, did not begin to have any wide official currency until the Romantic movement,’[2] indicates just how rapidly Pound’s privileging of the image spread into twentieth-century criticism and theory. Ten years later, in Frank Kermode’s *Romantic Image* (1957), we find the author insisting on the ‘high value placed during this period on the image-making powers of the mind at the expense of its rational powers.’[3] Far from constituting a mere ‘image-making’ faculty, however, for Wordsworth and Coleridge, the imagination represented a unifying entity that combined physical and metaphysical phenomena; ‘rational’ qualities with the transcendental. Influenced by Friedrich Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Coleridge’s famous remarks in the *Biographia Literaria*, in which the poetic imagination reveals itself in the ‘reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities … the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image,’[4] stressed just how important was the imagination’s role in producing ‘synthesis’, blending empirical sense impressions with the creative play of the mind. If anything, Coleridge was keen to refute the notion that images alone are of special import, famously warning that

---

[1] Cecil Day-Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), 17.

[2] Ibid., 18.

[3] Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 43.

[4] Samuel Tayler Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: London; W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 495.

> images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterise the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity.[5]

This insistence that images are secondary to the way the imagination 'modifies' sense data into 'associated thoughts' can be seen in Coleridge's 'Frost At Midnight', in which the 'gentle breathings' of the poet's sleeping infant are seen to 'Fill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought'[6] and prompt reflection on the speaker's own childhood:

> My babe so beautiful! it fills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
> And think, that thou shalt learn far other lore,
> And in far other scenes! For I was rear'd
> In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,
> And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.[7]

As Edward Larrissy has noted, the poem 'strives to depict the connectedness of different levels of the mind: intellection, private feelings, verbal play.'[8] The focus here is not on 'image-making', but on the articulation of thought in the manner of ordinary speech that gives the poem its 'conversational' quality. In keeping with Coleridge's declaration in the *Biographia Literaria* that 'the best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of mind itself,'[9] the poem demonstrates how the 'self-watching subtilizing mind'[10] is capable of pondering both its own inner workings – the 'abtruser musings' that come with 'solitude'[11]– and the empirical world of and 'lakes and sandy shores.'[12] Within the space of the poem, at least, the 'multitude' that is the complexities of thought is brought into a kind of 'unity'. To thus extract from Coleridgean theory the idea that the image holds a privileged position represents a misleading anachronism: a confusion of modernism's prioritisation of the image with a more complex set of ideas. In fact W.J.T. Mitchell has argued that most Romantic poets display a *scepticism* toward vision – what Wordsworth called 'the most despotic of our senses'[13]– noting:

---

[5] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, Chapters I-V, XIV-XXII, Wordsworth, Prefaces and Essays on Poetry, 1800-1815,* edited by George Sampson with an Introductory essay by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920, reissued 1983), 61.

[6] Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 121.

[7] Ibid., 121.

[8] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry,* 16 (see Intro., n. 29).

[9] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 502.

[10] Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 120.

> For all the talk of "imagination" in theories of romantic poetry, it seems clear that images, pictures and visual perception were highly problematic issues for most romantic writers … For Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, "imagination" is a power of consciousness that transcends mere visualization.[14]

This is not the impression we get from Romantic scholars writing after the first flush of Imagist practice. Jack Lindsay's remark in his 1929 study on William Blake that 'every image is a star, and obeys a law of gravitation by which it welds together the atomic material of its substance, emotional and aesthetic, around its central point of radiating fire'[15] indicates the speed with which the multifaceted entity that is the Romantic imagination would be subsumed into the single 'emotional and aesthetic' unit that is the Poundian image.

In part, this misreading of Romanticism is symptomatic of the widespread belief in a 'pictorial turn'[16] in twentieth-century thought. Although Roland Barthes in *Image, Music, Text* (1977) maintained that 'it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image – we are still, and more than ever, a civilisation of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of the informational structure,'[17] a number of prominent scholars including Martin Jay, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Barbara Maria Stafford, have maintained that 'imaging, ranging from high art to popular illusions, remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas.'[18] Formulations such as Horace's *ut pictura poesis* and, more recently, Michel Foucault's suggestion that 'the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation'[19] have contributed to the deeply ingrained privileging of visuality in literary criticism, and the abundance of studies on ekphrastic poetry in the last two decades[20] is symptomatic of the widespread desire to align literature with the apparent greater vividness and 'immediacy' of the visual arts. Stephen Fredman has discussed the way in which American literature in particular has historically sought to establish a connection between the word and the image:

---

[11] Ibid., 120.

[12] Coleridge, *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, 121.

[13] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays in Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 115.

[14] Ibid., 114-115.

[15] Jack Lindsay, *William Blake: Creative Will and the Poetic Image* (London: Fanfrolico Press, 1927. Reprinted New York: Haskell House, 1971), 3-4.

[16] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 16.

> Using terms such as typography, hieroglyph and ideogram, writers and critics have demonstrated the importance of picture-writing in virtually every period of American literature … Emerson is the fountainhead of this mystique of the word, arguing in 'Nature' that the hieroglyphic quality of words gives more direct access to truth than does endlessly mediated tradition.[21]

While this tradition of 'picture-writing' at least implies a level of cohesion between text and image, in *Vision and Textuality* (1995), Stephen Melville and Bill Readings observed the way in which modernism marked a break with the historical tradition of a 'rhetorical unity of the visual and textual in favour of the acknowledgement of a radical difference between the two modes.'[22] They note that

---

[17] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 38.

[18] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (London: Penguin, 2015); Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge MA; London: MIT Press, 1996), 3.

[19] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 5.

[20] See James A.W. Hefferman, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

[21] Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 145.

> on the literary side it seems fair to say that this break entails a turn against rhetoric and literary language more generally in favour of modes of expression deemed more immediate and more natural: a rejection of the overt materiality of rhetorical practice in favour of the (pictorial) illusion of presence.[23]

The poetic image is the embodiment of this 'more immediate and more natural' form of representation, and the belief in what Richard Moran called the 'greater "imperativity" of pictures over that of words'[24] is everywhere evident in twentieth-century poetic theory. So in his 1926 essay 'How Are Verses Made?', Vladimir Mayakovsky attested to the 'greater force of images'[25] by arguing that that 'you have to bring the poem to the highest pitch of expressiveness. One of the most noteworthy vehicles of this expressiveness is the image.'[26] Similarly, in 'A Note on the Semantics of the Poetic Image'(1946), Jan Mukařovský declared that 'every poetic designation, even a non-figurative one, evokes the impression of imagery,'[27] while glossing a definition of the 'concrete' as that language which may denote 'sometimes the evocation of a distinct image, sometimes the accompaniment of a word by a cluster of indefinite associated images.'[28] Moreover, although Paul Valéry declared that 'the value of a poem resides in the indissolubility of sound and sense,'[29] in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1981), we find Paul Ricoeur championing the theory of Marcus B. Hester, with its insistence that 'the act of reading shows that the essential trait of poetic language is not the fusion of sense with sound, but the fusion of sense with a wave of evoked or aroused images.'[30] Where contemporary philosophy underwent something of a 'linguistic turn' in the twentieth century, with influential linguists in the Bakhtin school arguing that '[it] is the word that constitutes the skeleton, the foundation of inner life,'[31] Mayakovsky and Ricoeur's remarks show just how anxiously modern poetic attempted to align itself with the 'illusion of presence' made possible by the image.

---

[22] Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, eds., *Vision and Textuality* (Basingstoke; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 9.
[23] Melville and Readings, *Vision and Textuality*, 9.
[24] Moran, 'Seeing and Believing,' 89 (see Intro., n. 44).
[25] Ibid., 89.
[26] Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How Are Verses Made?*, trans. G. M. Hyde (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 46.
[27] Jan Mukařovský, 'A Note on the Semantics of the Poetic Image,' in *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1977), 77.
[28] Jan Mukařovský, 'On Poetic Language,' in *The Word and Verbal Art*, 2.
[29] Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot with an introduction by T.S. Eliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 74.

In his seminal studies *Iconology* (1987) and *Picture Theory* (1994), W.J.T. Mitchell offered the most balanced approach to this conflict between 'text versus image' by tracing the historical developments of the *paragone* between poetry and painting. Recognising the 'hegemony of the verbal image'[32] in literary criticism, Mitchell was nevertheless keen to avoid creating what he viewed as an artificial boundary between the word and image, arguing that across all art forms, a 'transgression of the text-image boundary [is] in my view, the rule rather than the exception.'[33] While he was accurate in noting that 'the *theory* of imagery is deeply bound up with a *fear* of imagery,'[34] Mitchell's anxiety to distance himself from a reductive 'anti-pictorialist'[35] position resulted in an occasional aggrandisement of the poetic image, resorting to familiar conceptions of the figure as a mystical entity; a 'medium of presence and nature, sometimes cozening us with illusion, sometimes with powerful recollection and sensory immediacy.'[36] Similarly, by viewing Edmund Burke's notorious attack on the dominance of imagery in discussions of poetry ('so little does Poetry depend for its effect on the power of raising sensible images, that I am convinced it would lose a very considerable part of its energy, if this were the necessary result of all description')[37] as a heavy-handed attempt to 'reassert the boundaries between text and images'[38] rather than a valid critique of the overemphasis on the visual in accounts of poetic composition, Mitchell revealed his loyalties as lying closer to the pro-image critics than he would have us believe.

---

[30] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 210.

[31] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, eds., *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 205.

[32] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 4 (see Intro., n. 31).

[33] Ibid., 155.

[34] Ibid., 157.

[35] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 114 (see Intro., n. 31).

[36] Ibid., 114.

Nevertheless, he offered an insightful critique of Hugh Kenner's much-quoted assertion in *The Art of Poetry* that the image is simply 'what the words actually name'.[39]Arguably the most famous attempt to demystify the poetic image, Kenner's common-sense view of the figure as a simple textual strategy was nevertheless dismissed by Mitchell as a continuation of the 'modernist notion of verbal images as simple, concrete objects of reference' which 'has ample precedent in a body of common assumptions about language that goes back at least to the seventeenth century.'[40] Scholars have debated the origins of this view of language as 'concrete objects of reference': Terry Eagleton, for example, has seen this empirical bias as emerging slightly later, in the mid-eighteenth century:

> The prejudice that poetry deals above all in concrete particulars is actually fairly recent … It is really with the growth of modern aesthetics in the mid-eighteenth century, and then with the flourishing of Romanticism, that the idea of concrete particularity as precious in itself burst upon the literary scene in a big way. The assumption that poetry busies itself with the sensually specific, and is sceptical of general ideas, would no doubt have come as a mighty surprise to Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Johnson. [41]

In 'The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image' (1970), Paul de Man declared the change in poetic diction to have occurred around a similar time, observing that 'the structure of language becomes increasingly metaphorical and the image – be it under the name of symbol or even of myth – comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style'.[42] de Man noted the problems with such an impulse, however:

---

[37] Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol I: The Early Writings*, ed. T.O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 315.

[38] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 127.

[39] Hugh Kenner, cited in Mitchell, *Iconology*, 22.

[40] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 22.

[41] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 13.

> At times, romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close to giving in completely to the nostalgia for the object that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language.[43]

This unification of 'object and image' de Man identifies can be attributed to the widespread influence of seventeenth-century empirical ideas that would create the groundwork for the transformation of the Romantic symbol into the 'concrete' solidity of the Poundian image. That modern poetic theory extended this confounding of an 'expressive' with a 'mimetic' language is most evident in the striking resemblance between de Man's description and the words of Filippo Marinetti's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1909), in which he orders his followers to 'destroy' syntax, adjectives, adverbs and 'all punctuation'[44] in the belief that a poet should

> deliberately confound the object with the image that it evokes, foreshortening the image to a single essential word … Images are not flowers to be chosen and picked with parsimony, as Voltaire said. They are the very lifeblood of poetry. Poetry should be an uninterrupted sequence of new images, or it is mere anemic (sic) and green-sickness.[45]

This very deliberate 'confounding' of object and image, whereby of all the traditional elements of a poem are surrendered to the ultimate authority of the concrete particular, owes much to the Futurist desire to 'liberate words, dragging them out from the prison of the Latin period.'[46] To force poetry into the machine age meant not only emphasising poetic language as a concrete rather than an abstract entity, but more radically, involved 'foreshortening' the image to a ‘single essential word’; a doctrine of compression that would likewise become the *sine qua non* of Imagism.

---

[42] Paul de Man, 'Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,' in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York; Norton, 1970), 65-77, reprinted in *Romanticism: Critical Concepts in Literary And Cultural Studies, Vol III: Romanticism and the Margins,* ed. Michael O'Neill and Mark Sandy (London; New York: Routledge: 2006 ), 367.

[43] Ibid., 371.

[44] F.T. Marinetti, 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' (1909), in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 16.

[45] Ibid., 16.

[46] Ibid., 15.

Indeed, Pound’s notorious conception of the image – ‘the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective’[47]– would define the modern poetic image as an entity that transforms even subjective thought into an objective, ‘thing’-like construct. Pound’s praise for his protégé H.D.’s verse in a letter to *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe, noting that hers was wholeheartedly ‘objective – no slither; direct- no excessive use of adjectives,’[48] exposes how such a demand for objectivity was inflected with a marked derision towards any hint of ‘Romantic’ emotionalism, a notion equally apparent in T.E. Hulme’s ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ (1911), commonly taken to be the direct precursor to Imagist doctrines, in which we find the author extolling the virtues of ‘accurate, precise and definite description,’[49] a ‘dry, hard, classical verse,’[50] and poetry as, in essence, a ‘visually concrete language.’[51]

Although Andrew Thacker has stressed Imagism as one of the many schools jostling for position in the lively literary marketplace of London in the first decade of the twentieth century,[52] in accounting for Imagism’s meteoric rise in American literary culture, it is significant that Pound latched on to currents already latent in nineteenth-century poetry and beyond. In his 1889 essay ‘Time and Free Will’, Henri Bergson maintained that ‘the poet is he whom feelings develop into images, and the images themselves into words which translate them while obeying the laws of nature,’[53] while the American pragmatism of William James, with his sense of the pragmatist as one who ‘turns away from abstraction and insufficiency …

---

[47] Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 89.

[48] Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Longman, 1990), 53.

[49] T.E. Hulme, ‘Romanticism and Classicism,’ in *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2003), 78.

[50] Ibid., 79.

[51] Ibid., 79.

[52] See Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, pp. 1-10.

[53] Henri Bergson, quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes,* 202.

towards concreteness and adequacy,'[54] likewise found its way into Pound's calls for poets to eschew abstraction in favour of the visually concrete. As Peter Nicholls has discussed, precedents for Imagism's emphasis on particulars can be seen in Herbert Spencer's *Philosophy of Style* (1852), in which the author declared that 'we do not think in generals but in particulars', as they can in Hugh Blair's *Lectures in Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1873), a text warning of the dangers of poetry that 'clogs the image.'[55] And calls for a 'direct treatment of the thing' stem further back than Pound: in his seminal treatise *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1836), Gotthold Lessing advised of 'the rule concerning the harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy in in description of physical objects.'[56] Imagism did not emerge from a vacuum, then – even William Blake spoke of the importance of 'Minute Particulars'.[57] Pound was merely more astute than his fellow marketeers in aligning Imagism with the growing move towards concrete particularity, the emerging distrust of rhetoric, and the re-emergence of the desire for poetry to capture the vividness and immediacy of the visual arts.

## II

In her insightful study *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (2008), Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux discussed Imagism's attempt to mirror the achievements of contemporary Cubist and Futurist painting, noting that 'Imagism developed by implicit analogy to the visual arts in desiring the instantaneous revelation the image is thought to have … Poets have seen in works of art an immediacy, a presence, a "hereness" that they have wanted for words, but that they suspect that words can only gesture toward.'[58] Admittedly, poetry has long cultivated the greater 'immediacy' of painting: as Brian Cosgrove has observed, the rhetorical trope of 'enargeia', seen as the 'capacity of words to describe with a vividness that, in effect, reproduces the object before our very eyes', is one that 'arises from the ambition that words should emulate the visual arts on the level of pictorial immediacy.'[59] But Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', first published in the April 1913 edition of *Poetry*, is undeniably modern in being so explicit in this attempt to bypass the mediation inherent to poetic language to achieve the greater vividness and instantaneity of painting:

---

[54] William James, *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 379.

[55] Peter Nicholls, 'Poetry and Rhetoric: Modernism and Beyond,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, 176 (see Intro., no. 51).

[56] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, cited in Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire, eds., *Rethinking Lessing's* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'limits' of Painting and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

[57] William Blake, *Jerusalem*, cited in Susanne M. Sklar, *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[60]

Pound's removal of the conjunction 'are like' so that the 'faces in the crowd' and the exotic 'Petals' are held in a kind of hypnotic superimposition provides the most apt demonstration of an attempt to create what Charles Altieri called a 'presentational realism'.[61] Pound's belief that the image provided the means to bypass the mediation of language found its way into Yvor Winters's theorising on the image when he remarked that 'the image, so defined, being a fusion of sense perceptions, *presents* the emotion: that is, the emotion is seen in the concrete and acts directly, without the aid of thought.'[62] As Eagleton has noted of Pound's doctrines, 'Images, on this theory, are representations so lucid that they cease to be representations at all, and instead merge with the real thing. Which means, logically speaking, that we are no longer dealing with poetry at all, which is nothing if not a verbal phenomenon.'[63] In his important essay 'The Origin of the Term Image'', Ray Frazer observed that 'technical virtuosity was to become suspect in the later seventeenth century; "artificial" was to take on a pejorative meaning; the employment of figures came to be thought of as a sort of dishonest tampering with the truth,'[64] to the extent that 'language itself was shifty,'[65] and Imagism is in every sense the contemporary embodiment of such distrust of language as a representational medium. In *Romantic Image*, Kermode similarly recognised Imagism as an 'anti-poetic poetics',[66] in Rainer Emig's terms, when he described the fundamental paradox of the movement as the 'wish that poetry could be written with something other than words, but since it can't, that words may be made to have the same sort of physical presence as "a piece of string".'[67] It would be reasonable to conclude that such a skewed view of language would damage the integrity of Imagism as an artistic movement, but as Gage has noted, a remarkable number of critics continue to accept the outdated 'metaphysical assumptions concerning the underlying unity of word-thing-emotion implied by imagist theory.'[68] In *Modern American Poetry, 1965-1960* (1989), the editors Alan Shucard, Fred Moramarco, and William Sullivan declare that Imagism is important primarily

---

[58] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 3-4 (see n. 20).

[59] Brian Cosgrove, 'Murray Krieger: Ekphrasis as Spatial Form, Ekphrasis as Mimesis,' in *Text Into Image: Image Into Text: Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Bicentenary Conference held at St Patrick's College Maynooth (The National University of Ireland) in September 1995,* ed. Jeff Morrison and Florian Krobb (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997), 29.

[60] Ezra Pound, 'In A Station of the Metro', from *Lustra* (1913) in *Selected Poems, 1908-1969* (London; Boston: Faber, 1975), 53.

[61] Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 4.

[62] Yvor Winters, 'The Testament of a Stone, Being Notes on the Mechanics of the Poetic Image,' *Secession* 8 (1924), 6.

> because of the attention it directed to the sensuous qualities of poetry. It emphasised the fact that language, when used precisely, should appeal to the senses of readers and evoke a response as close as possible to the response generated by whatever is being described.[69]

This belief that the poet's rendering of the object will elicit the same emotional response in the reader as in the poet – a phenomenon John T. Gage has termed the 'fallacy of reciprocity'[70]– is based on highly erroneous assumptions regarding the relationship between subject, object, and text, whereby language becomes a transparent entity for rendering objects and the poet a subject who exists outside of language rather than being mediated by and dependent upon it: in Edward Larrissy's phrase, such an empirical view sees 'language as a nicely wiped window on the world.'[71] These assumptions have been radically undermined by contemporary philosophy of language: Foucault's assertion that 'Language is rooted not in the things perceived, but in the active subject ... if language expresses, it does so not in so far as an imitation and duplication of things, but in so far as it manifests and translates the fundamental will of those who speak,'[72] is rather at odds with Pound and Hulme's conception of a 'visually concrete language'. And with regards to Imagism's claims to show language 'used precisely', as Gage has summarised: 'words, in so far as they refer to such unique objects of sense perception, cannot convey the uniqueness of the object and suffice only to place it within a class of similar objects. In this sense, words, inevitably, name abstractions.'[73]

---

[63] Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem,* 140.

[64] Frazer, 'The Origin of the Term Image,' 150 (see Intro., no. 36).

[65] Ibid., 150.

[66] Emig, *Modernism in Poetry*, 107 (see Intro, n. 34).

[67] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 136.

[68] John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye*: *The Rhetoric of Imagism* (London; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 75.

[69] Alan Shucard, Fred Moramarco and William Sullivan, *Modern American Poetry: 1865-1950* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 70.

[70] Gage, *In The Arresting Eye*, 79.

And there are further problems. Pound's notorious instruction to his fellow *Imagistes* – 'Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of *peace*.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol,'[74] stems from a reluctance to use emotive language free from the shackles of the 'object'. But as Larrissy observed, 'no poet succeeds in creating descriptions to which one could definitively attach the word 'objective',[75] and the Imagist attempt to eradicate subjectivity from lyric verse merely highlights the manner in which poetry by necessity mediates between the concrete and the abstract. In 1914, Pound wrote that '[t]he point of *Imagisme* is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image itself is the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.'[76] Unsurprisingly, however, Imagist verse didn't quite pull of this trick of capturing the word 'beyond formulated language', as is immediately apparent in a sampling of opening lines taken from poems found in Pound's 1914 *Des Imagistes* anthology:

---

[71] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry,* 8.

[72] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London; New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 316.

[73] Gage, *In the Arresting Eye*, 73.

[74] Pound, *Literary Essays,* 5.

[75] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 126.

I have sat here happy in the gardens,
Watching the still pool and the reeds
Amid the dark clouds
Which the wind of the upper air
Tore like green leafy boughs
Of the dive-hued trees of late summer[77]

(Richard Aldington, 'Au Vieux Jardin')

I am weary with love, and thy lips
Are night-born poppies.
Give me therefore thy lips
That I may know sleep.[78]

(Skipwith Cannell, 'Nocturnes', V )

London, my beautiful,
it is not the sunset
nor the pale green sky
shimmering through the curtain
of the silver birch,
not the quietness;
it is not the hopping
of birds
upon the lawn,
nor the darkness
stealing over all things
that moves me.[79]

(F.S. Flint, 'London')

As Peter Jones has admitted, 'the poems the Imagists published as a group cannot honestly be called to stand among the great achievements of literature.'[80] And it is here that Rainey's suggestion that Imagism was merely 'absorbed in matters of writerly technique' starts to look a little flawed. Although Imagism pretends to be purely about form; an exercise in instructing poets as to economy of expression, to ‘compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome’,[81] inevitably it ends up dictating the poet’s choice of subject matter, leading a poet to prioritise the kind of natural phenomena (‘green leafy boughs’, ‘dive-hued trees’, ‘night-born poppies’, ‘sunset’, ‘the pale green sky / shimmering through the curtain’, ‘the darkness / stealing over all things’) that makes for the most ‘vivid’ and ‘immediate’ forms of poetic description. In his 1925 essay ‘General Aims and Theories,’ Hart Crane provided the most astute critique of the shortcomings of this Imagist mode (what he calls an ‘impressionistic’ method of poetry) when he remarked that:

---

[76] Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism,' *The Fortnightly Review* 96, no. 573 (1914): 471.
[77] Richard Aldington, 'Au Vieux Jardin', in *Imagist Poetry*, 53 (see Intro., n. 15).
[78] Skipwith Cannell, 'Nocturnes' (V), in *Imagist Poetry*, 59.
[79] F.S. Flint, 'London', in *Imagist Poetry*, 75.
[80] Jones, *Imagist Poetry*, 13.

> The impressionist is interesting as far as he goes – but his goal has been reached when he has succeeded in projecting certain selected factual details into his reader's consciousness. He is really not interested in the *causes* (metaphysical) of his materials, their emotional derivations or their utmost spiritual consequences. A kind of retinal registration is enough, along with a certain psychological stimulation … The impressionist creates only with the eye and for the readiest surface of consciousness … relinquishing entirely to his audience the problematic synthesis of the details into terms of their own personal consciousness.[82]

It is noticeable that we find the word ‘synthesis’ here, recalling Coleridgean theory and a corresponding desire to examine the ‘metaphysical’ nature of the object as opposed to merely the individual image. As Crane recognised, although Imagism claims to offer the means of rivalling the developments of contemporary painting, the result of these efforts in practice amounts to a poetry of ‘retinal registration.’ In fairness, the obvious failure of the early Imagist verse is merely a natural outcome of the contradictions at the heart of Imagist theory. In Pound’s terminology, the image is ‘as much like granite as it can be’[83]; it is ‘austere, direct, free from emotional slither’,[84] and yet an ‘intellectual and emotional complex’,[85] one capable of showing the ‘natural object’ as the ‘perfect and proper symbol’.[86] For a poet to successfully navigate these contradictions involved adhering to certain doctrines at the expense of others, as in H.D.’s ‘Oread’, where the poet can be seen to create the dynamic ‘vortex’ of Pound’s pronouncements by ignoring the ban on heightened rhetoric:

---

[81] Pound, *Essays of Ezra Pound*, 3.

[82] Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters,* 220 (see Intro., n. 75). It is interesting to note the similarity between Crane’s remarks and those of Paul Gauguin, who remarked of the Impressionists: ‘They heed only the eye and neglect the mysterious centre of thought, so falling into scientific reasoning … when they speak of their art, what is it? A purely superficial art, full of affectations and purely material. There is no thought there,’ quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes,* 160.

[83] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 12.

[84] Ibid., 12.

[85] Ibid., 34.

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.[87]

H.D.’s dynamic transformation of the sea into a vision of swirling pine trees is markedly different from the vapid Imagist verse of *Des Imagistes* primarily because it rejects any aspirations towards a simplistic visual resemblance (in fact it is difficult to visualise the sea as an expanse of ‘green’) in favour of a technique that is closer to Crane’s ‘logic of metaphor’, as the poet demands that we ponder the possible semantic, psychological, and ‘metaphysical’ connections between the restless energy of the sea’s waves and the awe-inspiring vision of a pine forest. Inevitably, however, lesser talents were to succumb to the pitfalls of Imagist theory, and Amy Lowell’s ‘Meeting-House Hill’ is an apt demonstration of how the contradictions at the heart of Imagist theory would have some unfortunate consequences for the verse it inspired:

> I must be mad, or very tired,
> When the curve of a blue bay beyond a railroad track
> Is shrill and sweet to me like the sudden springing of a tune,
> And the sight of a white church above thin trees in a city
>    square
> Amazes my eyes as though it were the Parthenon.[88]

In contrast to Pound’s *hokku*-like compression, Lowell’s *verse libre* is crammed with vapid pre-modifying adjectives, and despite her attempts to create a visually evocative landscape in these opening lines, Lowell's poem reads as a parody of Hopkin's sprung rhythm in its overuse of sibilance ('shrill', 'sweet', 'sudden', 'springing', 'sight', 'square'), archaic syntax ('springing of a tune', 'Amazes my eyes'), and seemingly random lineation. Where Pound warned against a synaesthetic blending of sensory modes, Lowell asks us to register the 'curve of a blue bay' as 'shrill and sweet'; terms that appear oxymoronic as well as overly sentimental. More troubling still, it is in these lines that the Imagist 'fallacy of reciprocity' Gage noted as the central flaw of Imagist theory can be seen most clearly. Lowell takes it as axiomatic that her ecstatic response to this mundane landscape will ignite a similarly enthusiastic response in the reader: her attempt to convince us that a humble 'white church above thin trees' in fact resembles 'the Parthenon' is dependent upon faith alone. As Adam Kirsch has said of James Wright's poetry, such an 'aesthetics of sincerity' ends up 'allowing the poet to be too easy on [themselves], to believe that the right feeling is more important than good writing.'[89] Where Aldington saw Pound's Vorticist project *BLAST* as representing the 'Death warrant of tedious amorphous hangers-on from past eras,'[90] Lowell's contemporaneous Imagist efforts epitomise a desperate hanging on to the coat-tails of Georgian sentimentalism in the face of the upward charge of 'making it new', for all she desired to be a part of that modernist project.

---

[86] Ibid., 9.

[87] H.D., ‘Oread’, in *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, 834.

[88] Amy Lowell, ‘Meeting House Hill’, in *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, ed. Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich (New Brunswick; New Jersey: London, Rutgers University Press, 2002), 80.

The recent attempt to revive the reputation of Lowell as a poet of substance is therefore misguided. In the introduction to *The Selected Poems of Amy Lowell* (2002), the editors Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich declare that 'Amy Lowell has much to offer readers in the twenty-first century,'[91] describing her poetry as 'accessible, passionate, moving',[92] while in her recent group biography of the Imagists *The Verse Revolutionaries* (2009), Helen Carr similarly praises what she calls the 'fine group of poems' Lowell published in the *Egoist* of 1914, arguing that her verse 'shows more imagination than the Boston capitalist has always been given credit for.'[93] In *The Imagist Poets* (2011), Andrew Thacker likewise insists that 'reconsidering the value of a poet like Lowell is [a] worthwhile strategy given ongoing debates around the literary canon',[94] while in a recent article in *The Guardian*, Hanna Roche attempts to argue that Ted Hughes's poem 'Pike' owes an 'unacknowledged debt' to Lowell's 1914 poem 'The Pike', claiming it is likely that Hughes 'confidently fished out the most appealing imagery from the earlier work.'[95] 'Obviously I have no proof Hughes was reading Lowell', Roche admits, 'but, personally, I'm convinced he must have done.'[96] Putting aside the lack of evidence, it is extremely unlikely that Hughes took inspiration from Lowell's oeuvre: a body of work that, up until very recently, has been largely ignored by scholars and readers ever since it was dismissed by Lowell's contemporaries as (in Aldington's terms) 'fluid, fruity, facile stuff'.[97] These efforts to revive Lowell's reputation are no doubt well meaning – in her own lifetime, Lowell was subject to misogynist critique, and rarely did her poetry get discussed without mention of her 'unwieldy body' and 'vast bulk.'[98] But the clear failings of Lowell's verse shouldn't be so easily glossed over: claiming that self-evidently lesser poets such as Lowell are worth the same level of critical scrutiny as such previously-overlooked figures as H.D. does little to increase anyone's faith in recent literary scholarship, and merely provides more evidence of the extent to which modern criticism remains inherently biased in favour of any verse deemed to be adhering to Pound's 'doctrine of the image'.

---

[89] Kirsch, *The Modern Element*, 183 (see Intro., n. 85).

[90] Richard Aldington, 'BLAST,' *The Egoist* 1, no. 14 (July 1914), 273.

[91] Bradshaw and Munich, *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, xxiv.

[92] Ibid., xxiv.

---

[93] Helen Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries*: *Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 673.

[94] Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, 2 (see Intro., n. 54).

[95] Dr Hannah Roche, quoted in Alison Flood, 'Amy Lowell: Ted Hughes and D.H. Lawrence 'owe unacknowledged debt' to 'uncelebrated poet'. *The Guardian*, Thursday 29 November 2018, accessed 3 December 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/29/amy-lowell-ted-hughes-and-dh-lawrence-poet.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Richard Aldington, quoted in *The Verse Revolutionaries*, 652.

[98] See Winfield Towley Scott, 'Amy Lowell After Ten Years,' *The New England Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1935): 320.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Simon Brittan's reading of T.E. Hulme's 'Above the Dock':

Above the quiet dock in midnight,
Tangled in the tall mast's corded height,
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.[99]

Brittan has remarked of the poem that 'we are presented with a single, very clear image and left to make something of it'.[100] But there is little room for the reader to 'make' anything of this trite comparison of the moon with a child's balloon. With its worn-out trope of lost childhood innocence and clumsy closing rhyme 'away'/ 'play', the poem asks us merely to register a momentary visual similarity in keeping with Hulme's belief that 'Fancy' is always superior to the poetic imagination. Just as Alan Shapiro noted the disturbing similarities between 'the Poundian ideal of the image flash which liberates the mind from the constraints of time and space' and the 'ideal of the advertised commodity',[101]a desire for instant gratification is palpable here: there are no nuances to be unearthed on a second reading. More problematically, Brittan's conscription to the idea that the poet's duty is to present us with a 'single, very clear image' leads him astray when he takes these principles to other modernist poems. His gloss of Eliot's famous lines from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock': 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas',[102] commenting that 'most critics agree that the image suggests age',[103] exposes the gulf between the simplicity of interpretation adequate to the Imagist poem and the demands placed upon us by Eliot's more challenging text. Reducing Eliot's couplet to a single, unified 'image' whose meaning can be readily decoded exemplifies what Furbank described as the tendency to reduce the 'high intellectual activity of a mind, putting out all of its force to strain language to its ends … to a kind of dumb-show manipulating the senses.'[104] For to ascribe the connotation of 'age' to this strange, proto-surrealist depiction of disembodied claws not only diminishes its power, but reveals a misunderstanding of Eliot's intentions. Earlier drafts of 'Prufrock' reveal the couplet as part of a longer, thirty-eight line passage titled 'Prufrock's Pervigilium' in which 'the evening woke and stared into its blindness' and the protagonist 'fumbled to the window to experience the world / and to hear my Madness singing'.[105] Eliot's excision of these lines, leaving only an ellipsis in their place, allows the couplet to gesture towards the isolation and psychic estrangement of the protagonist while evading easy symbolic interpretation. In contrast, Brittan's subsuming of these lines into 'the universal solvent of "the image"'[106] not only reveals a misunderstanding of Eliot's poem, but a terminally reductive attitude toward poetic expression itself, one that would continue to distort critical assessments of modernist verse.

---

[99] T.E. Hulme, 'Above the Dock', in *Imagist Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (New York, Dover Publications, 1999), 65.

[100] Simon Brittan, *Poetry, Symbol and Allegory: Interpreting Metaphorical Language from Plato to the Present* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 188.

[101] Alan Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure: Poetry and the Ethical Imagination, Essays 1980-1991* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, Tri Quarterly Books, 1993), 33.

[102] T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

[103] Brittan, *Poetry, Symbol and Allegory*, 190.

## III

It has become a critical commonplace to note that the 'Objectivist' poets Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker and Charles Reznikoff built upon what Oppen called the Imagist 'intensity of vision',[107] desiring an aesthetic that would foreground the object, and the poem *as* object, rather than the image *per se*.[108] Marjorie Perloff has rightly attested to the 'fuzziness'[109] of the Objectivist label, and certainly these poets represent even less of a cohesive school than the disparate Imagists. Even so, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain's contention in *The Objectivist Nexus* (1999) that the movement 'has come to mean a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics'[110] is representative of the majority opinion in emphasising the group as successfully progressing beyond Poundian Imagism.

---

[104] Furbank, *Reflections on the Word 'Image',* 56 (see Intro., n. 42).

[105] T.S. Eliot, 'Prufrock's Pervigilium', in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-17*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Harcourt, 1996), 43.

[106] Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 662.

[107] George Oppen, quoted in Robert Hass, *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination and the Natural World* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 57.

Critics have for the most part overstressed the extent to which these poets were able to overcome the limitations inherent to the Imagist form, however. In the opening paragraph of what was to become the Objectivist manifesto-of-sorts, Zukofsky's 1931 essay 'Sincerity and Objectification', the poet stressed the 'clarity of image and word-tone'[111] in a line from Reznikoff: 'Smooth and white with loss of leaves and bark –';[112] one that would not look out of place in Pound's *Des Imagistes* anthology. And in Zukofsky's early poetry, the poet does not appear to have moved much beyond Pound's early hybrid of Imagist concentration and heightened rhetoric: in 'Ferry', from the sequence '55 Poems', an attempt at a 'visually concrete language' sits uncomfortably beside lilting, Tennysonian rhythms:

Gleams, a green lamp
In the fog:
Murmur, in almost
A dialogue

Siren and signal
Siren to signal.

Parts the shore from the fog,
Rise there, tower on tower,

---

[108] Burton Hatlen articulated the majority opinion when he claimed that the term 'Objectivist': 'pointed back towards imagism as the wellspring of a new American poetics, whilst implicitly claiming that this new group of poets had gone behind the image to re/discover the object itself,' in 'A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: The Objectivist Poets in Context,' in *The Objectivist Nexus*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 37.

[109] Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 121.

[110] DuPlessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 3.

[111] Louis Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,' *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (1931), 272.

[112] Ibid., 272.

Signs of stray light
And of power.

Siren to signal
Siren to signal.

Hour-gongs and the green
Of the lamp.[113]

‘In contemporary writing’, Zukofsky remarked, ‘the poems of Ezra Pound alone possess objectification to a most constant degree.’[114] But if he attempts to mirror Pound’s aesthetic here, it is odd that Zukofsky makes it difficult for us to interpret the poem as being radically material or objectivist: the rhetorical invocation: ‘Rose there, tower on tower, / Signs of stray light / And of power’ connotes a beacon of hope, a signal of a new dawning in America, recalling Whitman’s ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ with its emphatic cry: ‘Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers! Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!’[115] – hardly a poem foregrounding concrete objectivity. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a continuity between Pound’s faith in a ‘presentational realism’ and Zukofsky’s similarly optimistic view of poetic language as a transparent medium for rendering objects. Where Pound’s friend Mary Sinclair noted that ‘what the Imagists are out for is direct contact with reality … There must be nothing between you and your object’,[116] in the preface to George Oppen’s *New Collected Poems*, Michael Davidson expressed a similar faith in the poem’s ability to bypass representation when he remarked that ‘in Oppen’s world, things are not like, they are there, right in front of you.’[117] In Oppen’s *Discrete Series* (1934), this desire for concrete immediacy is particularly apparent:

Town, a town,
But location

---

[113] Louis Zukofsky, ‘Ferry’, from ‘55 Poems,’ in *Complete Short Poetry* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 24.

[114] Zukofsky, ‘Sincerity and Objectification,’ 276.

[115] Walt Whitman, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ in *The Works of Walt Whitman* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 152.

[116] May Sinclair, ‘Two Notes: I. On H.D. II. On Imagism,’ *Egoist* 2, no. 6 (1915), 88.

[117] Michael Davidson, ed., *George Oppen*: *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), x.

Over which the sun as it comes to it;
Which cools, houses and lamp-posts,
  during the night, with the roads—
Inhabited partly by those
Who have been born here,
Houses built— From a train one sees
  him in the morning, his morning;
Him in the afternoon, straightening—
People everywhere, time and the work
  pauseless:
One moves between reading and re-reading,
The shape is a moment.
From a crowd a white powdered face,
Eyes and mouth making three—
Awaited—locally—a date.[118]

In what was no doubt a pointed attack on Hulme, Oppen once declared that ‘the weakness of Imagism [is that] a man writes of the moon rising over a pier who knows nothing about piers and is disregarding all that he knows about the moon.’[119] In contrast, Oppen presents himself as a poet who ‘knows’ about things, displaying his familiarity with ‘houses and lamp-posts’, the ‘roads’ and those ‘people who have been born here’. As Peter Nicholls has observed, ‘the abbreviated but highly focussed poems of *Discrete Series* acknowledged the clarity of Pound’s imagist poems.’[120] But where Pound gave us Japanese-inspired visions of ‘petals on a wet black bough’, these lines respond to the marginal and momentary, focusing attention upon what Oppen called ‘the little words that I like so much … categories, classes, concepts’.[121] As we stumble over the caesurae that slice through the middle of successive lines (and the eccentric placement of those ‘little words’ ‘But’, ‘Over’ ‘Which’, Who’, ‘Him’), it is clear the extent to which Oppen prohibits any smooth transitions between the poem’s various objects of scrutiny, moving us rapidly between ‘houses and lamp-posts’, the morning ‘train’, and the Poundian-inspired vision: ‘From a crowd a white powdered face’. Although Davidson has argued that ‘Objectivism served as a corrective to (not a repudiation of) Imagism's faith in the visual by linking the phenomenal object with an experiencing, language-using subject,'[122] the jittery, staccato quality of these lines (alongside the awkward scattering of half rhymes 'roads' / 'those', 'face'/ 'date'), makes it virtually impossible to interpret these observations as coming from a flesh-and-blood, 'language-using' speaker.

---

[118] George Oppen, *Discrete Series,* in *New Collected Poems*, 25.
[119] Oppen, quoted in *New Collected Poems*, xxix.
[120] Peter Nicholls, ‘Beyond the Cantos,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, 145 (see Intro., n. 13).
[121] Oppen, quoted in *What Light Can Do*, 55.

As such, although Oppen declared that he 'learnt from Louis, as against the romanticism or even the quaintness of the imagist position, the necessity of forming a poem properly,'[123] *Discrete Series* displays all the awkwardness of the attempt to use Imagist parataxis in a longer format: to 'construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements,'[124] in the poet's words. In visions such as 'Him in the afternoon, straightening— / People everywhere, time and the work / Pauseless', we observe Oppen's belief that 'the test of images can be a test of whether one's thought is valid.'[125] But it is unclear how such a paratactic wedging of image next to image can constitute a form of thinking, conveying as it does an almost mechanical accumulation of objects that recalls Marinetti's desire for a modern poem to constitute an 'uninterrupted sequence of new images.' As Terry Eagleton noted, Russian Formalism's *raison d'être* was to move beyond the 'quasi-mystical symbolist doctrines'[126] that saw poetry as merely a 'thinking in images', and yet the Objectivists, united by a similar desire to renounce symbolism, nevertheless subscribe to the same mystical belief in images as the primary means of rendering mind. Most critics would disagree with this unfavourable assessment, however: Altieri's view that 'collage construction enables images to become a form of thinking'[127] has become a kind of dogma in modernist studies, and parataxis is a form that has been oddly politicised, now commonly seen as the *modus operandi* of any avant-garde poet writing since Pound. In *Disjunctive Poetics* (1992), Peter

---

[122] Davidson, *New Collected Poems*, xxix-xxx.
[123] George Oppen, quoted in *The Dance of the Intellect*, 120.
[124] Ibid., 126.
[125] George Oppen, quoted in Alan Goulding, 'George Oppen's Serial Poems,' in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 94.
[126] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 2.
[127] Charles Altieri, 'The Objectivist Tradition,' in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 32.

Quartermain declared his admiration for all poetry that 'recognises paratactic syntax as a legitimate structure for the sentence,'[128] as well as a verse that 'undermine[s] the predilection for hypotactic subordination and social hierarchy built into such linguistic properties as style, grammar, and spelling.'[129] Tempting as it must be to link a preference for parataxis with the Marxist politics of Zukofsky and the like, the analogy does not bear much weight. Contrary to what Quartermain maintains, a poetry that seeks to accurately depict the mind with any degree of realism demands a syntax that allows for a 'hypotactic subordination' of clauses, as the contemporary poets addressed in this study would go on to discover.

Richard Gray was right to note that 'in retrospect, it seems fairly obvious that Objectivism grew dialectically out of Imagism – not in opposition to it but in fruitful tension with it'.[130] Although Objectivism advertised itself as a more sophisticated movement than Imagism in theory, in practice, it is hindered by the same naïve attitude toward language we find in Pound's Imagist credo. Zukofsky famously remarked that in the most successful poetry, 'Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist,'[131] but in this early Objectivist verse, as in the Imagism from which it derived, too often the dream of 'thinking with things' remains an illusion.

## IV

In *The Pound Era* (1975), Hugh Kenner noted of Imagism that 'by mid-1914 the "movement" was loose enough for Amy Lowell to appropriate it. It had come to mean very little more than a way of designating short *vers libre* poems in English. But the "doctrine of the image" … remained (remains) vital.'[132] That Pound's 'doctrine of the image' would retain its 'vitality' well into post-war American verse is nowhere more evident than in the phenomenon of 'Deep Imagism', a style largely conceived by Robert Bly, and centred upon unearthing the archetypal 'deep' images lurking in the depths of the unconscious mind. While the Deep Image poets are usually seen as consisting of Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, William Stafford, Louis Simpson, and W.S. Merwin (poets who became a regular feature of *Poetry* magazine under the editorship of Daryl Hine), it was Blyean theory that laid the groundwork for the movement, and his debut collection *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962) remains the exemplar of a style that would have a much more significant impact upon post-war American verse than many critics have acknowledged.

---

[128] Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrud Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

[129] Ibid., 5.

[130] Richard Gray, *A History of American Poetry* (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 118.

[131] Louis Zukofsky, 'Sincerity and Objectification,' *Poetry*, 273.

[132] Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 178.

Although there has been some discussion of the various shortcomings of Deep Image poetry – its retreat from the turbulent socio-political climate of the sixties, its sentimentality, its dismissal of the poem's music – the troubling parallels between Imagism and Blyean theory have been largely ignored. For a start, just as Carr noted that 'Pound's mysticism was a typical turn-of-the-century fusion of multiple traditions,'[133] so in Deep Imagism, Bly gives us a miscellaneous assortment of Jungian archetype, Zen Buddhism and sixties New Age philosophy. In a 1976 interview with Kevin Power, he made an unsuccessful attempt to distance himself from what he saw as Pound's 'Picturism' by insisting:

> I don't use the term *deep image*; I don't like it. The subjective image I don't like either … those are critical phrases. All images are subjective, that is to say, I make a distinction between the picture on the one hand, in which there are simple objects from the outer world, and an *image.*[134]

But in fact the differences between the two movements are relatively superficial. Bly's conception of the image as 'the natural speech of the imagination' and 'simply a body where psychic energy is free to move around'[135] sees the image take on a neo-Blakean 'energy', just as Pound believed the image to function as 'a radiant node or cluster … from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.'[136] Although Bly's infamous 1963 essay 'A Wrong Turning in American Poetry' dismissed the empirical, objectivist tradition of Pound and Eliot in an attempt to align his own verse with the 'intuitive' mode of the European poets Rilke, Lorca and Machado, a sampling from *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962) reveals just how wholeheartedly Deep Imagism conforms to the Poundian idea that the natural object is the 'proper and perfect symbol'.[137]

---

[133] Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries*, 659.

[134] Robert Bly, quoted in 'Interview with Kevin Power,' in *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 64.

[135] Howard Nelson, *Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984),16.

> The grass is half covered with snow.
> It was the sort of snowfall that starts in late afternoon,
> And now the little houses of the grass are growing dark.[138]
>
> ('Snowfall in the Afternoon')
>
> The box elders around us are full of joy,
> Obeying what is beneath them.
> The lilacs are sleeping, and the plants are sleeping;
> Even the wood made into a casket is asleep.[139]
>
> ('Night')
>
> I love to see boards lying on the ground in the early spring:
> The ground beneath them is wet, and muddy–
> Perhaps covered with chicken tracks–
> And they are dry and eternal.[140]
>
> ('Old Boards')
>
> The darkness drifts down like snow on the picked cornfields
> In Wisconsin: and on these black trees
> Scattered, one by one,
> Through the winter fields–
> We see stiff weeds and brownish stubble,
> And white snow left now only in the wheeltracks of the combine.[141]
>
> ('Three Kinds of Pleasures')

---

[136] Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism,' *The Fortnightly Review*, 147.

[137] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 9.

[138] Robert Bly, 'Snowfall in the Afternoon', from *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1969), in *Stealing Sugar from the Castle: Selected and New Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 11. All quotations from Robert Bly's poetry are taken from this edition.

[139] Bly, *Stealing Sugar from the Castle*, 10.

[140] Ibid., 13.

[141] Ibid., 15.

Upon reading successive poems in this style, the reader is reminded of Adrienne Rich's bleak observation in her 1971 poem 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children' that 'In America we have only the present tense.'[142] Only immediate sensory experience is granted space within Bly's universe: there is no sense here of history, politics, or even of the world of other people. Although Alan Williamson attempted to refute the parallels between Imagism and Deep Imagism by remarking that in the latter there is 'no taboo against emotional or abstract language,'[143] he unwittingly exposed the affinities between the styles when he remarked of Bly *et al* that there is 'an implicit aversion to all rhetorical devices which set an image in an "improving"– or even an interpretative – perspective; the image is intended to flash, like a spontaneous mental picture, and is usually coterminous with the line.'[144] This talk of an 'image flash' sounds remarkably similar to that desired by Pound; and, as with the verse of the original *Imagistes*, it is noticeable that Bly makes little effort to engage with his socio-political context, despite the collection coinciding with the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and the aftermath of the atomic bomb. Bly's remark: 'I don't believe that a bridge has to be built between the individual and society – if he goes far enough inward, he'll find society'[145] epitomises the poet's disturbing belief that privileged access to the Jungian collective unconscious is an adequate stand- in for any explicit socio-political engagement.

And while a contemporaneous conception of the image such as Yvor Winter's 'fusion of sense perceptions'[146] at least suggested a level of dynamic interplay between sensory modes, Bly's 'deep' image can be seen to be a more one-dimensional affair in sticking emphatically to the 'simple objects from the outer world' the poet claimed to reject. It is noticeable, moreover, that Bly employs a remarkably restrained syntax for a poet supposedly keen to stress the ‘psychic leaps’ between the unconscious and the conscious portions of the mind: his use of what Paul Breslin called ‘the syntax of a grade-school primer’[147] is designed so that we contemplate the image without the interference of ‘rationality’ or intellectual thought. Bly’s focus, instead, remains on those relatively blank terms ‘snow’, ‘trees’, and ‘darkness’ in the naïve belief that they come ready-made with meaning. And just as in Imagism, Deep Imagism is characterised by an unnerving anti-intellectualism. Where Kermode noted that for Pound, ‘The Image can be represented only as concrete, and entirely devoid of discursive meanings and appeals to the intellect,’[148] Bly exposed his departure from modern scientific thought when he outlined his belief that Deep Imagism (and its European counterparts) allowed the poet to tap into the more primitive portions of the psyche:

---

[142] Adrienne Rich, 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children', in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), 16.

[143] Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 69.

[144] Ibid., 69.

[145] Bellamy, *American Poetry Observed*, 64.

[146] Winters, 'Testament of a Stone,' 6.

> In our culture we’ve been taught to write poetry using only the top brain, and this has led to a dominance of academic and rational poetry … the great poetry, like Lorca’s *Poet in New York*, reaches back into the memory systems of the mammal brain and possibly into the memory systems of the reptile brain. Lorca, I’m sure, has penetrated the reptile brain.[149]

This talk of penetrating reptile brains seems to have taken us quite some distance from Pound’s conception of the image as an ‘intellectual and emotional complex’. But as with Pound, Bly’s remarks epitomise what Edward Larrissy has called the ‘mystical belief that there is such an entity as an image outside of the textual strategies which lead us to adopt that vague but useful word.’[150] The very notion of a ‘deep’ image rests on the illusion that the higher levels of consciousness are wordless and image-based, and on a nostalgia for a pre-verbal state of being. Despite the absurdity of much of Bly’s rhetoric, as this study will go on to demonstrate, Deep Imagism would prove far more influential than many commentators are willing to admit. In the conclusion to his essay on American poetry of the sixties, Nick

---

[147] Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-political Muse*: *American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 135.

[148] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 128.

[149] Bly, quoted in *American Poetry Observed*, 73.

[150] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 94.

Halpern asked: 'What happened to Deep Image poetry? Is there such a thing as post-Deep Image poetry?' before seeming to answer in the negative, declaring that 'The "image", chastened, returned to its place in Pound's lexicon.'[151] But this is wishful thinking. Deep Imagism was merely a logical outcome of the image-obsession initiated by Pound, and remains the movement most representative of the insistence we find throughout twentieth-century poetic theory that 'the image is the constant in all poetry.' Far from being 'chastened', the image took on a new dynamism in the decades following *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, synonymous not only with Bly and his followers, but with the emerging 'neo-formalist' verse of the seventies. In Brad Leithauser's 'Dead Elms By a River', published in *Poetry* in 1976, we see the characteristics of the equally image-heavy style in full force, beginning with its mediation on the 'disembodied cries' of 'birds':

Birds—unseen,
Perceived as sweet, disembodied voices—
Call through the blue chilly sky;
And callers echo from distant stations
All these fibrous cries encircling,

Encircling like the shrubs and ferns
That will close upon the elms,
Green infant fists battling
Wildly for vacant places. Blind
To light and heat, the elms
Will keep to their winter selves;
A dry company, among the summer foliage,
These same gray trunks
Will glimmer, pale as ghosts.[152]

Where Bly looked to Keats as a model for his pseudo-Romantic landscapes, Leithauser's efforts to recreate a Yeatsean music here make for equally uncomfortable reading. In the reaching after a grandiose rhetorical style in the bizarre depiction of 'infant fists battling / Wildly for vacant places,' – in which we see the poet readily subjugating syntax to the demands of the metre – we find evidence of Leithauser looking to the poetry workshop rather than to lived experience. And in the attempt to link through simile the cries of birds with the 'shrubs and ferns / That will close upon the elms', we see how this 'glimmering', complacent verse, despite claiming to be an antidote to the perceived excesses of the mid-century Confessional mode, retreats into a poetics of cloying sentimentality: in essence, a poetry of images rather than ideas.

---

[151] Nick Halpern, 'The Uses of Authenticity: Four Sixties Poets,' in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry,* ed. Alfred Bendixeu and Stephenie Burt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 890.
[152] Brad Leithauser, 'Dead Elms by a River', *Poetry* 129, no. 2 (1976): 100-101.

It is worth pointing out the hypocrisy of much critical commentary on the fate of the Poundian image, particularly the discrepancy between the widespread derision of Bly and other 'mainstream' poets of the mid-century and the unanimous praise given to those avant-garde poets equally enamoured with Imagist technique. In *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984), Altieri denounces the 'scenic mode' of Bly and his contemporaries as one that foregrounds 'imagistic strategies'[153] and builds toward a 'tactile closing image,'[154] highlighting the simplifying tendencies of these modes by noting that the typical contemporaneous workshop poem likewise 'seek[s] evocative power through developed image and metaphor.'[155] Yet in his later work *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2006), he expresses admiration for the way in which 'Pound seems committed to the power of language to create pictures or images of the real.'[156] What is the essential difference here? Aren't those 'mainstream' poets equally committed to (and equally naïve in subscribing to) Pound's notion of poetic language as creating 'pictures' of reality? Altieri notes that 'Pound never tires of distinguishing between an art that merely describes or represents and an art that makes something present and therefore vibrant,'[157] but how is it that the image offers Pound the means to 'present' (note his subscription to the fallacy of Imagism as bypassing representation) yet provides evidence of an anaemic, 'scenic' style when it appears in the work of his 'mainstream' epigones? Likewise, he observes the paradox that 'Bly wants his rhetoric to count also as immediate, concrete perception,'[158] but where does he think this contradiction has stemmed from? Wasn't it Pound who insisted that Imagism was a mode stripped of rhetoric, reliant only upon concrete particulars? Altieri is right to note the hypocrisy of Bly's claims to eschew rhetoric, but it seems at odds with his praise for the so-called 'new anti-rhetorical expressionism'[159] of Pound and his modernist contemporaries.

---

[153] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56.

[154] Ibid., 58.

[155] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 107.

[156] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* 19.

[157] Ibid., 27.

And there are further inconsistencies. Altieri can't seem to make up his mind as to whether he wants his rendering of perception concrete, immediate, fixed to the object itself, or gesturing toward its entanglement with more complex modes of thought. He praises Pound and Williams for achieving a '"presentational realism", stressing not accuracy to the object but accuracy to the felt moment of perception,'[160] yet critiques mainstream 'scenic' poetry by remarking that 'absolute scenic lyricism, we might say, isolates absolutely in its quest for moments of pure perception.'[161] In one breath he will denounce Romantic poetry by Shelley and Coleridge that 'purchases transcendence by muddying perception with generalizations and thus cannot rest with objects until they have been transformed by metaphor into explicit analogues for psychic life,'[162] then in another, declare the need for poets to recognise the extent to which 'perception itself, then, is not an end but the means of constructing attitudes and ideas the poet can treat as consistent with other forms of wisdom.'[163] Similarly, he champions Oppen and Zukofsky for foregrounding the 'measuring mind' rather than the 'interpretative mind'[164] of the Romantics, yet recognises that their 'myth of objectification evades questions of linguistic generality and social demands.'[165] Which is it to be? Should the poet 'rest with objects' or include those 'other forms of wisdom' that Altieri so often sees as 'muddying perception with generalizations'?

---

[158] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 43.
[159] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 6.
[160] Ibid.,4.
[161] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 83.
[162] Altieri, 'The Objectivist Tradition,' in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 30.
[163] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 57.
[164] Altieri, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 28.
[165] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 89.

In many senses, this contradiction merely provides a mirror image of the conflict played out in modern verse between what Stevens called 'the bare image and the image as symbol'; one Marjorie Perloff framed as the conflict between 'symbolist and anti-symbolist modes of signification,'[166] and Larrissy, in the most honest and accurate language, phrased as 'the old Romantic problem of how (or whether) to infuse a world of fascinating but chaotic sense-data with transcendent meaning.'[167]Of the various issues at stake here, the 'sincerity' of the poet's rendering of 'chaotic sense-data' is one that has produced the most heated debate, and somewhat unsurprisingly, considering his stance toward the image and perception more generally, Altieri's discussion of the topic is riddled with contradictions. Of the Objectivist poets, he notes that they 'share only a sense of the necessity and value of sincerity and a concern for the attention to craft,'[168] but when speaking of Bly and his contemporaries, these same terms become derogatory: theirs is a poetry of 'sincerity sustained by the act of scenic construction';[169] one preoccupied with 'careful attention to craftsmanly control'[170] and a desire to 'correlate sincerity with rhetorical self-consciousness.'[171] Never mind that Pound declared: 'I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity'[172] – if it isn't coming from an avant-garde poet,  talk of 'sincerity' and' craftsmanship' are taken as evidence of the poet's subscription to what Altieri calls the 'scenic'[173] mode of American poetry.

---

[166] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, viii.
[167] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 3.
[168] Altieri, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 29.
[169] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 36.
[170] Ibid., 3.
[171] Ibid., 5.
[172] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 9.
[173] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, 14.

Altieri is not alone in this hypocrisy, however. Speaking of post-war mainstream poetry, Marjorie Perloff has denounced what she called the ‘prevailing poetry culture of the time’[174] in which ‘poet after poet writ[es] his or her “sincere”, sensitive, intimate, speech-based lyric,’ in which we inevitably find ‘the language accessible, and the imagery concrete’.[175] But then this is a familiar tale from Perloff. In *21st-Century Modernism,* she summed up what she considers the scourge of the age:

> A generic, “sensitive” lyric speaker contemplates a facet of his or her world and makes observations about it, compares present to past, divulges some hidden emotion, or comes to a new understanding of the situation. The language is usually concrete and colloquial.[176]

It goes without saying that this bias toward ‘concrete’ language was exacerbated by Poundian Imagism, as was the tendency toward the ‘observation’ of merely one ‘facet’ of experience, the privileging of a ‘lyric’ speaker over narrative, epic, or dramatic verse, and the divulging of some ‘hidden’ emotion – as David Kennedy has observed, ‘the idea that a deeper meaning is ‘concealed’ in an image is … an endlessly repeated and modulated’[177] trope of modern verse. Like Altieri, Perloff sees any talk of ‘sincerity’ as evidence of an ‘attenuated Romanticism’,[178] one that is antithetical to the hard, clear, objective modes of signification she views as the exclusive realm of the early moderns. But the belief that ‘sincerity’ is a quality confined to that ‘rather flat free verse of the mid-century’[179] ignores the inconvenience that this principle was central to both Pound and the Objectivist poets Perloff reveres. The title of Zukofsky’s manifesto ‘Sincerity and Objectification’ somewhat gives the game away, as does Oppen’s 1962 essay ‘The Mind’s Own Place,’ in which he stresses the values of ‘sincerity’ alongside ‘clarity’ (Perloff’s bête noire) and announces, with all the semi-mystical faith in the image as we saw in Bly, that ‘the image is encountered, not found.’[180] Moreover, the sentimental, ‘sincere’ model Perloff derides is a direct by-product of Imagism’s pilfering from Romanticism. This lineage is now an uncontroversial truism of literary history, popularised by Kermode’s *Romantic Image* after first finding expression in Randall Jarrell, who noted that with Imagism, Pound merely ‘carried three of four romantic tendencies to their limits with the perfection of a mathematical demonstration’:[181]

---

[174] Marjorie Perloff, ‘Avant-garde Tradition and the Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry,’ *Revue française d’études americaines* no. 103 (2005): 123.
[175] Ibid., 123.
[176] Marjorie Perloff, *21st -Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 161.
[177] David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 1.
[178] Perloff, ‘Avant-Garde Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ 124.
[179] Marjorie Perloff, ‘Can(n)on to the Right of Us, Ca(n)non to the Left of Us: A Plea for Difference,’ *New Literary History* 18, no. 3 (1987):639.

> *His* variety of imagism is partly a return to the fresh beginnings of romantic practices, from their diluted and perfunctory ends; partly an extension to their limits of some of the most characteristic obsessions of romanticism – for instance, its passion for “pure” poetry, for putting everything in terms of sensation and emotion, with logic and generalizations excluded.[182]

Considering Jarrell made these observations in 1942, it is strange that Perloff should still be labouring under the illusion that Imagism represents a movement free from any attachment to Romantic ideals. Jarrell’s list of the characteristics we regard as being particular to modernist poetry – the ‘emphasis on the unconscious, dream structure, the thoroughly subjective, the … anti-scientific, anti-common-sense, anti-public’ and the belief in poetry as ‘primarily lyric, intensive’ – which he argues are ‘essentially romantic’ – bear an obvious relation to those hallmarks of Bly’s Deep Imagism, and serve to expose the movement as a return to a Romantic-inflected brand of modern verse rather than a radical new direction in post-war poetry. But long before Bly came onto the scene, Imagism took that Romantic ‘egotistical sublime’ Perloff despises to new levels, relying upon the reader’s readiness to indulge a poet so enraptured with their own emotional response to an object that they use it as the foundation for the entire poem. Much as she may see Coleridge as subscribing to a naïve belief in a unity between man and nature, he at least stressed the dialectic between image and idea; perception of an empirical world and the complex movements of the mind as it encounters ‘thoughts awakened by a passion’– for Pound and all Imagists who came after him, the ‘bare image’ is enough: ‘the right feeling’, as Kirsch noted, is always privileged over ‘good writing’.

---

[180] George Oppen quoted in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 9.
[181] Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden and Co.,* 78 (see Intro., n. 73).
[182] Ibid., 79.

These contradictions stem not only from these critics’s bias toward avant-garde writing regardless of its theoretical origins, but from their subscription to a specious, teleological view of American poetry that sees the opalescent Poundian image travel unscathed into the crystalline purity of the Objectivists before triumphantly re-emerging in the avant-garde ‘Language’ school of the seventies. Unfortunately, such faith in an unadulterated image is at odds with the reality that Imagism would spread unimpeded throughout American verse in a way that would make those quaint markers ‘avant-garde’ and ‘mainstream’ more or less redundant. Objectivism and Deep Imagism, though seemingly antithetical in their aims, equally fall prey to the skewed Poundian belief in the image as ‘the poet’s pigment’,[183] and serve to remind us that any post-war movement reliant on the image was doomed to rehash the failures of Imagism. If after Pound, ‘everything becomes image’, as Éluard insisted, contemporary poetry had little chance of exploring the conflict between ‘chaotic sense data’ and ‘transcendent meaning’ with any degree of originality or intellectual integrity. ‘We may find that the problem of the image is the problem of the twenty-first century,’[184] W.J.T. Mitchell declared. This was certainly the case for American poets coming to maturity in the seventies, as will become clear. In the following chapters, I examine the work of those willing to answer back to Pound’s call to ‘Go in fear of abstractions’; poets who suspected that the ‘image’ is not ‘the constant in all poetry’, and who sought the most effective means of dismantling the image complex inherited from Pound and his epigones.

---

[183] Pound, ‘Vorticism,’ 471.

[184] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 2.

# Chapter II: 'Reduced to an eye': Misreadings of William Carlos Williams

*The insignificant "image" may be "evoked" never so ably and still mean nothing.*[1]

William Carlos Williams

Like Pound, whom he met as a student at the University of Pennsylvania and would remain in lifelong correspondence, William Carlos Williams was a poet mired in contradictions. In many senses equally responsible for the biases toward compression, immediacy, and – thanks to his notorious mantra 'no ideas but in things'– the privileging of the concrete, Williams featured in Pound's *Des Imagistes* anthology of 1914, Zukofsky's 1931 'Objectivist' issue of *Poetry* (and the following year's *Anthology*), and shared with Oppen a desire for the Imagist 'intensity of vision'.[2] But he also subscribed to the Olsonian belief in the poem as process, and Williams's promotion of a hard-line empiricism, remarking that 'the only world that exists is the world of the senses,'[3] is strangely divorced from his championing of what he called the 'inventive imagination.'[4]Although Stephanie Burt is right to note that 'since his death in 1963, attention to his theories and to his life has been getting in the way of his poems,'[5] this problem is partly of Williams's own making: had he not wished the poetry to be read in light of his theorising, he would not have prefaced *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* with such combative prologues, nor have published a lengthy *Autobiography*. Nevertheless, in returning to the poems themselves, we find that the critical designation of Williams as the poet of the 'objective image' glosses over the many lacklustre poems of his early Imagist phase while doing a disservice to his more sophisticated, and often more abstract, mature verse in which we find the poet actively questioning the validity of the Poundian assertion that the image is the poet’s ‘primary pigment.’[6]

---

[1] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol I., 1909-1939,* ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), 188.

[2] George Oppen, quoted in *What Light Can Do,* 57 (see chap. 1, n. 103).

[3] William Carlos Williams, 'Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist,' in *The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), 196.

[4] Williams, Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, in *Selected Essays*, 10.

[5] Stephanie Burt, 'Chicory and Daisies,' *London Review of Books* 24, no. 5 (2002): 22.

As it stands, not enough attention has been paid to the impact Williams’s contradictory theoretical doctrines would have on the following generation of American poets. Nowhere is this more salient than in the example of Denise Levertov, whose oeuvre reads as a prolonged struggle to combine her loyalty to Williams’s so-called ‘objectivity’ with a pseudo-religious mysticism and a more discursive impulse than the Imagist model could accommodate. Given the obvious failings of her poetry, a contemporary reader would be forgiven for assuming that Levertov had fallen out of critical favour alongside those other neo-Imagists Amy Lowell and Robert Bly. In light of the continuing tendency to praise her as one of the forerunners of the ‘new’ avant-garde, however,[7] it is necessary to point out just how skewed is Levertov’s reading of her modernist forebear, and how limited is her own conception of the poem; a veritable case study in the dangers of poets cherry picking from Williams’s dubious theoretical legacy.

## I

In the September 1939 issue of *Poetry*, Williams published ‘The Poet and His Poems’, an *ars poetica* of sorts, which opens with the announcement:

> The poem is this:
> a nuance of sound
> delicately operating
> upon a cataract of sense.
>
> Vague. What a stupid
> image. Who operates?
> And who is operated
> on? How can a nuance

---

[6] Pound, ‘Vorticism,’ *The Fortnightly Review*, 471 (see chap. 1, n. 75).

[7] See Donna Hollenberg, *A Poet’s Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

operate on anything?[8]

Almost as soon as he brazenly offers up his definition of the poem, William tears it apart in such a disarmingly blunt critique it makes Eliot's contemporaneous moment of self-reflection – 'That was a way of putting it'[9]– look quaint in comparison. This is a poet interested in 'nuance', in what Zukofsky called 'an intense vision of the facts',[10] not in the 'image' as a kind of absolute, as critics would later try to insist. In pointing out the absurdity of embedding the intangible concept of a 'nuance' within a medical metaphor of an 'operation', Williams performs a kind of 'delicate operation' on his own verse, his Bishop-esque qualifications revealing a poet paying careful attention to the connotations of language and their implications for the poem's 'sense.'

Despite the speed with which he deconstructs his own metaphor, however, we sense Williams asking us to ponder the validity of this conception of the poem as 'a sound / delicately operating / upon a cataract of sense.' It is noticeably one that stresses the unification of sense with sound, as with Valéry, rather than assert the poem as dependent upon the fusion of sense with 'a wave of evoked or aroused images.'[11] And that word 'cataract'– meaning, no doubt, 'cascade' rather than 'impaired vision'– conjures an impression of the poem's sound modifying the chaotic sense data of the empirical world, forming it into some kind of unity or at least recognisable meaning. This is a markedly different stance to that of the Imagists and the Objectivists, for whom poetic language provides a direct reflection of 'the real,' as in Zukofsky's remark in 'Sincerity and Objectification' that 'words – are absolute symbols for objects, states, acts, interrelations, thoughts about them.’[12] Moreover, where Imagism always went hand in hand with a hypertrophy of the visual dimension – forcing the poem to behave as though it were a static picture rather than a verbal statement – Williams, in contrast, insists:

---

[8] William Carlos Williams, 'The Poet and His Poems,' *Poetry* 54, no. 6 (1939): 296.
[9] T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1959), 25.
[10] Zukofsky declared that 'The only human value of anything, writing included, is an intense vision of the facts,' quoted in Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), 51.
[11] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* trans. Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 210.

It is all in
the sound. A song.
Seldom a song. It should

be a song—made of
particulars, wasps,
a gentian—something
immediate, open

scissors, a lady’s
eyes—the particulars
of a song waking
upon a bed of sound.[13]

Revealing the term ‘free verse’ to be something of a misnomer here, Williams practices what he preaches, foregrounding the sound and rhythmic patterning he sees as the poem’s *raison d’être*. It is noticeable, for instance, how the almost-iambic rhythm of that quadrisyllabic word ‘particulars’ is immediately echoed in ‘a gentian’ and ‘immediate’, how the lightness of the ‘i’ sounds contrast with the long ‘o’ of the repeated word ‘song’, and the way sibilance ties together the words ‘sound’, ‘song’, ‘something’ and scissors’ without being overbearing. And Williams’s line breaks are characteristically playful, working to foreground the gestation of meaning: we are made to pause after the words ‘made of’, allowing us a moment of anticipation to discover what indeed it is that constitutes this ‘song’, as we are with the suspension before ‘a lady’s / eyes’, and the break after ‘open’, which leads us to expect some abstract entity, only to find that the noun modifies a humble pair of ‘scissors’. Despite the dexterity with which Williams utilises sound and syntax, however, it is solely his conception of the poem as a song made of *particulars* that would define his critical reputation since its flourishing in the 1970s. In his influential study of the influence of modernist visual art on

---

[12] Zukofsky, ‘Sincerity and Objectification’, 279 (see chap. 1, n. 111).

[13] Williams, ‘The Poet and His Poems’, *Poetry*, 296-7.

Williams’s early poetry *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech* (1969), Bram Dijkstra argued that the poet’s early volumes represent the progression ‘from the image as metaphor to the image as subject,’[14] in *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989), Charles Altieri claimed Williams remained ‘committed to the dominant force of the particular imag[e]’,[15] while in an essay on Williams and Zukofsky, Sandra K. Stanley declared that ‘for Williams, the mere image represents the fundamental component of his poetics; it is his most vital “figure of contact”.’’[16] But this is a misleading caricature. Williams was one of the first poets to mount a serious challenge to the Imagist hegemony, and although many critics have quoted his admission of the ease with which he took to Poundian mantras – ‘When I found Pound talking of the image I accepted it as a poem’[17] – just as often, we find the poet displaying his scepticism towards Imagism’s sentimental treatment of the image. In the second half of ‘The Poet and His Poems’, Williams calls out the foolishness of those he contemptuously labels:

> Stiff jointed poets
> or the wobble
> headed who chase
> vague images and think—
>
> because they feel
> lovely movements
> upon the instruments
> of their hearts—
>
> that they are gifted[18]

Williams understood the dangers of the Imagist ‘fallacy of reciprocity’ better than Pound. If an ‘image’ wasn’t accompanied by an authentic form of ‘contact’ with the American landscape and idiom, if it wasn't sourced from the poet's own 'inventive imagination,' it foregrounded only the poet's enrapturing with the 'lovely movements' of their own 'hearts'. Not that this left Williams immune to the Imagist impulse in his earliest poetry. In 'Love Song' ('Daisies are broken') from *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), the collection in which he finally rid himself of those bad imitations of Keats, his desire to pay 'naked attention first to the thing itself'[19] undermines the poem's music and energy, resulting in a flatness that would characterise his lesser poetry thereafter:

---

[14] Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 51.

[15] Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 232.

[16] Sandra K. Stanley, ‘The Link between Williams and Zukofsky,’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 17, no. 1 (1990): 58.

[17] Williams, *Autobiography,* 355 (see Intro., n. 62).

[18] Williams, *Poetry*, 297.

> Daisies are broken
> petals are news of the day
> stems lift to the grass tops
> they catch on shoes
> part in the middle
> leave root and leaves secure.
>
> Black branches
> carry square leaves
> to the wood's top.
> They hold firm
> break with a roar
> show the white![20]

Rather than the signature, dramatic splicing across lines to which we have become accustomed, here the rather banal images of broken daisies and 'Black branches' are largely coterminous with the line, creating a slow-paced, plodding verse that conflicts with the dynamic movement of the daisies' lifting 'stems' Williams acts us to visualise. Likewise, although the poet aims to foreground notions of ascent here, there is a heaviness to the largely monosyllabic diction ('stems lift to the grass tops / they catch on shoes') and to those spondees ('grass tops', 'black branches', 'wood's top', 'hold firm') that undermines the uninhibited movement of flowers suddenly busting into bloom associated with Spring. As such, there is little of the poet's trademark kinetic energy here – like that odd vision of 'square leaves', the verse sounds unnatural and lifeless, rather than buoyant. In contrast, in

---

[19] Williams, 'Youth, O Youth,' in *The Selected Essays of Williams Carlos Williams*, 35.

[20] William Carlos Williams, 'Love Song' ('Daisies are broken'), *in Collected Poems*, 71.

'Dawn', from the same collection, the Imagist focus on surface gives way to dynamic movement, energy, and noise:

> Ecstatic bird songs pound
> the hollow vastness of the sky
> with metallic clinkings—
> beating color up into it
> at a far edge,—beating it, beating it
> with riding, triumphant ardor,—
> stirring it into warmth,
> quickening in it a spreading change,—
> bursting wildly against it as
> dividing the horizon, a heavy sun
> lifts himself—is lifted—
> bit by bit above the edge
> of things,— runs free at last
> out into the open—! Lumbering
> glorified in full release upward—
>                                         songs cease.[21]

This is, to be sure, hardly a 'natural' American idiom (as Marjorie Perloff has observed, 'what conceivable voice speaks this way?'[22]), but the poem could not be more blatant in its smashing of the iambic pentameter. Everywhere we find an impulse to register sound and movement: those scattering of plosives 'bird, 'beating', 'bursting', 'bit', the insistent active verbs in the present participle: 'riding', 'stirring', 'quickening', 'spreading', 'dividing', create the illusion that the verse gathers pace as we read. Admittedly, only Williams could get away with beginning a poem with the noisy, consonantal pile-up that is 'Ecstatic bird songs pound / the hollow vastness of the sky / with metallic clinkings,' and there is a Tennysonian lilt to the 'riding, triumphant ardor' that creates a momentary lapse in a poem otherwise characterised by its distinctly modern tonality. But it is noticeable how far the poet has moved beyond the Imagist focus on 'the edge of things' – the comma dash that would become one of his stylistic trademarks encourages a continual movement onto the proceeding line; we are never asked to pause in a moment of meditative stillness with a single image, as in the Imagist model. Likewise, the poet’s declaration as to the ‘hollow vastness of the sky’ cannot be comprehended in visual terms, nor can the bird song ‘stirring’ the sky ‘into ‘warmth’, ‘ a spreading change’, or the notion of the sun ‘run[ning] free at last / out into the open.’ Although the poem is ostensibly dedicated to this familiar concept of the rising sun, Williams can be seen to emerge as a poet more preoccupied with ‘song’ than with the contours of the Poundian image.

---

[21] William Carlos Williams, 'Dawn', in *Collected Poems*, 85.
[22] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect,* 89 (see chap. 1, no. 109).

While this inconsistency in style is an inevitable part of a poet’s early development, the perennial disconnect between Williams’s brash theoretical assertions and the complexity of his poetry is more difficult to ignore. Often, we find Williams talking as if the poet’s task were to eradicate connotation from the poem altogether. Of Pound’s *Cantos*, he praised the author’s ‘dry, clean use of words’ and noted ‘they have not been violated by “thinking”,’[23] in an essay on Kenneth Burke, he claimed ‘writing is made of words, of nothing else’,[24] of Gertrude Stein, he remarked that ‘Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words ever had, in order to get them back clean’,[25] while of Marianne Moore, he declared that ‘a word may be used not to smear it again with thinking (the attachment of thought) but in such a way that it will remain scrupulously itself, clean perfect, unnicked beside other words in parade.’[26] It is unsurprising that Williams should have received criticism such as that from his contemporary Conrad Aitken, who famously complained:

> Mr. Williams too seldom goes below the surface. He restricts his observations almost entirely to the sensory plane. His moods, so to speak, are really always the moods of the eye, the ear, and the nostril. We get the impression from these poems that his world is a world of plane surface, bizarrely coloured, and cunningly arranged so as to give an effect of depth and solidity; but we do

---

[23] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 111.
[24] Ibid., 132.
[25] Ibid., 163.
[26] Ibid., 128.

> not get depth itself.[27]

This is an oversimplification, but it is one that Williams encouraged. Much of his ill-formulated theory demonstrates a tacit acceptance of the early modernist notion of an art that is able to conjure a realm of 'pure' seeing, and would dupe a generation of literary scholars into believing that Williams' poetry aspired toward a visual exclusivity, elevated from the subjective issues of authorial intention, content, and affect. This formalist view of modernist art was popularised by the art critic Clement Greenberg, but it quickly became endemic. In an essay entitled 'Heads It's Form, Tails It's Not Content', art theorist Thomas McEvilley derided this belief that 'visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience and make no reference to anything given in other orders of experience.'[28] As with the New Critics, he noted, 'form in art was a kind of absolute, a Platonic hyper-real beyond conceptual analysis.'[29] This mystical belief in a 'pure' opticality is explicit in Greenberg's review of Michel Seuphor's *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (1956), where he remarked that the author:

> raises his eyebrows at the statement made by a Dutch critic forty years ago that "the art of Mondrian is 'pure feeling', that he 'does not reason'" … But nowhere does Mr. Seuphor himself show clearly what role reasoning played in the creation of Mondrian's pictures … "intellectual art" can mean only mechanical art, which Mondrian's certainly was not.[30]

Although such anti-intellectualism permeated the Deep Image mantras of Bly and the *Sixties* group, Williams was not a poet who really believed visuality to be a simplistic entity divorced from the intellect or from language. He was astute enough to remark that 'modern painters … have been afraid of the horrible word 'representational'; they have run screaming into the abstract, forgetting that all painting is representational, even the most abstract, the most subjective, the most distorted.’[31] Notice how different this is from Pound, who glossed ‘In a Station of the Metro’ with the wistful aside: ‘if I were a painter … I might found a new school … “non-representative painting,” a painting that would speak only by arrangements of colour.’[32] And yet reading criticism of Williams, we come away thinking that the poet wholeheartedly embraced the modernist doctrine of a pure opticality. Altieri has argued that Williams and his fellow early modernists learnt from Cezanne the principle of ‘Absoluteness’, whereby the ‘visual event takes on a kind of absoluteness, freed from narrative or argument or anything else that might confuse the satisfactions of the eye with satisfactions deriving from other sources of desire’.[33] Likewise, Dijkstra acts as if Williams’s verse is directly analogous with the modernist painting he admired when he remarked that ‘of course many of Williams’ poems deal directly with people or their actions, but in many others only the eye was necessary to analyse and arrange nature into its most accurate visual parts.’ [34] Where these critics have been keen to stress the parallels between poetry and painting, Susan Sontag argued that it was in fact contemporary photography (particularly that of Alfred Stieglitz) that provided the more obvious counterpart to modernist poets’ attempt to achieve a visual immediacy:

---

[27] Conrad Aitken, 'Mr. Williams and his Caviar of Excessive Individualisms,' in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, 57.

[28] G. Roger Denson and Thomas McEvilley, *Capacity: History, The World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishing Association, 1996), 23.

[29] Ibid., 44.

[30] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 12.

> The ethos of photography – that of schooling us (in Moholy-Nagy’s phrase) in “intensive seeing” – seems closer to that of modernist poetry that that of painting. As painting has become more and more conceptional, poetry (since Apollinaire, Eliot, Pound, and William Carlos Williams) has more and more defined itself as concerned with the visual … Poetry’s commitment to concreteness and the autonomy of the poem’s language parallels photography’s commitment to pure seeing.[35]

This ‘commitment’ is a futile one. The notion that poetic language can ever achieve a level of ‘autonomy’ whereby a word is ‘wrenched from its context’ to stand isolated as an entity for the eye alone brings us back to the truism ignored by Poundian Imagism, namely that language is an abstract phenomenon, not a ‘visually concrete’ entity. In its extreme form, this idea leads to such alarming remarks as the following, made by Dijkstra when he summarised what he considered to be Williams’s primary challenge:

---

[31] Williams, quoted in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 82 (see Intro., n. 74).

[32] Ezra Pound, ‘Vorticism,’ *The Fornightly Review*, 96, no. 157 (1914): 467.

[33] Charles Altieri, ‘Cezanne’s Ideal of “Realization”: A Useful Analogy for the Spirit of Modernity in American Poetry,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, 200 (see Intro., n. 51).

[34] Ibid., 187.

[35] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), 95.

> [Williams] believed that if he could only succeed in approximating the concentration of statement which could be found in even a simple watercolour, he might be able to turn words into visual objects, into those hieroglyphics of a new speech which he considered far more powerful, far more intense, than any existing language.[36]

Were this to be the case, it would make little sense for Williams to trouble himself with writing lyric poetry at all. Like Pound’s skewed interpretation of the Chinese ideogram as a form of ‘concrete’ picture writing,[37] the attitude Dijkstra wrongly ascribes to Williams is predicated upon the belief that images are a ‘far more powerful, far more intense’ form of signification than that of words. Where Williams sometimes spoke as if he harboured the same disdain towards the abstract (and, at times, towards language itself) as that of Pound, Williams’s poetry provides ample evidence that he made room for the metaphysical realm as much as he did minute ‘particulars’. It is curious that contemporary critics should have taken on these prejudices in what can only be assumed to be a bizarre and misplaced display of solidarity. It is possible to admire Williams’s early poetry without believing that it is really ‘free from the attachment of thought’ or that it ‘smashes every connotation that words ever had’. These brash statements are cooked up for dramatic effect, and reflect the eccentricity of Williams’s personality, not the complexity of his poetry. As with Pound, it is necessary to take many of Williams’s theoretical pronouncements with a heavy dose of salt.

This warped view of Williams has had a strangely enduring shelf life, however. In their study *William Carlos Williams and the Language of Poetry* (2002), Burton Hatlen and Demetres Tryphonopoulos argue of Williams’s early poem ‘Metric Figure’ that it signals a

---

[36] Dijisktra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, 198.

[37] See Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition,* ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

‘new effort to isolate the edges of words in order to cleanse them of muddied associations and to foster visual clarity.’[38] This is not the impression we get from the poem itself:

Veils of clarity
have succeeded
veils of color
that wove
as the sea
sliding above
submerged whiteness.

Veils of clarity
reveal sand
glistening–
falling away
to an edge–
sliding
beneath the advancing ripples.[39]

It is difficult to see how these verses could be interpreted as an attempt to ‘cleanse’ words of their ‘muddied associations’, removing the process of connotation in favour of pure denotation, or, more to the point, why such a move would be desirable. Breaking the lines into two and three-word phrases so that they form a wave-like pattern across the page, Williams admittedly draws attention to the poem’s visual dimension by making us more alert to the eye’s effortful movements as we scan the lines. However, this depiction of ‘the sea / sliding above / submerged whiteness’ conjures an atmosphere of white mist mingling with the sea and sky; of elusive forms ‘submerged’ in the ‘glistening’ sea – hardly a description that eradicates connotation or foregrounds the ‘edges of words’ in a manner analogous to the geometric linearity of Cubist art. Similarly, although the second stanza appears designed to progress to ‘the edge –’, to the point of greatest precision – any desire for a lasting impression of ‘visual clarity’ is undermined by those active verbs Williams was so fond of: ‘falling’, ‘sliding’, ‘advancing’. The characteristically dynamic emphasis on movement and energy, whereby the sea and sand are seen to continually dissolve into one another, makes it impossible to align the poem with any notion of concreteness. Even the refrain 'Veils of clarity' is deliberately oxymoronic, foregrounding ideas of concealment even as the verse appears to insist on illumination, revealing a poet insistent upon keeping the multiple meanings of a given word in play, rather than have them stand 'separate in all their strangeness'.

---

[38] Burton Hatlen and Demetres Tryphonopoulos, eds. *William Carlos Williams and the Language of Poetry* (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2002), 9.

[39] William Carlos Williams, ‘Metric Figure,’ in *Collected Poems,* 51-52.

These misguided interpretations from Dijkstra *et al* stem from the belief that the relations between poetry and painting are 'infinite', as Foucault insisted, rather than strictly delineated. It has long been popular to privilege visuality in textuality – to insist that poetic innovations are always intimately tied up with parallel developments in the visual arts. Nevertheless, it is difficult to take seriously Dijkstra's conviction that Williams 'succeeded … in 'escaping the literary qualities, the tendencies to interpret and philosophize, which removes their work from painting,'[40] or Peter Hatler's assertion that Williams's early poems are really 'fields of action that combine Futurists kinetics with Fauvist colour explosions.'[41]At some point, these comparisons become purely metaphorical. As P.N. Furbank remarked, 'even an abstract or non-figurative painting is still *particular*. A blue circle in such a painting is bound to be that particular blue circle and no other; it is not like the words 'blue circle', which apply to all blue circles that ever were.'[42]

Critics for the most part have chosen to ignore this truism – George W. Layng, for example, has claimed that in *Spring and All*, Williams makes use of what he calls 'the visual phrase … where the visual segmentation allows individual words to stand separate in all their strangeness'.[43] This term 'visual phrase' is vague and unhelpful, every bit as redundant as the term 'image', but this notion that Williams's verse is closer to visual art than to the verbal medium of the poem has become deeply entrenched. In particular, the almost comic over-interpretation of Williams’s poem ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, long viewed as the Imagist poem *par excellence*, has been wholly dependent upon a perverse separation of the poem from its original context as part of an integrated sequence of verse and prose meditations within *Spring and All*. Returning the poem to its original context, an encounter with the two poems immediately preceding ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ (or, more accurately, ‘XXII’) makes it almost impossible to view the latter as the embodiment of a hard, dry Imagism:

---

[40] Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, 195.

[41] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 63.

[42] Furbank, *Reflections on the word 'Image'*, 7 (see Intro., n. 42).

[43] G W. Laygn, 'Rephrasing Whitman, Williams and the Visual Idiom,' in *Williams and the Language of Poetry,* 183.

> In the sea the young flesh playing
> floats with the cries of far off men
> who rise in the sea
>
> with green arms
> to homage again the fields over there
> where the night is deep—
>
> la lu la lu
> but lips too few
> assume the new— marruu
>
> underneath the sea where it is dark
> there is no edge
> so two—
>
> XXI
>
> one day in paradise
> a Gipsy
>
> smiled
> to see the blindness
>
> of the leaves–
> so many
>
> so lascivious
> and still
>
> XXII
>
> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens[44]

Against the luminous clarity of the Poundian image, Williams gives us an exotic dream world composed of ‘men / who rise in the sea / with green arms.’ This is a wholly fantastical landscape of the mind, not the localised American setting critics have associated with ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ when taken as an isolated fragment. [45] Rather than work towards ‘the edge’, as he does in ‘Metric Figure’ – here, ‘there is no edge’, merely a vast, unidentified landscape ‘over there / where the night is deep.’ As with that earlier poem, forms morph and slide into one another rather than stand ‘unnicked beside other words in parade’: the ‘leaves’ are at one ‘lascivious’ and ‘still’, and it is the ‘blindness’ of the leaves that makes them so captivating to the smiling ‘Gipsy’, not their vivid immediacy. In a 1928 letter to Zukofsky, Williams remarked that ‘It may be that I am to [sic] literal in my search for objective clarities of image. It may be that you are completely right in forcing abstract conceptions into the sound pattern. I dunno,’[46] and it is *Spring and All* where Williams can be seen to give up the search for literalness. The nursery-rhyme rhythms in the playful glossolalia ‘la lu la lu’, sending up the solemnity of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, remind us that this is a poet of sonic play as much as visual detail. And Marianne Moore’s astute critique of Williams, noting in a contemporary review that ‘one wonders upon what ground he has been able to persuade himself that poets spit upon rhyme’[47] seems fitting here, in a sequence in which we detect Williams’s relishing of those full rhymes ‘lu’, ‘new’, ‘few’, ‘two’. While George W. Layng has argued of *Spring and All* that ‘what distinguishes Williams’s manipulation of the text is that it is rooted in the visual appearance of the words rather than, in Eliot’s case, in the oral rhythm,’[48] the strongly aural quality of the preceding lines is, in fact, still resounding in the reader’s ear by the time we reach that famous opening conjecture ‘so much depends / upon’, making the rather po-faced interpretation of the poem as a classically Imagist lyric seem strangely unsympathetic to Williams’s intentions.[49]

---

[44] William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd., 1970), 137-138.

[45] Mark Hama, for example, has argued that ‘XXII’ was likely influenced by Orrick Johns (a member of Alfred Kreymbourg’s *Other’s* group), in particular his now-forgotten poem ‘Blue Under-Shirts’, arguing that Williams acquired from Johns an ‘innate sense of the particular, a talent for differentiating objects from their contextual background.’ Unlike in Williams, however, he believes Johns: ‘does not succeed in pulling the reader away from symbolic abstractions to an immediate perception of the object,’ noting that he ‘interrupts the presentation of the image with a narrative aside.’ In ‘“Blue Under-Shirts Upon a Line”: William Carlos Williams and the Genesis of “The Red Wheelbarrow”.’ College Literature 37, no. 3 (2010): 170, 176.

[46] William Carlos Williams, Letter to Zukofsky, July 25 1928, in *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (Middletown, Connecticut; Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 13.

Moreover, Layng’s view of the poem as a ‘triumph of an imagistic use of form because of its ability to bring into clearer focus the evocative power of each word and to suggest a deeper emotional resonance’[50] reveals the paradox at the heart of any poetic attempt to ‘pay naked attention first to the thing itself.’[51] Our readiness to add meaning to that simple noun phrase ‘a red wheelbarrow’, to imbue it with a kind of metaphysical aura even as the poem seems to insist upon words ‘unnicked beside other words in parade,’ speaks to an intrinsic tendency to oversignify when encountering poetic texts. *Spring and All* is less about ‘parad[ing] the potency of the Imagist imagination,’[52] as Albert Gelpi has insisted, than showing the way in which all ‘things’, however seemingly mundane, can be ‘lift[ed] to the imagination.’[53] After all, it was in this volume that Williams recognised the limitations of ‘that “evocation” of the “image” which served us for a time. Its abuse is apparent. The insignificant 'image' may be 'evoked' never so ably and still mean nothing.'[54] Although critics systematically ignore this important remark in their painting of Williams as the poet of the concrete particular – perennially caught 'between image and object', in Tom Orange's phrase – his poetry is evidence that his presiding interest remained in the 'nuances' of the poem as song.

---

[47] Marianne Moore, ‘Review of William Carlos Williams *Collected Poems, 1921-1931*’ (1934), in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 66.

[48] George W. Layng, *Williams and the Language of Poetry*, 188.

[49] Marjorie Perloff has called Williams’s verse a ‘poetry of luminous concrete particulars,’ in Review of *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos* Williams by Joseph N. Riddel. *The Modern Language Review* 71, no. 1 (1976): 158.

[50] Ibid., 199.

[51] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 35.

[52] Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendour: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 311.

[53] Williams, Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, in *Selected Essays*, 11.

## II

Contemporary poets have been equally given to such misreadings, however, and Denise Levertov is the embodiment of how Williams has been both misrepresented and perverted. Born in Ilford in 1923, Levertov moved to the United States in 1948 after meeting her American husband, and much critical commentary has presented the suspiciously smooth trajectory of a British poet writing in the heyday of the 'New Apocalypse' to a fully-fledged American poet, wholly acclimatised to the speech rhythms of Williams.[55] Where the New Jersey poet would look back fondly on his initial sympathy for Poundian Imagism and note that 'the immediate image, which was impressionistic, sure enough fascinated us all,'[56] Levertov's infatuation with the image would remain constant, and her dominant mode is an Imagism-cum-Objectivism – a 'chasing' of 'vague images', as Williams would put it – that unfortunately bypasses all the sophistication of her mentor's rendering of perception.

Before she came to model Williams's Imagist lyrics, Levertov undertook an apprenticeship in imitations of Auden. In her debut volume, endowed with the suitably Audenesque title *The Double Image* (1946), a poem entitled 'Too easy: to write of miracles' announces the poet's superiority to those who write of 'dreams where the famous give / mysterious utterance to silent truth.'[57] In contrast, she insists it is:

---

[54] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 143.

[55] In Dana Greene's recent biography of the poet, she expresses the majority opinion in stating of Levertov that 'it was not until she married and came to America that she found her poetic voice, helped by the likes of William Carlos Williams, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley.' (In *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014),i.).

[56] Williams, *Autobiography,* 148.

> —difficult to write
> of the real image, real hand, the heart
> of day or autumn beating steadily:
> to speak of human gestures, clarify
> all the context of a simple phrase
> —the hour, the shadow, the fire,
> the loaf on a bare table [58]

This is a misguided notion. It is very easy to write poetry of the 'bare image', as T.E. Hulme testifies. The 'difficulty' of rendering perception, as Williams understood it, lies in the need to capture the 'otherness' of the object while conveying its relationship to the poet's own subjective imagination, and to acknowledge that within the space of the poem, the 'thing in itself' is only recreated through the abstract medium of language. This is not a dilemma that seems to trouble Levertov. If she aims for a concrete specificity here, she has a strange way of going about it. This is a poem filled with bland abstractions – 'the heart of day', and 'human gestures', not vivid particulars, which is presumably what she intends by a 'real image'. That list of vaguely 'poetic' items: 'the hour, the shadow, the fire', with its emphatic triplet rhythm, shows just how influential for a time were the rhetorical operatics of Dylan Thomas, and Levertov picks up all the mannerisms of the neo-Romantic mode: the iambic rhythms and the measured, pentameter lines ensure that the verse is always seen to be 'beating steadily', neatly tying up its conceit of the difficulty of the creative process in the closing lines by announcing just how well the poet has been able to 'achieve / the unhaunted country of the final poem.'[59]

---

[57] Denise Levertov, 'Too Easy: to Write of Miracles', from *The Double Image* (1946), in *New Selected Poems*, ed. Paul A. Lacey (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2003), 3. All quotations from Denise Levertov's poetry are taken from this edition.

[58] Ibid., 3.

[59] Ibid., 3.

Admittedly this is very early work, and we can forgive a young poet their odd foray into the period style. But Levertov does not offer much in the way of stylistic development beyond the sentimental treatment of the object we find in *The Double Image*. In ‘The Instant’, from *Overland to the Islands* (1958), Levertov describes the poet and her mother on a morning walk before encountering Snowdon at a distance, as the poem fulfils the title’s promise of giving us present-tense immediacy, but little else:

> ‘We’ll go out before breakfast, and get
> Some mushrooms,’ says my mother.
>
> Early, early: the sun
> risen, but hidden in mist
>
> the square houses left behind
> sleeping, filled with sleepers;
>
> up the dewy hill, quietly, with baskets.
>
> Mushrooms firm, cold;
> tussocks of dark grass, gleam of webs,
> turf soft and cropped. Quiet and early. And no valley,
>
> no hills: clouds about our knees, tendrils
> of cloud in our hair. [60]

Kenneth Burke, an early and enthusiastic champion of Levertov’s verse, declared that she ‘had an almost perfect ear.’[61] This is not the impression we get from this poem. The rhythms are primary trochaic: ‘early’, ‘risen’, ‘hidden’, ‘houses’, ‘sleeping’, ‘dewy’, ‘baskets’, ‘Mushrooms’, ‘tussocks’ – in fact, they feature so prominently that it is difficult to assign anything close to a casual ‘spoken’ rhythm to these lines. And the syntax of the second stanza is archaic rather than distinctly modern: ‘Early, early: the sun / risen’ sounds like Zukofsky’s early poetry in the way its Georgian tonality seems so out of place in a poem attempting to

---

[60] Denise Levertov, ‘The Instant,’ in *New Selected Poems*, 7.

[61] Kenneth Rexroth, Review of Denise Levertov’s *Here and Now*, in *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 12.

'Make It New'.[62] As we stumble over the premodifying adjectives and caesurae that slice though the depiction of 'the dewey hill, quietly, with baskets', we sense Levertov as torn between 'paying naked attention first to the thing itself' and her natural impulse to embellish her train of thought with 'words that do not contribute to the presentation.' Those tautological lines depicting 'the square houses left behind / sleeping, filled with sleepers' likewise serve no real descriptive purpose, and we sense that these opening stanzas are really just preamble before we reach the moment of ecstatic vision: 'ah! Suddenly / the lifting of it, the mist rolls / quickly away … It's Snowdon, fifty / miles away!'[63] Throughout, the focus remains firmly on a desire to capture the numinous in the quotidian: we are asked to imagine the poet's delight in encountering the 'firm, cold' mushrooms, to relish the tactile quality of 'tussocks of dark grass', but that is about all we are asked to do. As Paul Breslin has remarked of this familiar attempt to 'respond to the moment' in modern verse: 'that one is excited and responding to the impulses of the moment does not guarantee that the resulting language will convey the excitement or evoke the moment for someone else.'[64] Levertov does not give us the grounds to invest these objects – square houses, dewy hills, firm mushrooms – with the degree of wonder she clearly intends. Instead, she assumes that by placing them in proximity to the familiar Romantic notion of an awe-inspiring encounter with nature that they become automatically charged with meaning – a category error that recalls Bly’s infatuation with those vapid ‘deep’ images: the sea, the sky, the dark.

---

[62] As Michael North noted in *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), Pound's notorious phrase 'Make It New' is itself a recycled phrase adapted from a Confucian text ordering rulers to keep their principles up-to-date, and remained relatively obscure until its critical use in the 1950s and beyond. North notes: 'These three words did not appear in Pound's work, it should be remembered, until 1928, well after the appearance of the major works of modernist art and literature, and the words did not become a slogan until some considerable time after that … In the process, the role of novelty in the development of poetic modernism is distorted, and the nature of novelty itself is simplified. The vast array of different positions that can be identified among the practitioners of modern art and literature shrinks to the size of a simple, three-word slogan, and the complex history of novelty is subtracted even from that, so that modernism loses a crucial part of the debt to tradition that it owes, paradoxically, through its devotion to the new.' (170-171). In keeping with North's argument, I argue throughout this thesis that Imagism's 'debt to tradition' has been overlooked, as has the tendency for modern and contemporary poets to recycle Imagist tropes and present them as 'new'.

[63] Levertov, 'The Instant', in *New Selected Poems*, 8.

[64] Breslin, *The Psycho-political Muse,* 192 (see chap. 1, n. 142).

Although Albert Gelpi has seen Levertov and Robert Duncan as being united by the desire to ‘invest the kinds of formal experimentation they learned from Pound and Williams with something of the metaphysical aura and mystique of the Romantic imagination,’[65] rarely does Levertov demonstrate anything close to the complexity of the Coleridgean (or indeed Williamsonian) conception of the imagination. Instead, we find attempts to combine the ‘formal experimentation learned from Williams’ with the watered-down methods of the Black Mountain school, as in ‘Merritt Parkway’:[66]

        As if it were
    forever that they move, that we
        keep moving—

                Under a wan sky where
                as the lights went on a star
                    pierced the haze & now
                follows steadily
                                a constant
                above our lanes
                the dreamlike continuum…

And the people— ourselves!
    the humans from inside the
    cars, apparent
    only at gasoline stops
                            unsure,
        eyeing each other [67]

This is a very transparent attempt at creating an ‘open’ form in the manner outlined in Charles Olson’s 1950 essay ‘Projective Verse.’ His announcement that ‘in any given poem always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!'[68] translates into Levertov's very literal insistence that 'we / keep moving'. In the poet's typography, we find a similarly heavy-handed attempt to mirror the 'dreamlike' flow of the cars, despite the fact that cars on a highway move in a linear, decidedly non-'dreamlike' formation. Just as Olson's emphatic, capitalised declarations fail to disguise the vagueness of his conception of a 'projective verse'– a cross between Pound's Vorticism and Bly's pseudo-Jungian 'energy' – Levertov's attempt to create a poem in which 'one perception' glides seamlessly into the next recalls Altieri's complaint of Bly that 'the effort to create the image contradicts the image.'[69] Everything here appears forceful: the ampersands, the attempt at an edgier syntax in the grammatical confusion of the second stanza with its missing articles and clauses, the jarring shift from the past tense ('as the lights went on') to the present ('& now / follows steadily'). Where Perloff noted in William's a 'studied clumsiness',[70] lines such as 'humans from inside the / cars, apparent / only at gasoline stops' merely expose how poor is Levertov's handling of syntax, while her habit of placing a single word on a line only draws attention to its banality: the word 'unsure' carries with it little semantic or musical interest, just as in the bizarre depiction of cars 'gliding / north & south, speeding with / a slurred sound—'[71] we find Levertov ending the poem with an overuse of too-obvious sound effect that harks back to Lowell and the original *Imagistes*.

---

[65] Albert Gelpi, quoted in Nick Halpen, ‘The Uses of Authenticity: Four Sixties Poets,’ in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, 881 (see chap. 1, n. 151).

[66] Merritt Parkway is a famously scenic parkway in Connecticut, known for the architectural style of its bridges and its greenery.

[67] Denise Levertov, ‘Merritt Parkway,’ in *New Selected Poems*, 10.

It wasn't that Levertov was unaware of the need for the poem to embody more than the mere visual impression. In a 1965 interview with Walter Sutton, she recognised the importance of a verse than moves beyond Pound's *phanopoeia*;

> I'm increasingly uninterested in what Pound has called *phanopoeia*, as such – the poetry of the visual image. I think the visual image is terribly important, but it must be accompanied by the *melopoeia* and *melopoeia* of a distinctly expressive kind, not the just the musical over-and-

---

[68] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950), in *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960,* ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

[69] Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility,* 15 (see chap. 1, n. 153).

[70] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 97.

[71] Levertov, 'Merrit Parkway', in *New Selected Poems*, 10.

> aboveness that Pound speaks of in *How to Read.*[72]

In Levertov’s most compelling work, her success can be almost wholly attributed to the way she combines a focus on visual detail with an ‘expressive’ *melopoeia* that registers a commitment to aspects of voice and aurality rather than the so-called ‘pure’ seeing of Greenberg and Maholy-Nagy. This can be seen most effectively in ‘The Ache of Marriage’, from Levertov’s 1964 collection *O Taste and See*, in which matrimonial angst is expressed through the way the poem’s ‘heavy’, ‘throb[ing]’ rhythms are set against descriptions of confinement and restriction:

> The ache of marriage:
>
> Thigh and tongue, beloved,
> are heavy with it,
> it throbs in the teeth
>
> We look for communion
> and are turned away, beloved,
> each and each
>
> It is leviathan and we
> in its belly
> looking for joy, some joy
> not to be known outside it
>
> two by two in the ark of
> the ache of it.[73]

By depicting marital strife not as a kind of existential e*nnui* but as a physical, bodily ‘ache’, Levertov is able to foreground the materiality of the voice in a way that ensures a corresponding focus on the physicality of the body rather than on imagery alone. Levertov’s technique here is comparable to Williams’s renderings of three-dimensional space by utilising sound as well as syntax; an aspect of his technique that Charles Tomlinson highlighted in the introduction to his edition of the *Selected Poems*:

> In the imaginative play of Williams’s poems, where the attention is frequently turned upon

---

[72] Denise Levertov, ‘Interview with Walter Sutton’ (1965), in *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 14.

[73] Levertov, ‘The Ache of Marriage’, in *New Selected Poems*, 30.

> outward things, the sound structure of the poems which embody that attention is an expression of strains, breath pauses, bodily constrictions and releases. Thus William's "locality" begins with a somatic awareness, a physiological presence in time and space, and this in quite early poems.[74]

In a similar manner, 'The Ache of Marriage' strives for this sense of a 'physiological presence in time and space'; the language itself almost 'throbs in the teeth' with its succession of dental sounds; 'thigh', 'tongue', 'teeth', 'turned', whilst the ballad-like repetition of 'beloved' allow these lines the sombre, 'expressive' music Levertov admires. Elsewhere, the verse is 'heavy' with the weight of the alternate stress patterns; 'thigh and tongue,' 'each and each', 'two by two'; phrases trapped in their respective pairings just as the married couple are trapped in their suffocating enclosure. In this instance, Levertov can be seen to relinquish the focus on 'the thing itself' in favour of a more comprehensive engagement with her subject matter in a way that permits the poem a greater degree of emotional resonance and memorability.

Likewise, in 'The Stone-Carver's Poem', Levertov successfully unites visuality with a more complex sonic arrangement through a deft use of assonance, so that the 'mottled rock' appears not merely as a visual impression, but an entity whose tactile quality is made vividly present:

> Hand of man
> hewed from
> the mottled rock
>
> almost touching
> as Adam the hand of God
>
> smallest inviolate
> stone violet[75]

In a 1972 interview with Ian Reid, Levertov commented that 'just as the painter or sculptor only really does see by *doing*- by painting or carving– so too the poet only sees in the process of language. There is no disembodied vision the poet then seeks words for’.[76] This highly perceptive recognition of the way vision in poetry is always a part of the ‘process of language’ is evident here, in which the stone-carver’s craft of intricately carving the ‘smallest’ ‘stone violet’ from the rock is paralleled with the craft of poetry; with the way the poem builds from simple two-word phrases to the numinous vision of the Adamic figure ‘almost touching’ ‘the hand of God’.

---

[74] Charles Tomlinson, Introduction, in William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), viii.

[75] Levertov, 'The Stone-Carver's Poem', *New Selected Poems*, 38.

However, as with all poetry working in the Imagist mode, there is little sense here of the poet engaging with vision as complex entity inseparable from questions of subjectivity and affect. Whilst James Elkins has described seeing as ‘irrational, inconsistent, and undependable … immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious’,[77] there is none of this fraught complexity in Levertov’s presentation of visual phenomena. Instead, what is most commonly registered is the poet’s childlike wonder at some natural or quotidian object with little consideration given to the way it functions in a complex web of associations. In Levertov’s Walter Sutton interview, Pound’s notion of *logopoeia* is conspicuous by its absence, and it is telling that the poet sees visuality and aurality as taking precedent over ‘the dance of the intellect’. But then again something of a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ is endemic to much of the modernist proselytising on the image. Rather than a severance between the passion and the intellect, as Eliot proclaimed, in Imagist theory, we find a demarcation of perception and visuality from anything pertaining to the rational, intellectual portions of the psyche. Where Pound famously separated *phanopoeia* from *logopoeia* in *How to Read*,[78] in his 1924 essay ‘Notes on the Mechanics of the Poetic Image,’ Yvor Winters similarly distinguished between an ‘image’ in which ‘the emotion is seen in the concrete and acts directly, without the aid of thought,’ and an ‘anti-image’, which he believed to ‘transmit an aesthetic emotion’ through the ‘intellect’.[79] Such a dismissal of the intellect from the visual realm makes it almost inevitable that poets striving for ‘visual clarity’ should reiterate the shallow, ‘pure’ seeing of Greenberg and Williams’s more naïve crucial assertions.

---

[76] Levertov, Interview with Ian Reid 1972, *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, 71.
[77] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On The Nature of Seeing*.
[78] See Pound, *Literary Essays*, 25.

In *The American Moment,* Geoffrey Thurley describes Levertov’s poetry as ‘sensible, normative, vivid with meaning’:[82] an alarming assessment of an art form designed to probe the capabilities of language and flaunt ‘the high intellectual activity of a mind’, in P.N. Furbank’s formulation. But it is an accurate account of the aims of a poem such as ‘The Broken Sandal’, from *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), in which Levertov makes the mistake (common to the Imagist poet) of assuming that any object brought under the poet’s eye is automatically of great interest:

> Dreamed the thong of my sandal broke.
> Nothing to hold it to my foot.
> How shall I walk?
>                         Barefoot?
> The sharp stones, the dirt. I would
> hobble.
> And—
> Where was I going?
> Where was I going I can’t
> go to now, unless hurting?
> Where am I standing, if I’m
> to stand still now?[83]

If this is ‘normative’ verse, it is because it embodies the most simplistic conception of the poetic image as (in Caroline Spurgeon’s formulation) ‘the little word-picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate and embellish his thought.’[84] Levertov undertakes no imaginative transformation of the quotidian event into a more interesting artistic dilemma: her broken sandal remains simply a ‘little word-picture,’ and although Thurley maintains that

---

[79] Winters, ‘The Testament of a Stone,’ 6, 7 (see chap. 1, n. 62).

[82] Thurley, *The American Moment*, 123 (see Intro., n. 12).

[83] Levertov, ‘The Broken Sandal’, in *New and Selected Poems*, 77.

[84] Caroline Spurgeon, cited in P.N. Furbank, *Reflections on the Word ‘Image’*, 4.

Levertov is a poet who consistently ‘exploits the imaginative possibilities in the banal’,[85] the evocation of the poet stumbling amongst ‘the sharp stones, the dirt’ offers merely the banal in its purest form. There is an inherent narcissism to the idea that the poet is so unique a specimen that the apparently unmediated record of their internal dialogue is of intrinsic interest. Where we can only assume that those insistent rhetorical questions constitute an attempt to give us privileged access to the poet’s thought processes in real time, the modernist efforts to convey the movements of mind (from which Levertov seemingly takes inspiration) wrestle with the discrepancy between the materiality of objects and the subjective imagination, the referential and self-referential dimensions of the poem, not the lack of appropriate footwear. It is unsurprising to find Levertov remarking in a letter to Robert Duncan: ‘I don’t think any poet, however different in kind, can afford to forget the words ‘No ideas but in things’’[86] – a much-misunderstood mantra long taken as evidence that Williams was interested only in the ‘the thing itself’ rather than in the complex relationship between the concrete and the abstract. In failing to recognise that a poem composed of ‘dream imagery’ has no merit in and of itself, Levertov demonstrates just how relevant is Alan R. White’s apparently common-sense observation that ‘the presence of imagery does not imply imagination.’[87]

But it is interesting to observe the way in which Thurley and numerous other male critics (and poets) have championed Levertov’s ‘simplicity’. James Wright – a poet who shares with Levertov a taste for Blyean ‘deep’ images – insisted that hers was a ‘quick, luminous mind, protected by wisdom against falsity till its spirit is strong enough to do its own protecting.’[88] Wright takes great interest in the fact that Levertov was home-schooled by her father, an eminent Jewish scholar who later converted to Anglicanism, and there is a hint here that

---

[85] Thurley, *The American Moment*, 121.

[86] Halpen, ‘The Uses of Authenticity,’ 881.

[87] Alan. R. White, *The Language of Imagination* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 91.

[88] James Wright, ‘From “Gravity and Incantation”,’ in *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*, 17-18.

Levertov's verse is 'luminous'– it 'does its own protecting' – through its bypassing the intellectuality of high modernism in favour of a more 'authentic' simplicity. It is ironic, then, that Thurley should hold up Levertov as a shining example of an antidote to the 'new academicism'[89] of Bly *et al* – Levertov displays all the 'folksy anti-intellectualism'[90] of her mid-Western counterpart, and shares with him the dubious honour of writing some of the most noteworthy examples of the bad Vietnam poetry to appear in the seventies. David Ignatow claimed that her Vietnam verse displayed 'a superb pathos,'[91] but in 'Life at War', from her 1967 collection *The Sorrow Dance,* Levertov foregrounds only her own strength of feeling when she laments:

> the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
> runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
> transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
> implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.
>
> We are the humans, men who can make;
> whose language imagines *mercy*,
> *lovingkindness*; we have believed one another
> mirrored forms of a God we felt as good –
>
> who do these acts, who convince ourselves
> it is necessary; these acts are done
> to our own flesh; burned human flesh
> is smelling in Viet Nam as I write.[92]

This reads more like an impassioned political speech than lyric verse, and Levertov lapses into her earlier lilting, neo-Romantic tonality in stressing not 'the bare image' but those vague concepts '*mercy*' and '*lovingkindness*', emphasised as if spoken by a priest rather than a poet. In its syntactic parallelism, its strict quatrains and fairly regular metrical pattern, the poem invites a sense of authority and grandeur that suggests Levertov getting caught up in her own rhetoric – in her passionate pronouncement that 'we humans' really are 'mirrored forms of a God', giving unfortunate credence to Perloff's complaint that too much twentieth-century poetry aims to carry on the tradition of a 'Romantic visionary humanism.'[93] In *American Poetry and Culture*, *1945-80* (1985), Robert von Hallberg provided an accurate diagnosis of the problems faced by post-war American poets attempting to use Imagist techniques as a form of political commentary when he observed that:

---

[89] Thurley, *The American Moment*, 218.

[90] Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, 101 (see chap. 1, n. 143).

[91] David Ignatow, Review of *The Freeing the Dust* by Denise Levertov, in *Selected Criticism*, 35.

[92] Denise Levertov, 'Life at War', in *New Selected Poems*, 65.

> Bly and, to a lesser degree, Wright, speak oracularly about politics and society, as if vision rather than understanding were needed. The techniques of this visionary political poetry do not permit the exercise of analytical intelligence … A generation of American modernist predecessors, especially Pound, made a poetic of juxtaposition and image seem unavoidable.[94]

The result for much political poetry of the sixties, as von Hallberg noted, was a 'sentimental simplification of history.'[95] And so it is in Levertov's Vietnam verse. As the poet herself admitted, Pound's 'various critical works, *Make It New*, *Pavannes and Divisions*, *ABC of Reading*, *Guide to Kulchur*, and *Polite Essays* … was at that time the critical writing I could most clearly use',[96] but by relying on the expressive potential of the evocative image from the outset – what Jerome Mazarro has called 'imagistic flashes of actual events'[97]– Levertov failed to develop the compositional tools necessary to produce a political verse that could display an 'exercise of analytical intelligence'. In many senses, the problems Levertov encounters here are identical to those faced by Oppen in *Discrete Series*, namely the difficulty of using parataxis to enact a sophisticated process of thought. In a sequence entitled 'The Cold Spring' from *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), this challenge is even more salient, as Levertov aims at an extended meditation on 'Birth, marriage, death' [98] and the passage of time, before being forced to concede:

What do I know?
            Swing of the
            birch catkins

---

[93] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 21.

[94] Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1985), 139-145.

[95] Ibid., 146.

[96] Denise Levertov, quoted in *Poetic License*, 121 (see Intro., n. 28).

[97] Jerome Mazarro, quoted in Audrey T. Rodgers, *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement* (London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993), 55.

[98] Levertov, 'The Cold Spring', in *New Selected Poems*, 78.

> drift of
> watergrass,
> tufts of
> green on the
> trees,
> (flowers, not leaves,
> bearing intricately
> little winged seeds
> to fly in fall
> and whoever
> I meet now,
> on the path.
> It’s not enough.[99]

In this rare moment of self-reflection, Levertov appears to question the validity of her images to carry her argument, and to recognise that a focus on the concrete particular is ‘not enough’. Whittling down the verse both visually and syntactically to a stream of natural images – ‘birth catkins’; ‘tufts / of / green on the / trees’, ‘intricately / little winged seeds’ – Levertov creates a vision of fragments she has shored against the relentless passing of time: ‘Twenty years, forty years, it’s nothing’.[100] Just as Kenneth Burke observed that ‘what Williams sees, he sees in a flash’,[101] Levertov’s aesthetic from the outset was dependent upon visual phenomena that can be captured in ‘the blink / of an eyelid’.[102] Although she recognised that ‘visual imagery can be overemphasised, and I think that that is what dissatisfies me about so much of the poetry that Robert Bly and the *Sixties* group write,’[103] like the Deep Imagists, Levertov often merely registers a sensitivity to ‘things’, and the poet’s eye as a passive reflector of images. At the close of the poem, she at least attempts to convey a chastened state of mind, to acknowledge the limitations of verse that is ‘Reduced to an eye’:

> I who am not about to die,
> I who carry my life about with my openly,
> health excellent, step light, cheerful, hungry,
> my starwheel rolls. Stops
> on the point of sight.
> Reduced to an eye

---

[99] Ibid., 78.
[100] Ibid., 78.
[101] Kenneth Burke, ‘Heaven’s First Law,’ *The Dial* 72 (1922): 197-200, cited in *The Critical Heritage,* 8.
[102] Levertov, ‘The Cold Spring’, in *New Selected Poems*, 78.
[103] Levertov, quoted in ‘Interview with Walter Sutton,’ in *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, 14.

I forget what
I
was.[104]

But Levertov rarely forgets the ‘I’– witness its prominence in the previous lines – and as with Bly, her attempts at navigate attention away from the self, to ‘offer the I an aesthetic alternative,’[105] in Stanley Plumly’s terms, more often serve to concentrate attention upon the way in which the verse is so emphatically occupied with the poet’s own psyche.

In *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (1984), Alan Williamson claimed that there exists:

> a fairly general consensus that what is most exciting and original about the poetry of the last twenty-five years is its individualism: its willingness to set values of universality at risk, in favour of the authenticity of specific autobiography, or of the momentary and immediate, or of the deeper levels of the psyche.[106]

But as Bly and Levertov demonstrate, a poetry caught up in the attempt to respond to ‘the momentary and immediate’ ends up risking very little, providing us with a sensitivity to ‘things’ rather than anything resembling the ‘deeper levels of the psyche’. Although she remarked in 1960 that ‘I feel the stylistic influence of William Carlos Williams, while perhaps too evident in my work of a few years ago, was a very necessary and healthful one,’[107] Levertov’s oeuvre consistently reveals her reading of Williams to have had a detrimental effect upon her verse. Williams’s belief that ‘poetry should strive for nothing else, this vividness alone, *per se*, for itself’[108] proved a dangerous trap for younger poets drawn to the Imagist ‘aesthetics of sincerity’, and by failing to recognise Williams’s verse as undermining the reductive tendencies of his own criticism, Levertov’s Imagist efforts appeared increasingly outdated in a contemporary climate in which the Greenbergian notion of ‘pure’ seeing was beginning to be undermined. Although she clung to the vision of the poem made of ‘particulars’, her contemporaries were recognising that to make Williams’s ‘contact’ applicable to the turbulent climate of post-war America, contemporary verse would have to make demands upon the intellect as well as the eye.

---

[104] Levertov, *New Selected Poems*, 82.
[105] Stanley Plumly, ‘Chapter and Verse,’ *The American Poetry Review* 7, no. 3 (1978): 24.
[106] Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, 1.
[107] Diana Surman, ‘Inside and Outside in the Poetry of Denise Levertov,’ in *Selected Criticism*, 111.
[108] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 66.

# Chapter III: 'The riddle comes with no answer': Charles Simic and the Poetry of Indeterminacy

*'In its essence an interesting poem is an epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet.'*

Charles Simic

Serbian-born poet Charles Simic is often mistaken for a modern-day Imagist,[1] and it is easy to see why. Those Poundian tenets asserting the need for a 'direct treatment of the 'thing',' and for the banishment of any word that 'does not contribute to the presentation,' seem to find their counterpart in Simic's early 'object' poems – the ostensibly minimalist lyrics in which all extraneous detail has been pared away to reveal the strange 'inner life' of otherwise-ordinary things: a pair of shoes, a fork, watermelons. And Simic's critical statements certainly point to a contemporary Imagist: 'It's not just me', he has insisted, 'It's the rule. Every poet, every writer is obsessed and returns again and again to a few, decisive images',[2] or, similarly, that 'my effort to understand is a perpetual circling around a few obsessive images.'[3] As with Williams, then, Simic should shoulder much of the blame for the now-entrenched belief that his verse is characterised first and foremost by its proficiency with the concrete image, a reading that has obscured the questions of being, temporality, and the metaphysics of the imagination that lie at the centre of his oeuvre. Far from clinging to the clarity of the concrete particular, Simic's celebrated early verse – which forms the focus of this chapter – embodies the poet's belief that despite the promise of resonant closure offered by the Poundian image, the 'poetry of indeterminacy still casts its spell.'[4]

---

[1] See *Charles Simic: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Bruce Weigl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

[2] Ibid., 221.

[3] Charles Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 56.

[4] Ibid., 56.

## I

Even a cursory glance at the critical literature on Simic's verse is enough to establish that it is now a commonplace to declare him a poet of the image. Robert B. Shaw has remarked upon Simic's 'preference … for the plain phrase and the concrete image',[5] Lisa Sack has insisted that he 'selects and juxtaposes a few striking images … and lets them resonate',[6] Thomas Lux has described his poetry as 'characterised by, among other things, almost relentless concrete imagery and metaphor',[7] while Bruce Weigl has argued that 'Simic has managed to strip down to a few notes, or images, or brush strokes, things as they are.'[8] It is unsurprising, then, to find that Simic has been placed alongside Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and James Wright as a proponent of the Deep Image,[9] or, conversely, with the likes of Mark Strand and James Tate as a practitioner of the 'New Surrealism,'[10] movements characterised first and foremost by their refashioning of Poundian Imagism. Although, as will become clear, Simic is not so easily shoehorned into these image-centric movements, too often in his critical prose we find the poet tacitly condoning this oversimplification of his poetic practice. In a 1980 interview, for example, he remarked that:

> In my early work I was very interested in imagery and metaphor. In fact, what I noticed about other poets, if I liked them, was that there was a great image in the poem. You could say I had a very poor sense of what the entire poem could do as an organism, the kind of effect it could make. But if it had a great image, I was happy.[11]

Simic's early 'object' poems, from *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), his first collection with a major press, ostensibly align with this desire for a single 'great image' to define the poem. So in the opening lines of 'My Shoes', we appear to be presented with a simple conceit whereby an ordinary pair of shoes provides access to the 'inner life':

---

[5] Robert B. Shaw, 'Charles Simic: An Appreciation,' in *Charles Simic: Essays on the Poetry*, 141.

[6] Lisa Sack, 'Charles the Great: Charles Simic's *A Wedding in Hell,*' in *Charles Simic*, 134.

[7] Thomas Lux, 'The Nature of the Pleasure: The Book of Gods and Devils,' in *Charles Simic,* 114.

[8] Bruce Weigl, *Charles Simic,* 2.

[9] See Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse.*

[10] See Paul Zweig, 'The New Surrealism,' *Salmaguni* 22/23 (1973): 269-84.

[11] Charles Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 55.

Shoes, secret face of my inner life:
Two gaping toothless mouths,
Two partly decomposed animal skins
Smelling of mice-nests.[12]

These lines appear to give us a straightforward defamiliarization of a quotidian object – we are made to think of Victor Shklovsky’s famous declaration in ‘Art as Technique’, where he maintained:

> art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.[13]

Simic’s admiration for the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert likewise recalls Shklovsky when he noted that his ‘way of defamiliarizing the familiar reminds me of folk humour. It’s the same free play of the imagination and jocularity one encounters in fairy-tales, riddles, and creation myths, which thrive on making the familiar strange.’[14] This is a pretty accurate description of Simic’s own aesthetic in ‘My Shoes’, in which the imaginative transformation of the humble footwear into the rather macabre vision of ‘Gaping toothless mouths’ reveals his own penchant for ‘folk humour’, instilling the poem with an earthy realism even as he seeks to make the familiar ‘strange’. But the expression ‘secret face of my inner life’, for all its tongue-in-cheek ‘jocularity’, is noticeably more abstract than we would expect of a poem desiring ‘a great image’, and what with the smell of ‘mice-nests’ and decomposing ‘animal skins’, these lines work to create a multisensory metaphor rather than a purely pictorial ‘image’. Moreover, as the speaker begins to address the shoes in a series of increasingly flamboyant rhetorical gestures, Simic complicates any sense of his verse as adhering to the Hulmean notion of a ‘visually concrete language’:

---

[12] Charles Simic, ‘My Shoes’, in *Looking for Trouble: Selected Early and More Recent Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 7. All quotations from Simic’s early poetry in this thesis are taken from this edition.

[13] Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’ (1917), in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

[14] Charles Simic, *The Renegade: Writings on Poetry and a Few Other Things* (New York: George Braziller, 2009), 54.

What use are books to me
When in you it is possible to read
The Gospel of my life on earth
And still beyond, of things to come?

I want to proclaim the religion
I have devised for your perfect humility
And the strange church I am building
With you as the altar.

Ascetic and maternal, you endure:
Kin to oxen, to Saints, to condemned men,
With your mute patience, forming
The only true likeness of myself. [15]

‘Today’, Simic has remarked, ‘to make an “image” is to make a theatre.’[16] This notion of theatricality is one he returns to in his critical prose, noting of Emily Dickinson that ‘she understood that a poem and our consciousness are both a theatre. Or rather, many theatres’,[17] and we sense in these statements a desire for the image to break free from its Imagist conception as a single ‘emotional and aesthetic’ unit to become a more malleable form capable of instilling the poem with a dramatic three-dimensionality. Similarly, there is a distinct theatricality to the speaker’s address to his shoes here, mockingly aggrandising the importance of what is otherwise an inanimate object by having them serve as the inspiration for a ‘new religion’ and an avatar of ‘things to come’. These lines bring to mind Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s *Old Shoes* in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, a painting that comes to embody his belief that ‘in the work of art, the truth of the being has set itself to work … In the work, a being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes to stand in the light of its being.’[18] Despite Simic’s half-playful, half-serious tone, then, the poem takes us beyond a straightforward display of ‘imagery and metaphor’: these shoes he insists are ‘The only true likeness of myself’ take on the ‘thingly’,[19] truth-revealing quality Heidegger attributes to Van Gogh’s boots, and direct us not only towards the authenticity of the ‘inner life’ over the falsity of the external image, but the manner in which Simic is able to use a single object to dramatize a re-making of the self.

---

[15] Simic, ‘My Shoes’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 7.

[16] Simic, ‘*The Uncertain Certainty*, 107.

[17] Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, 71.

[18] Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (1950), in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),16.

As such, the dominant reading of Simic’s verse as one that, in George Hitchcock’s formulation, represents a ‘return to a language of utmost simplicity, an alphabet of things’,[20] proposes an infantilisation of poetic craft at odds with the way these ‘object’ poems defy their apparent ‘simplicity’. In ‘Watermelons’, for example, Simic demonstrates how these short lyrics that are ostensibly reliant upon a central visual metaphor are in fact more unsettling than they first appear:

> Green Buddhas
> On the fruit stand.
> We eat the smile
> And spit out the teeth.[21]

Where Bly’s belief that an image ‘cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world’[22] causes him to leave the ‘real world’ behind and languish in the ephemerality of the collective unconscious, ‘Watermelons’ epitomises what Simic has called ‘keeping an allegiance to the soil, to our everydayness in the same instant as we experience the transcendental.’[23] Beginning with the sensuous delights of eating, the poem quickly takes a more sinister turn with the macabre notion of ‘spit[ting] out the teeth’ – a vision typical of Simic’s tendency to encourage violence to infiltrate the private domestic realm, so a fork becomes a ‘strange thing’ that has ‘crept / Right out of hell’[24] and a meditation on playing chess as a child is interrupted by the memory of ‘men hung from telephone poles.’[25] In this instance, by having this suggestion of brutality follow so quickly after the idea of the watermelons as ‘Buddhas’, Simic wryly undermines the tranquillity associated with Eastern spirituality, enacting a comic deflation from the sublime to the earthy, just as ‘My Shoes’ saw ‘the Gospel of my life on earth’ placed incongruously beside ‘decomposed animal skins’.

---

[19] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, 3.

[20] George Hitchcock, ‘Charles Simic’s *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk*,’ in *Charles Simic*, 50.

[21] Charles Simic, ‘Watermelons’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 12.

[22] Robert Bly, ‘A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,’ in *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), 26.

[23] Charles Simic, quoted in ‘Interview with Rick Jackson and Michael Panori,’ in *The Uncertain Certainty*, 63.

In a similar vein, in a poem entitled ‘Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand’ – a playful take on the medieval bestiary form – Simic’s riffing on the analogies that can be found to describe the human thumb complicates any notion of these early poems as representing a return to an ‘alphabet of things’:

> Thumb, loose tooth of a horse.
> Rooster to his hens.
> Horn of a devil. Fat worm
> They have attached to my flesh
> At the time of my birth.
> It takes four to hold him down,
> Bend him in half, until the bone
> Begins to whimper.
>
> Cut him off. He can take care
> Of himself. Take root in the earth,
> Or go hunting with wolves.[26]

In a discussion on Imagism and Surrealism, Simic remarked that ‘we find both traditions speaking of *the image*, and insisting on its importance … Imagism names what is there. Surrealism, on the other hand, endlessly renames what is there, as if by renaming it it could get closer to the thing itself.’[27] A sense of endless ‘renaming’ is likewise palpable here, in which the thumb is seen to be simultaneously a ‘loose tooth’, a ‘Rooster’, the ‘Horn of a devil’ and a ‘fat worm’. Rather than allowing us to get closer to ‘the thing itself’, however, this neo-surrealist technique undermines any sense in which ‘*the image’* could function as a single, cohesive entity within the text in the way Simic implies: none of these metaphors for the thumb can be said to take precedence over the other, and the speed with which we encounter the thumb in its various guises leaves us with a hallucinatory assortment of defamiliarizations rather than a straightforward transformation of the object into a single and recognisable ‘image.’

---

[24] Simic, ‘Fork’, in *Looking for Trouble,* 6.
[25] Simic, ‘Prodigy’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 38.
[26] Simic, ‘Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 4.
[27] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 88.

It is therefore surprising to find Simic peddling the familiar, superficial interpretation of William’s objectivist mantra, remarking in an essay on Robert Creeley that ‘when he comes out of himself and remembers William Carlos William’s injunction “no ideas but in things,” to actually look closely at the world around him, he is a far better poet.’[28] The oversimplification this remark encourages – the idea that a good poet simply requires accurate powers of perception rather than skill in shaping language – is difficult to align with Simic’s own poetry, so reluctant as it is to content itself with the naturalistic depiction of ‘things in themselves.’ Like Williams, Simic favours ‘nuance’ over the constraints of Imagist dicta, but he has been known to endow Imagist theory with a level of complexity difficult to align with Pound’s authoritarian doctrine. In the title essay from *Wonderful Words, Silent Truths*, he remarked that ‘Imagism is about the passion for accuracy. To get it right, etc. But, it’s not easy to get “it” right! A philosophical problem. Imagism is the epistemology of modern poetry.’[29] There is a danger here of implying that there is a single, definitive means of conveying reality, of ‘getting it right,’ and that Imagist instruction provides a failsafe means of achieving such ‘accuracy’. In the same essay, he quotes approvingly Artaud’s declaration: ‘no image satisfies me unless it is at the same time knowledge,’[30] – revealing, at least, a suspicion of sensuous detail for its own sake. But Simic’s misguided endorsement of Imagism in his critical prose has had unfortunate consequences for his own critical reputation. As well as the strange remark about the ‘alphabet of things’ supposedly found in Simic’s verse, George Hitchcock’s review contained the equally backhanded compliment that his verse displays an ‘elemental verity which escapes many of our more sophisticated and self-conscious poets.’[31] Such praise brings to mind Natalie Pollard’s observation that ‘those writers who receive praise for distinctiveness are likely to tell us as much about their audience, and its current preoccupations and established modes of thought, as about their radically singular departure from it.’[32] For Hitchcock’s remarks reveal just how strong was the critical appetite for a poetry of ‘elemental’ simplicity over the ‘intellectual’ verse of the High modernists at the mid-century – one that allowed neo-Imagists such as Denise Levertov a free pass. And it has let Simic off the hook at times, too. His weakest poems, such as ‘Animal Acts’ from *Charon’s Cosmology* (1977), collapse poetic expression into a series of dull visual conceits – ‘A bear who eats with a silver spoon. / Two apes adept at grave-digging. / Rats who do calculus. / A police dog who copulates with a woman’[33] – displaying little of the ‘theatre’ of the mind Simic is so adept at displaying in his stronger verse.

---

[28] Simic, *The Renegade*, 44.

[29] Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, 94.

[30] Ibid., 87.

More generally, the dominant flavour of criticism on Simic – in which we hear time and again that he is a poet of ‘relentless concrete image and metaphor’ – is indicative of the supreme confidence critics display in the validity of the ‘image’ as an operative term for all contemporary verse. These critics spot ‘images’ in Simic’s poems because they want to find them there: images are easy to demarcate and analyse in the old New Critical way, to neatly classify into categories that can be compared across poems (Helen Vendler has constructed one of her characteristic catalogues of ‘key words’ used by the poet, for instance)[34] and, usefully, such an endeavour avoids having to engage with Simic’s more difficult concerns, namely the questions of language, being, and time characteristic of what he calls the ‘poetry of indeterminacy’.

---

[31] George Hitchcock, ‘Charles Simic’s *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk*,’ in *Charles Simic*, 51.

[32] Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48.

[33] Charles Simic, ‘Animal Acts’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 35.

[34] Helen Vendler, ‘Totemic Sifting: Charles Simic’s *The Book of Gods and Devils*, *Hotel Insomnia*, and *Dime-Store Alchemy*,’ in *Charles Simic*, 121.

Simic has however been particularly unhelpful in this regard. In ‘Wonderful Words, Silent Truth,’ he argued: ‘certain philosophers have understood the poetic image better than literary critics. Bachelard, Heidegger, and Ricoeur come to mind. They grasp its epistemological and metaphysical ambition. The critics too often see the image solely in literary terms.’[35] It is difficult to see Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* as work emphasising the image’s ‘epistemological’ ambition, epitomising as it does the unfortunate entanglement between the poetic image and what Allan Williamson called a ‘folksy anti-intellectualism.’[36] As Bachelard tells us, his study is committed to revealing that

> the poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away … Because of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own; it is referable to a direct *ontology*.[37]

If this sounds eerily close to Bly’s mystical ramblings on the image as a means to ‘penetrate the reptile brain,’[38] it is because Bachelard shares with Bly the nostalgia for a purer state of being prior to language, one where the poetic image is said to originate: Bachelard wants to ‘specify that the image comes *before* thought,’[39] to stress that the image ‘sets in motion the entire linguistic mechanism. The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being.’[40] This is a text in which Lacan’s insistence that the unconscious is structured like a language doesn’t exist, where the mind is, in W.J.T. Mitchell’s terms, simply a ‘storehouse of images, and language a system for retrieving those images.’[41] Handily, such a conception of the image as a ‘direct *ontology*’ avoids having to engage with the more vexed subject of language, as well as breezily doing away with any sense of the image as a device dependent upon poetic artifice. Rather than making the error of subsuming metaphor within the broader category of the image, for Bachelard, the fallacy is to assume that the semantic workings of metaphor have any place within the shimmering sublime that is the poetic image: 'A metaphor is a false image, since it does not possess the direct virtue of an image formed in spoken revery.'[42] For Bachelard, then, the image is not a textual strategy, and only a pure phenomenology can come close to comprehending its 'novelty'. Such remarks bear an unfortunate resemblance to the Symbolist notion of art Shklovsky holds up for ridicule in the opening lines of 'Art as Technique':

---

[35] Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, 92.
[36] Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, 101 (see chap. 1, n. 143).
[37] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon press, 1969), xii.
[38] Robert Bly, quoted in *American Poetry Observed*, 73 (see chap. 1, n. 146).
[39] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xvi.
[40] Ibid., xix.
[41] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 121 (see Intro., n. 31).

> "Art is thinking in images." Poetry is a special way of thinking; it is, precisely, a way of thinking in images, a way which permits what is generally called "economy of mental effort," a way which makes for "a sensation of the relative ease of the process." "Without imagery there is no art" — "Art is thinking in images." These maxims have led to far-fetched interpretations of individual works of art. Attempts have been made to evaluate even music, architecture, and lyric poetry as imagistic thought.[43]

Russian Formalism did little to dispel this 'imagistic' hegemony, however, and Shklovsky's critique of these 'far-fetched interpretations' of art seemingly went unnoticed by Paul Ricoeur (another of the philosophers Simic champions), whose remarks in *The Rule of Metaphor* are worth returning to. Here, we find Ricoeur praising the writing of Virgil C. Aldrich, for whom 'thinking in poetry is a picture-thinking,'[44] as well as that of Marcus B. Hester, who he sees as demonstrating the way in which 'Poetic language is that language game … in which the aim of words is to evoke, to arouse images'[45] – a capacity he calls the 'iconicity of sense', which he recognises (with little degree of embarrassment, it seems) is a theory 'more psychological than semantic.'[46] In a strange elision of just about all writing on metaphor since Aristotle,[47] Ricoeur insists that most theories of the figure do not 'necessarily involve reference to any use of images,'[48] but rather 'designate aspects of verbal meaning.'[49] In contrast, he stresses that in any given metaphor, 'a verbal moment and a non-verbal moment cooperate.'[50] In a bizarre twist, he enlists the help of Wittgenstein in the attempt to lodge a 'sensible, thus non-verbal factor inside a semantic theory' of metaphor, insisting:

---

[42] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 77.

[43] Shklovsky, *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 3.

[44] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Cotello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 212.

[45] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 210.

[46] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 212.

> In contrast to mere association, iconicity involves meaning controlling imagery. In other words, this imagery is involved in language itself; it is part of the game of language itself … the image is not free but tied; and, in effect, 'seeing as' orders the flux and governs iconic deployment … the 'seeing as' activated in reading involves the joining of verbal meaning with imagistic fullness.[51]

For all Ricoeur's efforts to pair the now-familiar sense of metaphor as an image-game with Wittgenstein's more sophisticated idea of language games, it is impossible to reconcile the complexity of poetic metaphor with his notion that imagery is somehow 'tied' to Wittgenstein's theory of 'seeing as', a concept designed to illuminate the complexities of aspect perception, not the markedly different process of encountering a poetic text. And however much scholars remain enamoured with the idea of poetic metaphor as a pictorial entity, the poetic 'image'– what Edward Larrissy has generously called 'that vague but useful word'[52] – remains an illusion created by the poet's use of *language*, not a composite picture in the manner of Wittgenstein's famous duck / rabbit figure. Moreover, comprehending the various 'meanings' generated by a metaphor involves more than simply apprehending its 'imagistic fullness': Ricoeur's insistence that the tenor is 'seen as' the vehicle – Juliet is 'seen as' the sun – forcefully undermines all those properties besides the visual that make up any given metaphor (semantic, aural, musical, rhythmic), as well as working to undo the possibilities opened up by the very concept of iconicity itself, which by stressing the various levels of resemblance that may exist between the signifier and the signified, seems to offer a rare escape from the old problem of the arbitrariness of the sign.

---

[47] In 'Seeing and Believing,' Richard Moran provides a particularly useful discussion of the long-standing tendency to link metaphor with the image (see Intro., n. 44).

[48] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 208.

[49] Ibid., 208.

[50] Ibid., 208.

[51] Ibid., 211-213.

[52] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 94.

It is necessary to demonstrate the gulf between these specious image-theories and the more mature attitude toward questions of language and consciousness we find in Simic’s poetry. The opening stanza of ‘Stone’, one of the most well-known poems from *Dismantling the Silence*, in many respects appears to align with these strange Bachelardian ideas about the image as a form that takes us to the origin of the speaking being:

> Go inside a stone.
> That would be my way.
> Let somebody else become a dove
> Or gnash with a tiger’s tooth.
> I am happy to be a stone.[53]

And perhaps, for a moment, Simic buys into this idea too: these opening lines bring to mind Galway Kinnell’s much-quoted remark that if one were to go deep inside the self, eventually ‘you’d be a blade of grass or ultimately perhaps a stone.’[54] Simic, likewise, has spoken of his reverence toward ‘a state that precedes verbalization, a complexity of experience that consists of things not yet brought to consciousness, not yet existing as language’[55]– a quest for silence that sounds perilously close to the Bachelardian model. Certainly, ‘Stone’ favours a state of quiet interiority over the kind of mastery of the natural world symbolised by the vision of ‘gnash[ing] with a tiger’s tooth’; the poem’s ‘elemental’ diction and short, mostly end-stopped lines create an atmosphere of hushed contemplation that could be said to evoke a state ‘preceding verbalization.’ But rather than communicate a rejection of the intellectual component of the psyche in the manner of Bly and Bachelard, this desire to ‘go inside a stone’ is really just a momentary ruse, preparing us for Simic’s subsequent display of analytic dexterity as he undertakes an elaborate processes of conjecture as to what may lie hidden ‘inside’:

---

[53] Simic, ‘Stone’, in *Looking for Trouble,* 8.
[54] Galway Kinnell, quoted in *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, 65.
[55] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*.

From the outside the stone is a riddle:
No one knows how to answer it.
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,
Even though a child throws it in a river;
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed
To the river bottom
Where the fishes come to knock on it
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out
When two stones are rubbed,
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining
From somewhere, as though behind a hill –
Just enough light to make out
The strange writings, the star-charts
On the inner walls.[56]

Bachelard maintained that ‘at the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions’[57]– a statement that could be said to correspond with the way Simic mediates between the stone and the speaking subject here so that the two are almost indistinguishable. The speaker desires the means to ‘Go inside a stone’, to ‘be a stone’, even. But if the poem enacts a series of ‘unceasingly active … inversions’, they are not carried at ‘at the level of the poetic image,’ but rather at the level of grammatical function. The saliency of the terms ‘Or’, ‘Yet’, ‘Even though’, ‘That’, ‘Where’, ‘When’, ‘From’, ‘On’, ‘So’ in these lines highlight Simic’s proficiency with what George Oppen called ‘categories, classes, concepts’; those ‘little words that I like so much.’[58] And they are made to bear the weight of the argument: the qualifications ‘Yet’ and ‘Perhaps’ (placed strategically at the beginning of the lines, rather than tucked away in a subordinate clause) work to communicate a speaker undertaking a process of careful thought, clarifying his statements with a philosophical precision so that we are never allowed to rest upon a single interpretation of this mysterious ‘stone’, never made to grasp the definitive means of ‘getting it right’.

---

[56] Simic, ‘Stone’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 8.
[57] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xv.
[58] George Oppen, quoted in Hass, *What Light Can Do,* 55.

If Bachelard’s anti-intellectualism is antithetical to Simic’s argumentative rigour, then, Heidegger is closer to the poet’s own sensibility as it reveals itself in this early work. But Heidegger is strange choice for Simic to adduce alongside Bachelard and Ricoeur as a proponent of the image’s ‘epistemological and metaphysical ambition.’ In fact, his stance on poetry is directly antithetical to such grandiose musings on the ‘brilliance of the image,’ famously denouncing the ‘metaphysical interpretation of art’ that turns all concrete particulars into resonant symbols, as well as the tendency in Western poetry (up until the work of the German poet Hölderlin) to infuse the ‘things of nature’ with a ‘spiritual content’:

> In the poetic work … these things of nature assume the role of appearances that can be grasped as something sensuous [*sinnlich*], as something that offers a view and thus provides an “image.” Yet in the poetic work such images present not only themselves, but also a nonsensuous meaning. They “mean” something. The sensuous image points towards a “spiritual” content, a “sense” *“Sinn”*] … With respect to the metaphysical essence of art, we can also say that all art has to do with symbolic images [*ist sinnbildlich*].[59]

This demarcation between the sensuous and the spiritual Heidegger sees poetry as foregrounding is hardly new; we are reminded of the age-old conflict between sense impressions and abstract concepts that Plato and Aristotle famously disagreed upon, whereby for the former, the philosopher is one ‘making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas,’[60] while for the latter, images become the essential intermediary between the external world and the more integral workings of the mind: ‘when the mind is actively aware of anything it is necessarily aware of it along with an image; for images are like sensuous contents except in that they contain no matter.’[61] Simic is always struggling with this tension between the literal and the metaphysical, as he himself has recognised: ‘there is a constant dialectic in my poetry between a longing to take off on abstract flights and my concrete, physical needs.’[62] And such desire for a grounding in quotidian reality leaves Simic wary of any aesthetic that aligns poetry with unmediated personal expression – Simic has remarked that the ‘appeal of Heidegger was his attack on subjectivism, his idea that it is not the poet who speaks through the poem but the work itself. This has always been my experience. The poet is at the mercy of his metaphors.’[63] In ‘Stone’, there is a distinct sense of the object as having its own agency in the Heideggerian manner as it ‘sinks, slow, unperturbed / To the river bottom’. In these lines, what’s foregrounded is the distinctive character of the object itself over any symbolic resonances: it remains a ‘riddle’ that ‘No one knows how to answer’, perpetually resistant to ‘metaphysical’ interpretation. Nevertheless, in attempting to discover what lies ‘inside’, Simic cannot help but instil the poem with exactly the kind of ‘epistemological ambition’ Heidegger was so sceptical of: we are left with the glistening brilliance of ‘sparks’ that ‘fly out / When two stones are rubbed’; with a Romantic vision of ‘a moon shining / From somewhere’ and a speculation on the ‘star-charts / On the inner walls’ reminding us that, like Williams, Simic veers continually between empiricism and myth, as well as the desire to give full attention the object itself and the need to demonstrate how the ‘inventive imagination’ can transform it into something beyond ‘the familiar’.

---

[59] Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”*, trans. William McNeil and Julia Davis (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 16-17.

[60] Plato (*Republic* 511c) quoted in J. M. Cocking, *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* ed. Penelope Murray (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 18.

Where the ahistoricism of Bachelard’s image theories leads to a conception of the poem divorced from social realities – a ‘giving up on the outside world, a retreat from psycho-politics to a solipsistic religion of the unconscious’[64]– in Breslin’s terms, Simic shares with Heidegger an insistence on probing the political and historical context of any given work of art. Saturated with the poet’s memories of growing up in Nazi-occupied Belgrade, Simic’s landscapes are considerably darker, in a literal sense, than that of the Deep Image poets:

---

[61] Aristotle (*De anima* 432a) quoted in *Imagination*, 19.

[62] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 63.

[63] Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, 63.

[64] Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse,* 129 (see chap. 1, n. 142).

> They were talking about the war,
> The table still uncleared in front of them.
> Across the way, the first window
> Of the evening was already lit.
> He sat, hunched over, quiet,
> The old fear coming over him…
> It grew darker. She got up to take the plate –
> Now unpleasantly white – to the kitchen.
> Outside in the fields, in the woods
> A bird spoke in proverbs,
> A pope went out to meet Attila,
> The ditch was ready for its squad.[65]

Given the anonymous title of ‘The Place’, the poem epitomises Simic’s ability to cultivate a film noir environment of menace and uncertainty. Rather than attempt to render the silence that comes before language, this portrayal of a couple ‘sat, hunched over, quiet,’ captures the more unnerving silence of a family living in the shadow of Nazism. Where for Bachelard, the shimmering image enables a sidelining of ‘the distant past’ which merely ‘resounds with echoes,’[66] there is a chilling contemporaneity to this couple’s anxious ‘talking about the war’, even as the poem veers into more surrealist territory, populated with birds speaking in ‘proverbs’ and Popes who meet ‘Attila’. Indeed, ‘The Place’ brings to mind Simic’s remarks in an autobiographical section of his collected critical essays *The Renegade*, where he noted that ‘when people speak of the dark years after the war, they usually have in mind political oppression and hunger, but what I see are poorly lit streets with black windows and doorways as dark as the inside of a coffin.’ [67] This need for literalness is an important one in the poet’s sensibility: Simic once rebuffed the idea that his poems are simply allegories by insisting: ‘when I say ‘rats in diapers’ that’s to be taken literally’,[68] and the poet has praised Zbigniew

---

[65] Simic, ‘The Place’, in *Looking for Trouble*, 14.

[66] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xii.

[67] Simic, *The Renegade*, 9.

[68] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 78.

Herbet for this same literal-mindedness, noting that throughout his late work, ‘he still strove to make words mean what they mean’.[69] In a similar vein, ‘The Place’ brings us back to Heidegger’s insistence on the anti-symbolic nature of the poem’s sensuous details by having the plate, the window, the fields, the woods, all strenuously unadorned. In fact, Simic’s compression of the narrative into such economical phrases as ‘it grew darker’ means that the few spare details we do encounter – the ‘uncleared’ table, the single ‘lit’ window, the ‘unpleasantly white’ plate – are, in Helen Vendler’s rather dramatic formulation, isolated ‘in a glowing beam of pitiless interrogation.’[70] Simic’s technique here also shares affinities with Jan Mukařovský’s remarks in ‘A Note on the Semantics of the Poetic Image,’ in which he saw a clear separation between ‘imagery’ and ‘literal meaning’:

> After a period in which imagery has been emphasised there can follow a period in which literal meaning will be stressed, not in order to exchange one extreme for another but in order to gain a synthesis through contradiction … the image which has lost the obviousness of literal designation has also lost its poetic effectiveness. Today the risk, the necessary risk, of poetry consists much less in finding a new image … than in achieving a poetic designation of any kind which has a convincing relation to the reality designated.[71]

Mukařovský’s sense of the futility of an image that has ‘lost the obviousness of literal designation’ is one that Simic would condone: in ‘The Place’, the unexpected appearance of a ‘bird’ who ‘spoke in proverbs’ in those final lines actually forces attention back onto the gritty realism of the opening domestic scene: the ‘table still uncleared’, the window ‘already lit’. For all Simic has discussed the attraction of Surrealism, his awareness of the need to display a ‘convincing relation to the reality designated’ gives his warped reimaginings of twentieth-century history an emotional urgency so glaringly absent in the war poetry of Denise Levertov.

---

[69] Simic, *The Renegade*, 49.

[70] Helen Vendler, ‘Totemic Sifting: Charles Simic’s *The Book of Gods and Devils, Hotel Insomnia, and Dime-Store Alchemy*,’ in *Charles Simic*, 121.

[71] Jan Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1977), 79-80.

This emphasis on what Williams called the 'inventive imagination' is crucial in understanding Simic's departure from Bachelard's theory of the image. Simic has remarked that 'when poets forget what imagination can do they get into these linear, prosy, redundant, long-winded poems. It's possible to tell a story, the whole story, in twenty lines'[72] – a remark that is particularly useful in illuminating Simic's intentions in 'The Partial Explanation', from *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), a poem that is something of a manifesto piece on the mysteries of the creative process:

Seems like a long time
since the waiter took my order.
Grimy little luncheonette,
The snow falling outside.

Seems like it has grown darker
Since I last heard the kitchen door
Behind my back,
Since I last noticed
Anyone pass on the street.

A glass of ice water
Keeps me company
At this table I chose myself
Upon entering.

And a longing,
Incredible longing
To eavesdrop
On the conversation
Of cooks.[73]

Of the poems in this collection, Simic observed that 'There are … no surrealistic images in them',[74] and 'The Partial Explanation' is representative of Simic's increasing disillusionment with the idea of the 'great image' as an adequate means to render the creative mind. Simic has remarked that 'Form is "timing"– the exact amount of silence necessary between words and images to make them meaningful,'[75] and there is something about the casualness of the opening conjecture: 'Seems like a long time / since the water took my order', that creates the illusion of a speaker suspended in time, trapped in a state of bemused contemplation as he ponders the now long-distant sound of 'the kitchen door' and the fading memory of people 'pass[ing] on the street'. As in Williams, Simic's line breaks are made to foreground the creation and gestation of meaning: the series of dramatic pauses we find between the lines 'Since I last heard the kitchen door / Behind my back', 'Since I last noticed / Anyone pass on the street', allow these utterances to hover on what the poet called 'that borderline which divides silence and language.'[76] And as with the economy of expression that characterised 'The Place', the grammatical compression we find here ('grimy little luncheonette, / The snow falling outside'), means that a few metonymic details Simic spares us are given considerable weight: such objects as the 'glass of ice water' appear to embody the speaker's ice-cool exterior and meditative state of mind as they succumb to the trance-like state from which the poem may emerge. Even the poem's title 'The Partial Explanation' is emblematic of Simic's refusal to give us 'full' explanations – these final lines do not click into place with the 'inevitability and surprise of an elegantly executed checkmate',[77] as the poet once declared of his poetic endings, but rather leave the speaker speculating on 'the conversation / Of cooks'.

---

[72] Simic, quoted in 'An Interview with Sherod Santos,' in *The Uncertain Certainty*, 78.

[73] Simic, 'The Partial Explanation', in *Looking for Trouble*, 31.

[74] Simic, quoted in 'An Interview with Rod Steier' (1977), in *The Uncertain Certainty*, 48.

[75] Simic, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, 93.

In an essay entitled 'Negative Capability and Its Children,' Simic spoke of this need for poem to be 'in the midst', and asked of contemporary poets:

> How do we render this now overwhelming consciousness of uncertainty, mystery and doubt in our poems?… The poem, too, is in the midst, a kind of magnet for complex historical, literary and psychological forces, as well as a way of maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity.[78]

Simic's increasing awareness of the need for 'multiplicity' is explored most compellingly in his most ambitious poem *White* – a sequence of twenty meditations followed by a response entitled 'What the White Had to Say' – in which Simic attempts to make present the whiteness that is the poet’s blank page. First published by a small press in 1970 before being revised twice by Simic, first in 1980, and again in 1996 for the edition *Looking for Trouble: Selected Early and More Recent Poems* (1997), *White*’s publishing history shares affinities with the poem itself as an exploration of what Richard Howard has called ‘the paradox of poetry as process and impediment to process.’[79] Immediately upon encountering the opening lines, it is clear Simic permits a much greater degree of abstraction in *White* than is evident in the early ‘object’ poems:

---

[76] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 53.

[77] Charles Simic, 'Why I Still Write Poetry,' *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 2012, accessed 25 November 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/05/15/why-i-still-write-poetry/.

[78] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 83.

> Out of poverty
> To begin again
>
> With the taste of silence
> On my tongue
>
> Say a word,
> Then listen to it fray
>
> Thread by thread,
> In the fading,
>
> The already vanishing
> Evening light.
>
> *
>
> So clear, it’s obscure
> The sense of existing
>
> In this very moment,
> Cheek by jowl with
>
> My shadow on the wall,
> Watching and listening,
>
> With its gallows-like
> Contorted neck
>
> Bloodied by the sunset,
> To my own heart beat.[80]

It would be difficult to describe *White* as a poem of simple ‘imagery and metaphor’: the oxymoronic phrase ‘so clear, its obscure’ is an early indication of the way the poem’s dreamlike meditations stubbornly refuse to cohere into glittering, quasi-symbolic 'images'. Robert Shaw, in an otherwise astute commentary on the poem, made the puzzling remark that 'White, from which all colours of the spectrum are drawn, evidently represents the source in or beyond the unconscious mind from which all poetic images are drawn'.[81] But the very concept of 'white' as a non-colour, an absence, means that by definition, the poem could not depend upon images for its structure. Instead, as we saw in 'Stone', it is noticeable how these lines are characterised first and foremost by the language of grammatical function ('Out', 'To', 'With', 'On', 'Then', 'In', 'The', So'), not the pile-up of content words we find in Bly or Levertov's neo-Imagism. Although Simic creates the illusion of the verse being composed 'in this very moment', moreover, there is a circularity to the way we are endlessly drawn back 'To begin again' the attempt to capture words before they begin to 'fray' into the void:

---

[79] Howard, *Alone With America*, 2.

[80] Simic, *White,* in *Looking for Trouble*, 19-20.

> The sky of the desert,
>
> The heavens of the crucified.
>
> The great white sky
> Of the visionaries.
>
> Its one lone, ghost-like
> Buzzard hovering,
>
> Writing the long century's
> Obiturary column
>
> Over the white city,
> The city of our white nights.
>
> *
>
> Mother gives me to the morning
> On the threshold.
>
> I have the steam of my breath
> As my bride,
>
> The snow on my shoes
> Is the hems of her wedding dress,
>
> My love always a step ahead,

---

[81] Robert Shaw, 'Life Among the Cockroaches: Charles Simic's *Classic Ballroom Dances* and *White* (A New Version),' in *Charles Simic*, 60.

Always a blur,

A white-out
In the raging, dream-like storm.[82]

In a 1967 letter to Gail Roub, Lorine Niedecker recalled that ‘I used to feel that I was goofing off unless I held only to the hard clear image, the thing you could put your hand on but now I dare do this reflection,’[83] and a similar kind of ‘reflection’ is evident here. In employing the couplet form, Simic allows the verse to enact a series of deflations: as soon as we attempt to visualise such strange, synaesthetic descriptions as ‘the taste of silence’, upon reaching the following line, we discover that they are already dissolved ‘on’ the ‘tongue’, ‘already vanishing’ into the whiteness. And in the poem’s highly opaque diction (the ‘heavens of the crucified’), Simic give these lines a hermetic quality that is antithetical to the earlier ‘object’ poems, allowing him to foreground complex states of consciousness over concrete ‘things’. Howard’s remark of Robert Creeley’s poetry, that his was one ‘without images or rather with an imagery pulverized beyond the recognition of shared contours, an imagery hugged to the self, “played” close to the chest,’ [84] is useful here – the ‘white city, / The city of our white nights’[85] evokes an ‘unreal city’ of the mind that somehow occupies a simultaneous existence throughout all of history and time, not the tangible visual landscapes we associate with Imagism. Abstract concepts such as ‘the long century’s Obituary column’ are similarly impossible to comprehend in visual terms, revealing a ‘pulverised’ language that does not cohere into any recognisable pictorial frame, but rather collapses into the insubstantiality of ‘breath.’

Peter Schmidt has argued that ‘White’s persistent quest for a centre, a source, plus its infinite evasions and decentrings, make it a deeply philosophical poem’[86] – a remark that brings to mind Joseph N. Riddel’s comments on William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, where he observed:

---

[82] Simic, *White*, in *Looking for Trouble*, 23.
[83] Lorine Niedecker, Letter to Gail Roub, 20 June 1967, cited in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 12 (see chap. 1, n. 104).
[84] Howard, *Alone With America,* 70.
[85] Simic, *White*, in *Looking for Trouble*, 23.
[86] Peter Schmidt, ‘*White*: Charles Simic’s Thumbnail Epic,’ in *Essays on the Poetry*, 24.

> There is implicit in the search for a central controlling image or image cluster the assumption that in any poem some body of detail subsumes or subordinates the rest … The word *poem*, with its more or less implicit assumption of internal coherence or wholeness, suggests a totalization of elements that likewise implies the presence of a centre, an organising principle. This principle, whether author, consciousness, intention, or imagination, is fundamentally the principle of logos.[87]

Certainly, Simic makes it impossible for us to identify a ‘central controlling image’. But as much as it is tempting to read *White* as an attack on logocentrism, with its ‘infinite evasions’ and Derridean ‘decentrings’, Simic is not a poet who shuns ‘imagination’, and *White* cannot be so easily shoe-horned into a postmodernist framework. In an interview, Simic remarked that ‘*White* is an attempt to think the limits of imagination through metaphors’[88]– hardly an ardent post-structuralist stance – and *White* remains preoccupied with the difficulties of accessing the creative imagination. As such, Simic’s is a highly self-reflexive poem in the way it concentrates attention on the craft of writing, and on the difficulty of finding the right words amid the whiteness of the blank page:

> In the inky forest,
> In its maziest,
>
> Murkiest scribble
> Of words
>
> And wordless cries,
> I went for a glimpse
>
> Of the blossom-like
> White erasure
>
> Over a huge,
> Furiously crossed-out something.[89]

---

[87] Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 16.

[88] Simic, quoted in ‘An Interview with Bruce Weigl,’ in *Essays on the Poetry*, 218.

[89] Simic, *White*, in *Looking for Trouble*, 24-25.

In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur can be found proselytizing the wonders of Bachelard’s theory, proclaiming that he ‘has taught us that the image is not a residue of impression, but an aura surrounding speech: The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being.’[90] In contrast, *White* continually reminds us that the poem emerges from the poet’s wrestle with the *material* forms of writing – the white page, the ‘Murkiest scribble of words’,[91] and the ‘long tip of my pen’[92]– never merely a metaphysical ‘aura’. Simic once declared that *White* ‘was one of those poems that was *endlessly* revised. It took me about a year to write it and it went through many, many versions,’[93] and something of this struggle is evident in the almost childlike diction we find here: those terms ‘maziest’ and ‘murkiest’, alongside the frequent appearance of compounded terms (‘sun-reddened’, ‘blossom-like’, ‘ghost-like’, ‘dream-like’), point to Simic’s own wrestle with ‘words and meanings’, bending and forcing words together to see what ‘sparks fly out’. Noticeably, these lines are characterised by the same oxymoronic expressions evident in the opening lines – ‘words’ cohabit with ‘wordless cries’ – and no sooner have we been lulled into conjuring a visual picture of an ‘inky forest’ than Simic informs us that such attempts at composition merely result in the ‘Furiously crossed-out something’ of the poet’s failed poetic efforts.

Moreover, *White* is perhaps the most explicit demonstration of Simic’s departure from Bachelard’s conception of the image as ‘a property of a naïve consciousness’.[94] Bachelard’s belief that the ‘image, in its simplicity, has no need of scholarship … in its expression, it is youthful language’,[95] could not stand at a further remove from *White’s* furious crossings out and false starts, as the poet attests to the perennial difficulty of reaching what Levertov, with uncharacteristic felicity, called the ‘unhaunted country of the final poem.’[96] Simic’s self-lacerating tone here reminds us that the figure of the white is a kind of warped alter ego of the poet himself, a notion particularly salient in the final section entitled ‘What the White Had to Say’, in which we find a sinister personification of the blank page berating the poet for his desire for the ‘intangible something’ to ‘say more’, to make itself known in language:

---

[90] Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor,* 214.
[91] Simic, *White,* in *Looking for Trouble*, 24.
[92] Ibid., 29.
[93] Simic, quoted in ‘An Interview with George Starbuck’ (1975), in *The Uncertain Certainty*, 27.
[94] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xv.
[95] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xv.

> Listen to this, my dear nothing.
> I’m the great nothing that tucks you to sleep,
> The finger placed softly on your lips
> That makes you sit up in bed wide awake.
> Still, the riddle comes with no answer.
> The same unknown mother left us on a doorstep,
> The same four walls made us insomniac.
> Late-night piano picking out blues notes,
> I’m that intangible something between them,
> And still you want me to say more,
> And so we can never get past the beginning.[97]

Even as the White insists on their insubstantiality, the way Simic has them ‘tuck[ing]’ the poet to sleep, placing a ‘finger…softly’ on his ‘lips’, and even taking on a human form as an abandoned infant ‘left …on a doorstep,’ reveals the white – or the silence before the poem – as a kind of bodily experience integral to the creative process. Similarly, in the poem’s progression towards a state of stasis whereby ‘Time has stopped’ and the poet’s ‘shadow’ ‘Has not stirred on the wall’,[98] Simic reveals that in the wrestle with the ‘Murkiest scribble of words’ inherent to the creative process, there can never be the resonant closure offered by the Blyean ‘deep’ image.

Simic remarked of *White* that ‘the poem, once I finished it … *resolved* something. I realised that to *begin* again, it would be a question of starting again with a contradiction.’[99] Not that this prevented Simic from continually, and perhaps unwisely, revising the sequence after its publication. In the latest revisions to the poem, found in the *New and Selected Poems*

---

[96] Ibid., 3.
[97] Simic, *White,* in *Looking for Trouble*, 30.
[98] Ibid., 30.
[99] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 29.

(2013), we find that the poet has undone much of the compelling strangeness of the 1997 version. Gone is the epigraph from Walt Whitman: 'What is that little black thing I see there in the white?', and most of the compounded words: 'gallows-like', 'dream-like' 'white-out', 'blossom-like', lose their hyphens, and with them, the sense of the poet forcing words into a hypnotic superimposition. The once-strange vision of a 'sun-reddened beak' in 1997 version becomes the more familiar 'bloodied beak'; the sinister threat 'I spit bile laced with blood' becomes the tamer admission 'I cough bile laced with blood'; an 'all-evil century' becomes chastened to a 'evil-eyed century'; the darkly comic vision of a young boy whose 'tongue twisted into a noose' on encountering the 'wizened' hand of a 'tiny old woman' becomes the less musical, less macabre: 'His tongue lept back in fear / saying thanks.' And where in the original section of 'What the White Had to Say', Simic envisions an 'ear that rose at four in the morning / Desiring to hear the truth inside a word', in the most recent revisions, these lines are replaced with: 'The ear that rose in the night / To hear the truth inside the word *love*'. Where the earlier version creates a sense of frustrated knowledge, of the inadequacy of being able to find the single truth inside any given 'word', in the latter, we are allowed to think that perhaps the ear did find the answer to the 'truth' of 'love' after all – a sentimental notion so out of place in a poem that otherwise refuses any consolations. The most telling of Simic's revisions, however, is to the sixth section in the sequence, which in the 1997 version of the texts, reads:

> It's as if we were the unknowing
> Inmates of someone's shadowbox,
>
> And the curtain was our breath
> And so were the stage sets
>
> Which were like the world we know,[100]

In the new revised version, however, these lines are changed to:

> It's as if we were the unknowing

---

[100] Simic, *Looking for Trouble*, 21-22.

> Inmates of someone’s shadow box
>
> And its curtain was our breath
> And so were the images it caught,
>
> Which were like the world we know.[101]

Instead of the three-dimensionality of the ‘world’ being like ‘stage sets’, evoking the ‘theatre’ Simic sees as a figure for both consciousness and poetic craft itself, in the new version, we simply have a rehashed working of the parable of Plato’s cave – the ‘caught images’ being ‘like the world we know.’ Although Simic once made the puzzling remark that ‘abstraction is precisely what one should avoid in poetry,[102] *White* is dependent upon its abstractions, its refusal to cohere into a series of readily-decodable ‘images’, just as in an interview, Simic complained:

> You see … the *Silence-in-the-Snowy-Fields* poem being repeated again and again, the kind of poem where you begin by stating some basic situation or conflict, someone who is out there, *in* Nature, doing something, and you *know*, inevitably, the poem is going to end with some Cosmic Image which puts it all together.[103]

In the 1997 version of the text, we sense Simic’s desire to find the antidote to this sentimental desire for closure. In the former, we end by being told that ‘the riddle comes with no answer’; as if all riddles must remain perpetually unsolved. In the new version, however, the speaker merely insists that ‘*this* riddle comes with no answer’ (my italics) – a rare instance of Simic using the wrong determiner, pinning the poem down to a single riddle rather than gesture towards the manner in which all of his lyrics remain similarly ‘indeterminate’.

In this conflict between ‘empiricism and myth’ that characterises Simic’s verse, unsurprisingly, most critics have sided with empiricism. Adam Kirsch has complained of Simic’s middle work that the poet abandons his ‘imagist firecrackers’ for a ‘tame, formulaic language.’[104] But what Kirsch reads as ‘Imagist firecrackers’ are not as image-reliant as he believes: poems such as ‘Watermelons’, ‘My Shoes’, ‘Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand,’ and ‘Stone’ may be so strongly visual that it is tempting to read them as straightforwardly Imagistic, but it is difficult to read these poems as examples of what David Young has called the ‘overt comparison Simic has always been so adept at’,[105] or as evidence of his ‘trust in the simple power of juxtaposition.’[106] Where Simic’s later work can appear weaker than these early celebrated poems is not in their desire for a greater level of ‘prosaicness,’ as Kirsch implies, but rather in the way Simic comes to imitate his own voice. ‘My Friend Someone’, from *Jackstraws* (2000), appears too much as Simic to the nth degree:

---

[101] Charles Simic, *White*, in *New And Selected Poems, 1962-2012* (Boston; New York: Harcourt, 2013), 36.
[102] Simic, quoted in ‘An Interview with Sherod Santos,’ in *The Uncertain Certainty*, 71.
[103] Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*, 41.

On this day without a date,
On a back street, dusky
But for the glow of a TV set
Here and there,
And one lone tree in a flower
Trailing a long train
Of white petals and shadows.[107]

Here are all the familiar ingredients: the mysterious, film noir environment, the ‘lone tree’, the anonymity of the ‘day without a date’, falling too neatly into place to be considered alongside his most compellingly original work. But Simic is self-aware enough to poke fun at these stylistic tics. In ‘A Letter’ from Simic’s 1990 collection *The Book of Gods and Devils*, the poet playfully sends up his inherent pull towards ‘the reduction of images’:

I went to visit my friend Bob, who said to me:
“We reach the real by overcoming the reduction of images.”
I was overjoyed, until I realized
Such abstinence will never be possible for me,
I caught myself looking out the window.[108]

---

[104] Kirsch, *The Modern Element*, 110 (see Intro., n. 85).
[105] David Young, quoted in *Essays on the Poetry*, 63.
[106] Ibid., 63.
[107] Charles Simic, ‘My Friend Someone’, in *Jackstraws* (London: Faber, 2000), 25.
[108] Charles Simic, ‘A Letter’, in *The Book of Gods and Devils* (Orlando: Harvest, 1990), 22.

While Simic highlights the pretentiousness of any attempt to abandon a taste for visual surface altogether, it is noticeable that in this late work, there is little sense of a poet prioritising 'great images'. In 'De Occulta Philosophia', Simic instigates an enquiry into 'large / And obscure knowledge', only for the poem to collapse into a bleak vision of negation:

Oh supreme unknowable,
The seemingly inviolable reserve
Of your stratagems
Makes me quake at the thought
Of you finding me thus

Seated in a shadowy back room
At the edge of a village
Bloodied by the setting sun,
To tell me so much,
To tell me absolutely nothing.[109]

In a 2016 review of Jana Prikryl's debut collection *The After Party*, Simic praised Prikryl for 'remain[ing] faithful to the ambiguity of our existence, that condition of being aware of the multiple meanings of everything we do or is done to us, and [being] wary of settling for one at the expense of the others.'[110] By ending with this oxymoronic state that reveals at once 'so much' and 'absolutely nothing', this late poem exemplifies Simic's own tendency to keep 'multiple meanings' in play, however much faith he may pronounce in Bachelard's concept of the 'epistemological ambition' of the poetic image. Rather than see the image as tantamount to 'knowledge' in the manner of Artaud, then, Simic's verse tells us time and again that the quest for definitive answers ends in failure, and reveals a poet finally less interested in honing the contours of the poetic image than in capturing something of the murky insubstantiality of 'the midst' he believes poetry must attempt to embody. Although the word 'indeterminacy' is one usually reserved for the avant-garde (denoting the 'anticlosural’ zeitgeist of the contemporaneous ‘Language’ school), in their concern for erasure, absences, and endless revisions, Simic’s poems are ‘indeterminate’ in a truer sense – they are, to paraphrase *White*, ‘riddles without answers,’ providing glimpses into worlds that invite but ultimately resist easy visualisation.

---

[109] Charles Simic, 'De Occulta Philosophia', in *Jackstraws*, 10-11.

[110] Charles Simic, 'The Consolations of Strangeness,' Review of *The After Party* by Jana Prikryl, *The New York Review of Books*, August 18 2016, accessed 1 November 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/jana-prikryl-consolations-of-strangeness/.

# Chapter IV: 'Making room for consciousness' in the poetry of C.K. Williams

*Sometimes the old workshop maxim has to be revised from "Don't tell, show" to "Tell: everything you can."*

C.K. Williams

In *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, Edward Larrissy observed that 'emotive language is a characteristic the modern period can honestly say it has tried to avoid … the modern aversion to stated emotion, combined with the common dislike of rhetoric, is a fairly distinctive feature of our period.'[1]But Pound's role in bringing about this state of affairs is greater than Larrissy is willing to admit: his notorious edits to the manuscript of *The Waste Land* – cutting four lines of 'The Fire Sermon' with the one-word objection 'personal'[2] – is merely a logical extension of the 'objective impersonality'[3] of Imagism laid out in his critical writing from 1912 onward, in which we find continual reminders of his derision toward anything deemed to be less than 'austere, direct, free from emotional slither.'[4] This notorious remark is strangely at odds with Pound's definition of the image as an 'intellectual and emotional complex',[5] as it is with his desire for 'a rhythm … in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed',[6] and with his justification for 'pawning over the ancients,' that 'if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched the thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations'[7] – evidence that Pound recognised the need for emotional 'nuances' when it suited, but preferred the polemical calls for a verse 'nearer the bone'; for writing that is 'as much like granite as it can be.'[8]

---

[1] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry,* 4 (see Intro., n. 29).

[2] See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, a Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Draft Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound,* rev. ed., ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber, 2010), 31.

[3] Charles Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry,' *PLMA* 91, no. 1 (1976), 101.

[4] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 12 (see Intro., no. 5).

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Ibid., 11.

Against this background, it becomes clear that C.K. Williams was one of the rare contemporary poets to be wholly unembarrassed in placing 'stated emotion' at the centre of his examinations of mind. In the title essay of his collected prose *Poetry and Consciousness*, he remarked that 'the problem with the way we communicate our emotions and try to delve more deeply into them, is that we tend to leave the emotion itself out'[9] – a far cry from Eliot's demand for an 'objective correlative'[10]– and, in contrast to the attention paid to Simic, the relative lack of critical commentary on Williams's oeuvre says much about our collective discomfort with a verse more interested in examining the interplay between thought and feeling than in rendering sensuous particulars. This chapter seeks to redress this critical aversion towards 'stated emotion', examining Williams's rendering of 'the emotion itself' as it relates to the wider question of what he called 'disjunctive consciousness.'[11] Although Williams's debut collection *Lies* (1969) reveals the unfortunate influence of the mid-century brand of Imagism, in his middle work, represented here in poems from *Tar* (1984) and *A Dream of Mind* (1992), the poet's expressionistic portraits of consciousness challenge every facet of Imagist technique as well as work to expose the shallowness of the contemporary, Poundian-influenced mantra 'show, don't tell'.

## I

As with Simic, Williams's critical statements have at times pandered to the outdated empirical model of mind as a 'storehouse of images'. In *Poetry and Consciousness*, we find the poet insisting:

---

[7] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 11.

[8] Ibid., 12.

[9] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 2.

[10] T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co., 1948), 100.

[11] C.K. Williams, *In Time: Poets, Poems, and the Rest* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 120.

> Not only the most basic of mind’s activities but the least remarked, is what I’ll call the image-making mechanism. This is a phenomenon hinted at but not really captured by the term *stream of consciousness* … it is my observation that one of the major activities of mind is the constant, incessant, and terrifically rapid production of image. I mean by image those mental pictures that exist aside from, or along with, but as it were *behind*, the images received by sense. There is a kind of perception screen through which we process images that arise from the world, and a screen behind it onto which images are being projected.[12]

Williams’s suspicion of the term ‘stream of consciousness’ here recalls Nabokov’s complaint of Joyce’s *Ulysses,* in which he declared that such a technique ‘exaggerates the verbal side of thought. Man thinks not always in words but also in images, whereas the stream of consciousness presupposes a flow of words that can be notated.’[13] This is a familiar argument – pro-image critics such as Barbara Maria Stafford are equally anxious to ‘disestablish the view of cognition as dominantly and aggressively linguistic,’[14] as if the Lacanian notion that language exists at all levels of consciousness has been a historical commonplace of theories of mind. Far from it – the ‘linguistic turn’ is both relatively recent (beginning in the first decades of the twentieth-century with Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, and Jean Paul Sartre), and something modern poetic theory has been perennially reluctant to take on board. In *The Language of the Imagination*, Alan White noted that an ‘assumption of a connection between imagination and imagery became common ground to almost all philosophers, psychologists and laymen from Aristotle’s time to the present day’[15] – hardly the ‘least remarked’ of the ‘mind’s activities’, then – and in Williams’s depiction of images being ‘projected’ onto a ‘screen’, we witness the poet’s unfortunate pandering not only to what Ryle called the ‘ghost in the machine’ view of the mind, but to the shopworn idea of art as a ‘thinking in images’.

In his debut collection *Lies*, there is a strong tendency to resort to the elaborate visual conceit in a manner consistent with this view of the mind as an ‘image-making mechanism’:

---

[12] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 3-4.

[13] Vladimir Nabokov, quoted in Craig Raine, ‘Babylonish Dialects,’ *Poetry Review* 74, no. 2 (1984), 31, cited in *A Century of Poetry Review* ed. Fiona Sampson (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), 163.

[14] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on The Virtue of Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 7.

[15] White, *The Language of Imagination*, 3 (see chap. 2, n. 81).

> Here I am, walking along your eyelid again
> toward your tear duct. Here are your eyelashes
> like elephant grass and one tear
> blocking the way like a boulder.[16]
>
> ('In There')

> And that's why rage howls in your arms
> like a baby and why I can't move –
> because of the thunder and the shadows
> merging like oil and the smile gleaming
> through the petals. [17]
>
> ('Even If I could')

> There is a world somewhere else that is unendurable.
> Those who live in it are helpless in the hands of elements,
> they are like branches in the deep woods in wind
> that whip their leaves off and slice the heart of the night
> and sob.[18]
>
> ('Dimensions')

Clearly, the 'bastardy of the simile' is not a prejudice Williams would inherit from his modernist namesake. Defending this early work, Williams insisted that 'I was especially interested in what I called the disjunctive consciousness: ways of charting movements of mind that were similar to some of the methods that we call (unfortunately, I think) modernism.'[19] But it is difficult to align this simile-heavy technique with Breton's surrealism, in which the image 'cannot be born from a comparison,'[20] or with Peter Quartermain's definition of 'disjunctive writing' as that category of modernist verse that is:

> in flat and generally "abstract" language, recalcitrant to description, ambiguous, highly wrought, apparently disjointed and even vacant (which is to say, seemingly "about" nothing at all). Yet it is identifiably a passionate and extremely concentrated act of attention to a tangible (i.e. perceived) world whose most salient characteristics (multiplicity and uncertainty) are aspects of its inexplicableness.[21]

---

[16] C.K. Williams, 'In There', from *Lies* (1969), in *Collected Poems* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006), 12. All quotations from C.K. Williams's poetry are taken from this edition.

[17] C.K. Williams, 'Even If I Could', in *Collected Poems*, 9.

[18] C.K. Williams, 'Dimensions, in *Collected Poems*, 19.

[19] C.K. Williams, *In Time*, 120-121.

[20] In his 'Manifesto of Surrealism,' Breton insisted that the image is 'a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distinct realities,' cited in Peter Nicholls, 'Beyond the Cantos…,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, 152 (see Intro., n. 13).

[21] Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, 4 (see chap. 1, n. 123).

Far from accommodating 'abstract' language, Williams's persistent recourse to the simile – tears 'like a boulder', 'rage' like a howling child – gives us merely the familiar Imagistic fixation on the concrete, and *Lies* doesn't so much dwell in 'multiplicity and uncertainty' as an unidentified hinterland – ' a world somewhere else that is unendurable' – in what is presumably a veiled commentary on the aftereffects of the atomic bomb and the Holocaust. As with Bly, what really interests Williams is not the societal chaos itself, but its damaging effects on an individual psyche, hence the multiple references to 'tears', 'sobs', and 'rage' that 'howls in your arms like a baby' – evidence of the strangely infantile quality that pervades these early poems. Moreover, where Quartermain noted that 'disjunctive writing' must include 'concentrated attention to a tangible …world' if it is to mediate the effects of seemingly being '"about" nothing at all', what is lacking in these images, in Mukařovský terms, is a 'convincing relation to the reality designated'.[22] Just as Plumly argued that surrealism promises 'mind without the pretensions of body, mind as the ultimate image-making machine,'[23] in these vapid depictions of 'thunder and shadows / merging like oil', of 'branches' that 'slice the heart of the night and sob', we see only the mind as it transforms experience into a series of increasingly far-fetched visual metaphors.

This becomes highly problematic when Williams attempts to use 'image-making' as a form of socio-political critique, as in 'The Man Who Owns Sleep':

> The man who owns sleep
> is watching the prisoners being beaten
> behind the fence.
> His eye pressed to the knothole,
> he sees the leather curling into smiles
> and snapping, he sees the intricate geography
> of ruined backs,
> the faces propped
> open like suitcases
> in the sunlight.[24]

---

[22] Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art,* 80 (see chap. 3, n. 69).
[23] Plumly, 'Chapter and Verse,' 24.
[24] C.K. Williams, 'The Man Who Owns Sleep', from *Lies* (1969), in *Collected Poems*, 17.

Who is this man
who’s cornered the market
on sleeping?
He’s not quite finished.
He bends over with a hand on his knee
to balance him
and from the other side they see
that clear eye in the wall
watching unblinking.[25]

This figure who ‘owns sleep’, we gather, is intended to act as an emblem for America itself, a country increasingly desensitised to the violence it was inflicting on the Vietnamese as well as the oppression of its own black citizens. In a reflection on his undergraduate years, Williams’s contemporary Robert Hass described his growing understanding of the ‘country we were growing up into, its racism, the violence it was unleashing in Asia, what seemed the absolute acquiescence of our elders in that violence,’[26] and ‘The Man Who Owns Sleep’ is in many respects the formal counterpart to this kind of political awakening. News of the My Lai massacre of 16 March 1968 had reached the American public just one year before the publication of *Lies*, and we sense here Williams’s disgust with the hypocrisy of what Piotr K. Gwiazda called ‘America’s self-image as a global cop charged with a mission to promote peace, democracy, and human rights.’[27] But this cartoonish figure with his ‘clear eye in the wall / watching unblinking’ is a limited (and, it has to be said, unsubtle) means of conveying the poet’s disillusionment. With the conjecture ‘Who is this man / who’s cornered the market / on sleeping?’, any idea of brutality is projected onto a figure who is comfortably distant from the speaker themselves. More problematically still, the central ‘image’ around which the poem is intended to coalesce – the sinister, all-seeing ‘eye’ that never sleeps – though designed to evoke the grim spectacle of a war live-screened on television for the first time in history, ends up unwittingly drawing attention to how such unprincipled spectatorship is matched by the poem's own emphatic insistence upon visual observation. Those short, present-tense declarative statements, so entrenched within the Imagist mode, can't help but create a myopic focus on such pithy visual analogies as 'faces propped / open like suitcases', so that as with the Vietnam poetry of Denise Levertov, there is an eerie sense of the poem revelling in its own violence; in the 'leather curling into smiles / and snapping'; in the 'intricate geography / of ruined backs'.

---

[25] C.K. Williams, *Collected Poems*, 17.
[26] Hass, *What Light Can Do,* 8 (see chap. 1, n. 103).
[27] Gwiazda, *US Poetry in the Age of Empire*, 5 (see Intro., n. 82).

In fairness, this brand of Imagism was to become so pervasive that Alan Shapiro could complain of American poetry of the eighties that 'the majority of journals and periodicals across the country were filled with free verse poems written in a flat, demotic style devoted primarily to the presentation of surreal or quotidian images.'[28] Williams quickly became disillusioned with the dominant mode, however, and in a reminiscence on his beginnings as a young poet, he critiqued the 'protective withdrawal' into the unconscious that characterised the poetry of his contemporaries in what reads as a pointed attack on Bly's Deep Imagism:

> I began to feel that a great deal of human interaction, a large portion of real moral sensibility and concern, had somehow been usurped from the poets by the novel and drama, and that in the face of it there had even been a further kind of protective withdrawal and a tunnelling of vision on the poet's part …What the poets of our time seemed to be left with were subtleties, hair-splittings, minute recordings of a delicate atmosphere. Even in the poetry I could find to admire for one technical reason or another, there seemed to be a meagreness of theme and attempt compared to the works in longer forms.[29]

Ironically, this desire to parallel the achievements of 'work in longer forms' places Williams in the same company as Pound and the early modernists, whose 'rallying cry', as Charles Altieri noted, was that 'poetry must be as well written and as true to the flux of experience as the modern novel'.[30] Nevertheless, there is a marked difference between Pound's belief in a radically compressed pictorial language to capture the clarity of prose and Williams's development of a verse line so long it can barely be contained on the page margin. The critical tendency has thus far been to attribute Williams's radical shift in style to the influence of Whitman,[31] certainly the most obvious candidate, and in his 2010 study of the poet, Williams marvelled at *Leaves of Grass* for its 'hundreds of precise observations', [32] the 'wild and accurate and sweeping perceptions',[33] and the 'shiftings and leaps, unlogical, ungrounded, unconnected, from one theme, one image, one anecdote, one sound, to another.'[34] In 'The Dog', from Williams's fourth collection *Tar* (1983), the second volume to feature the newly-developed long line, as the speaker recollects their encounters with an older black woman and her sick dog, we see the ease with which these 'extended intellectual units'[35] accommodate a Whitmanesque accumulation of concrete and abstract detail:

---

[28] Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure,* 2 (see chap 1., n. 101).

[29] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 74.

[30] Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind,' 101. Altieri has argued elsewhere that William Carlos Williams attempted to transform 'the discipline of prose description into the intensities of lyric poetry,' in *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* 100 (see chap. 1, n. 61).

> Except for the dog, that she wouldn't have him put away, wouldn't let
>     him die, I'd have liked her.
> She was handsome, busty, chunky, early middle-aged, very black, with a
>     stiff, exotic dignity
> that flurried up in me a mix of warmth and sexual apprehension neither
>     of which, to tell the truth,
> I tried very hard to nail down: she was that much older and in those days
>     there was still the race thing.[36]

Despite the vernacular, conversational energy we find here (helped by the fact Williams throws us into the narrative *in medias res*), there is nevertheless an 'order' to these almost ostentatiously long lines created by the heavily-accented pile-up of adjectives ('handsome, busty, chunky, early middle-aged, very black'), the assonantal chimes ('dignity'/ 'flurried up in me'), the parallelism in the syntax ('wouldn't have him put away, wouldn't let / him die'), and the elaborate patterning of 'i' sounds ('stiff, exotic dignity') that demonstrate just how forcefully the poet rejected the 'flat, demotic' mode of his earlier Imagism. 'I didn't really know what I was doing when I started with the long line’, Williams claimed in an interview – ‘I just started writing it and felt that it was right. What I felt intuitively was that I could deal with larger units of meaning than I had.’[37] But this isn’t entirely accurate: as he indicates in *Poetry and Consciousness*, the development of these ‘extended intellectual units’ was a calculated means of opening the lyric poem up to the social realm after the protective withdrawal into the collective unconscious that blighted ‘New-Surrealist’ verse of the sixties. Equally as important, the longer line also enabled Williams to parallel the ‘moral sensibility and concern’ and psychological realism he found in Dostoevsky, a writer ‘whom I esteemed / beyond almost all who ever scraped with a pen’,[38] he would later remark. Despite his subsequent disillusionment with the novelist’s thinly-veiled antisemitism, Williams’s portrait of this ‘exotic’ black woman clearly owes something to the forensic level of observational detail found in Dostoevsky’s depiction of the encounter between Raskolnikov and his odious landlady:

---

[31] See Kevin Brown, Review of C.K Williams's *Repair*, *Harvard Review*, no. 18 (2000): 117-120;

[32] C.K. Williams, *On Whitman* (Princeton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20.

[33] Ibid., 27.

[34] Ibid., 11.

[35] C.K. Williams, quoted in Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with C.K. Williams,' 165 (see Intro., n. 66).

[36] C.K. Williams, 'The Dog', in *Collected Poems*, 162.

> She was a tiny, dried-up little old woman of about sixty, with sharp, hostile eyes, a small, sharp nose and no headcovering. Her whitish hair, which had not much grey in it, was abundantly smeared with oil. Wound round her long, thin neck, which resembled the leg of a chicken, was an old flannel rag of some description, and from her shoulders, the heat notwithstanding, hung an utterly yellowed and motheaten fur jacket. Every moment or so the old woman coughed and groaned.[39]

Here, every seemingly minor detail; the ‘sharp nose’, the ‘hostile eyes’, the attention paid to ‘long, thin neck’ resembling ‘the leg of a chicken’, play a part in exposing Raskolnikov’s dehumanisation of this ‘dried- up little old woman’, and, in a wider sense, his attempt to justify to himself the imminent act of murder. In ‘The Dog’, the similarly alarming level of critical scrutiny to which the dog owner is subjected indicates the speed with which this seemingly ‘objective’ portrait of an encounter between the speaker and an old acquaintance will veer into more unsettling territory. Channelling Whitman but also a much older lyric tradition, Williams begins the poem with a Miltonic suspension of the verb as we must wait to hear the 'except[ion]' to the speaker's 'liking' of this as yet unknown woman, a technique reminiscent of the famous opening lines of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India,* in which we are informed that 'Except for the Marabar Caves – and they are twenty miles off – the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary.'[40] As with Forster's ironic opening passage (the Marabar Caves will play a key role in the narrative), the speaker's insistence that he 'would have liked her' 'except for the dog' is disingenuous, as we will come to learn, as his disgust at the woman's treatment of her clearly-sick dog becomes a convenient stand-in to disguise his racial prejudice:

---

[37] Keller, ‘An Interview with C.K. Williams,’ 165.

[38] C.K. Williams, ‘Jew on Bridge’, from *Wait* (2010), in *Selected Later Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) 136.

[39] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1991), 37.

> It was horrifying; I was always going to call the police; once I actually
> went out to chastise her –
> didn't she know how selfish she was, how the animal was suffering? – she
> scared me off, though.
> She was older than I'd thought, for one thing, her flesh was loosening,
> pouches of fat beneath the eyes,
> and poorer too, shabby, tarnished: I imagined smelling something
> faintly acrid as I passed.[41]

In Whitman, Williams argued, 'the images, even those that are fairly precise and seemingly off the point, are elements of [the] argument.'[42] And so it is in these lines. The uncomfortable dissonance between the (presumably) white, middle-class speaker and the poorer, 'exotic' black woman on which they meditate is potent here, what with the voyeuristic focus upon her 'loosening' 'flesh', her 'shabby' appearance, the 'tarnished' skin, with the speaker close enough to observe 'pouches of fat beneath the eyes'. Where Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux noted the Imagist impulse to 'hold something still, and external to the self'[43] – Pound's 'faces in the crowd' remain safely at a distance – in bringing us into such close proximity to this stranger, Williams insists that there can be no such easy demarcation of the 'other'. More crucially, it is in these lines that we recognise the earlier, almost-throwaway remark that ‘in those days there was still the race thing’ as not only an ‘elemen[t] of the argument’, but the central point of emotional focus around which everything will coalesce.

---

[40] E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Penguin, 2005), 5.
[41] C.K. Williams, 'The Dog', in *Collected Poems*, 163.
[42] C.K. Williams, *On Whitman*, 15.
[43] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Art*s, 20 (see chap. 1, n. 19.)

It would therefore be misleading to attribute the development of the long line wholly to the influence of Whitman. Unlike his unbounded ‘shiftings and leaps’, Williams’s highly convoluted syntax, full of qualifications and embedded clauses, is designed to provide the formal counterpart to the poet’s belief that ‘emotions, I hold, are in and of themselves neither pure, spontaneous, nor very clear. They require a stringent attentiveness.’[44] By Quartermain’s reasoning, a Poundian-inspired parataxis has a naturally ‘democratising’ tendency in giving each unit of the line an equal footing, and he is quick to dismiss what he sees as the ‘hypotactic subordination and social hierarchy built into such linguistic properties as style.’[45] But a hypotactic syntax is precisely what allows Williams to expose the racist ‘social hierarchy’ of mid-century America the poem attempts to ‘nail down’, and to articulate what Michael Bibby called the ‘white, masculinist hegemony that both dominated oppressed peoples in the United States and waged a racist war of imperialism in Vietnam.’[46] In particular, by strategically placing the most alarming objectifications of the women in less salient sections of the line (‘shabby’, ‘tarnished’, ‘faintly acrid’), Williams insists that we pay ‘stringent attention’ to the speaker’s attempt to underplay their derision towards this black woman they both fear and objectify. Moreover, by subtly weaving into the verse ostensibly minor details – the ‘race thing’, ‘sexual apprehension’ – Williams exposes ‘disjunctive consciousness’ as a troubling, highly selective property of mind, not the passive reflector of ‘images’ he outlined in *Poetry and Consciousness*. Even at the poem’s close, the ‘complicated’ web of racism, poverty, and deprivation remains suspended and entangled, as the gentrification of this urban space that was once reserved for poor communities completes the erasure of the already-marginalised black woman the speaker remains eerily ambivalent toward:

---

[44] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 8.

[45] Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics,* 5.

[46] Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 6.

> Everything was complicated now, so many tensions, so much bother-
> some self-consciousness.
> Anyway, those back streets, especially in bad weather when the gingkos
> lost their leaves, were bleak.
> It’s restored there now, ivy, pointed brick, garden walls with broken
> bottles mortared on them,
> but you’d get sick and tired then: the rubbish in the gutter, the general
> sense of dereliction.
> Also, I’d found a girl to be in love with: all we wanted was to live
> together, so we did.[47]

Ira Sadoff has claimed that Williams’s ‘secular materialism critiques the project of making more of the world, for trying to find fictive correspondence (metaphor in art), spiritual meaning, and coherence, because the interjection distorts reality, the actual material world.’[48] But Williams did not share Sadoff’s discomfort with ‘metaphor in art’: in his advice to aspiring young poets entitled ‘A Letter to a Workshop,’ the poet commented on what he called the ‘right … to move our work into the realm of abstraction, with neither too much credence in the seductive powers of philosophical purity and certainty, nor too limiting a scepticism about abstraction’s capacity to enlarge on the ordinary and incidental.’[49] Here, Williams shows little hesitation in shifting seamlessly between the concrete materiality of ‘ivy, pointed brick, garden walls with broken bottles mortared on them’ to ‘complications’ and ‘tensions’, emphasizing not the isolated particular but ‘the general sense of dereliction’. Although there is no moralised discovery, no moment of enlightened epiphany as in the Imagist model, the poet speaks to the very human desire to find ‘spiritual meaning’, to make ‘more of the world’ in the face of inevitable social divisions. In these final lines, the speaker’s desire to do nothing other than to 'live / together' with his 'girl' pulls the black woman and the speaker into a kind of 'fictive correspondence', as we recognise the parallels between his need for emotional intimacy and the woman's need to hold on to the dog as simply something 'to be in love with'.

---

[47] C.K. Williams, ‘The Dog’, from *Tar* (1983), in *Collected Poems*, 163.

[48] Ira Sadoff, *History Matters: Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 176.

[49] C.K. Williams, *In Time*, 91-92.

Sadoff's argument shows just how strong is the critical bias against poetry deemed to be 'muddying perception with generalizations',[50] in Altieri's terms, just as we are still very much in the grip of Pound's belief in a 'presentational realism'. In a 2018 article entitled 'The Ontological Turn in Literary Criticism and Some Challenges it Faces', Altieri applauded Nathan Brown's efforts to 'denigrate the image, the main source of idealization in twentieth-century poetics'[51] in his study *The Limits of Science: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* (2017), yet appeared unfazed by his 'materialist' interpretation which 'emphasizes the fundamental elements of poetic language (mark, space, grapheme, phoneme, breath, and signifier) in order to break the text out of stressing what the language represents in favour of what it literally performs.'[52] This is little better than Pound's belief in the image as a form that bypasses representation altogether –'convey[ing] meaningful experience virtually without the mediation of language'[53]– in Hugh Witemeyer's formula, and although Sadoff and Brown appear to believe that the Poundian drive toward concrete particularity enables poets to 'break the text out of' its dependence upon the abstract medium that is language, no such attempt to avoid 'mediation' or cling to the sanctity of 'the actual material world' is evident in Williams.

Sadoff thus paints a strangely distorted picture of the poet in placing him alongside John Ashbery as a poet who 'requires postmodern strategies to mediate and interrogate romantic values.'[54] For a start, the 'prosy' grammatical style of Williams 'intellectual units' are antithetical to the fracturing techniques we associate with postmodernism, and where Edward Larrissy has noted that 'the attempt to find coherent meaning in much of Ashbery, especially the early work, is sufficiently close to reductionism to be misleading,'[55] 'The Dog' continues the Romantic tendency (continued throughout modernism) to attempt to 'register accurately the movements of the mind.'[56] Then again, Sadoff's argument provides more evidence that Romanticism has become the whipping boy of choice for critics undertaking a postmodern critique. In the introduction to his study, entitled *History Matters: Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture* (2009), Sadoff takes the opportunity to deride what he calls 'representational poets,' among which 'one finds significant discussion about the value of clarity, accessibility, and universality, but rarely will these poets investigate the ideological assumptions behind those terms.'[57] It is strange, then, that he doesn't feel the need to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of his own argument: the very notion that there are poets 'working on the margins' who are able to see the world with an 'imaginative freshness' absent to those poets of the 'centre' is so obviously Romantic in origin that Sadoff's attempt to disassociate himself from the 'failure of the already nostalgic pastoral values of romanticism'[58] appears strangely contradictory.

---

[50] Altieri, 'The Objectivist Tradition,' 30 (see chap. 1, n. 104).
[51] Charles Altieri, 'The Ontological Turn in Literary Criticism and Some Challenges It Faces,' *American Literary History* 30, no. 2 (2018): 304- 317, accessed 20 November 2018. https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajy003.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Witemeyer, 'Early Poetry,' 48.

This sentimental idea is certainly not one Williams would have endorsed: 'The Dog' may examine life at the 'margins', set as it is amidst the derelict streets of old housing projects, but the speaker's vision is a flawed, distorted picture of that territory, not an unbiased account of 'imaginative freshness'. Not that Sadoff is not alone in pursuing this flawed line of reasoning: in *Poetic Licence*, Perloff complains that the 'terminology' of the 'Great

---

[54] Sadoff, *History Matters,* 168.
[55] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 173.
[56] Ibid., 16.
[57] Sadoff, *History Matters*, 4.
[58] Ibid., 5.

Romantics … casts a shadow on virtually every attempt to Make It New,’[59] and yet praises the contemporary poetry of Poland and Hungary by noting that it ‘continues to deploy figures of imaginative transformation, an intense, often visionary subjectivity,’[60] as if these were terms invented by the post-Poundian avant-garde. Williams is at least more honest in admitting his debt to the Romantics, and just as White observed that ‘Coleridge seems in general, though not entirely, to have freed imagination … from its complete dependence on images’,[61] in this mature verse, Williams shows little desire to confine ‘disjunctive consciousness’ to an Imagist (or a postmodern) process of image-making.

Instead, one of his most distinctive means of examining the texture of thought and feeling was to employ an elaborately-extended metaphor as the means of scrutinising a single emotion, as in a poem from *A Dream of Mind* (rather ironically) entitled ‘The Image’. Examining the intricacies of jealousy, the poem shows us the workings of its female protagonist’s thought- processes as she considers the ‘maniacally pathological’ level of vindictiveness she believes her lover to be demonstrating:

> She brought to mind a parasite, waiting half a lifetime for its victim to
> pass beneath its branch,
> then coming to fully sentient, throbbing, famished life and without heist-
> tation letting go.
> It must have almost starved in him, she thinks, all those years spent
> scenting out false stimuli,
> all that passive vigilance, secreting bitter enzymes of suspicion, ingesting
> its own flesh;
> he must have eaten at himself, devouring his own soul until his chance
> had finally come.[62]

Despite the attractive simplicity of the poem’s title, the term ‘image’ is hardly appropriate for the complex, multi-sensory scenario the poet unravels here: a virtuoso display of the way the ‘extended intellectual units’ function as a means of (in the poet’s own words) ‘making room for consciousness.’[63] Where Williams once spoke of a rapid, inadvertent production of image, the saliency of the phrase ‘brought to mind’, placed strategically at the beginning of the line, exposes the intentionality of this so-called ‘image’ so that the whole elaborately-imagined vignette becomes a deliberate, almost masochistic gesture on the part of the speaker rather than a passive process of creating a mental ‘picture’. In ‘Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image and Force,’ Richard Moran helpfully deconstructed the traditional equation of metaphor with image-making by noting:

---

[59] Ibid., 1.
[60] Perloff, *Poetic License*, 27 (see Intro., n. 28).
[61] White, *The Language of the Imagination*, 46.
[62] C.K. Williams, ‘The Image’, in *Collected Poems*, 340.

> the appeal to images gives us an especially bad model for accounting for the endlessness of the paraphrase or elaboration of a living metaphor. This endlessness is a familiar fact about poetic metaphor, and may even itself contribute to the association with images, via the notion that it is a *picture* that is worth a thousand interpretative words in such a case. But what kind of picture would we get if we tried to visualize the various parts of the manifold of paraphrase and pack them into a single image? … part of the initial attraction of the “image” idea was the unifying or organizing function claimed for an image; yet, in fact, you don’t get anything like a picture by putting all these things together. And a concessionary appeal to *several* images at this point fails to explain or justify any recourse to images in the first place.[64]

Just as Moran insists that the ‘force’ of a poetic metaphor does not arise from its imagistic properties, so ‘The Image’ doesn’t rely on the vividness of its visual content, but rather the illusion Williams creates of allowing us privileged access to the speaker’s ever-more-alarming imaginative scenario. The stress on verbs in the present participle we find in these lines (‘waiting’, ‘coming’, ‘throbbing’, ‘letting’, ‘scenting’, ‘secreting’, ‘ingesting’, ‘devouring’), not only reveal the metaphor as dependent upon continual movement – designed to parallel the speaker’s anxious, repetitive thoughts – but in their sheer variety, demonstrate Moran’s contention that it is impossible to pack the various elements of a complex poetic metaphor into a recognisable ‘picture’. Claiming that the poem consists of ‘several images’ would likewise be specious, by Moran’s reasoning, for the poem relies upon this relentless addition of detail to a single conceit rather than an assortment of separate, tangible pictures. Moreover, as the poem shifts into increasingly abstract territory, progressing from the physicality of the parasite's 'throbbing, famished life' to the vision of the creature 'secreting bitter enzymes of suspicion … devouring his own soul', it is impossible to think of this metaphor as a predominantly visual entity, as Williams places the focus firmly on the speaker's own sadistic imagination. Furthermore, by extending the description over the entire second half of the poem, the poet creates an 'endlessness' to this metaphor that is central to conveying the kind of all-encompassing paranoia that has 'devoured' his subject:

---

[63] C.K. Williams, quoted in Ahren Warner, ‘C.K. Williams: Obituary,’ *The Guardian*, Tuesday 6 October 2015, accessed 25 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/06/ck-williams.

[64] Moran, ‘Seeing and Believing,’ 92-93 (see Intro., n. 44).

> She let the vision take her further; they had perished, both of them,
> they lay there, decomposing,
> one of them drained white, the other bloated, gorged, stale blood oozing
> through its carapace.
> Only as a stupid little joke, she thought, would anybody watching dare
> wonder which was which.[65]

Where Walter Sutton famously criticised Pound's conception of the image as 'inconsistent with the organic nature of the reading process, which involves the gradual and tentative apprehension of the form of a complex and many-sided phenomenon in a shifting time perspective',[66] 'The Image' is likewise dependent upon our 'gradual' comprehension that the parasite is a more accurate emblem of the speaker themselves than it is of their apparently jealous lover. For all her protestations of innocence, in these final lines, the speaker's disturbing enactment of their lover's demise has effectively dissolved the boundaries between her own virtue and her lover's 'barbaric vindictiveness'.[67] As such, the conjecture on which the poem ends as to whether an onlooker could 'wonder' of the speaker and her partner 'which was which' finally reveals the fundamental ambiguity of this so-called 'image' – one designed to expose the way jealousy can infect a relationship to the point where it is impossible to distinguish between oppressor and victim.

---

[65] C.K. Williams, 'The Image', from *The Vigil* (1997), in *Collected Poems*, 341.

[66] Walter Sutton, 'The Literary Image and the Reader: A Consideration of the Theory of Spatial Form,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 1 (1957), 123.

[67] C.K. Williams, 'The Image', in *Collected Poems*, 340.

One could argue that there is a 'postmodern' flavour to this 'erosion of boundaries between the objective and the subjective'[68] – as Edward Larrissy has noted, 'whatever people think postmodernism is or should be, the subject of the erosion of difference between the 'inside' and 'outside' is in fact part of it.'[69] But to label Williams as employing 'postmodern strategies' distorts the extent to which his portraits of consciousness continue the dialectical movement between mind and world found in Romantic verse. And reviewers of Williams's mid-career collections certainly picked up on his decidedly un-postmodern reincorporation of 'stated emotion': Preston Merchant criticised Williams's eighth collection *Repair* by remarking: 'prosy pronouncements in artlessly organized poems are all Williams really has to offer … Avoiding terseness, compression of language, or suggestiveness of detail, the poems rely on those tepid moments of revelation – but there are no surprises and no delights.'[70] The qualities Merchant finds wanting here; 'terseness', 'compression of language', alongside his complaint that Williams moves away from 'the here and now', are obvious products of Imagist doctrine, with all its incumbent emphasis on immediacy and spontaneity. As with Kirsch's disappointment in Simic for progressing beyond his early 'imagist firecrackers' to what he deemed a disappointingly 'prosy' style,[71] such remarks reveal the enduring desire for a verse that adheres to Pound's call for a pared-down minimalism over an 'artlessly organized' discursivity. But Williams was not a poet to adhere to any orthodoxy: where these critics subscribe to the deeply-ingrained notion that, in Roland Barthes's terms, 'pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it',[72] in 'The Dog' and 'The Image', we see Williams refusing to covet the immediacy and ‘imperativity’ of the Poundian image at the expense of the ‘social, moral world’[73] American poetry would find it increasingly difficult to ignore.

---

[68] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 177.
[69] Ibid., 177.
[70] Preston Merchant, 'The Poet's Prose,' *Contemporary Poetry Review*, 14 July 2010, accessed 26 November 2018. http://www.cprw.com/the-poets-prose.
[71] Kirsch, *The Modern Element*, 110.
[72] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Anette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), 110.

---

[73] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 83.

# Chapter V: ‘I cannot go on / restricting myself to images’: Acts of Mind in Louise Glück

*‘We respect, here in America, / what is concrete, visible’.*

Louise Glück

Louise Glück once declared in an interview that she was ‘not a visual poet. I’m not a keen observer. I don’t see degrees of differentiation. I remark on large absolutes and their relation, one to another, it appears.’[1] While this isn’t technically true – many of Glück’s poems show her proficiency with visual material – her treatment of perception departs so radically from the methods usually associated with ‘imagery’ that it is impossible to place her within the limiting category of a ‘visual poet’. As with C.K. Williams before her, Glück quickly recognised the shortcomings of a verse wedded to concrete particulars, and after a brief flirtation with a William Carlos Williams-inflected Imagism, she went on to develop a mode that consistently challenges Pound’s instruction to ‘Go in fear of abstractions’. Borrowing its title from Charles Altieri’s essay ‘Objective Image and Acts of Mind in Modern Poetry,’[2] this chapter focuses on Glück’s 1985 collection *The Triumph of Achilles* as the first instance in which we see the poet rendering mind *without* recourse to the ‘objective images’ so revered by the early moderns, instead establishing the tools to enact what Matthew Arnold called ‘a dialogue of the mind with itself’.[3]

---

[1] Louise Glück, quoted in Ann Douglas, ‘Descending Figure: An Interview with Louise Glück,’ *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* no. 6 (1981): 124.

[2] See chap. 4, no. 3.

[3] Matthew Arnold, quoted in Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

## I

Although Glück would grow increasingly disillusioned with what Rosalind Krauss has called the 'modernist fetishization of sight,'[4] in an early poem entitled 'Early December in Croton-On-Hudson' from her debut collection *Firstborn* (1968), we see the poet being hindered by Imagism's emphasis on 'what lies on the surface'[5]:

> Spiked sun. The Hudson's
> Whittled down by ice.
> I hear the bone dice
> Of blown gravel clicking. Bone-
> pale, the recent snow
> Fastens like fur to the river.
> Standstill. We were leaving to deliver
> Christmas presents when the tire blew
> Last year. Above the dead valves pines pared
> Down by a storm stood, limbs bared …
> I want you.[6]

Despite the poem's attempts to create a stringent minimalism, Glück's descriptive technique seems a little heavy handed: the Hudson River 'whittled down by ice'; a snow that 'Fastens like fur'; pines 'pared / Down by a storm' – there is a dense, claustrophobic quality to these already-short lines created by the poet's insistence that every object, material or otherwise, finds its representation in a concrete 'image'. Such a pile-up of flashy metaphor gives these lines a 'spiked', hard-edged quality that says much of Glück's desire for what Altieri called 'the objective impersonality of Imagism.'[7] In fact, there are so many parallels between 'Early December…' and Helen Carr's definition of Imagist verse as one that is 'pared-down, elliptical, fragmentary, vivid, with unexpected images and juxtapositions,'[8] that it is difficult not to read the poem as a mere exercise in Imagist technique. And it is not just the visual descriptions that lack subtlety: in the speaker's listening for the sound of 'the bone dice / Of blown gravel clicking', we see how readily Williams's eccentric taste for 'Ecstatic bird songs' that 'pound / the hollow vastness of the sky / with metallic clinkings' translated into mannerism in younger poets. Glück borrows Williams's typographical quirks, too, splicing 'Bone – / pale' across the line the attempt to isolate individual words 'unnicked beside other words in parade,'[9] while in the sudden, jarring shift to the subjective revelation 'I want you' on which the poem ends, we sense Gluck's struggle to maintain a fidelity to Imagism's demand for a verse that is 'austere, direct, free from emotional slither'[10] given her natural inclination towards exploring interiority and states of consciousness.

---

[4] Rosalind Krauss, quoted in Jay, *Downcast Eyes,* 161 (see chap. 1, n. 405).

[5] Marjorie Perloff has declared that '*modern* poetry gives renewed attention to what "lies on the surface",' in *The Dance of the Intellect*, 11 (see chap. 1, n. 109).

[6] Louise Glück, 'Early December in Croton-On-Hudson', from *Firstborn* (1968), in *Poems 1962-2012* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 16. All quotations from Louise Glück's poetry are taken from this edition.

[7] Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind,' 101 (see chap. 4, n. 3).

[8] Carr, *The Verse Revolutionaries,* 2 (see chap. 1, n. 92).

There is an explanation for Glück's initial pull toward this limiting, Imagistic style beyond merely a selective reading of Williams, however. Glück was diagnosed with Anorexia nervosa as a teenager, undergoing a course of psychoanalysis as part of her treatment, and the poet's conversion to depth psychology finds its manifestation in the very Freudian-sounding debut collection *Firstborn*. In psychoanalysis, the poet has claimed, 'what's utilized are objective images … I cultivated a capacity to study images and patterns of speech, to see, as objectively as possible, what ideas they embodied.'[11] But it is difficult to see how the images supposedly emerging from the depths of the unconscious mind could constitute 'objective images,' and Glück's remarks skirt dangerously close to a reductive logical positivism, whereby 'patterns of speech' find their ready counterparts as 'pictures' of reality. The poet's faith in such representations is reminiscent of Wittgenstein 'picture theory' of meaning outlined in the *Tractatus*, with its claims that 'the proposition is a picture of reality' and 'the logical picture can depict the world,'[12] and where Wittgenstein would go on to heavily revise this positivist view of language, unsurprisingly, literary theory took a little longer to lose its infatuation with Freud's 'objective images'. There is a notable parallel, for instance, between Freud's model of interpretation in which a dream 'image' becomes a readily-decodable symbol and the New Critical obsession with decoding texts for their buried or implicit metaphor – a hermeneutics that found its way into the mainstream of American literary culture not long after the advent of psychoanalysis. As Stephen Melville and Bill Readings have observed, in New Criticism, the task became one of 'replacing the object with its meaning, of determining the object as having just been a metaphor for something else all along.'[13] These remarks bear an obvious resemblance to Glück's discussion of studying 'objective images' to 'see what ideas they embody', and in many respects a poem such as 'Early December…' provides the ready counterpart for the superficial New Critical reading, in which the 'Bone-pale' snow and 'whittled down' river can be easily decoded as manifestations of the speaker's icy detachment. In more sophisticated models, Melville and Readings note, 'interpretation is not a move behind or beyond the representation to its hidden meaning: it is rather a work of prolongation of the object.'[14] The editors's choice of words bring to mind Yeats's desire for poetry to 'prolong the moment of contemplation'[15] in 'The Symbolism of Poetry' (a title that reveals of his distance from the Imagist *dicta*),[16] and Yeats, like Glück, famously came up against Pound's injunction to 'go in fear of abstraction': 'When I returned to London from Ireland,' he remarked in 1914, 'I had a young man go over all my work with me to eliminate the abstract. This was an American poet, Ezra Pound.'[17] Simic's declaration some seven decades later that 'Abstraction is precisely what one should avoid in poetry'[18] reveals just how long the Poundian prejudice against the abstract would linger, and to complicate matters, abstraction remains a notoriously difficult concept for literary critics to discuss. Undoubtedly, we are more accustomed to thinking of this mode as a realm of the visual arts, as when the editors of *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2014) gloss the term 'abstraction' with the definition: 'Applied to the fine arts, the term refers to the abandonment of representational practices, with a concomitant emphasis on the part of artists on form and colour for their own sake.'[19] This is clearly inadequate to describe poetry, however, as William Carlos Williams recognised when he declared that 'all art is representational, even the most abstract, the most subjective, the most distorted',[20] and although the idea of poetic language as merely self-referential was in vogue as Glück was coming to maturity, abstraction in poetry need not entail an abandonment of referentiality: to borrow Peter Hatler's succinct formula, 'words always *mean*, even when freed from the task of mere mimetic "copying".'[21] As rudimentary as it may seem, the definition of 'abstraction' offered by the OED is at least a reasonable starting point for illuminating Glück's technique in *The Triumph of Achilles*:

---

[9] William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays,* 128 (see chap. 2, n. 3).

[10] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 12 (see Intro., n. 5).

[11] Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 12.

[12] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico- Philosophicus* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 45.

---

[13] Melville and Bill Readings, *Vision and Textuality*, 22. (see chap. 1, n. 21).

[14] Ibid., 22.

[15] W.B. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry' (1900), in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 247.

[16] In his 1914 essay 'Vorticism,' Pound declared that 'Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in "association", that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory,' 463 (see chap. 1, n. 75).

[17] William Butler Yeats, quoted in James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 97. Longenbach provides context for the famous quotation, noting that 'On March 1st [1914] , *Poetry* magazine gave a banquet in Yeats's honour, and in his after dinner speech Yeats offered what must have seemed the ultimate compliment to Pound: he compared their collaboration to the meetings of the Rhymer's club.'

> 1.The action of withdrawing or secluding oneself from worldly or sensual things, or of turning one's mind away from the world towards the contemplation of the spiritual; a state of solitude or concentration on the spiritual arising from this action … 3. a. The action of considering something in the abstract, independently of its associations or attributes, the process of isolating properties or characteristics common to a number of diverse objects, events etc. without reference to the peculiar properties of particular examples or instances.[22]

The first gloss offered by the editors, describing the act 'of turning one's mind away from the world', reads more like a definition of meditative practice than anything usually associated with abstraction. But there are obvious parallels between the act of 'withdrawing oneself from worldly or sensual things' and the characteristics particular to Glück's verse, particularly its 'contemplation of the spiritual' and the ease with which she encounters the object 'independently of its associations or attributes.' Likewise, her speakers are often in 'a state of solitude or concentration'– Glück's is not the dialogic heteroglossia of Bakhtin's favoured literature, to be sure – and her aesthetic is, with a few exceptions, an apparently monologic form of communication in which a single 'voice' (a term Glück has defended in her prose)[23] relates to us its seemingly 'private' thought processes.

---

[18] Simic, *Essays on the Poetry*, 71 (see chap. 3, n. 1).
[19] Wolfreys et al, *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, 56 (see Intro., n. 38).
[20] William Carlos Williams, quoted in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts,* 82 (see Intro., n. 74).
[21] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts,* 42.
[22] 'abstraction, n.'. OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. accessed 26 October 2018. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/766?redirectedFrom=abstraction.

Rather than confine itself to any single, restricting conception of the abstract, then, Glück's verse will be seen to keep these varying levels of abstraction in play. In a 1981 interview with Ann Douglas, she described her increasing awareness of the need to progress beyond Imagism's compression and objectivity, remarking that 'my poems are vertical poems. They aspire and they delve. They don't expand. They don't elaborate, or amplify. Though I'm trying to write, now, poems that will do that because I have so clearly seen the absence of this strategy,'[24] and the poet's fourth collection *The Triumph of Achilles* is the first occasion in which we see this attempt to 'amplify' the lyric's ability to trace the movements of mind. In 'Mock Orange', an initial focus upon sensuous 'images'– 'the moon' and 'these flowers / lighting the yard'[25]– gives way to an atmosphere of numbed reflection:

In my mind tonight
I hear the question and pursuing answer
fused in one sound
that mounts and mounts and then
is split into the old selves,
the tired antagonisms. Do you see?
We were made fools of.
And the scent of mock orange
drifts through the window.

How can I rest?
How can I be content
when there is still

---

[23] Glück has remarked that 'we fall back on that term, voice, for all its insufficiencies; it suggests, at least, the sound of an authentic being', in *Proofs and Theories*, 92.

[24] Louise Glück, quoted in 'Descending Figure: An Interview with Louise Glück,' 117.

[25] Louise Glück, 'Mock Orange' from *The Triumph of Achilles* (1984) in *Poems 1962-2012*, 147.

that odor in the world?[26]

Stephanie Burt has noted the way Glück's 'poems go in fear of description, speeding from anecdotes, myths, or scenes straight to their general meanings,'[27] and here, Glück is equally keen to head straight for 'large absolutes': the 'old selves'; the 'tired antagonisms' of this clearly rocky marriage. The 'whittled' precision and 'spiky', hard-edged diction of 'Early December…,' give way to a complex train of thought – draped over six of the stanza's nine lines – and, in turn, we find a diction that is at once more naturalistic and more unnerving. There is something eerie, for instance, about the relative lack of punctuation in these lines, creating a voice whose revelations seem to 'fuse' into 'one sound' like the mounting 'question and pursuing answer' that haunts the speaker. This cerebral tone has more in common with Eliot's *Four Quartets* than with the 'hard light, clear edges'[28] of Williams's Imagist lyrics, and in a revealing passage of her collected prose *Proofs and Theories*, Glück remarked upon the differences between Williams's privileging of the concrete particular and Eliot's pull toward the abstract, arguing that the former:

> had a moral commitment to the actual, which meant the visible, whereas it was Eliot's compulsion to question that world … If Williams thought of the real as that which was capable of being registered by the senses, Eliot, in his deepest being, equated the real with the permanent.[29]

Like many such critical statements, this tells us more about Glück's own sensibility than it does about Eliot, and her remarks grossly oversimplify Eliot's recognition of the difficulty of *any* poetic attempt to create 'the real': his remark that 'Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified'[30] may evoke the familiar fallacy of a 'presentational realism', but *Four Quartets* is hardly a sequence that equates 'the real with the permanent'. Nevertheless, Glück's sense of Eliot as 'question[ing]' the validity of 'the actual' and 'the visible' realm is an apt means of describing her own technique in *The Triumph of Achilles*. In 'Elms', Glück scrutinises the validity of knowledge 'registered by the senses' by interrogating two abstract concepts, in this case the nature of 'need' and 'desire', in a poem that dramatizes the interaction between what Peter Hatler called 'the process of perception and the perception of process.'[31]

---

[26] Glück, *Poems, 1962-2012*, 147.

[27] Stephanie Burt, 'The Dark Garage with the Garbage: Louise Gluck's Structures,' in *On Louise Gluck: Change What You See*, ed. Joanne Feit Diehl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 74.

[28] Pound, *Selected Letters*, (see Intro, n. 67).

[29] Glück, 'On T.S. Eliot,' in *Proofs and Theories*, 20.

[30] T.S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Poet' (1921), in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism,* 7th ed. (London: Methuen, 1920, reprinted 1950), 149.

> All day I tried to distinguish
> need from desire. Now, in the dark,
> I feel only bitter sadness for us,
> the builders, the planers of wood,
> because I have been looking
> steadily at these elms
> and seen the process that creates
> the writhing, stationary tree
> is torment, and have understood
> it will make no forms but twisted forms.[32]

Where Conrad Aiken complained that Williams 'denies us his emotional reactions to the things he sees,'[33] 'Elms' shows the poet's conscious progression beyond Williams's objectivism by having the poem depend upon the illusion of privileged access to the speaker's most intimate thoughts. Dan Chiasson has called the poet an 'objectivist of the emotions,'[34] but this label isn't as modernist (or Imagist) as it appears: Geoffrey Thurley has claimed of 'Romantic subjectivism' that it 'is to be explained as a shift in contents, by which certain ranges of feeling and perception themselves became objective: subjectivity – the mind's processes and movements – itself becomes objective.'[35] While this is an anachronistic view of Romantic subjectivity, it is an accurate description of the delicate balancing act between subject and object we find in 'Elms', as Glück enacts a process of mediation between the 'writhing, stationary tree', and the human subject: 'us, / the builders, the planers of wood'. In an important sense, the poem is also an interrogation of *poiesis*, the 'process that creates', as the elm tree become a figure for the construction of the poem, modelled out of the 'twisted forms' of the speaker's own 'torment'. In keeping with this embracing of 'stated emotion', Glück employs a markedly different syntax from anything we find in *Firstborn*: the embedded clauses tucked within the single, elaborately-sustained sentence reveal just how intricately entangled are the (admittedly Freudian) drives of 'need' and 'desire', so that vision becomes a mode 'soaked in affect',[36] to use James Elkins's formulation, never a straightforward process of unearthing an 'objective image'.

---

[31] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 218.
[32] Glück, 'Elms', in *Poems 1962-2012*, 189.
[33] Conrad Aiken, 'Mr. Williams and his Caviar of Excessive Individualisms,' in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London; Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1980), 57.
[34] Dan Chiasson, 'The Body Artist: Louise Gluck's Collected Poems,' *The New Yorker*, 12 November 2012, accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/11/12/the-body-artist.
[35] Geoffrey Thurley, *The Romantic Predicament*, cited in *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 11.

It is worth noting the contrast between the interrogation of perception and the creative process found in 'Elms' and the mere sensitivity to 'things' we get from an Imagist poem such as Amy Lowell's 'Autumn', quoted here in its entirety:

> All day I have watched the purple vine leaves
> Fall into the water.
> And now in the moonlight they still fall,
> But each leaf is fringed with silver.[37]

As Altieri has observed, 'Amy Lowell's imagism or "Amygism," [is] content merely to picture a world of objects.'[38] Here, Lowell expresses interest only in the aesthetic quality of the fallen leaves as they change from 'purple' to glistening 'silver': the poem begins and ends with visual surface. In 'Elms', by contrast, we find ideas free from their association with 'things', alongside an insistence that our observation of the world is inseparable from issues of introspection, subjectivity, and – as Linda Anderson has said of Elizabeth Bishop – the knowledge that 'the visual conveys both too little and too much.'[39]

---

[36] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On The Nature of Seeing* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 11.

[37] Amy Lowell, 'Autumn', in *Imagist Poetry*, 89 (see Intro., n. 15).

[38] Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind,' 110.

[39] Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott, eds., *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002), 161.

Where 'Elms' is explicit in its desire to interrogate the intricacies of perception, more often, we find Glück eschewing the focus on the 'concrete, visible' realm altogether in favour of a more hermetic meditation on the nature of temporality and being. In 'Winter Morning', a poem that interweaves the returning seasons with the speaker's enquiry into Christ's resurrection, Glück reveals her presiding subject as those 'places where a thought might grow':[40]

> Today, when I woke up, I asked myself
> why did Christ die? Who knows
> the meaning of such questions?
>
> It was a winter morning, unbelievably cold.
> So the thoughts went on,
> from each question came
> another question, like a twig from a branch,
> like a branch from a black trunk.[41]

In *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, Edward Larrissy argued that 'there is no reason in principle to take the idea of the truthful depiction of the mind seriously. It denies the necessity of the signifier.'[42] But the attempt to create a 'truthful' depiction of mind doesn't always signal obliviousness as to the lack of a 'single apodictic signifier for the truth of mental process.'[43] Where the Imagist desire for what Altieri called a 'presentational realism' turns language into a transparent entity allowing direct access to the real, here, Glück enacts a process of thinking in language that takes account of the difficulty of any attempt to maintain a fidelity to the mind. In particular, there is a repetitive, methodical quality to the speaker's efforts to articulate their own thought-processes: 'like a twig from a branch, like a branch from a black trunk' that is antithetical to the 'feigned naturalism' of Bly's Deep Imagism. Unlike in *Firstborn*, moreover, in this instance, poetic expression is not a means to unearth 'the ideas embodied' by 'objective images': the question that opens the poem ('why did

---

[40] Derek Mahon, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2000), 54.
[41] Louise Glück, *Poems 1962-2012*, 152.
[42] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 100.
[43] Ibid., 98.

Christ die?') is merely met with 'another question', and in response, Glück simply replies 'who knows?' Even when she turns to more sensuous territory in the poem's final section, we find a highly stylized, rhythmical meditation on the cyclical nature of the returning seasons that puts heed to any notion of the 'objective image' as conveying 'the truth of mental process':

> Winters are long here.
> The road a dark gray, the maples gray, silvered with lichen,
> and the sun low on the horizon,
> white on blue; at sunset, vivid orange-red.
>
> When I shut my eyes, it vanishes.
> When I open my eyes, it reappears.
> Outside, spring rain, a pulse, a film on the window.
>
> And suddenly it is summer, all puzzling fruit and light.[44]

In leaving us to contemplate the purity of the colour contrasts 'white on blue'; 'vivid orange red', the poem could be charged with undergoing something of a deflation from the most abstract and difficult of questions ('Why did Christ die?') to the relative stability of a series of sensuous images: 'white on blue; at sunset, vivid orange-red'. But the childlike simplicity of the speaker's observation of Spring, 'when I close my eyes it vanishes, / when I open my eyes it reappears', as if discovering object permanence for the first time, prevents the kind of naïve realism that would seek to push the mind too close to the natural world. Where Bly's Deep Imagism insists upon a harmonious unity between the collective unconscious and natural objects, Glück articulates a more chastened state of mind, giving voice to a speaker who appears humbled by the knowledge that grappling with nature of being must remain a 'puzzling' light' to contemplate rather than grasped in a snapshot of clear perception.

And rather than give us abundance of visual detail, it is noticeable that Glück's description of the landscape is 'pared down' to simple categories: 'sunset, 'spring rain' 'summer'. Admittedly, Glück creates a flatness in the language here that is reminiscent of

---

[44] Glück, *Poems 1962-2012*, 154.

Williams's early Imagist poetry ('the road a dark gray, the maples gray'), but no sooner have we been lulled into this atmosphere of monotonous repetition then the poet enacts an ascent from the banal to the sublime, transforming the winter 'gray' into the 'puzzling fruit and light' of summer. Joanne Feit Diehl's contention that the Glück demonstrates a 'capacity to render the pathos in the quotidian that marks Glück as a Wordsworthian poet'[45] seems fitting here, then. But more noticeably Wordsworthian is the way in which Glück enacts a return, a re-visioning of some prior material. In *Image, Music, Text,* Roland Barthes declared that 'the image is re-presentation, which is to say ultimately resurrection,'[46] and where Imagism's 'tortured premises' prohibit any such awareness of the image as a mediated form of expression, in 'Winter Morning', Glück captures something of this affinity between 're-presentation' and 'resurrection' by having the earlier return of 'Christ in his cocoon of light'[47] mirrored in the return of the 'puzzling' 'light' of summer. Indeed, with its contemplation of the 'maples gray, silvered with lichen', these final lines force attention back onto the opening metaphor of thought as an expanding tree: 'like a twig from a branch / like the branch from a black trunk', as we recognise the miraculous shift in seasons as representing the speaker's own renewed, 'resurrected' state of mind. Here, as in Williams, we have Spring as rebirth, bringing with it the promise of respite from the 'grey' fog of a wintery depression. Such patterning in the poem's symbolism is antithetical to the feigned spontaneity of Levertov's internal dialogue in 'The Broken Sandal', as it is to the simple declarative statements of Bly's Deep Imagism, a mode designed to banish any notion of the rational or intellectual portions of the psyche from interfering with the glittering sublime that is the poetic image. In *The Triumph of Achilles*, by contrast, Glück insists that thought can be rhythmical and ordered as much as ‘free flowing’, and, in Wittgenstein’s terms, both ‘pictorial and propositional’[48] – never merely an unmediated encounter with ‘objective images’.

---

[45] Diehl, *On Louise Glück,* 7.

[46] Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 2 (see chap. 1, n. 17).

[47] Glück, *Poems 1962-2012*, 153.

Such re-visioning is integral to the matured sensibility toward matters of perception Glück displays in this later work. Adorno once remarked of Marcel Proust that ‘nothing has substance for him but what has already been mediated by memory’,[49] and in ‘Nostos’, from *Meadowlands* (1996), we find Glück making similar claims when she declares: ‘We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory.’[50] Here, as elsewhere, it is as if she is only interested in a visual landscape that is subject to temporality and flux; already changed by the meditating process of ‘memory’, never fixed its pure, ‘immediate’ state. Where Altieri noted that the ‘early moderns wanted to keep [a] sense of the intricate immediacy of experience,’[51] in ‘The Night Migrations’– the poem that begins Glück’s tenth collection *Averno* (1006) – it is significant that Glück begins with the ‘moment when you see again / the red berries of the mountain ash’,[52] as if to stress that the ‘luminous detail’ is less integral to her aesthetic than an elaborate process of emotional fine-tuning: as in C.K. Williams, we are asked to ‘look again’.[53]

More contentiously, by shifting the focus away from images, Glück’s verse naturally gives greater weight to the vexed issue of the poet’s ‘voice’, a move that has lost her some critical supporters. In *The Modern Element*, for example, Adam Kirsch complained that

> Glück’s poetry also suggests that a poet who wages everything on tone – whose poems cannot function unless they are read as urgent, reverent, hypnotic monologues – ends up losing most of the qualities that make poetic language memorable. It is as though her lines are flattened by the gravitational pull of a “mystery” so intense that it crushes adjective and metaphor.[54]

---

[48] James Elkins has argued that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* ‘might, in short, offer the most powerful possible critique of the word-image dichotomy, as it proposes a concept of picture that is undecidably both “visual” and “verbal” – or, in Wittgenstein’s clearer and more honest language, “pictorial” and “propositional”,’ in *The Domain of Images* (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 58.

[49] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Hertfordshire: Spearman, 1967), 182.

[50] Louise Glück, ‘Nostos’, from *Meadowlands* (1996), in *Poems 1962-2012*, 342.

[51] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* 5 (see chap. 1, n. 61).

[52] Louise Glück, ‘The Night Migrations’, in *Poems 1962-2012*, 489.

[53] Michael Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009 ), 56.

[54] Kirsch, *The Modern Element*, 99.

This says much about Kirsch's bias toward the poetry of 'adjective and metaphor', and of the critical tendency to see these figures as that ones that almost define poetry itself.[55] Kirsch's remarks bring to mind Susan Sontag's claim that 'photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow,'[56] and of the long-standing association of images with notions of greater 'force' and 'immediacy'. But what Kirsch calls Glück's 'urgent … hypnotic monologues' are 'memorable' because they utilise all the tools at a poet's disposal rather than limit themselves to the narrow range of rhetoric afforded by 'objective images'. As 'Elms' and 'Winter Morning' demonstrate, there is a degree of truth to Kirsch's suggestion of Glück as 'crushing' adjective and metaphor, but Glück is self-aware enough to poke fun at this unfashionable rejection of the image. At the heart of her seventh collection *Meadowlands* lies a witty dialogue between the speaker and their soon-to-be ex-husband, and in a poem from that sequence entitled 'Rainy Morning', the latter derides his interlocutor's rejection of images, and, it is implied, her corresponding *joie de vivre*:

> You don't love the world.
> If you loved the world you'd have
> images in your poems.
>
> John loves the world. He has
> a motto: judge not
> lest ye be judged.[57]

This is telling of Glück's attitude toward the image more generally. In those notorious lines in 'Mock Orange' in which the speaker declares of the 'flowers lighting the yard': 'I hate them as I hate sex', we sense Glück's conflation of the image with broader ideas regarding an embracing of the sensual, a notion also evident in 'Clear Morning' from *The Wild Iris* (1992), in which we find the God-like figure Glück gives voice to declaring:

---

[55] This is an opinion shared by Jonathan Holden, who noted in *The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric*: 'I think it's fair to say that never in the history of English language use has traditional prosody received less emphasis than it is receiving now, and never has metaphor received more.' (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 36.

[56] Sontag, *On Photography*, 17 (see chap. 2, n. 33).

[57] Louise Glück, 'Rainy Morning', from *Meadowlands* (1996), in *Poems 1962-2012*, 319.

I cannot go on
restricting myself to images

because you think it is your right
to dispute my meaning:

I am prepared now to force
clarity upon you.[58]

Where the poet once coveted 'clarity' through Imagist techniques, here images constitute a form of false comfort: a 'restriction' to be overcome. Here, as elsewhere, the voice Glück creates is austere, uncompromising, strangely unemotional, and as much as Glück's has been called a 'post-confessional' poet,[59] her desire has never been for the nakedly 'personal'– as she remarked in *Proofs and Theories*, 'art is not a decanting of personality'. [60] This is a noticeably different stance to that of T.E. Hulme, who in a 1908 lecture declared that 'in the arts, we seek for the maximum of individual and personal expression, rather than for the attainment of any absolute beauty.'[61] As Bly and Levertov's verse testifies, it is the Imagist poem that so often becomes a naval gazing exercise in poetic 'sensitivity', not a highly abstract mode like Glück's, always more interested in 'absolutes' than it is in 'delicate epiphany'.

But the now-clichéd notion of Glück as narcissist – one displaying a 'sovereign egotism', in Kirsch's words, in maintaining that 'the most interesting theatre is the theatre of the mind' – is an inherently contradictory argument. Where the Imagists (and the Symbolists from which they claimed to depart) believed poetry could enact a 'thinking in images', the theories of Bakhtin-school linguist Valentin Voloshinov, who famously renounced Freud's 'objective images' in *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, provide a useful demonstration of the way in which Glück's 'urgent hypnotic monologues' are more dynamic than Kirsch's critique implies. As Voloshinov maintained, even the apparently solipsistic mode of individual thought is always linguistic and material, and so by necessity, equally as 'complex' as outer speech:

---

[58] Louise Glück, 'Clear Morning' from *The Wild Iris* (1994) in *Poems 1962-2012*, 251-252.

[59] See Daniel Morris, *The Poetry of Louise Gluck: A Thematic Introduction* (Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 23; Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück* (Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 1992); John Charles Ryan, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Uta Gosman, *Poetic Memory: The Forgotten Self in Plath, Howe, Hinsey, and* Glück (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 18.

[60] Ibid., 3.

[61] T.E. Hulme, quoted in Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure*, 31 (see chap. 1, n. 101).

> The complex apparatus of verbal reactions functions in all its fundamental aspects also when the subject says nothing about his experiences but only undergoes them 'in himself', since, if he is conscious of them, a process of inner ('covert') speech occurs (we do, after all, think and feel and desire with the help of words; without inner speech we would not become conscious of anything in ourselves). This process of inner speech is just as material as is outward speech.[62]

Voloshinov's critique of Freud may have been discredited by later models, but his insistence on the dynamic nature of 'inner speech' chimes with more contemporary discussions in the philosophy of language, particularly the argument made by Jean Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley in their study 2004 study *The Force of Language*, in which they describe their primary task as being to put forth:

> an account of language which radically rethinks the usual contrast between 'inner' and 'outer', which is prepared to start from the collective and consider private consciousness as the internalisation of public linguistic intercourse, rather than the usual reverse … If we decide that inner speech *is* natural speech, then it is 'inner' (in my head) because it is first 'outer', in the public space of interlocution.[63]

Much as it may seem the most glaring contradiction to enlist the Bakhtin circle – with their famous denouncing of Saussurian theory in favour of 'concrete' speech acts – in the service of discussing Glück's proficiency with the abstraction, in a poem entitled 'Landscape' from *Averno*, we find a moment of quiet meditation that seems to capture something of the complexity Voloshinov saw in 'inner speech':

> In the silence of consciousness I asked myself:
> why did I reject my life? And I answer
> *Die Erde überwältigt mich*:
> the earth defeats me.

---

[62] Valentin N. Voloshinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik and N.H. Bruss (Bloomington; Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), 21.

[63] Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language* (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan: 2004), 3, 75.

I have tried to be accurate in this description
in case someone else should follow me. I can verify
that when the sun sets in winter it is
incomparably beautiful and the memory of it
lasts a long time. I think this means

there was no night.
The night was in my head.[64]

Chiasson's description of Glück as an 'objectivist of the emotions' applies particularly well here, where we find a speaker analysing her own 'consciousness' with a forensic precision: 'I have tried to be accurate in this description', 'I can verify…', 'I think this means': phrases that, taken out of context, read more like a witness testimony than the 'Abtruser musings' of thought. But where Bram Dijkstra saw Williams as 'succeeding … in escaping the literary qualities, the tendencies to interpret and philosophize, which removes [the poem] from painting,'[65] 'Landscape' is explicit in interpreting and 'philosophizing' the complexities of mind. In particular, by answering the speaker's inquiry 'why did I reject my life?' with a line of German, 'Die Erde überwältigt mich', it is almost as if Glück's consciousness momentarily takes on a palpable form, and there is something about the alienating effect of finding a line of verse in a language that is not our own that allows these words to become momentarily 'defamiliarized', as we register their quality as sound before we discover their 'meaning' in the translation that follows. Putting aside the 'ideas' embodied' by 'objective images', what's foregrounded here is the act of translation itself; the attempt to transpose feeling into poetic language. As Voloshinov remarked, we 'think and feel and desire with the help of words': thought and is as dependent upon language as it is on 'mental images'. Glück does not desire the immediacy or instantaneity of painting, then, but a gradual and tentative move toward comprehension, as the speaker weighs and determines the 'accuracy' of her 'description': 'I think this means / there was no night. The night was in my head.'

---

[64] Glück, 'Landscape', in *Poems 1962-2012*, 529.

[65] Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, 195 (see chap. 2, n. 13).

Importantly, Glück does not aim for a conversational naturalism here; for what Perloff contemptuously labelled a ‘topical “subjective” realism’[66]– the ‘voice’ that inhabits these lines is sombre, authoritative, flat, even unearthly. Although the critical tendency is to read Glück’s lyrics as ‘urgent hypnotic monologues’, there is actually something of a dialogic quality to this delicate negotiation between the speaker and their own consciousness. Jed Rasula was misguided, then, when he complained of post-war American verse that ‘the compulsion is to retrieve the present in a medium (print) that facilitates fantasies of the unmediated. Voice has been nominated as the icon of this fantasy.’[67] It is rather the long-standing obsession with the poetic *image*, not with that equally slippery concept of ‘voice,’ that epitomises the desire for ‘unmediated’ expression. And as *The Triumph of Achilles* consistently demonstrates, Glück’s insistence that visual material always be subject to an active process of re-visioning demands that we similarly rethink the integrity of the picture offered by the objective image.

---

[66] Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism*, 163 (see chap. 1, n. 176).

[67] Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, 50 (see Intro., n. 83).

# Chapter VI: ‘Brooding on the form / of things’: Robert Hass’s *Time and Materials*

In *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*, Jerome McGann drew attention to what he described as a ‘marked change that has taken place in certain writers whose work has emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.’[1] In particular, he noted:

> They come trying to rethink the question of poetry’s relation to politics and truth. They do so, however, by turning the question of poetry’s social function into a more general examination of how we are to understand the relation of language and truth.[2]

Nowhere is this ‘rethinking’ more evident than in the oeuvre of Robert Hass. In his debut volume *Field Guide* (1974), chosen for the Yale Younger poets series in 1973, we find the shop-worn Imagism typical of the decade: a coolly detached, paratactic verse committed to what Stephen Fredman called the ‘hieroglyphic quality of words as giving more direct access to truth.’[3] But under the influence of George Oppen and the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, whose poetry Hass translated over the course of a twenty-year friendship and collaboration, the poet underwent something of a conversion, leaving behind Imagism’s ‘hard light, clear edges’ in favour of an altogether more socially-engaged aesthetic. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005* (2007), Hass not only announces his departure from his early image-heavy mode, but scrutinises the very foundations of Imagism as a valid means of representation – as ‘a position of honesty’[4]– in George Oppen’s terms. Exposing the self-defeating nature of Imagism’s privileging of the ‘concrete’ while disparaging the noun, *Time and Materials* constitutes Hass’s most sustained attempt to articulate the ‘relation between language and truth’, stressing the importance of giving context to the 'luminous detail', and revealing that if there is a place for the Poundian 'image' in contemporary verse, it is in servicing what Hass called the 'sentence as an ethical activity of perception.'[5]

---

[1] McGann, *Black Riders*, 123 (see Intro., n. 21).

[2] Ibid., 123.

[3] Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry,* 145 (see chap. 1, n. 20).

[4] George Oppen, quoted in Hass, *What Light Can Do,* 57 (see chap. 1, n. 103).

## I

It would be some time before Hass would question the legitimacy of Imagism's 'presentational realism', however. In his debut volume *Field Guide*, we find not only Pound's 'immediate image, which was expressionistic,'[6] but remnants of the mid-century Imagism complete with those Blyean fixtures, the sea, the sky, the dark:

> I won't say much for the sea,
> except that it was, almost,
> the color of sour milk.
> The sun in that clear
> unmenacing sky was low,
> angled off the gray fissure of the cliffs,
> hills dark green with manzanita.[7]
>
> ('On the Coast near Sausalito')

> She dreamed along the beaches of this coast.
> Here where the tide rides in to desolate
> the sluggish margins of the bay,
> sea grass sheens copper into distances.[8]
>
> ('Palo Alto: The Marshes')

> Coppery light hesitates
> again in the small-leaved
>
> Japanese plum.[9]
>
> ('Measure')

---

[5] Hass, *What Light Can Do*, 57.

[6] Williams, *Autobiography,* 148 (see Intro., n. 62).

[7] Robert Hass, 'On the Coast near Sausalito', from *Field Guide* (1973), in *The Apple Trees at Olema: New and Selected Poems* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2011), 43. All quotations from Robert Hass's early poetry are taken from this edition.

[8] Hass, *The Apple Trees at Olema*, 55.

[9] Ibid., 64.

Hass's meditations on his native Californian landscape may invite comparisons with his West Coast predecessor Robinson Jeffers, but when we find him reaching for such Poundian-inflected images as the 'small-leaved / Japanese plum', we are reminded of just how accurate was Marjorie Perloff's rhetorical speculation: 'What is it in Pound's oeuvre that has made such a difference in the poetry of the later twentieth-century, a difference that transcends, in curious ways, the local differences between individual poets?'[10] Perloff noted the 'famous obiter dicta of the critical prose' and the 'obvious place to begin',[11] and as per Pound's instruction, Hass's early poems could not be more emphatic in their insistence upon the natural object as 'the proper and perfect symbol.'[12] Although Hass toes the Imagist party line by aiming for the 'purity of intent and aesthetic concentration'[13] he admires in Paul Cezanne, there is a strangely ornate, *fin de siècle* quality to these luscious visual landscapes – leaves infused with 'Coppery light'; the 'sea … the color of soured milk'; 'sea grass' that 'sheens copper into distances' – precisely the 'minute recordings of a delicate atmosphere'[14] C.K. Williams found so inadequate in the poetry of his contemporaries. Elsewhere in *Field Guide*, poetic expression is reduced to listing exotic objects, as in 'Fall', where Hass stops to name 'Chanterelles, puffballs, chicken of the woods',[15] as he does in 'Adhesive: For Earlene', in which the speaker observes 'palm nuts, / palm leaves, and sweet rotting crab apples,'[16]and 'Spring', which begins with 'great ornamental oranges, / Mexican cookies, a fragrant yellow tea.'[17] Dennis O'Driscoll has spoken admiringly of the 'quick turnover of things observed and absorbed' in this early work, claiming Hass can be seen to 'hur[l] images and ideas from line to line.'[18] But this sense of dynamic movement is antithetical to the static, quietly meditative quality Hass cultivates in these image-heavy lyrics; all 'Coppery light' and shimmering surface. Not that Hass was completely unaware of this 'meagreness of theme':[19] in a 1981 interview with David Remnick, the poet discussed his increasing disillusionment with the 'tunnelling of vision' created by adhering to Imagism's strict parameters:

---

[10] Perloff, *Poetic License,* 121 (see Intro., n. 28).
[11] Ibid., 121.
[12] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 9.
[13] Robert Hass, *Twentieth-Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), 284.
[14] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 74 (see chap. 4, n. 9).
[15] Hass, 'Fall', *The Apple Trees at Olema*, 45.
[16] Ibid., 50.
[17] Ibid., 53.

> When I first started reading poets like Creeley, James Wright in *The Branch Will Not Break*, Galway Kinnell, and Williams, one of the things that seemed terrifically fresh and attractive about them was that there was that one clear perception on every line or broken very plainly across two lines; it was unlike the packed, complicated modern poets – Eliot, Pound and Hart Crane. It was like a first icy taste of something. That was very appealing to me. It was also characteristic of the Chinese poems. Each line is a clear unit of meaning with one clear image in it. Then, after a while, I felt impatient with it. I began to feel that there were kinds of richness that just couldn't be touched if that was the only way you rendered perception.[20]

It seems ironic that Pound's 'packed, complicated' *Cantos* should be set against the 'icy taste' of the Imagist tradition he initiated, but it's a useful reminder of the extent to which he would leave behind any desire for 'one clear perception on every line' in his later work. Hass, too, would grow increasingly 'impatient' with the limitations of the Imagist model, but the Poundian parataxis had more troubling consequences than simply its inability to render the 'richness' of 'perception'. In 'Maps', the dangers of a myopic focus on the line as a 'clear unit of meaning' are immediately evident as Hass begins with a wistful recollection of

Sourdough French bread and pinot chardonnay

*

Apricots—
the downy buttock shape
hard black sculpture of the limbs
on Saratoga hillsides in the rain

*

These were the staples of the China trade:
sea otter, sandalwood, and bêche-de-mer

*

---

[18] Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Beyond Words: The Poetry of Robert Hass,' *The Poetry Ireland Review* no. 43/44 (1994): 164.

[19] C.K. Williams, *Poetry and Consciousness*, 74.

[20] Robert Hass, quoted in David Remnick, 'A Conversation with Robert Hass,' *Chicago Review* 32, no. 4 (1981): 25-26.

The pointillist look of laurels
their dappled pale green body stirs
down valley in the morning wind
Daphne was supple
my wife is tan, blue-rippled
pale in the dark hollows [21]

In the tongue-in-cheek, grammatically-inverted rendering of ‘Apricots— / the downy buttock shape’, we sense Hass’s desire to blend Imagism’s ‘icy’ clarity with the playfulness of William Carlos Williams Objectivist lyrics. But as Louise Glück astutely observed in ‘American Narcissism’ (1998), ‘in the absence of context, fragments, no matter how independently beautiful, grow rapidly tedious: they do not automatically constitute an insight regarding the arbitrary’.[22] The ‘tedious’ paratactic wedging of image next to image we find here – downy apricots beside ‘Saratoga hillsides in the rain’, arbitrary lists of ‘sea otter, sandalwood, and bêche-de-mer’ – couldn’t stand at a further remove from Williams’s kinetic syntax, and from the pseudo-objectivist rendering of the ‘hard black sculpture of the limbs’, Hass lapses into a much earlier style in the poem’s fourth stanza, one that bears an unnerving resemblance to F.S. Flint’s ‘The Swan’, first published in Pound’s 1914 *Des Imagistes* anthology:

Over the green cold leaves
and the rippled silver
and the tarnished copper
of its neck and beak,
toward the deep black water
beneath the arches
the swan floats slowly.[23]

As with Flint’s Imagist efforts, in which the poet brazenly flouts Pound’s rule regarding the use of ‘no word which does not contribute to the presentation,’ Hass opts for Georgian verbosity over a pared-down minimalism, particularly in the elaborate sound-patterning that unites the ‘dappled pale’ body of the ‘laurels’ with the ‘blue-rippled ... hollows’: a reminder of Imagism’s proximity to the ornate Georgianism it was so anxious to leave behind. Against this background of glittering visual surface, when the speaker turns to address the contemporaneous bombing of the Vietnamese capital, the announcement appears merely a momentary intrusion into the rarefied atmosphere of ‘Sourdough French bread and pinot chardonnay’:

---

[21] Hass, *The Apple Trees at Olema,* 46.
[22] Louise Glück, ‘American Narcissism’ (1998), in *American Originality: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 21.
[23] F.S. Flint, ‘The Swan’, in *Imagist Poetry*, 80.

> The night they bombed Hanoi
> we had been drinking red pinot
> that was winter the walnut tree was bare
> and the desert ironwood where waxwings
> perched in spring drunk on pyracantha
> squalls headwinds days gone
> north on the infelicitous Pacific[24]

In an attempt to mirror what Hass has called the ‘painterly combination of intensity and detachment’ he admires in the work of Yosa Buson, Hass eschews syntax or punctuation, moving us seamlessly between the bombed Vietnamese capital, the cosy activity of drinking ‘red pinot’, and waxwings ‘drunk on pyracantha’. But in this misguided attempt to translate the Japanese haiku aesthetic into the decidedly less interesting ‘one perception per line’ free verse, Hass effectively relinquishes any claims the poem may have had to what McGann called poetry’s ‘social function’. In particular, by ensuring that ‘every cultural fact is on a level with any other,’[25] to use Edward Larrissy’s formula, Hass ends up endorsing a bourgeois indifference to, even an aestheticisation of, human suffering: here, bombed civilians are merely ‘on a level with’ evocative renderings of ‘waxwings / perched in spring’. As Michael Bibby noted in *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era*, throughout the period of American involvement in Vietnam (from 1963 to almost 1975), ‘poets saw poetry as an inherently anti-establishment vehicle for their political expressions.’[26]

---

[24] Hass, *The Apple Trees at Olema*, 47.
[25] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry,* 176.
[26] Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds,* 7 (see chap. 4, n. 46).

But in Hass's complacent privileging of the image for its own sake, the poem unwittingly exposes just how irrelevant is the Imagist formula for a contemporary verse attempting to respond to the volatile political climate of the Vietnam War. Shapiro's critique was justified, then, when he complained that this verse is characterised by a 'limiting and formulaic glorification of immediacy' and a 'disturbing desire to live wholly in a world of sensory experience.'[27] In fairness, Shapiro could be describing Amy Lowell, Robert Bly, or Denise Levertov here: Imagist verse has always been quick to demarcate from the intellectual in the name of living 'wholly in a world of sensory experience.' But Hass was particularly slow to learn the dangers of this 'glorification of immediacy': ten years later, the poet's curious reverence for the image is on full display in his 1984 essay 'Images,' in which we find him promoting the Poundian faith in the image as a figure that 'presents' rather than re-presents the object:

> Images are not quite ideas, they are stiller than that, with less implication outside themselves. And they are not myth, they do not have the explanatory power; they are nearer to pure story. Nor are they always metaphors; they do not say this is that, they say this is.[28]

Hass's insistence that the image says 'this is' confirms just how successful was Imagism's claim to a 'presentational realism.'[29] And there are echoes here, too, of Pound's declaration that 'THE IMAGE IS NOT AN IDEA. It is a radiant node or cluster.'[30] But rather than conjure a sense of 'radiant' energy, Hass's conception of the image is markedly 'stiller' – the oxymoronic phrase 'pure story' has something of the 'pure opticality' endorsed by Clement Greenberg, even as the term denotes narrative progression and movement. This strange paradox – the idea that the image is at once a static entity that needn't display any 'explanatory power', and yet can function as a viable alternative to narrative – is one that would continue to blight Hass's early poetry. In a short lyric from the poet's second collection *Praise* (1979), unimaginatively entitled ‘The Image’, we find the logical culmination of this curious belief that the image is tantamount to ‘pure story’:

---

[27] Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure*, 115.

[28] Hass, *Twentieth-Century Pleasures*, 304.

[29] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* 4 (see chap. 1, n. 61).

[30] Pound, 'Vorticism,' *The Fortnightly Review*, 471.

> The child brought blue clay from the creek
> And the woman made two figures: a lady and a deer.
> At that season deer came down from the mountain
> And fed quietly in the redwood canyons.
> The woman and the child regarded the figure of the lady,
> The crude roundness, the grace, the coloring like shadow.
> They were not sure where she came from,
> Except the child’s fetching and the woman’s hands
> And the lead-blue clay of the creek
> Where the deer sometimes showed themselves at sundown.[31]

In *A Little Book on Form* (2017), Hass accurately observed that ‘so much of what we say about the experience of form in poetry is based on or assumes the work done by syntax; syntax is the red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens. It does both the deep and the surface work of organizing words into expressive meanings’.[32] It is strange then, that he was once so willing to forgo syntax altogether in the name of having each line function as ‘a clear unit of meaning’. But in actual fact Hass makes it extremely difficult for us to discern what ‘meanings’ this poem could possibly generate besides the vividness of the so-called images. In a recent attempt to bolster the integrity of Imagist doctrine, Jennifer Varney defended the Poundian image as ‘a sort of equation for an emotion, it is an effect produced by a relationship between things rather than a simple snapshot of the thing itself.’[33] It is inconceivable what ‘emotion’ Hass asks us to ponder here. The only ‘relationship between things’ the poem offers us is the romantic idea of the poetic imagination as directly equitable to the mysterious ‘deer’ who ‘sometimes showed themselves at sundown’, so that just as Bly took comfort in the idea that the image resides in the depths of the collective unconscious, Hass takes refuge in old Romantic notion of the image as ‘a radiant truth out of space and time’,[34] in Frank Kermode’s formulation. As with Bly, there is no possibility of interpreting the image as a textual entity constructed out of the material form of language, nor any sense that these ‘images’ are intended to ‘gesture beyond themselves’. As in the most vapid offerings of Denise Levertov, Hass gives us merely the vague outlines of ‘the thing itself’: the figure’s ‘crude roundness’, its ‘coloring like shadow’.

---

[31] Hass, *The Apple Trees at Olema*, 87.

[32] Robert Hass, *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry* (New York: Ecco, 2017), 369.

[33] Jennifer Varney, ‘The Imagist Poet as Cultural Mediator,’ in *Event or Incident: On the Role of Translation in the Dynamics of Cultural Exchange*, ed. Jon Naaijkens (Berlin; New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 74.

Twenty years later, in a long prose poem entitled ‘I Am Your Waiter Tonight and My Name is Dmitri’ from *Time and Materials,* we find particulars being used to a very different end. Taking its premise from ‘the title of a poem by John Ashbery’, the poem encompasses reflections on Raskolnikov’s motivation for murder in *Crime and Punishment* to soldiers ‘tromping down a road in Fallujah / In combat gear and a hundred and fifteen degrees of heat’ and ‘a woman strapping / Twenty pounds of explosives to her mortal body in Jerusalem’,[35] before ending with the speaker wryly musing upon his ‘sea bass’:

> Here is your sea bass with a light lemon and caper sauce.
> Here is your dish of raspberries and chocolate; notice
> Their subtle transfiguration of the colours of excrement and blood;
> And here are the flecks of crystallized lavender that stipple it.[36]

In these final lines, we are made to think of May Sinclair’s remark that ‘The Imagists are Catholic; they believe in Trans-Substantiation. For them the bread and the wine are the body and blood.’[37] Except here, the naïve literalism of the Imagists is transformed into a highly self-conscious vision of ‘raspberries and chocolate’ as ‘excrement and blood’, as the cosy activity of dining at an expensive restaurant becomes just a momentary stay against a context of suicide bombers and American involvement the Middle East. Instead of the uncritical revelling in ‘Sour dough French bread and Pinot Chardonnay’ amidst the bombing of

---

[34] Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 2.

[35] Robert Hass, ‘I Am Your Waiter Tonight and my Name is Dmitri,’ in *Time and Materials*: *Poems 1997-2005* (New York: Ecco Press, 2007), 36. All quotations from Robert Hass’s *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005* are taken from this edition.

[36] Ibid., 65.

[37] Sinclair, ‘Two Notes,’ 89 (see chap. 1, n. 116).

Vietnam we found in 'Maps', here, Hass presents the 'luminous detail' in a manner that is wholly self-conscious, deliberately politicised; in Pounds' terms, 'charged with meaning'.[38] Earlier, Hass had reflected upon the way 'Metal travelling at … speed works amazing transformations / On the tissues of the human intestine',[39] and in *Time and Materials,* the poet never lets us forget that any pleasure in the momentary and immediate must always come up against the 'pressure of reality'. So in 'A Supple Wreathe of Myrtle', a taste for sensuous detail becomes comic in light of Hass's rather pathetic portrait of Nietzsche:

eating sausage his mother
Mails to him from Basel. A rented room,
A small square window framing August clouds
Above the mountain. Brooding on the form
Of things: the dangling spur
Of an alpine columbine, winter-tortured trunks
Of cedar in the summer sun[40]

Depicting the great philosopher staring out of the 'small square window' of his 'rented room', this is Nietzsche as Mr Bleaney, lamenting those 'whose wasteland is within'.[41] If 'how we live measures our own nature',[42] Nietzsche's reliance on his mother's offerings of mailed 'sausage' expose just how disingenuous is his grandiose conception of humans as displaying a 'will to power'. Against the prosaic reality of solitude and illness that blighted his later years, there is a melancholic but also frankly ludicrous air to his 'Brooding on the form / of things', given added emphasis through the way Hass deliberately lingers over 'the dangling spur / Of an Alpine columbine, winter-tortured trunks / Of cedar in the summer sun'. From these cerebral heights, Hass enacts a comic deflation to the ageing man 'Dying of syphilis. Trimming a luxuriant mustache. / In love with the opera of Bizet,'[43] still clinging to his luxuries despite his rapidly deteriorating health. Rather than foreground the contextless fragments that make up much of *Field Guide*, in *Time and Materials*, sensuous particulars always placed within a socio-political frame, and always subordinate to the volume’s wider narratives regarding the contingency and flux of experience.

---

[38] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 23.
[39] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 62.
[40] Ibid., 3.
[41] Ibid., 3.
[42] Philip Larkin, 'Mr Bleaney,' in *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber, 1964), 10.
[43] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 3.

‘We cannot choose our influences’, Glück observed in ‘American Narcissism’: ‘these are rooted in responses we cannot (and would not wish to) control. But we can recognize the grip of unproductive influence as we recognise dangerous seductions.’[44] As many critics have recognised, one of the most crucial factors in encouraging Hass towards recognising Imagism as a ‘dangerous seduction’– and the radical change of style that ensued – is the influence of Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz. The Polish poet taught alongside Hass at the University of California Berkeley from 1960 until his retirement in 1978, and over the course of a twenty-year friendship and collaboration, Hass and Milosz would meet weekly to translate Milosz’s poems from Polish into English. Unsurprisingly, such an intimate working relationship had a profound effect upon Hass’s later work, and in demonstrating the more sophisticated treatment of the image Hass would imitate in *Time and Materials*, it is useful to observe Milosz’s technique in one his most famous poems, ‘Campo dei Fiori’, written in 1943 when the poet was living in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. First published in the underground anthology *From the Abyss* in 1944, the poem is named after the market in Rome where the Italian mathematician and philosopher Giordarno Bruno’s was burned at the stake by the Catholic Church in 1600 on the charge of heresy, and opens with a seemingly-innocent vision of city life:

> In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori
> baskets of olives and lemons,
> cobbles spattered with wine
> and the wreckage of flowers.
> Vendors cover the trestles
> with rose-pink fish;
> armfuls of dark grapes

---

[44] Glück, *American Originality*, 16.

heaped on peach-down.[45]

If modern poetry is marked by the tension between 'the bare image' and the 'image as symbol', in Wallace Stevens's formulation, Milosz finds a kind of fruitful middle ground here: in the 'cobbles spattered with wine', the 'wreckage of flowers' and the 'rose-pink' fish, there is both a literalness indicative of a belief in the image as 'what the word actually name' and, by subtly evoking the blood and flesh of the ensuring martyrdom, a sense that these 'luminous details' are, from the outset, charged with symbolic resonance. Where the Imagist poem is always marked by a cool detachment; a refusal to allow the poem's images to 'gesture beyond themselves', Milosz demands that we pass judgement on the scene the poem confronts us with: not only the crowd's indifference to Bruno's' death, but in a more pressing sense, the silence of those witnessing the Holocaust:

Someone will read as moral
that the people of Rome or Warsaw
haggle, laugh, make love
as they pass by the martyrs' pyres.
Someone else will read
of the passing of things human,
of the oblivion
born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only
of the loneliness of the dying,
of how, when Giordano
climbed to his burning
he could not find
in any human tongue
words for mankind,
mankind who live on.

Already they were back at their wine
or peddled their white starfish,
baskets of olives and lemons
they had shouldered to the fair,
and he already distanced
as if centuries had passed
while they paused just a moment
for his flying in the fire.

---

[45] Czeslaw Milosz, 'Campo dei Fiori', trans. David Brookes and Louis Iribarne, in *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (New York: Ecco Press, 1988).

Equating seventeenth-century Rome with Nazi-occupied Warsaw, a martyred cosmologist with the genocide of the German Jews, is an admittedly risky strategy – Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska has argued that 'a contemporary reader may voice reservations that the poem is too clear and obvious in its message and, considering the tragic context, perhaps too regular and aesthetically pleasing because of its slow-paced rhythm and soft imagery.'[46] 'Clear' and 'obvious' though the message may be, it is one Milosz felt compelled to convey. In a 2003 interview, he declared that 'the poem was born out of a sort of moral obligation, where you feel you must act,' [47] and this sense of the urgency of poetry's 'social responsibility' could not stand at a further remove from the complacency of the 'one perception per line' offerings so entrenched within post-war American verse. The poem may be 'aesthetically pleasing', in Adamczyk-Garbowska's terms, but it is unapologetic in casting judgement on what Aimé Césaire called 'the sterile attitude of the spectator.'[48] Whatever is meant by the vague term 'soft imagery', moreover, it is not one that could accurately describe anything found in the poem: Milosz makes no attempt to record the 'minute recordings of a delicate atmosphere' or employ wilfully obscure images that must be parsed into sense. Unlike Hass's remarks in 'Images', or his technique in that early poem 'The Image', Milosz demands his visual details have 'explanatory power'. In particular, by returning to the vision of 'baskets of olives and lemons' in the poem's final lines, now tainted with the same trappings of bourgeois detachment as Hass's offerings in *Field Guide*, Milosz points to the circularity of history, and shows just how quickly we retreat back to the comfort of sensual pleasure in the face of surrounding atrocity. By the time Hass came to write *Time and Materials*, the influence of Milosz's emotionally urgent poetry is immediately apparent in a poem entitled 'Ezra Pound's

---

[46] Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, 'Czeslaw Milosz,' in *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work, Vol II: Lerner to Zychlinsky*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 846.

[47] Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in an Interview with Malgorzata Anna Packalen, Krakow, 10 December 2003, accessed 9 November 2018. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/milosz/interview/.

[48] Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land* (1939) (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 13.

Proposition', in which we find Hass taking aim at what Larrissy called Pound's 'poisonous brew of aesthetic, political and sexual fascism':[49]

> Beauty is sexual, and sexuality
> Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility
> Of the earth is economics. Though he is no recommendation
> For poets on the subject of finance,
> I thought of him in the thick heat
> Of the Bangkok night. Not more than fourteen, she saunters up to
>     you
> Outside the Shangri-La hotel
> And says, in plausible English,
> "How about a party, big guy?"[50]

In these lines, Hass's disillusionment with Imagism goes beyond its failure to render the 'richness' of perception. Although Edward Brunner has claimed that Hass took from his Stanford professors Yvor Winters and Donald Davie 'examples of poetry and critical writings that envisioned poetry as a public art that blended responsiveness to large concerns with responsibility to the poetic tradition,'[51] Hass is more than willing to answer back to 'the poetic tradition', rebutting Pound's 'proposition' with a disturbing vision of capitalist oppression and exploitation. Dismantling what he sees as Pound's reductive reasoning that equates beauty with economics, Hass gives us the context that Imagism's epiphanies overlook, exposing Pound's orientalising vision of the women who populate his early lyrics to constitute a shallow, even amoral form of 'making it new'. Following these lines with a matter-of-fact account of 'The World Bank arrang[ing] the credit' to create a dam that 'Floods three hundred villages', forcing the inhabitants out of their homes and into the teeming city streets, Hass eventually return us to the young girl who addresses the speaker, ending the poem with the vision of 'hives of shimmering silver' that 'throw that bluish throb of light / Across her cheekbones and her lovely skin.'[52] Where Andrew Thacker praised

---

[49] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 105.

[50] Robert Hass, 'Ezra Pound's Proposition', in *Time and Materials*, 81.

[51] Edward Brunner, 'The 1970s and the "Poetry of the Center",' in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, 937.

[52] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 81.

Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ for transforming human faces into ‘minute visual blobs of data,’[53] the ‘bluish throb of light’ we find on this young woman’s skin is wholly unnerving; a spotlight shined onto the human consequences of the ruthless, unprincipled economics that turns teenage girls into commodities. In an interview with *Guernica* magazine, Hass discussed the problems of ‘writing about politics in the ‘age of globalization’, noting:

> so much of the violence in the form of war and also in the forms of institutional violence – sweatshops, child labor, victimization of people economically – happens elsewhere and out of sight. And when we do know about it and need to witness it, it’s always mediated by images of one kind or another, so you’re kind of stuck trying to write about what it’s like trying to be you living your life thinking about and experiencing this stuff in that way. That is, one way to escape the universe in which everything is a kind of media cartoon is to write about the part of your life that doesn’t feel like a cartoon, and how the cartoon comes into it.[54]

Although Marjorie Perloff has argued that the ‘current suspicion of “imageful” language, on the part of the more radical poetries, has a good deal to do with the actual production and dissemination of images in our culture,’[55] Hass’s clear discomfort at the ease with which institutional violence is translated into a ‘media cartoon’ leads him towards an expressive clarity of the kind found in ‘Campo dei Fiori’, not the self-referentiality and fracturing techniques associated with the so-called ‘radical poetries’. In fact, the poem’s deliberately flat, ‘unpoetic’ language becomes an explicit antidote to the simplifying and distorting tendencies of the media’s ‘cartoons’: here, Hass is unwilling to embellish the narrative with extraneous images for their own sake. Just as Shapiro noted the disturbing proximity between the ‘Poundian ideal of the image-flash which liberates the mind from time and space’ and the ‘ideal of the advertised commodity’,[56] in ‘Ezra Pound’s Proposition’, Hass dismantles a much older association, noted by W.J.T. Mitchell, between the concept of the image as visual, bodily, bound up with a ‘will to silence’, and the essentialist gender ideas (entwined within

---

[53] Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, 55.

[54] Robert Hass, ‘The Consequences’, *Guernica*, 5 January 2008, accessed 13 November 2018. https://www.guernicamag.com/the_consequences_an_interview/.

[55] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 57.

[56] Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure*, 33.

Pound’s outlawing of ‘emotional slither’) that confine women to similarly silent objects subject to the aestheticizing male gaze.[57]

Hass’s disillusionment with the self-sufficiency of the ‘luminous detail’ is even more explicit in a long prose poem entitled ‘Then Time’. Following the narrative of a former couple reunited twenty years later over dinner at a restaurant, Hass subverts what Kenneth Burke called the ‘hatred of the idea in art’[58] by engaging in a subtle mediation between ‘large absolutes and their relation’ and concrete particulars:

> He decides that she thinks more symbolically
> Than he does and that it seemed to have saved her,
> For all her fatalism, from certain kinds of pain.
> She finds herself thinking what a literal man he is,
> Notices, as if she were recalling it, his pleasure
> In the menu, and the cooking, and the architecture of the room.
> It moves her – in the way that earnest limitation
> Can be moving, and she is moved by her attraction to him.
> Also by what he was to her. She sees her own avidity
> To live then, or not to not have lived might be more accurate,
> From a distance, the way a driver might see from the road
> A startled deer running across an open field in the rain.
> Wild thing. Here and gone. Death made it poignant, or,
> If not death exactly, which she’d come to think of
> As creatures seething in a compost heap, then time.[59]

If Glück’s verse enacts a ‘depressive realism’,[60] in Stephanie Burt’s terms, articulating a sensibility more aware of ‘certain kinds of pain’, this woman’s tendency to think ‘symbolically’ is seen as a useful defence mechanism against such an unblinkered view of reality. Initially, it may appear as if woman’s tendency to live ‘at a distance’ is Hass’s way of demanding that we live in the here and now, that we prioritise the specifics of daily experience over the kind of abstracted thinking that is tantamount to a spiritual death; to ‘not to have lived’. But Hass appears just as sympathetic towards the woman’s tendency to ‘think more symbolically’ as he does towards her male companion’s ‘literal’-mindedness. In particular, by seeing his desire to live wholly in the moment (his ‘pleasure in the menu, and the cooking, and the architecture of the room’), as an ‘earnest limitation’, this woman aligns with Hass’s own increasing distrust of Imagism’s myopic focus on the present moment. Here, the ‘image’ of a ‘startled deer running across an open field in the rain’ is not isolated as ‘pure story’– a crystalline structure suspended in space and time, as in that earlier poem ‘The Image’ – but is rather a metaphor for a metaphor: a means for the poet to describe the sense of living ‘at a distance’. Moreover, it is significant that this vision is purely conjectural: ‘the way a driver *might* see from the road’ (my italics) – a hypothetical scenario the woman allows herself to envisage rather than an isolated visual epiphany in the manner of Pounds’ ‘petals on a wet black bough’. As such, not only is this image subordinate to the wider narrative of the couple’s reconciliation, to the way these opposite personalities are pulled into a state of mutual admiration and emotional intimacy, but, more to the point, serves as merely another means of demonstrating the necessary intertwining of the concrete and the metaphysical; the ‘intricate immediacy of experience’ and the inevitable marching on of ‘time’.

---

[57] See Mitchell, *Iconology*, 109.

[58] Kenneth Burke, ‘Heaven’s First Law’, in *The Critical Heritage*, 73.

[59] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 36.

[60] Burt, ‘The Dark Garage with the Garbage, 74 (see chap. 5, n. 27).

It is worth stressing how rare it is for a contemporary poet to challenge the Imagist notion that poetry is made out of concrete things. In *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, a study that stretches from Pound and the early moderns to John Ashbery, Edward Larrissy documented the overwhelming tendency in American poetry to view ‘accurate description’ as the ‘touchstone of value’ for contemporary poetry; to ‘think that the only knowledge worth having is of minute particulars.’[61] Similarly, in Andrew Epstein’s 2016 study *Attention Equals Life*, the author argues that from the mid-century to the present, poetry has stood as ‘the quintessential genre for the rendering of concrete, everyday experiences and objects.’[62] It is therefore striking that a poet who could so emphatically endorse the ‘doctrine of the image’ in his early work should replace it with an aesthetic that gives as much attention to ‘absolutes and their relation’ as it does to ‘minute particulars’. Although Milosz’s influence is an integral part of the story, Hass’s radical departure from the Imagist framework owes almost as much to the poet’s increasing interest in the work of George Oppen, a poet who famously underwent his own conversation from an Imagist-inspired Objectivism to the more abstract, socially-engaged verse found in *Of Being Numerous* (1968). In his 1985 essay on Oppen, Hass articulated one of the defining problems for writers of his era when he observed that:

---

[61] Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 174.

[62] Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

> In my generation of writers at least, the issue of the noun has become very difficult. The work of the language poets, particularly some of the essays of Ron Silliman, has suggested a profound distrust of the mimetic idea that there is a constituting connection between word and thing; they have suggested, in fact, that the connection between word and thing has become a sort of conspiracy among the writer, the reader, and merchant to convince themselves that the objects of desire are real.[63]

The attitude of the emerging ‘Language’ poets, for whom (in Steve McCaffery’s terms) ‘language is above all else a system of signs and … writing must stress its semiotic nature through modes of investigation and probe, rather than mimetic, instrumental indications,’[64] may have threatened the integrity of representational or mimetic art for writers coming to maturity in the seventies, but as Hass recognised, this ‘issue of the noun’ stretches back to Pound, with his endorsement of Fenollosa’s idea that ‘A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature.’[65] Of course, this distrust of the noun is a strange contradiction of the propensity toward the ‘static’, concrete images we find in Imagist poetry, and Pound certainly didn’t shy away from advocating concrete nouns when it suited him, writing to Williams in 1920 to remind him: ‘When did I ever, in enmity, advise you to use vague words, to shun the welding of word and thing, to avoid hard statement, word close to the thing it means?'[66] Although Hass would reject the radical empiricism of the Imagist and Objectivist conception of poetic language, what is essential in Oppen's testing of the 'relation of language and truth' is his confidence in the noun, particularly with the way it situates the poem within a historical context and enables the poet, as Hass puts it elsewhere, to 'render time'.[67] Rather than promote the noun as a means of creating what Hulme called a 'visually concrete language', Hass shares Oppen's belief that the nouns play a crucial role in mediating between the concrete and the abstract dimensions of the poem: 'What happens with the nouns in George Oppen's poetry,' the poet remarked, 'is that you can actually watch, as the words are laid down on the page, the process from which the perception of the thing gets born into its numinous quality as a word, an abstraction out of a thing.'[68] Hass uses the noun '1875' in *Of Being Numerous* as a prime example of this tendency:

---

[63] Hass, *What Light Can Do*, 55.

[64] Steve McCaffery, ‘The Death of the Subject,’ cited in Perloff, ‘Avant-garde Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ 126.

[65] Fenollosa and Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, 82 (see chap. 2, n. 35).

> The great stone
> Above the river
> In the pylon of the bridge
>
> '1875'
>
> Frozen in the moonlight
> In the frozen air over the footpath, consciousness
>
> Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,
> Which loves itself [69]

By isolating the noun '1875' in a kind of nominalist purity, framed as it is by those quotation marks, Oppen instils the word with a certain monumentality, as if the proper noun now takes on the 'numinous' quality once reserved for Pound's 'immediate image'. What is of primary interest here for Hass, however, is the way these concrete nouns – literally the solid, tangible forms of the 'great stone' in the 'pylon of the bridge' – are made to play against the abstract, intangible entity that is 'consciousness'. Where *Discrete Series* placed the focus firmly on 'the thing itself'; in this late work, the 'shipwreck of the singular' is replaced with 'the meaning / Of being numerous', and collective responsibility is valued over the profoundly singular. Hass clearly takes the lines quoted above to heart – we find them in a long, ambitious prose sequence in *Time and Materials* entitled 'Consciousness' – but where Hass really puts this interrogation of a 'visually concrete language' to use is in his more explicitly political poems. In 'Winged and Acid Dark', a harrowing portrait of war-time atrocity, Hass looks to Oppen as a model for how to combine concrete particulars with what Altieri called those 'other forms of wisdom':[70]

---

[66] Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound,* 158 (see Intro., n. 67).

[67] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 26.

[68] Hass, *What Light Can Do*, 56.

[69] George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous*, cited in *What Light Can Do*, 56.

> A sentence with "dappled shadow" in it.
> Something not sayable
> spurting from the morning silence,
> secret as a thrush.
>
> The other man, the officer, who brought onions
> and wine and sacks of flour,
> the major with the swollen knee,
> wanted intelligent conversation afterward.
> Having no choice, she provided that, too.
>
> Potsdamer Platz, May 1945.
>
> When the first one was through he pried her mouth open.
> Bashō told Rensetsu to avoid sensational materials.
> If the horror of the world were the truth of the world,
> he said, there would be no one to say it
> and no one to say it to.
> I think he recommended describing the slightly frenzied
> swarming of insects near a waterfall.[71]

Hass's notes to the poem direct us to the anonymous war-time memoir *A Woman in Berlin*, (first published in the US in 1954 and reissued in 2003), chronicling the arrival of the Red Army in Berlin in 1945 and the sexual assaults suffered by the city's inhabitants at the hands of Russian soldiers. Given such a historical frame, we sense Hass's desire in these lines to do justice to what William James called ‘the complexity of fact.’[72] Rather than view the noun as inherently limited, Hass takes on Oppen’s belief in the importance of the noun as a way ‘to notice, to state, to lay down the substantive for its own sake.’[73] Directly reminiscent of Oppen’s isolation of the noun ‘1875’, Hass’s placement of the historical marker ‘Postdamer Platz, May 1945’ creates a specificity of time and place; a contextualisation of the poem’s visual landscape rather than the image as a ‘radiant truth out of space and time’. Whereas earlier visions of the Californian landscape appeared curiously timeless, divorced from any discernible social context, here, we cannot interpret such evocative images as the ‘dappled shadow’ without reading them as a coded commentary on living under the shadow of war in 1945.

---

[70] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility,* 57 (see chap. 1, n. 153).

[71] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 11.

More crucially, where Oppen once declared he was ‘beginning from Imagism as a position of honesty’,[74] in this late poem, Hass dismantles the integrity of the Imagist claims to representational accuracy. The initial contemplation of a sentence containing the suggestive phrase ‘dappled shadow’ appears deliberately out of place beside the brutality of the woman’s treatment, and there is an uncomfortable dissonance between the lyricism of those opening sibilant phrases (‘sentence’, ‘shadow’, ‘something’, ‘sayable’, ‘spurting’, ‘silence’, ‘secret’) and the grimly prosaic details of the ‘onions / and wine and sacks of flour’ carried by the officer. In this interrogation of the ‘honesty’ of the Imagist mode, Hass appears particularly ambivalent toward Bashō’s advice to avoid ‘sensational materials’. Beside the searing honesty of this woman’s account, the attempt to translate suffering into the more palatable form of an ‘image’ – the ‘slightly frenzied / swarming of insects near a waterfall’ – is tantamount to a deliberate bypassing of poetry’s role as an ‘ethical activity’, and in this context, failing to acknowledge the ‘the horror of the world’ constitutes a tacit evasion of the poet’s ethical responsibility to record the full spectrum of the human condition.

---

[72] James, *The Writings of William James*, 482 (see chap. 1, n. 53).

[73] Hass, *What Light Can Do*, 57.

[74] Oppen, quoted in *What Light Can Do*, 57.

Andrew Epstein has noted the tendency to associate ‘realism’ with ‘naïve or old-fashioned ideas about representation, mimesis, and the transparency of language,’ noting the form ‘has long cast as the fussy and outmoded other – the antithesis to daring, difficult, progressive, and subversive writing,’[75] but what Hass creates here isn’t a straightforward ‘mimetic’ translation of the memoir form into the lyric poem. In contemplating ‘A sentence with “dappled shadow” in it’ – the kind of meta-commentary for which Hass has become known – the poet reminds us of the impossibility of making history transparent. Where he once looked to the luminous clarity supposedly offered by the ‘one perception per line’ lyric, here Hass creates a sustained tension between what ‘cannot be said’ and the need to document history, to ‘pass these things on’. Even as he acknowledges the difficulty of articulating trauma: of communicating ‘something not sayable’ when there is ‘noone to say it / and no one to say it to’, in the final lines, Hass insists that the poet must find a means, in language, to convey the ‘horror of the world’:

> Pried her mouth open and spit in it.
> We pass these things on,
> probably, because we are what we can imagine.
>
> Something not sayable in the morning silence.
> The mind hungering after likenesses. “Tender sky,” etc.,
> curves the swallows trace in air.[76]

In the study in which he critiqued Hass’s early lyrics, Shapiro described poetry’s ability to enact ‘a kind of ethical play, testing and revising our moral certitudes through a vigilant appeal to the complexities of circumstance,’[77] and such ‘ethical play’ is an accurate term to describe Hass’s intentions in ‘Winged and Acid Dark’. The declaration that the poem builds toward: ‘we are what we can imagine’, is not a neo-Romantic assertion of the redemptive powers of the recreating mind, but rather a reminder that the imagination is a disturbing, as much as a liberating, quality of human nature. Here, there is a palpable sense that the ‘dappled’, ‘pointillist look of laurels’ he ruminated upon in his earliest poetry cannot exist comfortably beside the revelation of human atrocity, and Hass appears chastened by the perennial difficulty of presenting history a way that honours the ‘ethical activity’[78] of bearing witness. Although he closes with the ephemeral vision of ‘curves the swallows trace in air’, the image cannot help but be tainted by the ugliness we encounter in the previous lines; this is not the ‘Cosmic Image’ that ‘puts it all together’, in Simic’s terms. Where Hass once coveted the ‘icy’ clarity of ‘one perception per line’, in *Time and Materials,* the shallowness of the Imagist premise, its ‘hungering after likenesses’, is met with the insistence that confronting twentieth-century history demands a level of moral engagement that cannot be accommodated by the ‘pure story’ of the concrete image.

---

[75] Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 9.
[76] Hass, *Time and Materials*, 11.
[77] Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure,* 9.

---

[78] Hass, *What Light Can Do*, 57.

# Chapter VII: ‘Does the part represent the whole?’: Synecdoche in Rae Armantrout and Timothy Donnelly

*The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole.*

William Carlos Williams

Hidden amongst a long list of ‘some of the qualities of typical modernistic poetry’ compiled in his 1940 essay entitled ‘A Note on Poetry,’ Randall Jarrell observed a pronounced ‘emphasis on details, on the part rather than on the whole.’[1] Of Imagism’s many ‘tortured premises,’[2] this focus on ‘details’ – retaliating as it does against the Romantic idea of the poem as an organic, unified construct – has particularly troubling consequences for the poem’s ability to incorporate politics and history, nowhere more evident than in the verse of Robert Bly and Denise Levertov. Rae Armantrout was taught by the latter at The University of California, Berkeley, and like her mentor, has declared that her earliest poems are ‘minimalist and neo-Imagist.’[3] Nevertheless, in her later work, for which he has received widespread critical acclaim, Armantrout forcefully undermines the Imagist privileging of the ‘part’ through a deft use of synecdoche, a figure that enables her to interrogate what she has called the ‘vexed’ relationship of ‘part to whole’ by placing ‘luminous details’ firmly within a wider, socio-political context. In *Money Shot* (2011), composed in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the poet presents us with what look to be decontextualised fragments – traces of narrative, unidentified voices, advertising slogans – only to expose their entanglement within elusive networks of power and the erosion of public and private realms that is the 'infiltration of capitalism into consciousness.'[4]

---

[1] Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co.,* 49 (see Intro., n. 73).

[2] Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry*, 3 (see Intro., n. 8).

[3] Rae Armantrout, *Collected Prose* (San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 2007), 57.

The necessity of contextualising 'details' is equally pressing in Timothy Donnelly's critically-lauded *The Cloud Corporation* (2010). Unlike Armantrout's quite literal use of synecdoche, Donnelly's 'metonymic linkages' provide the basis for more abstract reflections upon the relation of part to whole, and form part of Donnelly's broader interrogation of the post- 9/11 climate of a 'War on Terror', the damaging effects of our modern 'turbo-capitalism',[5] and the military atrocities of the Iraq War. If Armantrout's stanzas are minimal, elliptical, opaque, Donnelly mines instead the 'packed, complicated' aesthetic of John Ashbery and Wallace Stevens, employing a hypotactic syntax capable of accommodating a dizzying array of concrete and abstract detail. By examining these collections for what they tell us of more contemporary responses to the Imagist orthodoxy, this chapter will reveal how both poets mount a provocative challenge not only to Imagism's isolation of the solitary particular, but to the deeply- ingrained notion that a 'disjunctive poetics' is dependent upon the Poundian 'nondiscursive juxtaposition of images'.[6]

## I

In an essay entitled 'Cheshire Poetics,' Armantrout discussed the influence of Imagism on her early poetry, declaring:

> I discovered Williams (and the other Imagists) early on and was very much moved by them. By what though? I would say it was by their attempt to make the object speak, to put things in dialogue with mind and somehow make them hold up their end of the conversation. This is both an important project and a doomed one. The world enters the poem only through a kind of ventriloquy … It is as if the Imagist poet wants to spin around suddenly and catch the world unaware, in dishevelment, see it as it is when we're not looking. And how can we not want that?[7]

---

[4] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 120.

[5] See Edward Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: Winner and Losers in the Global Economy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

[6] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 37 (see Intro, n. 74).

[7] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 55.

This is a flattering view of the Imagist 'project'. Armantrout's clear discomfort with the idea of the self being so present in the poem, desiring to see the world 'as it is when we're not looking', speaks of her early identification with the 'Language' school's commitment to a 'decentring of the lyric 'I''.[8] But as she recognises, the attempt to rid the poem of subjective experience altogether is a 'doomed' enterprise, and Armantrout never really subscribed to Imagism's 'objective impersonality'.[9] In 'Dusk', from her second collection *The Invention of Hunger* (1979), what appears to be a straightforwardly Imagist lyric undermines its own premise of allowing the natural object to be left 'serene in its otherness':

> spider on the cold expanse
> of glass, three stories high
> rests intently
> and so purely alone.
>
> I'm not like that![10]

Where Andrew Epstein has noted that 'the poetics of Williams and the Imagists depends upon isolating and heightening what Pound calls "magic moments",'[11] by ending with such an abrupt qualification, Armantrout deliberately undermines the self-contained autonomy of the opening stanza – and along with it, any claims to capture an external world as it is 'when we're not looking'. Although 'Cheshire Poetics' begins with her claims to be 'moved' by Imagism's aesthetic project, within that own essay, as with elsewhere in her critical prose, Armantrout speaks of Imagism in more sceptical and even derogatory terms. She has scolded Sharon Olds for having 'her Imagistic ducks in a row'[12] (further evidence that the Imagist influence extends well beyond the post-Poundian avant-garde), critiqued the way 'American feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Alice Ostriker … continue to valorize the poem dominated by a single image,’[13] praised Lorine Niedecker’s poems for ‘achiev[ing] a brilliant clarity, not because of the predominance of a single image or a subordinating metaphor, but because they follow the labyrinthian twists of thought and circumstance with great agility,’[14] and (alongside Edward Larrissy) has noted the ‘gynophobia behind [Pound’s] rhetoric’, with his desire for a verse free from ‘slither’– ‘I wanted my Imagism and my slither too,’[15] she retorted. Clearly, Armantrout clearly grew increasingly sceptical of Imagism as a ‘position of honesty’, but even in her earliest poetry, there is a palpable resistance to the ‘brilliant clarity’ of Pound’s image. In ‘Grace’, from her first collection *Extremities* (1978), Armantrout evokes the Williams-inflected Imagist model at the same time as undermining any focus on the ‘visually concrete’:

---

[8] Gillian White summaries the intentions of the 'Language' school in *Lyric Shame,* noting: 'Language writers … drawing on the insights of post-structural theory, sought experimental forms that could decenter, demote, and deconstruct what more and more comes to be known as "the lyric I".' (*Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 43).

[9] Charles Altieri, 'Objective Image and Act of Mind,' 101 (see chap. 4, no. 3).

[10] Rae Armantrout, 'Dusk', from *The Invention of Hunger* (1979), in *Veil: New and Selected Poems* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 22.

[11] Epstein, *Attention Equals Life*, 7.

[12] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 42.

> 1
>
> a spring there
> where his entry must be made
> signals him on
>
> 2
>
> the sentence
>                     flies
>
> isn’t turned to salt
> no stuttering
>
> 3
>
> I am walking
>
> covey in sudden flight[16]

In the elliptical opening stanza, the Imagist ‘intensity of vision’ is nowhere to be found. Much like in Oppen and Simic, the stress falls not on concrete particulars, but on the small grammatical function words ‘there’ and ‘on’, foregrounding ideas of space and movement over anything tangible or ‘immediate’. And by consciously avoiding any charge of anthropomorphosis by delaying the appearance of the ‘lyric I’ until the final lines, Armantrout insists that our attention remains focussed upon ideas of process and interaction – the bird’s ‘entry’, a sentence that ‘flies’, the movements of ‘stuttering’ and ‘walking’ – rather than on the bird as an aesthetic object to scrutinise. Moreover, in the strange phrase that sits at the centre of the poem, ‘The sentence / flies’ (where we would expect to find the bird flying), the discernible pause created by the poet’s typography means that we must actively work to find the possible semantic connections between the movement of birds in flight and the sinuous movement of ‘the sentence’. Such a project is reminiscent of Williams, as is the poem’s lack of capitalisation or punctuation, creating a feeling of weightlessness that echoes the ‘grace[ful]’ movement of the ‘covey’, as well as the placing of the word ‘flies’ so that it stands as a word ‘put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature.’[17] Armantrout has remarked of Williams that ‘from him, I leaned the musical possibilities of the short line, the uses of enjambment, and the importance of looking at what’s around you.’[18] But it is his insistence that the word is always a ‘part, cognizant of the whole’[19] that would be the most important lesson she would take from Williams, and in her more recent poetry, Armantrout uses synecdoche – a subset of metonymy – to mount a much more explicit challenge to Imagism’s failure to see beyond parts. As Charles Altieri noted in a discussion of Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, there is a notable dilemma faced by any modernist poet seeking to employ ‘metonymic images’:

---

[13] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 40.
[14] Ibid., 45.
[15] Ibid., 57.
[16] Rae Armantrout, ‘Grace’, in *Veil*, 4.

> Once the writer denies both discursive and Romantic symbols, he finds himself trapped in a consciousness like Prufrock’s, maintaining a delicate balance between a variety of metonymic images, all suffused with a nagging sense of how much the images seek to participate in larger wholes or structures of meaning, and a peculiarly empty decadent sense of knowing all, of taking

---

[17] William Carlos Williams, quoted in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 40.

[18] Rae Armantrout, quoted in Paul Holler, ‘An Interview with Rae Armantrout,’ *Bookslut*, July 2010, accessed 27 October 2018. http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_07_016299.php,

[19] Williams, quoted in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 40.

> these fragments as total order.[20]

Lawrence Rainey similarly noted the frequency with which Eliot delegates action to ‘dissevered body parts via synecdoche,’[21] and although Edward Larrissy insisted of ‘Prufrock’ that ‘those imagistic parts do not sit at all ill with the others, for the whole poem works to convey to us that part is subservient to the aim of representing a state of mind,’[22] there is little sense of these parts as ‘participat[ing] in larger … structures of meaning.’ The cyclical, repetitive nature of Prufrock’s observations expose his crippling inability to see beyond ‘days of hands’, ‘arms and legs’, ‘voices dying’, ‘arms that are braceleted and white’, or ‘a pair of ragged claws’,[23] and at the poem’s close, the overriding feeling remains one of fragmentation rather than of a coherent ‘state of mind’. Arguably the most problematic instance of a poet taking ‘fragments as total order’ is found not in Eliot, however, but in in Pound’s early Imagist verse, of which Graham Hough has observed that ‘there is in Pound’s practice and theory at this time a positivism, a defiant insistence on the surface of things, and an insistence that the surface of things is all.’[24] Nowhere is this positivism more apparent than in ‘The Encounter’, in which the female protagonist is at once aestheticized and reduced to a ‘paper napkin’:

> All the whole 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.[25]

Even Andrew Thacker – a critic admiring of Pound’s Imagist poetry – has admitted that in this instance Pound adopts a ‘strategy that reduces her to mere fingers, a synecdoche that then diminishes the woman still further by comparison with the disposable, though possibly sensuous, napkin.’[26] It would be difficult to interpret the poem as evidence of Pound desiring the poem’s object of interest to ‘hold up their end of the conversation’. The focus remains very much on the (male) poet’s gaze as it transforms the woman first into a pair of eyes and subsequently into those ‘sensuous’ fingers. Where Pound continued to employ what Marjorie Perloff called ‘metonymic linkages’[27] as well as (in Pound’s words) ‘true metaphor, that is interpretative metaphor, or image,’[28] Armantrout remains suspicious of the power dynamics inherent to the latter trope, famously remarking to Lyn Hejinian that ‘metaphor is like one thing swallowing another: the bulge of the antelope in the boa’s midriff.’[29] In fact she has spoken repeatedly of her disdain for the ‘hyperextended and contrived metaphor,’[30] the ‘totalizing metaphor;’[31] the ‘tenacious and all-absorbing metaphor,’[32] as if associating the figure with coercive ‘totalizing’ power structures more generally, making it unsurprising that her preference should be for a figure less reliant upon power-structured relationships. As Altieri has noted, for Roman Jakobson, ‘metonymic thought [is] based on contiguity rather than similitude. Relationships derive not from structural patterns but from connections or associations perceived in time or space.’[33] Armantrout’s preference for foregrounding ‘connections or associations’ is evident throughout her critical prose, such as when she remarked of her own verses:

---

[20] Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind,’ 106.

[21] Lawrence Rainey, ‘Pound or Eliot: whose Era?,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, 99 (see Intro., n. 11).

[22] Ibid., 58.

[23] T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969, reissued 2004), 13-17.

[24] Hough, *Image and Experience*, 13 (see Intro., n. 9).

[25] Ezra Pound, ‘The Encounter’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1977), 53.

> The relation between stanza and stanza or section and section is often quite oblique, multiple or partial. This isn’t an accident. It’s a way to explore the relation of part to whole. This relation is a vexed one. Does the part represent the whole?’[34]

---

[26] Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, 58 (see Intro., n. 54).
[27] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 17.
[28] Ezra Pound, quoted in Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry,* 37.
[29] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 105.
[30] Ibid., 41.
[31] Ibid., 41.
[32] Ibid., 42.
[33] Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind,’ 104.
[34] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 62.

In *Money Shot* (2011), a volume she once declared as raising 'the question of what constitutes an entity or unit,'[35] this 'vexed' relationship between part and whole is subtly interrogated in 'The Given', quoted here in its entirety, in which a single 'bubble' takes on greater significance than is apparent at first sight:

> Given potassium enough
> and time,
> The bougainvillea explodes
>
> into pink
> papier-mâché boxes.
>
> *
> Availability bias.
>
> *
> "The risk
> of a bubble bursting
>
> should be reflected
> in the price…"[36]

The air of scientific authority to the opening declaration: 'Given potassium enough / and time' quickly gives way to an altogether more unnerving atmosphere thanks to the strange vision of bougainvillea flowers 'explod[ing]' into 'pink / papier- mâché boxes', one that harks back to Williams in its desire to parallel the Cubist fragmentation of the natural object into tangible, discrete units. Armantrout's transformation of flowers into 'papier-mâché' – a technique involving bits of torn-up newspaper – is especially close to Cubism's use of fragments to create a new wholes, and although Joseph N. Riddel has argued that 'Cubism frustrates our attempt to decipher the sign in terms of referential meaning,'[37] in this instance, we are reminded of Jakobson's more accurate observation that in Cubism, '"everything is based on relationship" and interaction between parts and wholes, between colour and shape, between the representation and the represented.'[38] For if Armantrout looks to create a kind of Cubist portrait here, her representational strategies, although characteristically opaque, do not 'frustrate interpretation' altogether. The term 'papier-mâché' makes us think of something papered over – an entity delicate and likely to break – anticipating the poem's imminent shift from foregrounding the natural object to the murkier world of finance in which cracks are routinely papered over in the hope that someone else will pick up the pieces. While the bougainvillea flowers take on a tangible three-dimensionality quality in transforming into pink 'boxes', Armantrout is less interested in rendering the contours of the object itself (as is so often the case in Imagism) than in contrasting the vivid tactility of these flowers with the insubstantial nature of the 'New Economy' she evokes in the poem's third section: one that, in Matthias Regan's terms, is governed by a 'form of capital that requires the ceaseless movement of nothing more tangible than information.'[39]

---

[35] Rae Armantrout, quoted in Ben Lerner, 'Rae Armanrout,' *BOMB* no. 114 (2010): 79.

[36] Rae Armantrout, 'The Given', in *Money Shot* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 4. All quotations from Rae Armantrout's *Money Shot* are taken from this edition.

[37] Riddel, *The Inverted Bell,* 17 (see chap. 3, n. 87).

We are forced to do something of a double take at this point, to think back to the poem's title 'The Given' with its connotations of inevitability, and note the way it now seems to point forward to the foregone conclusion of the 'bubble burst[ing]'. Moreover, Armantrout's strange isolation of the phrase 'Availability bias' as a unit in and of itself is suddenly illuminated by its context. This psychological phenomenon, in which we misrepresent the likelihood of circumstances arising based on what information is more ready 'available' to us, is emblematic of our tendency to obscure complex information in the name of efficiency, and such a 'mental shortcut' – one that usually results in a miscalculation of the level of risk – provides obvious parallels with the reckless gambling of the bankers trading risky, sub-prime mortgages. Just as it is a 'given' that in time the flowers will 'explode' into bloom, so it was inevitable that the 'bubble' of the housing market would burst and leave a trail of devastation in its wake. Even within the narrow confines on a ten-line poem, Armantrout points to the realities of a globalised economy in which a single 'unit' – a risky loan, a single bank – can lead to the collapse of the entire financial market in one of the more grimly ironical instances of the inseparability of the part and the whole.

---

[38] Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 4.

[39] Matthias Regan, Review of *A Wild Salience: The Writing of Rae Armantrout* by Tom Beckett, *Chicago Review* 47, no. 1 (2001): 122.

This fascination with the relationship between parts and wholes is a recurring theme in the poet's critical prose. 'As we know from physics, and from neuroscience,' Armantrout has declared, 'any single object we will ever see is, in fact, a buzzing multiplicity which we have found it practical to identify as a single entity.'[40] Of her poem 'The Ark', the poet similarly maintained that it represented a 'playing around with the tension between one and the many. Both religion and science want to trace everything back to one point, be it Eve, the first true Homo sapiens, Babel, the Big Bang. They're telling us that origin is singular.'[41] This conflict is also evident in 'Colony', a poem which begins by ruminating upon the relationship of a single particle to the dark matter surrounding it and ends with an insistence that a single jellyfish is in fact a 'colony' of its own:

As if
the space around
each particle were filled
with countless
virtual particles

*

And the Lord said,

"I am aware
of weighing options,

of dither,

but the moment of decision
has always remained obscure."

*

Which one of these

---

[40] Lerner, 'Rae Armantrout,' *BOMB*, 80.

[41] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 109.

do you most closely resemble?

Green stucco bungalow,

four brown gargoyles
on its flat roof.

Beehive Diva;

Rehab Idol.

*

Semi-transparent,

each

stinging jelly
is a colony.[42]

Armantrout’s use of asterisks to essentially divide the text into four semi-independent ‘units’ immediately signals the need for us to establish ‘connections or associations’ between parts and wholes. But where Imagism takes these fragments as ‘total order’, Armantrout ensures an atmosphere of indeterminacy by isolating the conjecture ‘As if’ as a single ‘unit’, foregrounding the act of comparison itself, as if to highlight contemporary scientific discourse as being as reliant upon abstract speculation as it is upon tangible, concrete data. It is telling that Armantrout has expressed some dismay at Steve Evan’s description of her poetry as displaying a ‘keen-eyed objectivism,’[43] and we detect here a poet more interested in the strained relationship between the concrete and the abstract – a single atom and the ‘countless virtual particles’ that make up the cosmos – than in the modernist desire to reach a what Altieri called a ‘presentational realism’ mirroring ‘a new realism in science’.[44] Similarly, although the second stanza appears to move us into the more familiar territory of a religious sermon, as is typical of Armantrout’s humorous usurping of biblical narratives, here we have the ‘Lord’ as a kind of Prufrockian ‘dither[er]’, caught in an endless cycle of ‘weighing options’ rather than reaching the decisive ‘moment of decision’.

---

[42] Rae Armantrout, ‘Colony’, in *Money Shot*, 2.
[43] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 119.
[44] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* 3.

As a precursor to Armantrout’s desire for ‘doubleness’, what she calls a ‘Cheshire Poetics’, Altieri has observed the way in which Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ ‘embodies both the esthetic (sic) strategies of the objective, presentational image and the problems created by these strategies.’[45] In a similar vein, ‘Colony’ utilises the ‘connections or associations’ foregrounded by synecdoche at the same time as exposing the figure’s potential to be equally as reductive as ‘totalizing metaphor’. In the poem’s third section or ‘unit’, Armantrout mimics the vapid tone of contemporary women’s magazines by asking: ‘Which one of these / do you most closely resemble?’ before producing the incongruous, comic figures of a ‘Beehive Diva’ and ‘Rehab idol’, terms that expose the poet’s derision toward the modern phenomenon of turning people into branded commodities. Just as Dickens’s famous synecdoche of the ‘hand’ symbolising a human factory worker epitomises what Armantrout called the ‘interventions of capitalism into consciousness,’[46] so this non-sequitur pokes fun at the idea that these vapid caricatures mined from the vapid world of celebrity culture could possibly ‘resemble’ the complexity of human personality. Throughout *Money Shot*, we sense the poet’s discomfort at the ease with which we substitute wholes for parts in the name of expediency, but this is not to be mistaken for what Andrew Christopher West has called the poet’s ‘heartfelt nostalgia for [and] profound faith in an unmediated experience of the world.’[47] If anything, her poems are explicit in demonstrating how all forms of discourse – religious, scientific, financial – are necessarily mediated and distorted. Her employment of synecdoche should be understood as reflecting her belief that ‘experience feels somehow incomplete’:

---

[45] Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind,’ 106.

[46] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 120.

[47] Andrew Christopher West, ‘Metaphor in Rae Armantrout’s *Veil*,’ *Amerikastudien / America Studies* 56, no. 3 (2011): 407.

> I sense that it feels that way to most other people as well. That could be what’s worst or best about humans. We always think there must be something *more*, something else. That’s why my poems sometimes end suddenly, perhaps without punctuation, certainly without a sense of true conclusion. They are leaning out into what’s missing.[48]

It is easy to see why Armantrout should be suspicious of the image, epitomising as it does the tendency to translate the ‘buzzing multiplicity’ of objects and sensory data into a single, cohesive entity. In ‘Prayers’, Armantrout ‘leans out into what’s missing’ by envisaging escape from a modern world pervaded by militarised discourse of ‘targets’ and ‘torture’:

All we ask

is that our thinking

sustain momentum,
identify targets.

The pressure
in my lower back
rising to be recognised
as pain.

The blue triangles
on the rug
repeating.

Coming up,
a discussion
on the uses
of torture.

The fear
that all *this*
will end.

The fear
that it won’t.[49]

Armantrout has spoken of a desire to have her sentences ‘veer suddenly’[50] into different territory, and here, in what is the second ‘unit’ of the poem, the seemingly-innocent desire for ‘thinking’ to ‘sustain momentum’ is quickly warped into the military use of ‘identify[ing] targets'. The title 'Prayers' is something of a ruse, then, preparing us for a religious meditation of some kind only to confront us with the language of modern warfare and surveillance. In a 2009 interview with Lynn Keller, Armantrout observed of her more recent work:

---

[48] Natalia Carbajosa, ‘An Interview to Rae Armantrout,’ (*sic*) *Jot Down,* 2012, accessed 27 October 2018. https://www.jotdown.es/2012/03/an-interview-to-rae-armantrout/.

[49] Armantrout, ‘Prayers’, in *Money Shot*, 8.

[50] Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 109.

> there are longer sentences as maybe a little less abrupt jump-cutting, and I don't know why that's happening. I don't know if it's because I'm getting older or because I'm less afraid to carry one thought through, but I'm finding that there are longer, quasi-narrative patches in my poetry now.'[51]

In this late poem, we similarly find Armantrout progressing parataxis to a more fluid, almost discursive line. In the depiction of 'pressure / in my lower back / rising to be recognised / as pain', we find a 'following through' of a single thought that captures the gradual and tentative move toward comprehension – what she calls elsewhere a 'lag-time' between feeling and recognition of that feeling as 'pain' – more effectively than could an overlay of fragmented 'parts'. In this moment of lucid 'quasi-narrative', Armantrout establishes a palpable conflict between the fragility of the human body under stress and the body politic, the intimacy of an individual speaker experiencing pain and the shockingly unemotional 'discussion on the uses of torture' overheard on network news. Where Riddell insisted that 'Williams's world flattens out into a chaos of random but related particulars',[52] these 'longer sentences' Armantrout permits in this later verse reveal that she is not merely interested in establishing connections between *parts*, as in the empiricist project, but rather the relationship between 'particulars' and 'larger wholes and structures of meaning'. In the final lines, we recognise how the sudden, seemingly incongruous attention paid to the 'blue triangles / on the rug / repeating' exists in dialogue with the speaker's despair that the daily cycle of news, so that the poem ends not by stressing the juxtaposition of fragmented parts, but a 'fictive correspondence' between the private, domestic realm and the 'pressure' of reality. Although the title of her

---

[51] Rae Armantrout, quoted in Lyn Keller, 'An Interview with Rae Armantrout,' *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 2 (2009): 231.

[52] Joseph Riddel, quoted in *Williams and the Language of Poetry*, 18 (see chap. 2, n. 37).

*New and Selected Poems*, ‘*Partly*’[53] suggests a focus upon ‘details’, in this late work, we see a poet refusing Pound’s credo that the ‘surface of things is all’, recognising that fragments can never be taken as ‘total order’, and revealing that particulars are always ‘parts / of some larger being’.[54]

## II

Midway through a witty apostrophe from *The Cloud Corporation* entitled ‘To his Detriment’, Donnelly’s speaker has a sudden revelation as to their own misfortune ‘somewhere over lunch, as the whole becomes / discernible through the parts I’m given access to’.[55] Tucked away within one of the poet’s characteristically elaborate sentences, this insight into the integrity of ‘the whole’ is more than an offhand observation: as with Armantrout, Donnelly remains preoccupied with the difficult relationship between parts and wholes, the ‘luminous detail’ and the context it so often overlooks. As one of the few contemporary poets to call themselves a ‘post-Romantic’,[56] Donnelly remains sceptical of the Imagist claims to take fragments as ‘total order’, and in the volume’s opening poem ‘The New Intelligence’, written after the poet’s diagnosis of Ménière’s Syndrome and a series of clinical tests to determine if the condition was terminal, we see the first instance of the poet’s discomfort with what he calls ‘the permanent dusk of the particular’. Beginning with a state of post-lapsarian despondency as the speaker stands ‘complacent at the window overlooking the garden’, doubting if they have ‘time / or strength for sentences,’[57] four stanzas in, they are forced to ‘admit’:

---

[53] Rae Armantrout, *Partly: New and Selected Poems* 2001-2015 (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).
[54] Armantrout, ‘Following’, in *Money Shot*, 44.
[55] Timothy Donnelly, ‘To His Detriment’, in *The Cloud Corporation* (London: Picador, 2011), 90. All quotations from Timothy Donnelly’s *The Cloud Corporation* are taken from this edition.
[56] Timothy Donnelly, ‘Timothy Donnelly on *The Cloud Corporation*, Romanticism, and “The Historical Sense”,’ *Guernica*: *A Magazine of Global Arts and Politics*, 4 March 2011. accessed 27 October 2018. https://www.guernicamag.com/timothy_donnelly_on_poetry_x_a/.
[57] Donnelly, ‘The New Intelligence’, in *The Cloud Corporation*, 3.

> that what falls
> falls solitarily, lost in the permanent dusk of the particular.
> That the mind that fear and disenchantment fatten
>
> comes to boss the world around it, morbid as the damp-
> fingered guest who rearranges the cheeses the minute the host
> turns to fix her a cocktail. A disease of the will, the way
>
> false birch branches arch and interlace from which
> hands dangle last leaf-parchments and a very large array
> of primitive bird-shapes.[58]

Where Armantrout’s examination of part and whole takes place within minimal, often paratactic ‘units’, Donnelly’s ‘metonymic linkages’ – to a greater extent even than those of C.K. Williams – are dependent upon an elaborate, hypotactic syntax that ensures the individual ‘particular’ is always framed within ‘the world around it’. In this instance, the speaker takes on the role of the ‘solitary’ part, navigating their new-found alienation from their surroundings as ‘reality’ blurs into a ‘vagueness at the centre’; a world drained of all colour and energy in which we find ‘A door without mystery, / a room without theme.’[59] In keeping with this sense of opacity, navigating Donnelly’s syntax here requires a certain amount of labour as we are made to work to follow the multiple trains of thought the poet keeps in play: the ‘dusk of the particular,’ the ‘damp- / fingered guest’, the ‘hands’ dangling ‘last leaf parchments’. The choice of tercet form, the hidden rhymes (‘way’ / ‘array’), and the dense, knotted syntax – as intricate as the ‘arched and interlaced’ branches on which the speaker ruminates – brings to mind Wallace Stevens and the desire not only to respond to ‘the pressure of reality’, but his belief that ‘Reality is a cliché / From which we escape by metaphor.’[60] Far from minimising the ‘totalizing’ effects of metaphor, Donnelly consciously exploits the ‘structural relationships’ inherent to the figure as a means of interrogating the ‘vexed’ relationship between mind and world, and in these lines, we see the ease with which

---

[58] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 3.

[59] Ibid., 3.

[60] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1977), 768, 920.

Donnelly mediates between synecdochic visions of guests reduced to their 'damp-finger[s]' and birds as 'pasted feathers', and the witty personification of the mind as an obsessive-compulsive who 'rearranges the cheeses the minute the host / turns to fix her a cocktail'.

Donnelly once remarked that 'we're always creating reality, whether or not we admit it to ourselves,'[61] and just as Peter Hatler noted that many of Williams longer, 'looser' poems 'explore the tension between the recalcitrant object-world and the "design" or order imposed on it,'[62] Donnelly's vision of a mind that cannot help but 'boss the world around it' exemplifies his belief that the object-world is less 'recalcitrant' than we would like to believe. In an interview with the online magazine *Prac Crit*, the poet remarked that he 'had some trouble with what you might call the basic idea of Objectivism: that there's an art that could be devoid of a certain subjectivity … that didn't feel the necessary particularity of its origins.'[63] In 'The New Intelligence', the premise of an art that can 'hold something still, and external to the self,'[64] in Bergmann Loizeaux's words; that can separate the fluctuations of the mind from the living environment, starts to look as artificial as the 'false birch branches'[65] upon which the speaker muses. In the penultimate stanza, they come to realise:

> That the goal of objectivity depends upon one's faith
> in the accuracy of one's perceptions, which is to say
> a confidence in the purity of the perceiving instrument.[66]

Though the poet addresses his own perceptual abnormalities here, in a more general sense these lines reveal the naivety of giving too much credence to the 'accuracy of one's perceptions'. Whereas Imagism always strives towards the illusory 'goal of objectivity', Donnelly has little 'faith' in the 'purity of the perceiving instrument' in light of his potentially-fatal diagnosis. By ending on the promise that the speaker will ‘go on living dizzily / hereafter in reality, half-deaf to reality’,[67] the poet transforms Stephen’s metaphor of the ‘pressure’ of reality to more ameliorative ends, vowing to embrace the world’s ‘buzzing multiplicity’ and, in his own art, a form of poetic representation that can accommodate more than the ‘solitary particular’.

---

[61] Donnelly, quoted in 'Three Poets' (see Intro., n. 70).
[62] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 189 (see Intro. 2, n. 74).
[63] Timothy Donnelly, quoted in 'The New Intelligence: Interview by Dai George,' *Prac Crit*, November 2014, accessed 27 October 2018. http://www.praccrit.com/interviews/the-new-intelligence-interview-by-dai-george/.
[64] Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 20 (see chap. 1, n. 19).
[65] Donnelly, 'The New Intelligence', in *The Cloud Corporation*, 3.
[66] Ibid., 4.

This critique of the modernist emphasis on ‘details’ is even more explicit in ‘Chapter for Being Transformed into a Sparrow’ (one of many titles to allude to the Egyptian Book of the Dead) in which Donnelly interrogates the limitations of the static photograph. Where Hatler noted of the Objectivists that ‘the name of the movement itself is directly related to photography,’[68] evident in Zukofsky’s gloss in the original Objectivist manifesto: ‘An Objective: (Optics) – the lens bringing rays from an object to focus,’[69] Donnelly takes a much more sceptical view of the validity of an art form professing to the ‘flatten’ the world into a two-dimensional image. Although the speaker initially marvels at the way ‘Pictures develop / more speedily than ever, in an hour if you ask,’[70] there is a sudden shift in tone as they lament:

> I can’t take it anymore,
> photography. How it flattens memory’s body down
>
> to a roll of surfaces— insistent surfaces; persuasive, yes,
> but not convincing, though they threaten everywhere
> to take the place of, usurping what they’d save, the way
>
> a javelin of lavender, sprung from the close of a once-
> loved book, asserts a dozen verities[71]

We are reminded here of Susan Sontag’s argument that ‘the knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism,’[72] and that ‘only that which narrates can make us understand.'[73] As with Pound's image, the photograph must always be similarly 'sentimental' in its dependence on the isolated fragment divorced from time and history. Barthes's remarks in *Camera Lucida* are similarly useful in illuminating the poet's stance on the medium here. Maintaining that the photograph 'is the absolute Particular … the photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "see", "Here it is"… it cannot escape this pure deictic language,'[74] Barthes's analysis has clear parallels with the Imagist-Objectivist project. Speaking of Williams's poem 'January Morning', Armantrout observed of his treatment of 'the sun, dipping into the avenues / streaking the tops of the irregular red houslets', that 'Williams has nothing much to say about these things; he only points to their being'[75] – a 'pure deictic language', in Barthes's terms – that speaks of Williams's proximity to Stieglitz's *Camera Work*. In contrast, Donnelly recoils from the shallowness of an art form based upon the 'absolute Particular'. Unlike the reductive, 'flatten[ing]' tendencies of the photograph, the poet's long, meandering lines become the means to 'lean out into what's missing', providing the antidote to what Susan Sontag called the photograph's 'view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery.'[76] The immediacy of the 'luminous' image may be 'persuasive', Donnelly admits, but it can never tell us anything of the process that went into the making:

---

[67] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 4.
[68] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts,* 188.
[69] Ibid., 188.
[70] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 43.
[71] Ibid., 43.
[72] Sontag, *On Photography*, 24 (see chap. 2, n. 33).

> never how it felt, what anxiety or rapture
> conducted or conducts it, what faith in what ability
>
> of anything to capture, what brought it to begin with,
> what labor of the blood, what accident of lavender
> dismantled now on the carpet, what measure of the spirit
>
> and of its having been removed, which is perhaps
> now waving through a field, and that from which it grew:
> keep waving through that field, keep waiting, please.[77]

---

[73] Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.
[74] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 4, 5.
[75] Rae Armantrout, *Collected Prose*, 25.
[76] Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.
[77] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 44.

It is difficult not to read these lines as a meta-textual commentary on Donnelly’s own poetic form, forgoing the ‘persuasive’ pull of Imagism’s ‘insistent surfaces’ in favour of a technique accommodating the ‘anxiety’ and ‘rapture’ of the poet’s own thoughts. Rather than foreground the vivid immediacy of the concrete detail, Donnelly desires a form of representation that can capture ‘how it felt’, ‘what brought it to begin with, / what labor of the blood’, answering Hart Crane’s call for poets to examine the ‘causes (metaphysical)’ of their ‘materials’[78] rather than succumb to the ‘impressionistic’ style of his Imagist contemporaries. Moreover, there is a rhetorical energy to these lines (particularly to the insistent anaphora: ‘what faith’, ‘what labour’ ‘what accident’), that appears to take a side-swipe at Pound’s injunction against rhetoric at the same time as undermining the validity of his semi-mystical ‘image’.

This critique of photography as a ‘pure deictic language’ takes on an even greater urgency in ‘Partial Inventory of Airborne Debris’, a poem responding to the Abu Ghraib photographs of torture and prisoner abuse at the hands of US soldiers. Adopting the form of a legal document, the poem is uncompromising in its exposition of our complicity with state-sanctioned torture:

> *Item.* I stand before me
> in a haze where people
>
> can be made to want to
> make people stand
> precariously on boxes,
>
> arms wide open, strange
> hoods pulled down
> over human faces, little live
>
> wires hooked to various
> parts of the bodies
> ridden on like donkeys,
>
> smeared in feces, stacked
> one on top the other
> for a photo to prolong

---

[78] Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, 220 (see Intro., n. 75).

the swell an accomplishment
    like that engenders.[79]

Donnelly once reflected in an interview upon the manner in which ‘through our own imaginative capacity we do damage to the world outside us. I wanted to think about how unguided or unprincipled imagination can be a sort of disastrous quality.’[80] In these photographs, it seems, we find the most grotesque example of ‘unguided or unprincipled imagination’ at work. It is noticeable that Donnelly breaks the line here much more frequently than elsewhere in the collection, creating Armantrout-like ‘units’ designed to give added weight to each individual word in the phrase, particularly to those active verbs ‘pulled’, ‘hooked’, ‘ridden’, ‘smeared’, ‘stacked’, with their suggestion of an angular contortion of the human body. While these fragments or ‘parts’ are thus given greater emphasis, Donnelly’s elaborate syntax is antithetical to the Imagist ‘nondiscursive juxtaposition of images.’ Indeed, while it is noticeable that Michael Bibby describes his methodology in *Hearts and Minds* as an ‘examin[ation of] the way images, tropes, and symbols of human bodies in activist poetry express views of corporeality, political identity, and modes of resistance as they intersect with and negotiate key ideological struggles of the period’,[81] Donnelly instead has *syntax* do the work of demonstrating the messy entanglement between US-backed torture and our own ‘political identity’. Stretching a single sentence over the course of sixteen lines, the poet ensures that there is a relentlessness to the way each atrocity is ‘stacked / one on top the other’ – ‘strange hoods pulled down over human faces’, prisoners ‘ridden on like donkeys’ – giving us not the ‘partial inventory’ of the poem’s title, but a full catalogue of horror. As Ann Keniston observed in ‘Recipient Unknown: Terrorism and the Other in Post-9/11 American Poetry’, in the most nuanced poetry exploring the aftermath of 9/11, there exists some recognition of the fact that ‘the poet’s access to others’ experiences is partial, especially in the case of other’s learned about through media reports’,[82] but here, we find a delicate negotiation between part and whole; the fragmentary nature of the media evidence and the wider picture of American aggression these photographs expose. In this uncompromising portrait of state-sanctioned violence, what’s emphasised is not ‘images…of human bodies’ as such, but the ‘unknown recipient’, to borrow Keniston’s term – the nameless ‘human faces’ that point to what Alex Danchev called the ‘ethical, political and legal limbo’[83] of the prisoner-of-war camp.

---

[79] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 15-16.

[80] Donnelly, ‘Three Poets,’ *Harper’s Magazine*.

[81] Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds,* 5 (see chap. 4, n. 46).

In ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind’, Altieri appeared almost apologetic when admitting that his critique of modernism’s ‘metonymic images’ wasn’t new, noting ‘it is a commonplace among critics on the left and the right, from Georg Lukaćs to Yvor Winters, that modernism is a very limited literary movement because it denies the full discursive powers of the mind to generalise about and interpret experience.’[84] Critical commonplace it may be, but poetry that is unable to ‘interpret experience’ with any degree of complexity is a failing that goes beyond mere aesthetic preference. As Donnelly demonstrates in these lines, if poetry cannot point to the general as well as the ‘absolute Particular’, if it cannot speculate on the motivations for why people ‘can be made to want to make people’ perform seemingly-inhuman acts of torture, it loses its ability to function as anything other than what Williams called a ‘machine made of words’, and has little chance of sustaining what Altieri calls ‘the intellectual and emotional power to shape identities’ and our ‘relationship to history.’[85]

Crane was arguably the first poet to mount a critique of this complacent dismissal of the whole in favour of the part, and where he noted of the Imagist poet that ‘he is really not interested in the causes (metaphysical) of his materials, their emotional derivations or their utmost spiritual consequences', in Donnelly's 'The Malady that Took the Place of Thinking' – a poem responding to a photograph of the My Lai Massacre – the poet continues his examination the 'consequences' of banishing thought from perception. In a darkly ironical tone, the speaker comes to the realisation:

---

[82] Ann Keniston, ‘Recipient Unknown: Terrorism and the Other in Post-9/11 American Poetry’, in *Terrorism and Literature*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 478.

[83] Alex Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 177.

[84] Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind,’ 102.

[85] Altieri, *Self and Sensibility*, (see chap. 1, n. 153).

> There had seemed to be only one world to adhere to
>
> but now I can see how there really isn't any, just roads
> with signs directing further, towards and away
> from the same humiliating noplace you already are.
>
> […]
>
> If it looks like I'm thinking, I'm not,
> I'm waiting, and I can wait forever to find out why.
>
> If it looked like I was sorry to look at that photograph
> of women and children shot down by an American
> battalion on a bright clear day in March, look again:
>
> with no world to adhere to, there can be no photograph
> no women, no children, and certainly no battalion
> shooting when there was nothing there to begin with.[86]

Speaking of Pound's *Cantos*, Williams praised the work as one that 'ha[d] not been violated by "thinking".'[87] In these lines, in contrast, Donnelly reveals the 'violation' inherent to the Imagist 'dissociation of sensibility' in which perception is divorced from the intellect, *phanopoeia* from *logopoeia*, in Pound's terms. Doing away with what the poet calls elsewhere the 'burden of thinking'[88] when observing a photograph of 'women and children shot down by an American / batallion' demands an almost inhuman level of detachment, recreated here in the poem's deliberately flat tone, insistent repetition, and bluntly monosyllabic diction. Although Barthes's insisted that 'whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see,'[89] this photograph has a material reality, a tangible physical presence that cannot be so easily banished into the ‘void’. While these lines critique the postmodern collapsing of representation into an endless stream of ‘signs directing further’ – the phenomenon Fredric Jameson called the ‘society of the image or the simulacrum and a transformation of the “real” into so many pseudoevents’[90] – more pressingly, the poem is also a damning indictment of the modernist rally cry for an art that ignores what Hass called the ‘ethical activity of perception’.

---

[86] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 4-5.
[87] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 111.
[88] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 19.
[89] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

In his study of Williams, for example, Peter Hatler quotes continually from the visual artists who influenced the poet’s early aesthetic, and appears untroubled by their persistent championing of what John Ruskin called ‘the innocence of the eye.’[91] For Cezanne, he claims, ‘Ideally, the artist is only a receptacle of sensations,’[92] before quoting approvingly his declaration ‘if I’m thinking while I’m painting … all goes to pieces.’[93] Hatler similarly applauds Paul Valéry’s complaint that ‘most people see with their intellect much more often than with their eyes,’[94] and views Williams’s critical prose as sharing affinities with Georges Braque’s outcry against the tendency to ‘perceive things by the intellect only’:

> I have made a great discovery: I no longer believe in anything. Objects don’t exist for me except in so far as a rapport exists between them or between them and myself. When one attains this harmony, one reaches a sort of intellectual non-existence – what I can only describe as a state of peace – which makes everything possible and right.[95]

Hatler appears unfazed by the troubling implications of Braque’s epiphany. But this dismissal of a ‘Cartesian world of rationalism in which … people “perceive things by the intellect only”’[96] reveals not only a misunderstanding of the complexity of human perception, but a readiness to relinquish any ethical responsibility for the things we observe. In ‘The Malady

---

[90] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 48.

[91] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 70.

[92] Ibid., 70.

[93] Ibid., 70.

[94] Ibid., 71.

[95] Hatler, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts*, 68.

[96] Ibid., 69.

That Took the Place of Thinking’, we see just how empty and naïve is Braque’s desire for an ‘intellectual non-existence’ when confronted with a photograph of ‘woman and children shot down by an American / battalion on a bright clear day in March.’ In Donnelly’s dark parody, we find the fitting counterpart to this ‘intellectual non-existence’ in the poet’s revelation that ‘there can be no photograph, / no women, no children … when there was nothing there to begin with.’

Altieri was misguided, then, when he argued of modernist poetry that ‘the achievement, in short, was to keep metonymy but to show how particulars themselves complement and are complemented by a mind brought as close as possible to palpable physical existence.’[97] Where Imagism allows the poet to exist in satisfying proximity to ‘petals on a wet black bough’ and the ‘rainwater’ glazing a red wheelbarrow, in Donnelly’s verse, the mind is brought unnervingly close to what it does *not* want to see. Throughout *The Cloud Corporation*, Donnelly’s expansive, meandering verse line constitutes an attempt to show us the bigger picture in a world where information is continually reduced to the sound bite, the luminous image, the static photograph. For both Armantrout and Donnelly, then, the lyric is neither the concrete object of the Objectivist dream nor the New Critical ‘verbal icon’ in which the text’s conflicts, ironies, and buried metaphors finally coalesce into a harmonious whole, but rather a space in which to interrogate both the ‘buzzing multiplicity’ of the object and the ‘reality it renders intelligible’.[98]

---

[97] Altieri, ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind,’ 110.

[98] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. R.J. White, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Cockburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 30.

# Chapter VIII: ‘To be lost / in an image’: Ocean Vuong and the Limits of Neo-Imagism

*No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old.*

Ezra Pound

The critical and commercial success of Ocean Vuong’s debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), which won the 2016 Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn award, and in the UK, the Forward and T.S. Eliot prizes, is a timely reminder not only of Imagism’s persistence into contemporary practice, but of its enduring appeal to both literary critics and the reading public. Of the unanimously positive reviews the collection has garnered, most have foregrounded Vuong’s imagery: in the *New Statesman*, Paul Batchelor declared ‘Ocean Vuong’s poetry brims with precise, surreal, and exotic imagery’,[1] in *The Guardian*, Kate Kellaway praised the poet’s ‘delicacy and timeless imagery’,[2] while Bill Herbert, awarding Vuong the T.S. Eliot prize, likewise noted the collection’s ‘quite extraordinary imagery.’[3] As these critical assessments indicate, Vuong’s is a style characterised first and foremost by the kind of concentrated visual description inherent to Imagism, a fact that becomes immediately apparent as the reader samples the opening lines of several poems across the collection:

> A finger’s worth of dark from daybreak, he steps
> into a red dress. A flame caught
> in a mirror the width of a coffin. Steel glinting
> in the back of his throat. A flash, a white
> asterisk.[4]

---

[1] Paul Batchelor, ‘Ocean Vuong’s poetry brims with precise, surreal and erotic imagery,’ Review of Ocean Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, *New Statesman*, 18 July 2017, accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/07/ocean-vuongs-poetry-brims-precise-surreal-and-erotic-imagery.

[2] Kate Kellaway, ‘Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong review – violence, delicacy, and timeless imagery,’ *The Guardian*, Tuesday 9 May 201, accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/09/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-ocean-vuong-review.

[3] Sian Cain, ‘T.S. Eliot prize going to Ocean Vuong’s ‘compellingly assured’ debut collection,’ *The Guardian*, Monday 5 January 2018, accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/ts-eliot-prize-goes-to-ocean-vuongs-compellingly-assured-debut-collection.

[4] Ocean Vuong, ‘Trojan’, in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 9. All quotations from Ocean Vuong’s poetry are taken from this edition.

(‘Trojan’)

Afterward, I woke
    into the red dark
to write
    *gia đinh*
on this yellow pad.[5]

(‘Logophobia’)

& this is how we danced: our mothers’
white dresses spilling from our feet, late August

turning our hands dark red.[6]

(‘Homewrecker’)

Red is only black remembering.[7]

(‘Daily Bread’)

I approach a field. A black piano waits
at its center.[8]

(‘Queen Under the Hill’)

This is familiar territory. Vuong’s desire in all these examples is to render atmosphere and mood rather than work through the complexities of an idea, so it is unsurprising to find stanzas characterised by their paratactic syntax, the recognisable Imagist technique of omitting a main verb from a sentence (‘A flash, a white / asterisk.’), a desire for ‘immediacy’ (‘*this* yellow pad’), and a focus upon individual colour (a ‘red dress’, the ‘red dark’, the hands ‘dark red’). Vuong is at his most effective when describing his own childhood memories (‘our mothers’ / white dresses spilling from our feet’), and his tendency to plunge the reader into these visual landscapes *in medias res* creates a sense of dramatic expectation that is quite unlike the static quality of Skipwith Cannell or Richard Aldington’s Imagist efforts. But his aesthetic recalls Randall Jarrell’s remarks of Pound that ‘his talents are primarily lyric – not narrative, certainly not expository or didactic. He is not really a “thinker” at all.’[9] Whatever vivid effects may be said to emerge from these neo-Imagist techniques, the notion of the poet ‘thinking’ through language is not one of them. It is telling that the vast majority of the thirty-five poems that make up the collection are written in the present tense: even when adapting ancient myth, as in ‘Trojan’, Vuong demands that the past be made vividly present (‘he steps into a red dress’), a technique that similarly carries echoes of Pound – as Marjorie Perloff has noted, ‘Pound plays the historian but paradoxically treats the past as though it were here and now.’[10] Although British poet Sarah Howe has claimed that the collection ‘brings a new range of notes to poetry in English’,[11] this is really just the same old Imagism in a different guise.

---

[5] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 77.
[6] Ibid., 19.
[7] Ibid., 72.
[8] Ibid., 48.

In an illuminating essay entitled ‘Will there be peace again? : American and Vietnamese Poetry on the Vietnam/American War’, Subarno Chattarji remarked that: ‘Post-war Vietnam is as complex an entity as it was during the war and there has been a concerted effort ever since the early 1980s to make Vietnamese representations of the war and its aftermath available to an English-reading audience, primarily in the US.’[12] Chattarji noted the need for poetry that takes account of ‘historical complexities often overlooked or exaggerated within the US,’; for ‘Vietnamese voices which create polyphonic counterpoints to the monopoly of American voices’.[13] But as with the early poetry of C.K. Williams and Robert Hass, Vuong’s reliance on a paratactic stream of images makes it difficult for him to employ the ‘analytic intelligence’ his socio-political subject matter demands. In ‘Aubade with Burning City’, the poet depicts the fall of Saigon by juxtaposing fragments of narrative with lines from Irvin

---

[9] Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden and Co.*, 43 (see Intro., n. 73).

[10] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 20 (see chap. 1, n. 109).

[11] Sarah Howe, quoted on the dustjacket of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

[12] Subarno Chattarji, ‘Will there be peace again?: American and Vietnamese Poetry on the Vietnam/American War’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 216.

[13] Ibid., 216.

Berlin’s ‘White Christmas’, a song he tells us was played by Armed Forces Radio as ‘a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American Civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter’ on 29th April 1975:

Milkflower petals in the street
like pieces of a girl’s dress.

*May your days be merry and bright…*

He fills a teacup with champagne, brings it to her lips.
Open, she says.

She opens.
Outside, a soldier spits out
his cigarette as footsteps fill the square like stones
fallen from the sky. *May*
*all your Christmases be white*
as the traffic guard unstraps his holster.

His fingers running down the hem
of her white dress. A single candle.
Their shadows: two wicks.[14]

Fredric Jameson’s notion of postmodernism as ‘a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project,’[15] finds its unfortunate counterpart in Vuong’s depiction of American history here. This style is not comparable to the grammatical compression found in Simic’s ‘The Place’; Vuong is closer to Amy Lowell in his tendency to overwrite – ‘footsteps fill the square like stones / fallen from the sky’ – rather than leave us to fill in the gaps through ‘metonymic linkages’. And if Vuong’s ‘visual mirages’ are means of making history tangibly present rather than abstracted and distant, it is strange that these images should hinder his efforts to present these scenes with any degree of visual clarity. It is difficult to see how a stampede of footsteps on the ground is akin to stones ‘falling from the sky’, just as the superfluous vision of ‘A single candle’ (placed for dramatic effect rather than narrative progression) contradicts Vuong’s subsequent insistence that the figures of the soldier and the girl merge into ‘two: shadows: two wicks’; an image equally incomprehensible in its claim that dark shadows are ‘like’ burning flames. While Vuong could be easily forgiven the odd mixed metaphor, when these vapid images are used to structure an entire poem – as in ‘Aubade with Burning City’ – we see how grimly accurate was Robert von Hallberg’s assessment of the extent to which Pound ‘made a poetic of juxtaposition and image seem unavoidable.’[16]

---

[14] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 10.

[15] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 46 (see chap. 7, n. 86).

In fact, the opening vision of ‘Milkflower petals in the street / like pieces of a girl’s dress’ could almost be a Poundian *hokku,* except instead of the tranquil contemplation of ‘petals on a wet black bough’, Vuong gives us the nightmarish vision of ‘pieces of a girl’s dress’ torn apart by napalm. As well as being the first war to be televised live on American screens, Vietnam is now synonymous with Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize-winning image of Phan Thi Kim Phuc after a napalm attack in Trảng Bàng on 8 June 1972, and Vuong’s compressed rendering of ‘pieces of a girl’s dress’ is designed to be equally as affecting. Michiko Kakutani, writing in the *New York Times,* praised Vuong’s ability ‘to capture specific moments in time with photographic clarity.’[17] But this is somewhat disingenuous. Far from achieving a similar degree of realism, ‘Aubade with Burning City’ unwittingly exposes photography’s superior capacity to convey the texture of lived experience. Where Nick Ut was able to capture the exact emotional response of a real human in time, Vuong can only give us the sentimental metaphor of ‘milkflower petals’ as being akin to ‘a girl’s dress’. And where Alex Danchev noted that ‘[t]he classic war photographers have all been portrait photographers *in extremis* … They sought the whites of the eyes, and tried to fathom what they found there’[18] – Don McCullin’s ‘Shell-shocked US Marine, Huy, Vietnam, 1968’ being perhaps the most famous example – in Vuong’s poem, the figures are merely archetypes: ‘a girl’, ‘a soldier’, not fully fleshed-out individuals. Besides, a reader could be forgiven for finding the poet’s attempt to add melodrama to the already-harrowing subject of Vietnamese civilians fleeing from American bombing raids a little distasteful – a strategy to highlight his own descriptive prowess rather than foreground the actual lived experience of those he aims to represent.

---

[16] von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*, 145 (see chap. 7, n. 87).
[17] Michiko Kakutani, ‘Night Sky with Exit Wounds, Verses from Ocean Vuong, *The New York Times*, 9 May 2016.
[18] Alex Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror*, 34 (see chap. 7, n. 83).

And there are further problems. As Vietnam veteran and novelist Wayne Karlin has noted:

> There exists among Americans two stereotypes of the Vietnamese … The first sees the Vietnamese as sadistic and heartless communist robots … The second paints the Vietnamese as saintly, simple-yet-wise warriors, Third World bodhisattvas who speak in fortune cookie platitudes.[19]

Unfortunately, more often than not, Vuong’s choice of poetic expression panders to this stereotype of the Vietnamese as speaking in ‘fortune cookie platitudes’. In ‘Headfirst’, the reader finds a series of semi-aphoristic expressions alongside a bombardment of rhetorical questions in what is tantamount to a will to poetry:

> Don’t you know? A mother’s love
>                                                 neglects pride
>                                     the way fire
> neglects the cries
>             of what it burns. My son,
>                                                 even tomorrow
> you will have today. Don’t you know?[20]

Pound once declared that ‘great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.’[21] By contrast, these lines appear curiously devoid of substance. The comparison of a ‘mother’s love’ to a fire that ‘neglects the cries / of what it burns’ seems to offer the promise of resonant meaning – before we realise that the comparison is both clichéd (the mother as passionate, fiery, all-consuming, potentially destructive and yet life-giving), and oddly detached: this is not any tangible human being but simply ‘a mother’, just as elsewhere, we find continual mention of ‘the body’, ‘the girl’, ‘the soldier’; even the poet’s father is reduced to the shop-worn archetypal figure of Odysseus. Where Imagism always risked simplifying the very processes of visual perception it was designed to make vividly present, Vuong’s neo-Imagism goes further in reducing human character and feeling to a series of stereotypes; ‘a mother’s love’,[22] the dutiful ‘son’. For all that Imagism claims to be about a ‘passion for accuracy’,[23] in Simic’s terms, such vapid, tautological expressions as ‘even tomorrow / you will have today’ only highlight Vuong’s inability to pinpoint the texture of thought and feeling with the dexterity of Rae Armantrout or Timothy Donnelly. And where Chattarji notes that a contemporaneous poem such as Viet Thanh Nguyen’s ‘Untitled’ articulates something of the ‘historical complexities’ he sees as essential to successful Vietnam-era poetry, documenting a speaker ‘yearning to find a clue / in the ash to my people, / … for an invisible world / that stretches with the years’,[24] Vuong is unable to offer a vision of *collective* experience, reflect upon the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the subsequent diaspora, or to break what Chattarji noted to be the ‘clichés of a pastoral Vietnam that is pounded by war’ with its Vietnamese woman as ‘patriotic providers of sons’.[25]

---

[19] Wayne Karlin, cited in ‘Will there be peace again?’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, 217.

[20] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 19.

[21] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 23 (see Intro., n. 5).

As ‘Aubade with Burning City’ demonstrates, in many respects Vuong is hindered by subscribing to a purer Imagism than that of Pound. Where ‘In a Station of the Metro’ is dependent upon the removal of the conjunction in favour of a colon, Vuong’s inclusion of the word ‘like’ in the opening simile ‘Milkflower petals in the street / like pieces of a girl’s dress’, foregrounding the act of comparison itself, reveals the poet as working in the earlier, less sophisticated theoretical model offered by T.E. Hulme, whose notorious privileging of ‘fancy’ over the imagination has made its way into mainstream literary criticism. As Simon Brittan’s interpretation of ‘Above the Dock’ so aptly demonstrates, Hulme continues to be read as an exemplar of how to present 'a single, very clear image', and of the even more entrenched belief that, in Brittan's terms, 'by using ordinary language to create vivid images, art can beautify the ordinary'.[26] In his 1907 essay 'Notes on Language and Style,' Hulme justified his belief in analogy as the master trope of poetry, declaring that it 'enable[d] one to dwell and linger on a point of excitement.'[27] With some degree of urgency, he warned: 'Never, never, never a simple statement. It has no effect. Always must have analogies (sic), which make an other-world-through-the-glass effect, which is what I want.' [28] There are few formal devices more 'simplistic' than the bare analogy, however, and as in his own poem 'Above the Dock', the figure often goes hand in hand with an infantilising treatment of the object that reduces perception to making striking visual comparisons.[29] Hulme's belief that 'beauty does not exist by itself in nature, waiting to be copied, only organised pieces of cinders'[30] – the same anti-mimetic stance we saw in Braque – finds its contemporary counterpart in Vuong's obsessive mutation of 'the "thing", whether subjective or objective' into an ever-more-elaborate stream of analogies. So the poet's father's 'voice' is 'like a skeleton' ('Threshold'),[31] a 'faux Rolex' watch 'dims / like a miniature moon behind her hair' ('A Little Closer to the Edge'),[32] a figure 'watches' the sea 'open like a thief staring into his own heart' ('Immigrant Haibun'),[33] a man enters a room 'like a shepherd stepping out of a

---

[22] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 19.

[23] Simic, *Wonderful Words: Silent Truth*, 74 (see chap. 3, n. 3).

[24] Viet Thanh Nguygen, ‘Untitled’, cited in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, 218.

[25] Chattarji, *The Edinburgh Companion*, 217.

---

[26] Brittan, Poetry, Symbol, and Allegory, 184 (see chap. 1, n. 100).

[27] T.E. Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style,' in *T. E. Hulme: Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2003), 51.

[28] Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 46.

[29] The British 'Martian' poetry of Craig Raine, Christopher Reid and David Sweetman is equally dependent on outlandish visual metaphor. In Raine's second collection *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), widely taken to be the exemplar of the style, the poet declares that 'a glinting beetle on its back / struggled like an orchestra / with Beethoven', and elsewhere, that 'Dead dandelions bald as drumsticks / swaying by the roadside' are 'like Hare Krishna pilgrims / bowing to the Juggernaut', a technique Sean O'Brien has accurately described as 'loudly pointing at things without quite seeing them.' (*The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1997), 224).

[30] Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 56.

[31] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 3.

[32] Ibid., 12.

[33] Ibid., 14.

Caravaggio' ('Odysseus Redux'),[34] and in a poem with the Blyean title 'In Newport I watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin's Wet Back', a 'dolphin's eye' is seen to be 'gasping like a newborn's / mouth',[35] recalling the early pseudo-surrealist efforts of C.K. Williams the poet was sensible enough to abandon.

Where Sean O'Brien has praised Elizabeth Bishop's tendency to 'let the subject be itself rather than subject to the allegorising habit which can stifle experience until it is merely exemplary,' noting that 'a vast self-awareness is directed at letting things be – landscapes, climates of feeling, people',[36] this is decidedly not the goal of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. The relentlessness with which the body, the landscape, and even the self ('Sometimes I feel like an ampersand')[37] is transformed into a visual analogy is reminiscent of Yvor Winters's deluded pronouncement that 'a perception…does not really exist until it becomes an image.'[38] Far from 'making the stone stony' in the manner of Russian Formalism, Vuong's 'allegorising habit' only highlights how often his banal images are placed side by side with the fantastical. As with the strange transformation of the soldier and the girl into 'two shadows: two wicks' in 'Aubade with Burning City', it is impossible to envisage the human body as an 'ampersand', just as it is difficult to see how a 'dolphin's eye' bears any resemblance to the mouth of a newborn child. But then again, these metaphors are designed to concentrate attention on Vuong's dexterity with metaphor rather than bring us closer to 'the thing itself'. As Natalie Pollard has noted of the British Martian Poets[39] – in every sense the British counterpart to the American neo-Imagism-cum-Surrealism – such poets

---

[34] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 75.
[35] Ibid., 22.
[36] Sean O'Brien, '*The Casual Perfect* by Lavinia Greenlaw,' *The Guardian*, Friday 14 October 2011, accessed 24 November 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/casual-perfect-lavinia-greenlaw-poetry-review.
[37] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 15.
[38] Winters, 'The Testament of a Stone,' 7 (see chap. 1, n. 62).
[39] See n. 19.

‘assertively render the world strange, whilst dropping hints about their admirable gift for making that departure’.[40]

Such a penchant for visual conceits leaves little in the way of real flesh-and-blood reality to be found. Although Andrew MacMillan has claimed that Vuong reveals ‘the body’s appetites for destruction and love’[41] in this collection, everywhere we find talk of the body as an intangible entity rather than a physical presence: ‘the body is a blade that sharpens / by cutting’ (‘Headfirst’),[42] ‘the body is more than / a portion of night’ (‘Torso of Air’),[43] ‘The body was made soft / to keep us / from loneliness’ (‘Into the Breach’),[44] ‘I thought love was real / & the body imaginary’(‘Eurydice’).[45] Such effects speak to a deeper anxiety over the need to sound ‘poetic’ at every turn, and we sense Vuong’s strenuous attempts to prevent his verse from ever appearing, to use Kirsch’s term, ‘ploddingly prosaic.’[46] Even in a sequence composed of prose, Vuong can’t resist closing with a haiku:

> Summer in the mind.
> God opens his other eye:
> two moons in the lake.[47]
>
> (‘Immigrant Haibun’)

Ironically, while Vuong is keen to stress the ‘immediacy’ of experience elsewhere, here, where such clarity is more obviously warranted, we find an oddly vague, generalised depiction of ‘summer in the mind’ reminiscent of Deep Imagism in the way it languishes in the collective unconscious rather than in an external, empirical reality. Then again, Haiku and Imagism have been synonymous ever since Pound looked to Japanese poetry for the concision he required from ‘In A Station of the Metro’. In *The Imagist Poets*, Andrew

---

[40] Natalie Pollard, ‘Stretching the Lyric: The Anthology Wars, Martianism and After,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.104.

[41] Andrew McMillan, quoted on the dustjacket of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

[42] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 19.

[43] Ibid., 53.

[44] Ibid., 35.

[45] Ibid., 45.

[46] Kirsch, *The Modern Element*, 110.

[47] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 13.

Thacker notes the 'employment of images of Orientalism' (alongside the use of a 'visual concrete language') as one of the 'two significant aspects that help delineate the modernism of Imagist verse.'[48] Although he balks at Eliot's tone-deaf remark that 'Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time,'[49] noting that such a reading 'cannot stand sustained examination in today's post-colonial world,'[50] Thacker nevertheless appears unfazed by the Imagist tendency to create 'an imaginary geography of the orient,'[51] merely commenting that it constitutes a 'striking feature of Imagist poetry.' In 'Immigrant Haibun', Vuong likewise shows little hesitation in orientalising his own narrative. While the earlier prose passages are equally reliant upon imagistic detail – 'White hyacinths gasped in the embassy lawn. The sky was September blue'[52] – the closing haiku appears designed to add an exotic flavour to an otherwise familiar immigrant narrative. Despite its Japanese origins, Haiku has become a form fully assimilated into the American mainstream, and as Karen Jackson Ford has observed, 'Haiku was booming in the post-World War II counterculture … and was one of the poetic forms taught by social activists working with prisoners in writing programs … for many American poets at the time, haiku presented a vivid image in seventeen syllables.'[53] As is clear from Vuong's contemporary efforts, such a reductive reading of the art form remains the norm, and the resounding critical praise for Vuong's 'precise, surreal, and erotic imagery' demonstrates just how deeply ingrained is the appetite for poetry that presents us with nothing more than 'a vivid image'.

As with Denise Levertov, in Vuong's most successful poems, there is evidence that he recognises the need to progress beyond Imagism's paratactic handling of vivid images. In 'Because It's Summer', syntax and enjambment combine to create a dizzying narrative of a youthful sexual encounter in a way that captures the interconnectedness of lust, loneliness and coming-of-age anxiety without the melodrama of a poem such as ‘Aubade with Burning City’:

---

[48] Thacker, *The Imagist Poets*, 53 (see Intro., n.54).
[49] Ibid., 58.
[50] Ibid, 58.
[51] Ibid., 59.
[52] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 13.
[53] Karen Jackson Ford, 'The Fight and the Fiddle in Twentieth-Century African American Poetry,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, 394 (see Intro., n. 51).

> you’ve come
> this far to be no one & it’s June
> until morning you’re young until a pop song
> plays in a dead kid’s room water spilling in
> from every corner of summer & you want
> to tell him *it’s okay* that the night is also a grave
> we climb out of but he’s already fixing
> his collar the cornfield a cruelty steaming
> with manure you smear your neck with
> lipstick you dress with shaky hands[54]

Here, what’s foregrounded is not the immediacy of the images *per se*, but rather Vuong’s kinetic syntax. These long, unruly sentences, spilling continually over onto the proceeding line, make it impossible for us to rest content with a single image, instead creating a kaleidoscopic assortment of narrative detail that takes us far beyond the ‘evocative power [of] developed image and metaphor’ Altieri noted of the typical workshop poem. Similarly, in a prose section from ‘On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous’, it is evident just what is gained when Vuong utilises his dexterity with narrative alongside a longer, more fluid line, resulting in a much more three-dimensional portrait of his subject than is possible in his more Imagistic poems:

> I wanted to disappear – so I opened the door to a stranger’s
> car. He was divorced. He was sobbing into his hands (hands
> that tasted like rust). The pink breast-cancer ribbon on his key
> chain swayed into the ignition. Don’t we touch each other just to
> prove we are still here? I was still here once. The moon, distant &
> flickering, trapped itself in beads of sweat on my neck. I let the
> fog spill through the cracked window & cover my fangs. When I
> left, the Buick kept sitting there, a dumb bull in pasture, its eyes
> searing my shadow onto the side of suburban houses.[55]

In those later lines especially, it is clear how the hypotactic subordination of clauses (‘When I left, the Buick kept sitting there, a dumb bull in pasture’) allows Vuong to articulate a much more complex strain of thought than is evident elsewhere, giving form to the speaker’s gradual and tentative move towards comprehension of his lust and sympathy for this older man, his own feelings of self-disgust, and the romantic longing for something more profound than the steady rows of ‘suburban houses’. Admittedly, there is something of the ‘fortune-cookie platitude’ flavour to the rhetorical invocation: ‘Don’t we touch each other just to prove we are still here?’, and the ‘distant & flickering’ moon risks sounding Lowell-esque rather than eerily atmospheric. Nevertheless, the poem stands as encouraging evidence that Vuong has the means at his disposal to develop a more nuanced, discursive, altogether post-Imagist poetics in his future collections.

---

[54] Vuong, ‘Because It’s Summer’, in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 34.

[55] Vuong, ‘On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous, in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 42.

It is easy to see why a young poet such as Vuong should fall into the trap of choosing Imagism’s flashy pyrotechnics over the prosy expansiveness of a Robert Hass or C.K. Williams, poets who have received relatively little critical attention despite acclaim from their peers. If the critical response to Vuong’s ‘photographic clarity’ is anything to go by, the current literary climate is hardly one that encourages younger poets to seek complex discursiveness over vivid images. In a controversial article for *PN Review* entitled ‘The Cult of the Noble Amateur,’ Rebecca Watts addressed the critical response to contemporary poets from minority groups such as Vuong by noting that ‘the middle-aged, middle-class reviewing sector … is terrified of being seen to criticise the output of anyone it imagines is speaking on behalf of a group traditionally under-represented in the arts.’[60] Watts is referring to British criticism here, but the same applies to the contemporary American establishment, in which the critical tendency thus far has been to shed light on Vuong’s biographical narrative rather than the nuances of his poetic technique (Vuong spent a year in a refugee camp before emigrating to the United States at two years old). At a time when the country feels particularly conscious of the damaging effects of the Trump administration upon a largely immigrant population, it is easy to see why there is an added incentive to heap praise upon a poet who Batchelor has described as ‘a Trump voter’s worst nightmare.’[61] In Bachelor’s own article for the *New Statesman*, in which he reviews *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* alongside British poet Adam O Riordan’s *The Herring Famine* (2017), he is quick to disparage O’Riordan’s sloppy technique, noting that ‘line-breaks are often arbitrary, poems fall in and out of rhythm, and the syntax is repetitive, overusing the “x of y” construction as a shortcut to sounding poetic: “a smur of butter”, “the hutch-stink of the soul”.’[62] And yet he fails to diagnose these same faults in Vuong, instead remarking of the poet’s clichéd use of ‘a range of symbols and tropes: hands and guns; bodies kneeling and falling; petals and clothes or skin’, that while ‘none of these images and associations is unfamiliar’, we are nevertheless made to ‘see them afresh’.[63] What Bachelor calls Vuong’s ‘unique perspective … on Western language and life’ seemingly gives him a few pass when it comes to employing these clichéd tropes. Although it is encouraging that the American Academy is acknowledging a younger, more diverse coterie of contemporary poets for its prizes and fellowships then has traditionally been the case, it is surely misguided to declare work such as *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* as bringing ‘a new range of notes to poetry in English’: Viet Thanh Nguyen’s assessment of Vuong as ‘the Walt Whitman of Vietnamese American literature’[64] seems highly premature considering this is the poet’s debut collection.

---

[60] Rebecca Watts, ‘The Cult of the Noble Amateur,’ *PN Review* 239, 44, no. 3 (2018), accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10090.

And it is highly doubtful that Vuong’s style is as ‘new’ as these critical assessments indicate. When reading the poetry of Vuong’s older contemporary, the Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee (b. 1957), we can’t help but note the similarities between Lee’s aesthetic and much of what is to be found in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*:

---

[61] Batchelor, ‘Ocean Vuong’s Poetry,’ *New Statesman.*
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Viet Thanh Nguyen, ‘Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Lit: A Primer from Viet Thanh Nguyen,’ *Literary Hub*, February 10 2017, accessed 4 October 2018. https://lithub.com/vietnamese-and-vietnamese-american-literature-a-primer-from-viet-thanh-nguyen/.

And night begins when my mother’s fingers
let go of the thread
they’ve been tying and untying
To touch toward our fraying story’s hem.

Night is the shadow of my father’s hands
setting the clock for resurrection.[65]

(‘Pillow’)

Look at the birds. Even flying
is born

out of nothing. The first sky
is inside you, open

at either end of day.[66]

(‘One Heart’)

As though touching her
might make him known to himself,

as though his hand moving
over her body might find who
he is[67]

(‘Dwelling’)

The centrality of mother and father figures, the foregrounding of narrative and story-telling (our fraying story’s hem’), the Blyean lingering on ‘night’, ‘shadow’, and ‘sky’, the anaphora (‘As though / / as though’), the semi-aphoristic expression (‘Even flying / is born / out of nothing’, the ephemeral metaphors (‘Night is the shadow of my father’s hands’); all the ingredients we find in Vuong are here displayed in full force, and even if Vuong did not consciously adopt these stylistic features from his older contemporary, the fact that his literary tics can be readily found elsewhere shows how misguided it is to declare his brand of ethereal Imagism as radically new.

Then again, the reaction to Vuong is highly reminiscent of the critical hype surrounding Bly’s Deep Imagism as an exciting departure from the stale New Critical mode rather than a rehashed Imagism. In the introduction to his anthology *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962), Donald Hall declared Deep Image verse to be the ‘one thing happening in American poetry, as I see it, which is genuinely new’[68] – one wonders what he made of the speed with which the style became the dominant mode of American verse in the seventies. And the parallels with Blyean Deep Imagism are more than aesthetic. Just as Paul Breslin noted that the turning away from empirical reality embodied in sixties Deep Imagism provided ‘a welcome escape from cultural guilt’ for an American public embroiled in an unpopular war and the civil rights movement, so for contemporary critics, loudly announcing their support for Vuong’s sentimental depictions of immigrant experience becomes a form of virtue signalling, as well as a means to avoid the more vexing task of confronting their complicity with a system that has brought about the current anti-immigrant administration. Reading reviews of the collection, it appears many critics have relished the opportunity to put aside questions of form and technique – or indeed any wider socio-political questions the book may raise – in favour of what Michiko Kakutani called ‘Mr Vuong’s sincerity and candour’. In a particularly gushing review, Cristopher Soto insisted:

---

[65] Li-Young Lee, ‘Pillow’, in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 584 (see Intro., n. 17).
[66] Lee, *Contemporary American Poetry*, 584.
[67] Ibid., 585.

> Ocean has so many small truths and observations that he shares with the reader. His life lessons are slipped gently aside an image in the poems. The truths that Ocean reveals throughout the book do not feel absolute and all-knowing though. The truths that Ocean gifts to the reader feel genuine, self-questioning, and open to mutual discovery.[69]

Unsurprisingly, given breathless assessments such as these, there is little in the way of a ‘negative capability’ in *Night Sky with Ext Wounds*. In ‘Notebook Fragments’, a poem that appears to consist of a series of diary entries, Vuong gives us such musings as: ‘How come depression makes me feel more alive?’; ‘Discovery: My longest pubic hair is 1.2 inches’, and ‘Shouldn’t heaven be superheavy by now?’[70] For Soto, these ‘small truths and observations’ are taken to be direct from the poet's mouth: rather than dramatizing possible selves, Vuong gives us merely the self unfiltered and uncensored. Even Soto's use of the poet's first name here reveals a critic enraptured by the way Vuong's verse invites an easy intimacy with the reader, one that allows him to overlook his obvious misgivings about the poet's technique. Later in the review, for example, he provides an amusing account of his exasperation with Vuong's tendency to repeat certain Blyean elementals: sky, grass, sea, bones, dark, and, it appears, teeth:

---

[68] Donald Hall, ed., *Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York, Penguin, 1972), 32.

[69] Christopher Soto, ‘Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong’, *Lambda Literary*, April 4 2016, accessed 28 October 2018. www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/04/04/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-by-ocean-vuong/.

[70] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 65-66.

> At times, I did feel a bit under stimulated (*sic*) by these repeating words. I would think to myself "please, not another poem with teeth." But ultimately, I think, this sort of obsession is what creates the poet, what allows the reader to understand the culture and viewpoint of the poet.[71]

But this is misleading. Like the Deep Imagism to which this familiar pile-up of words is indebted, Vuong's poetry is actually very limited in its ability to allow the reader to 'understand the culture and viewpoint of the poet.' His tendency to begin a sentence with 'because' as a shortcut to emotionally-charged expression is reminiscent of the Blyean error of believing 'deep images' such as 'dark' and 'stones' are ready-made archetypes replete with cultural significance: 'Because the city / beyond the shore / is no longer / where we left it. Because the bombed / cathedral is now a cathedral / of trees' (Telemachus),[72] 'Because in my hurry to make her real, make her / here, I will forget to write / a bit of light into the room. / Because my hands were always brief / & dim as my father's' ('Daily Bread').[73] These are pseudo-metaphysical musings, hardly the 'life lessons' Soto sees Vuong's verse as embodying. Encountering successive poems in this style, the reader is reminded of W.K. Wimsatt's discussion of the so-called 'Intentional fallacy', bemoaning those 'passwords of the intentional school, "sincerity", "fidelity", "spontaneity", "authenticity", "genuineness".'[74] While the New Critical concept of an 'intentional fallacy' is now rightly maligned as flawed and outdated, the critical reaction to Vuong indicates the pendulum as having swung back much too far in the direction of a focus upon extra literary values. As William Logan has accurately observed:

---

[71] Christopher Soto, *Lambda Literary*.

[72] Vuong, *Night sky with Exit Wounds*, 7.

[73] Ibid., 72.

[74] W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 9.

> Every age has a few tacit beliefs it wants to find glinting in its poetry, and these usually reflect the anxieties of the age. Most of the various modes of our verse are united under a single banner: AUTHENTICITY… Authenticity favours any poet who can claim discrimination, pain, bad parents, bullying; we have made a fetish of the poetry of witness (where the personal is given political weight) without questioning the art of craft necessary to bring witness to bear.[75]

It is noticeable that Vuong ticks many of the boxes Logan identifies – as a queer Vietnamese-American immigrant with a troubled relationship with his father (a recurring theme of the collection), the poet is well-placed to fulfil the critical appetite for an ‘authentic’, semi-confessional verse. But this anxiety over ‘authenticity’ isn’t new. As Michael Bibby noted in *Hearts and Minds,* the years of American involvement in Vietnam coincided with an ‘emphasis on the corporeal as the authentic ground for aesthetics in U.S poetry. Leftist oppositonalism in the 1960s typically couched its rhetoric and values in the countercultural obsession with unmasking and celebrating “real”, “authentic” and “naked” expression.’[76] Marjorie Perloff summarised the decade equally as succinctly when she noted that ‘[t]he dominant poetic of the American sixties [was a poetic] of strenuous authenticity, the desire to present a self as natural, as organic, and as unmediated as possible’.[77] Unsurprisingly, the image has returned as the vehicle for this poetry of ‘unmediated’, wholly ‘authentic’ expression. Nevertheless, as Logan recognises, a poet can only do so much with a style whose primary purpose is to stress the poet’s authenticity, and the extent to which Vuong’s neo-Imagist mode is inadequate to the task of ‘bring[ing] witness to bear’ is glaringly apparent in a poem addressing 9/11 entitled ‘*Untitled* (*Blue*, *Green*, *and Brown*): oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952.’:

---

[75] William Logan, *The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in an Age of Tin* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8-9.

[76] Bibby, *Hearts and Minds,* 21 (see chap. 4, n. 46).

[77] Marjorie Perloff, quoted in *Hearts and Minds*, 21.

> The TV said the planes have hit the buildings.
> & I said *Yes* because you asked me
> to stay. Maybe we pray on our knees because god
> only listens when we’re this close
> to the devil. There is so much I want to tell you.
> How my greatest accolade was to walk
> across the Brooklyn Bridge
> & not think of flight. How we live like water: wetting
> a new tongue with no telling
> what we’ve been through. They say the sky is blue
> but I know it’s black seen through too much distance.[78]

Arguably, there is no such thing as a successful ‘9/11 poem’ (see Galway Kinnell’s ‘When the Towers Fell’ and Amiri Baraka’s ‘Somebody Blew Up America’ for particularly excruciating examples), but there is something particularly distasteful about Vuong’s attempt to render that tragedy in terms of his own psycho-sexual drama here. The superficiality of expression – the monosyllabic, almost-childish diction – sits uncomfortably against the weight of collective grief associated with the immediate aftermath of 9/11. And in those lines informing us that ‘god / only listens when we’re this close / to the devil’, Vuong evokes the simplistic binaries between good and evil found in Bush’s rhetoric of the ‘War on Terror’; precisely the kind of language that Armantrout and Donnelly dismantle in *Money Shot* and *The Cloud Corporation*. As Keniston has noted: ‘The term *terrorism* points to a contradiction: it implies an absolute distinction between “us” and “them”, but it radically undermines this distinction.’[79] And yet there is little attempt to complicate what she calls ‘terrorism’s polarizing discourse’[80] in Vuong’s ‘Untitled…’. But then this was always the danger of the Imagist poem. Rather than analyse the significance of what is seen or acknowledge the ‘ethical activity’ of bearing witness to a public tragedy, Vuong can only describe the present moment with the same vacuous description as he describes the body elsewhere: ‘They say the sky is blue / but I know it’s black seen through too much distance’ –

---

[78] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 47.
[79] Keniston, ‘Recipient Unknown…’, in *Terrorism and Literature*, 469 (see chap. 7, n. 81).
[80] Ibid., 476.

Hulme’s ‘other-world-through-the-glass effect’ writ large – and as usual, we have to take the poet’s word for it that his powers of perception are superior to ours. In relying wholly on these present-tense declaratives, Vuong is unable to offer either an ‘exercise of analytical intelligence’ or a coherent vision of what Jameson called ‘the collective project’:

> There is so much
> I need to tell you – but I only earned
> one life. & I took nothing. Nothing. Like a pair of teeth
> at the end. The TV kept saying *The planes* …
> *The planes* … & I stood waiting in the room
> made of broken mockingbirds. Their wings throbbing
> into four blurred walls & you were there.
> You were the window.[81]

Instead of Eliot’s ‘pair of ragged claws’, here we have an arbitrary ‘pair of teeth’ (we can only imagine Soto’s response to their appearance here), as the reader struggles to decipher the connections between this gratuitous simile, a ‘room / made of broken mockingbirds’, and planes crashing into the World Trade Centre. Perhaps this is Vuong’s attempt at translating a painterly abstract expressionism into verse: it is unfathomable as to why the poem should take Rothko’s painting as its title, other than to gratuitously align itself with the New York school, and the depiction of ‘wings throbbing / into four blurred walls’ could, at a stretch, be said to capture something of the ‘throbbing’, hypnotic effect of a Rothko canvas. But Vuong’s attempt to have the poem function in the same way as Rothko’s ‘colour forms’ has the unfortunate effect of making a poem proposing to speak to a sense of shared grief collapse instead into a rendering of individual suffering, just as Rothko’s canvases were designed to give form to what he called ‘tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on’.[82] Ironically, then, Vuong’s neo-Imagism is defined by its antithesis to what Marjorie Perloff saw as the Poundian effort to mount an ‘offense against the great principle of inwardness, of internalisation that has put us at the center of things and laid waste to the visible world.'[83] More troublingly still, the poem exposes Vuong's belief that a shared tragedy such as 9/11 can be rendered as a series of vivid descriptions: as if these images of rooms made of broken mocking birds, throbbing wings, and pairs of teeth were adequate to convey the complexity of response to three thousand dead. And he is not alone. In 'Recipient Unknown…', Keniston discusses Yusef Komunyakaa's 2008 poem 'The Towers' and notes that 'One of the poem's central image patterns … relates to birds and winds. Wings appear twice in the first column, both times in conjunction with disturbing and inconsistent similes: The first reference depicts birds "wings" as "like blood", while the second depicts a personified "happiness … beat[ing] its wings / bloody against the bony can" of the ribs.'[84] For all the critical hype, it is difficult to see Vuong's collection as a radically new, or to agree with Dave Coates's assessment that *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is 'a book that refuses to accept simplified formulations of complicated ideas.'[85]

---

[81] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 47.

[82] Mark Rothko, quoted in Peter Schjeldhal, ‘The Dark Final Years of Mark Rothko’, *The New Yorker*, 19 December 2016, accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/19/the-dark-final-years-of-mark-rothko.

Will Harris is one of the few poet-critics to offer a more balanced assessment of Vuong's debut. In a 2017 review in *Ambit* magazine, Harris noted that:

> Vuong's own choice of subject matter and too-repetitive tone can cause issues. 'Into the Breach' features the serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer, who, as it turns out, speaks much like Vuong's other characters – that is to say, poetically. The writing is so fine that what's being described starts drifting off like 'Fireflies strung / Through sapphired air'. A lot of the poems also have unnecessarily stark take-home messages appended to them. In the case of 'Into the Breach', the portentous image of a 'mouth opening // to the width / of Jerusalem', becomes this:
>
> To love another
>
> man – is to leave
>
> no one behind
>
> to forgive me.
>
> In the context of what precedes it – an account of someone who leaves no one behind because their

---

[83] Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, 10 (see chap. 1, n. 106).
[84] Keniston, 'Recipient Unknown…', in *Terrorism and Literature*, 476.
[85] Dave Coates, 'Ocean Vuong, Night Sky with Exit Wounds,' accessed 28 October 2018. https://davepoems.wordpress.com/.

> corpses are mutilated and consumed – this seems tasteless.[86]

Few critics have been as candid as Harris in pointing out Vuong’s tendency to ‘sound second-hand in the wrong way: slogan-y, borrowed’,[87] and unsurprisingly, Vuong’s brand of neo-Imagism has caught on fast. In Kaveh Akbar’s ‘River of Milk’, from his 2018 collection *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, the poet sounds uncannily like Vuong, teeth and all:

> bear with me      it wasn’t long ago I was brainless
> lazily pulling fireflies into my teeth      chewing them
>
> into pure light      so much of me then was nothing
> I could have fit into a sugar cube      my body burned
>
> like a barnful of feathers      nothing was on fire
> but fire was on everything      the wild mustard
>
> the rotting porch chair      a box of birth records      eventually
> even scorched earth goes green[88]

It is fitting that the poem should have made its first appearance in *Poetry*, the magazine to champion the earliest Imagist verse of Pound *et al*, Bly’s Deep Imagism (under the editorship of Daryl Hine) and now, it seems, the neo-Imagist verse of Vuong and his contemporaries. In the magazine’s December 2018 issue, Amy Bedeer’s ‘The Jealous Minor Gods’ displays all the hallmarks of the style, beginning with the speaker’s revelation: ‘I have hidden your lost teeth in the net of / all my famous hair / And with foresight promised your umbilicus / To several minor Gods’,[89] just as Sandra Simond’s ‘She steps into La Roue de la Fortune Movie Theatre’ relies on a similar pile-up of extravagant metaphor as she describes ‘the dark soda up her clear plastic straw, reels / of rodents, popcorn, teenage workers, / acne, blood and circulation turn to ice / inside this mechanized paradise',[90] while Christian Wiman's 'The Parable of Perfect Silence' seems to take its cue from C.K. Williams's 'The Long Naked Walk of the Dead' (with its inane vision of a 'dark metal man gleaming in the talons of silence'[91]) when the poet declares: 'There was a man made of airplane parts / one of which was always missing … Another man with anvil hands sat six months of night in faith / that there would come occasion of darkness, unguardedness, and vision'.[92] Given the turbulent political climate in which American poets now find themselves, perhaps it is inevitable that we should be seeing a return to verse that offers (in von Hallberg's terms) 'vision' rather than 'understanding'.[93] In fairness to these poets, a certain vacuous quality has always gone hand in hand not only with an Imagist verse, but with the very concept of the image itself. Just as Barthes noted that 'general opinion too has a vague idea of the image as an area of resistance to meaning,'[94] part of the mystical appeal of the poetic image has always been its proximity to notions of ephemerality, the irrational, and what James Elkins called the 'non-verbal glamour of the "purely" visual.'[95] Marianne Moore insisted that 'the power of the visible / is the invisible',[96] Michael Ann Holly has declared that 'the spirit that hover[s] just behind the visible scene is, of course, the image – the spectral presence that is forever out of reach, untouchable',[97] W.J.T. Mitchell remarked that 'the image is immaterial; it is the name of an apparition, a phenomenon, or maybe a relationship that occurs to a consciousness,'[98] while in 'Images,' Robert Hass argued:

---

[86] Will Harris, ‘Sometimes I feel like an ampersand’: on debut collections from Ocean Vuong and Kayo Chingonyi’, *Ambit*, 14 August 2017, accessed 27/03/2019. http://ambitmagazine.co.uk/reviews/sometimes-i-feel-like-an-ampersand-on-debut-collections-from-ocean-vuong-and-kayo-chingonyi.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Kaveh Akbar, ‘River of Milk’, from *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* (London: Penguin, 2018).

[89] Amy Bedeer, ‘The Jealous Minor Gods’, *Poetry*, December 2018, accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/issue/148345/december-2018#toc.

> Often enough when a thing is seen clearly, there is a sense of absence about it – it is true of Impressionist painting – as if, the more palpable it is, the more some immense subterranean

---

[90] Sandra Simonds, 'She steps into La Roue de la Fortune Movie Theatre', *Poetry*, December 2018.
[91] C.K. Williams, 'The Long Naked Walk of The Dead', in *Collected Poems*, 11 (see chap. 4, n. 16).
[92] Christian Wiman, 'The Parable of Perfect Silence', *Poetry*.
[93] von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*, 139.
[94] Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 32 (see chap. 1, n. 17).
[95] Elkins, *The Domain of Images*, 62 (see chap. 4, n. 45).
[96] Marianne Moore, 'He "Digesteth Harde Yron"', in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman (London: Faber, 2003), 246.
[97] Michael Anne Holly, quoted in *What is an Image?*, ed. James Elkins and Maja Naef (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 115.
[98] W. J.T. Mitchell, quoted in *What is an Image?,* 28.

> displacement seems to be working in it; as if at the point of truest observation the visible and the invisible exerted enormous counterpressure.[99]

Eloquent though these remarks are, they are really just elaborate ways of saying that there has always been a certain emptiness to that art which attempts the snapshot of clear perception; that, in Williams’s terms, ‘strive[s] for nothing else, this vividness alone, per se, for itself.’[100] With Hass’s analogy with impressionist painting, we are reminded of the validity of Crane’s dismissal of the ‘Impressionist’ style of his contemporaries: for all Imagism would mutate into its various incarnations over the years, it remains, at its heart, a poetry of ‘retinal registration’.

At the close of a poem called ‘Ode to Masturbation’, Vuong ends with a vision of ‘a word / being nailed to its meaning.’[101] It is an apt metaphor to describe the limitations of all brands of neo-Imagism. Like a word being whittled down to a single denotation, the Imagist attempt to force poetry to not only enact its processes of thought but generate its *meaning* entirely through the potency of its images is one that is tantamount to stripping poetic language of much of its power. To ‘be lost in / an image’, Vuong insists, ‘is to find within it / a door’.[102] But in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, these doors lead only to more images; to, as Donnelly would have it, an endless stream of ‘roads / with signs directing further.’[103]

---

[99] Robert Hass, *Twentieth-Century Pleasures,* 274-275 (see chap. 6, n. 12).

[100] Williams, *Selected Essays*, 66 (see chap. 3, n. 3).

[101] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 64.

[102] Ibid., 60.

[103] Donnelly, *The Cloud Corporation*, 4.

# Conclusion

Explaining his exclusion of Vachel Lindsay from the second edition of *Blast*, Pound declared that his was a poetry 'headed for the popular, which is, in the end, hell.'[1] There is an amusing irony, then, to the way Imagism would become the definitive 'popular' movement in American verse; its premises filtering down through the mainstream so that it would stand, not as the exclusive realm of an elite avant-garde, but the 'democratic beer-garden'[2] of Pound's nightmare. Just as Susan Sontag observed that the 'industrialization of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images,'[3] so Imagism carries with it a similar promise. However unwittingly, the notion at the heart of Poundian doctrine – that poetry is an art form that anyone can master as long as they can construct 'a great image'– is one that, time and again, has produced a reductive, ahistorical verse that reduces the complexities of perception to a 'retinal registration'[4] and a static world of concrete 'things'.

These are lessons that have gone unlearned by commentators who insist that Imagism 'opened the way'[5] for an exemplary lineage of American poetry that fulfils Pound's desire for a verse that is 'nearer to the bone', 'free from emotional slither', and utterly devoid of rhetoric. In the introduction to his reissued anthology *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature* (2009), William Pratt joined the already-strong chorus of praise for the movement when he declared that 'there is no doubt that Imagism was the means by which most of the masters of modern English verse discovered their own style, and in some sense every important poet of the twentieth century was an Imagist.'[6] This study is intended as the first step towards challenging this reductive and inaccurate narrative. Far from being the poet of the 'concrete image', Charles Simic's elusive, film-noir-influenced verse foregrounds notions of indeterminacy, the creative process, and the metaphysis of the imagination in a way that contradicts his own tendency to inflate the 'epistemological and metaphysical ambition' of Imagism. And where the Poundian image was always a means of bypassing the direct expression of emotion, C.K. Williams's progression from a limiting, surrealist-inflected Imagism to his radical 'extended intellectual units' allowed him to examine the texture of thought and feeling as well as merely the contours of objects, turning his gaze outwards to a social world even as he interrogated the workings of his own consciousness. In both these poets, we see just how misguided is the deeply-ingrained belief that compression and objectivity are, in Pratt's terms, 'perennially valid principles of poetry.'[7]

---

[1] Ezra Pound, quoted in *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry*, 44 (see Intro., n. 1).

[2] Ezra Pound, Letter to Harriet Monroe, January 1915, in *Selected Letters*, 48 (see Intro., n. 67).

[3] Sontag, *On Photography*, 7.

[4] Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, 220 (see Intro., n. 75).

[5] Ethan Lewis, *Modernist Image*, xiv (see Intro., n. 48).

And there are clear parallels between the trajectory of these poets's oeuvres and Louise Glück's conscious move away from Pound's 'luminous details'. While *Firstborn* reveals the unmistakable influence of Williams's early Imagist lyrics, the multifaceted use of abstraction that constitutes such a striking feature of her late verse allowed her to create the process of re-visioning – the dialectic between sight and insight – that constitutes her most significant challenge to the validity of the Imagist premise. Altieri was inaccurate, then, when he talked of the difficulty of achieving a contemporary poetry that 'reaches out toward the world without succumbing to the scenic mode that representational ambitions now find it very difficult to avoid.'[8] In Glück's *The Triumph of Achilles*, as in Robert Hass's *Time and Materials*, Rae Armantrout's *Money Shot*, and Timothy Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation*, we find a contemporary verse unapologetic in its 'representational ambitions', answering to a shared world of history and politics as well as the difficulties of individual perception, and speaking to the complexities of the mind as well as the contours of the object. Just as James Longenbach noted of Pound that his 'Imagist aesthetic would not allow him to speak meaningfully of contemporary culture,'[9] in each of these poets, we see that all those features Imagism declared to be null and void – abstraction, syntax, and discursiveness – are in fact integral in allowing the lyric to speak to the demands of contemporaneity.

---

[6] Pratt, *The Imagist Poem*, 25 (see Intro., n. 57).

[7] Ibid., 18.

[8] Charles Altieri, 'The Transformations of Objectivism: An Afterword,' in *The Objectivist Nexus*, 310 (see chap. 1, n. 104).

In *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, Longenbach recalled that 'in 1991 the Poetry Society of America sponsored a forum called "Free verse vs. Formalism: Robert Bly and Brad Leithauser",' and concluded that 'from the perspective of the final decade of the century, these distinctions have begun to look wildly dated.'[10] The distinction is dated not only because the old 'cooked vs raw' controversy can now be safely consigned to the mid-century, however, but because Bly and Leithauser are in fact cut from the same cloth, and both equally committed to a neo-Imagist verse dedicated to 'the presentation of images without authorial commentary,' albeit to serve very different ends. Much as American criticism can be as partisan as its politics, to divide poets into these aesthetic camps is to perform a subtle sleight of hand, obscuring the way Imagism's influence effectively dismantles the usual barricades between the 'formalist' poetry of Brad Leithauser and the 'free verse' of Robert Bly. As Longenbach indicates, hindsight makes it easier to cast doubt upon what looked to be certainties of literary history – to note that the Objectivist poets didn't move all that far beyond the Imagist doctrines they attempt to usurp, to observe the way Deep Imagism rehearsed rather than subverted Poundian *dicta*. Much as critics will no doubt continue to dispute the various misgivings of Imagist theory, the testimony of the poetry itself provides the most damning evidence that Imagism remains a 'dead end'[11] for contemporary verse.

---

[9] James Longenbach, 'Modern Poetry,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 108.

[10] James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

[11] Ibid., 110.

It is worth remembering that ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’ was originally drafted as a rejection letter for aspiring poets sending work to *Poetry*, and that, as Stanley Coffman has put it, ‘for both Hulme and Pound the image was a means to a more general end, good writing … Imagist poetry was only a logical way of insisting upon the freshness of language.’[12] But from T.E. Hulme to Amy Lowell, Robert Bly to Denise Levertov, Brad Leithauser to Ocean Vuong, everywhere we find evidence that Imagist *dicta* are not the failsafe recipe for ‘good writing’ that Pound envisioned. Much as the fact has been continually overlooked by pro-Imagist critics, the pervasiveness of what Alan Shapiro called ‘free verse poems written in a flat, demotic style devoted primarily to the presentation of surreal or quotidian images’[13] is a direct result of Imagism’s influence. It is disingenuous of Perloff to condemn the ‘rather flat verse of the American mid-century, with its emphasis on delicate epiphany’[14] while championing the Poundian legacy. For Perloff, it seems, there is no connection between this tired verse of ‘delicate epiphany’ and what Hugh Witemeyer called Pound’s ‘epiphany of beauty in a crowded Paris underground-railway station.’[15] Though she is quick to ridicule a poetry giving pride of place to images, clarity, and ‘sincerity’ (always in quotation marks), to deny the origins of this ‘rather flat free verse’ in Poundian Imagism is to rewrite literary history, and turn a blind eye to the way Imagist principles would leave their traces upon *all* American poetry that followed, no matter how cooked or raw, open or closed, ‘symbolist’ or ‘anti-symbolist’, we imagine that verse to be.

Contrary to much of the critical literature on William Carlos Williams, this study demonstrates why he should rightly be considered as one of the first poets to challenge the ubiquity of what he called the ‘bare image haphazardly prescribed in loose verse.’ As has become clear, the dominant (mis)reading of Williams as a practitioner of the ‘objective, presentational image' has done almost as much to fuel the Imagist hegemony as that of Pound's critical pronouncements, which, as Longenbach observed, have 'probably been more influential than the [Imagist] poems themselves.'[16] Without question, 'The Red Wheelbarrow' is the only poem that can rival Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' as the Imagist poem *par excellence*; practically synonymous with the word 'Imagism' itself, and Adam Kirsch wasn't far off the mark when he declared:

---

[12] Coffman, *Imagism*, 155 (see Intro., n. 1).

[13] Shapiro, *In Praise of the Impure*, 2.

[14] Marjorie Perloff, ‘Ca(n)non to the Right of Us,’ 639 (see chap. 1, n. 175).

[15] Hugh Witemeyer, ‘Early Poetry 1908-1920,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, 49.

> possibly no modern American poem is more well-known than Williams's 'The Red Wheelbarrow', that tiny epiphany … If you look at the lingua franca of American poetry today – a colloquial free verse focussed on visual description and meaningful anecdote – it seems clear that Williams is the twentieth-century poet who has done most to influence our very conception of what poetry should do, and how much it does not need to do.[17]

His final qualification is telling: as Denise Levertov is such a potent reminder, those who would read Williams as embodying merely a 'conscience of the eye' peddle the most superficial interpretation of his mantra 'no ideas but in things', and make up a large proportion of what Pound called 'the dilutors': 'those who follow either the inventors of the 'great writers', and who produce something of lower intensity, some flabbier variant, some diffuseness or timidity in the wake of the valid.'[18] In the closing essay of his anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (1993), Eliot Weinberger provided an apt demonstration of the confusion surrounding Williams's critical legacy when he described what he considers to be the dominant mode of American verse since 1970:

> The reigning dogma has been that the function of poetry is to transform our perception of everyday matters. (Curiously, the establishment hero is now Williams, who was reviled by the establishment for most of his life as a crackpot or a naïf. But it is the Williams of "The Red Wheelbarrow," not the exuberant, collaged, sometimes "automatic" writings that still remain little known.[19]

---

[16] Longenbach, 'Modern Poetry,' 108.

[17] Adam Kirsch, 'The New World of Williams Carlos Williams,' *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2012, accessed 7 December 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/02/23/new-world-william-carlos-williams/.

[18] Pound, *Literary Essays*, 23.

[19] Eliot Weinberger, ed., *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*: *an Anthology* (New York: Marsilio, 1993), 405.

Weinberger’s bafflement at learning that a figure treasured by the avant-garde should become an important influence for just about every American poet writing in his wake appears a little naïve to say the least. Donald Hall noted Williams’s immediate and widespread impact as early as 1962, declaring in *Contemporary American Poetry* that ‘the poets of the orthodoxy have admired him for his descriptive powers; they have learned from him a conscience of the eye rather than a conscience of the ear,’[20] before going on to praise the Deep Imagism of Robert Bly as the one ‘genuinely new’ innovation of post-war verse. The contradiction was lost on Hall, just as Weinberger failed to see the paradox in his line of reasoning when, a few paragraphs after the one quoted above, he praised contemporary American poetry as ‘an epic of particulars’.[21] As flawed as these assessments of Williams are, they tell us much about the continual tendency to unplay the indiscriminate influence of Imagist *dicta* on the contemporary verse that followed, and of the discomfort many feel at the speed with which the ‘avant-garde’ Imagist aesthetic of ‘In a Station of the Metro’ and ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ turned into an Imagist orthodoxy. Inevitably, the quest for poetic innovation – what Jerome McGann called modernism’s ‘astonishing inventiveness’ - quickly degraded into the lowered ambitions of ‘transform[ing] our perception of everyday matters.’

Alongside the perennial popularity of Imagist verse, it is tempting to link the persistence of this Imagist hegemony into contemporary American poetry to the proliferation of creative writing programs across the country since the seventies; a cultural shift Christopher Beach has described as ‘the single most significant demographic phenomenon in American Poetry since World War II.’[22] As Piotr K. Gwiazda has discussed, MFA programs have long been ‘seen as one of the main causes of the growing homogeneity of style … and the relegation of poetry to a subculture status despite (or precisely because of) the seeming overproduction of poems and poets.'[23] This is a significant charge to level at a relatively recent phenomenon, but Imagism is a notably easier style for budding poets to assimilate than the knotty, discursive mode of Robert Hass or C.K. Williams, and combines easily with a watered-down Confessionalism: these styles are thought to require little in the way of artifice or formal training. But the rise in MFA is only part of the explanation, and there have been important poets to emerge from these programmes – Timothy Donnelly took an MFA at Columbia before going on to teach there himself, for example. More importantly, the trivialization of poetry and its steady reduction to the status of a subculture has a much longer history, and if creative writing programs have had a detrimental impact on contemporary verse, it is because so much of their pedagogical literature effectively quotes verbatim Pound's Imagist doctrines on the primacy of the concrete image. In David Jauss's 2009 textbook *Words Overthrown By Stars: Creative Writing Instruction and Insight from the Vermont Collage of Fine Arts MFA Program*, Mark Doty foregrounded the image as the primary element of poetic composition when he remarked that: 'I almost always begin with description, as a way of focussing on that compelling image, the poem's given … if I am lucky, the image I've been intrigued by will become a metaphor.'[24] Similarly, in his 1994 handbook for budding poets *Writing Poems*, Peter Samson echoed Poundian doctrine when he announced: 'when we write vividly and accurately, we create another world for ourselves and for our readers. It is a world that is ordered, re-created from things that we already know about the world.'[25] This is a depressing analysis of an art form allegedly intended to dismantle the known, to show us alternative selves and realities rather than given ones, to enact imaginative transformations of the real rather than give us 'things that we already know.' Inevitably, Samson goes on to cite 'The Red Wheelbarrow' as the exemplar of good practice, before quoting the poet's mantra: ''No ideas but in things' Williams said. Show us enough and we will fill in the rest: don't philosophise about it, just give us the vivid detail.'[26] Against this background, it is striking how much C.K. Williams, Louise Glück, Robert Hass, and Timothy Donnelly stand out as being poets willing to 'tell' as well as 'show'; how much they interrogate the difficult issues of mind and consciousness over the reassuring certainties of 'things … we already know about the world'.

---

[20] Hall, *Contemporary American Poetry*, 29 (see chap. 8, n. 48).

[21] Weinberger, *American Poetry Since 1950*, 411.

[22] Christopher Beach, quoted in *US Poetry in the Age of* Empire, 15 (see Intro., n. 82).

---

[23] Ibid., 15.

[24] Mark Doty, 'Souls on Ice,' in *Words Overthrown by Stars: Creative Writing Instruction and Insight from the Vermont Collage of Fine Art MFA Program*, ed. David Jauss (Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2009), 239-240.

[25] Peter Samson, *Writing Poems*: *Bloodaxe Poetry Handbooks: 2* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), 38.

And it is not just in American poetry classrooms where this advice to 'just give us the vivid detail' is played out – David Trotter's concern in *The Making of the Reader* that the gimmicky visual metaphors of the British 'Martian' poets Craig Raine and Christopher Reid indicated the extent to which 'comparison' had become synonymous with 'the entire scope and value of the art'[27] is merely symptomatic of the widespread popularity of 'the flash of descriptive analogy' directly traceable to Pound and Hulme: not without good reason has Raine's 'Martian' poetry been described as a 'demented Imagism'.[28] For all critics saw the movement as radically new, or as 'definitively English,'[29] in John Bayley's terms, Martianism was merely a carbon copy of the faux-surrealist neo-Imagism that dominated American verse merely a few years earlier, producing equally dire results.

In an essay written for *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook* (2010), Albert Mobilio appeared triumphant when he remarked that 'with much contemporary art wired for visual immediacy and commercial viability, no aesthete need argue for poetry's splendid isolation.'[30] Far from rising above this 'commercial viability', however, poetry remains every bit as indebted to the market as any other art form, and the lavishing of praise upon the Martians in the eighties, as with a contemporary Imagist such as Vuong, is merely evidence of just how profitable is a verse that panders to our taste for 'visual immediacy'. 'In the body', Vuong tells us in 'Threshold', 'everything has a price'.[31] It is a fitting reminder that images have been the common currency of American poetry ever since Pound saw Imagism as the perfect marketing tool to 'give H.D's five poem's a hearing,' and remain the go-to trope for budding poets ever since, no matter the cost to poetry's cultural or intellectual ambitions.

---

[26] Samson, *Writing Poems*, 38.

[27] David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader*: *Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London; Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1984), 248.

[28] Luke Maxstead, 'When the Martians Landed: From the Archives: Craig Raine and the Birth of Martian Poetry,' *New Statesman*, 28 February 2013, accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2013/02/when-martians-landed.

[29] John Bayley, 'Contemporary American Poetry: A Romantic Persistence?' *Poetry* 146, no. 4 (1985): 235.

[30] Albert Mobilio, 'A Note on Hanging and the Uselessness of Verse,' in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 9.

Recognising that he had set in motion a dangerously democratising movement as early as 1916, Pound lamented that his once-treasured Imagism had dissipated 'into froth':

> At present its chief defects are sloppiness, lack of cohesion, lack of organic centre in individual poems, rhetoric, a conventional form of language to be found also in text-books, and in some cases a tendency more than slight towards the futurist's cinematographic fluidity.[32]

This remains an accurate diagnosis for much of the neo-Imagism in American poetry ever since. Although creative writing programs have accelerated the resurgence of this 'sloppiness', if these programmes were abolished tomorrow, there would still be people writing Imagist verse. For all Imagism was a contradictory, under-developed theory whose core practitioners disbanded after four years, the seduction of its central idea – that a poem can bypass its status as verbal expression to become something else, a picture suspended in time, an image rather than a textual entity – is one so powerful that its effects are still abundantly present in contemporary writing. As Coffman noted, Pound 'wanted the campaign directed to the few who were capable of reading and writing poetry, not to the masses, for whom poetry was not intended.'[33] While the success of Vuong's debut collection is a timely reminder that there will always be poets willing to subsume poetic expression into the confines of the image, the verse of Glück, Hass, Simic, Williams, Donnelly, and Armantrout provides the powerful and much-needed 'counter-pressure', disseminating a body of ideas in verse that cannot exist within the perimeters of Imagism’s ‘tortured premises.’ It is to these poets that the new generation should look for evidence that the hegemony of Imagism has already been broken.

---

[31] Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 3.
[32] Ezra Pound, 'Status Rerum – the Second,' *Poetry* 8, no. 1 (1916): 39-40.
[33] Coffman, *Imagism*, 10.

# Bibliography

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Aiken, Conrad. ‘The Place of Imagism.’ *The New Republic* 3, no. 29 (1915): 75-76.

Akbar, Kaveh. *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*. London: Penguin, 2018.

Aldington, Richard. ‘BLAST.’ *The Egoist* 1, no. 14 (1914): 272-3.

Allen, Donald M., ed. *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*. New York; London: Evergreen Books, 1960.

Armantrout, Rae. *Collected Prose*. San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 2007.

—— *Money Shot*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

—— *Veil: New and Selected Poems*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Bedeer, Amy. ‘The Jealous Minor Gods’. *Poetry*, December 2018. Accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/issue/148345/december-2018#toc.

Blaisdell, Bob, ed. *Imagist Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Dover Publications, 1999.

Bly, Robert. *Stealing Sugar from the Castle: Selected and New Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Burke, Edmund. *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol I: The Early Writings*. Edited by T.O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Césaire, Aimé. *Notebook of a Return to a Native Land*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria, Chapters I-V, XIV-XXII, Wordsworth, Prefaces and Essays on Poetry, 1800-1815*, edited by George Sampson, with an Introductory essay by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920, reissued 1983.

—— *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano. New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

—— *The Statesman’s Manual*. Edited by R.J. White. In *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Cockburn. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Crane, Hart. ‘General Aims and Theories.’ In *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, edited by Brom Weber, 217-223. New York: Liveright, 1966.

Donnelly, Timothy. *The Cloud Corporation*. London: Picador, 2011.

—— ‘Three Poets: The Halls of Aspartame,’ Harper’s Magazine, 24 January 2013. Accessed 27 October 2018. https://harpers.org/blog/2013/01/three-poets/.

—— ‘Timothy Donnelly on The Cloud Corporation, Romanticism, and “The Historical Sense”.’ *Guernica: A Magazine of Global Arts and Politics*, 4 March 2011. Accessed 27 October 2018. https://www.guernicamag.com/timothy_donnelly_on_poetry_x_a/.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by David McDuff. London: Penguin, 1991.

Eliot, T.S., *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-17*. Edited by Christopher Ricks. London: Harcourt, 1996.

—— *The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber, 1969, reissued 2004.

—— *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen and Co., 1948.

—— *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.

—— *The Waste Land, a Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Draft Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound,* rev. ed. Edited by Valerie Eliot. London: Faber, 2010.

Fenollosa, Ernest, and Ezra Pound. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition.* Edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. London: Penguin, 2005.

Glück, Louise. *American Originality: Essays on Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

—— *Collected Poems 1962-2012*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

—— *Proofs and Theories*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1999.

Hass, Robert. *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry*. New York: Ecco, 2017.

—— *The Apple Trees at Olema: New and Selected Poems*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2011.

—— ‘The Consequences’, *Guernica*. 5 January 2008. Accessed 13 November 2018. https://www.guernicamag.com/the_consequences_an_interview/.

—— *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005*. New York: Ecco Press, 2007.

—— *Twentieth-Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*. New York: Ecco Press, 1984.

—— *What Light Can Do: Essays on Art, Imagination and the Natural World*. New York: Ecco Press, 2012.

Heidegger, Martin. *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”.* Translated by William McNeil and Julia Davis. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

—— ‘The Origin of the Work of Art.’ In *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by

Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hopkins, Gerard Manly. *Selected Poems of Gerard Manly Hopkins*. Edited by Bob Blaisdell. New York: Dover Publications, 2011.

Hulme, T.E. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Patrick McGuinness. Manchester: Fyfield Books: Carcanet, 1998.

Jakobson, Roman. *Language in Literature*. Edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy. Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.

James, Williams. *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. Edited by John J. McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Jones, Peter, ed. *Imagist Poetry*. London: Penguin, 1972.

Keegan, Paul, ed. *The New Penguin Book of English Verse.* London: Penguin, 2001.

Larkin, Philip. *The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber, 1964.

Leithauser, Brad. ‘Dead Elms by a River.’ *Poetry* 129, no. 2 (1976): 100-101.

Levertov, Denise. *New Selected Poems*. Edited by Paul A. Lacey. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2003.

Lowell, Amy. *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*. Edited by Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich. New Brunswick; New Jersey: London: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Mahon, Derek. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin, 2000.

Marinetti, Filippo. *Selected Writings*. Edited by R.W. Flint. Translated by R.W. Flint and A.W. Coppotelli. London: Secker and Warburg, 1972.

McClatchy, J.D., ed. *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987*. New York: Ecco Press, 1988.

Moore, Marianne. *The Poems of Marianne Moore*. Edited by Grace Schulman. London: Faber, 2003.

Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. Edited by Michael Davidson. Manchester: Carcanet, 2003.

Pound, Ezra. *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions, 1970.

—— ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.’ In *Selected Prose: 1909-1965*. Edited by William Cookson (London: Faber, 1973): 19-43.

—— *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Edited by T.S. Eliot. London; Boston: Faber, 1954, reissued 1985.

—— *Selected Poems, 1908-1969*. London: Faber, 1975.

—— ‘Status Rerum – the Second.’ *Poetry* 8, no. 1 (1916): 38-43.

—— ‘Vorticism.’ *The Fortnightly Review* 96, no. 573 (1914): 461-471.

Pratt, William. *The Imagist Poem: Modern Poetry in Miniature,* 3rd ed. New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2009.

Shklovsky, Victor. ‘Art as Technique.’ In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays,* edited and translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 3-24. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Simic, Charles. *The Book of Gods and Devils*. Orlando: Harvest, 1990.

—— ‘The Consolations of Strangeness.’ Review of *The After Party* by Jana Prikryl. *New York Review of Books*. August 18 2016. Accessed 1 December 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/jana-prikryl-consolations-of-strangeness.

—— *Jackstraws*. London: Faber, 2000.

—— *Looking for Trouble: Selected Early and More Recent Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.

—— *New and Selected Poems, 1962-2012*. Boston; New York: Harcourt, 2013.

—— *The Renegade: Writings on Poetry and a Few Other Things*. New York: George Braziller, 2009.

—— *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985.

—— ‘Why I Still Write Poetry.’ *New York Review of Books*. 15 May 2012. Accessed 25 November 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/05/15/why-i-still-write-poetry/.

—— *Wonderful Words: Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Simonds, Sandra. ‘She steps into La Roue de la Fortune Move Theatre’. *Poetry*, December 2018. Accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/issue/148345/december-2018#toc.

Sinclair, May. ‘Two Notes: I. On H.D. II. On Imagism.’ *Egoist* 2, no. 6 (1915): 88-89.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1977.

Voloshinov, Valentin N. *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. Translated by I.R. Titunik and N.H. Bruss. Bloomington; Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987.

Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2017.

Whitman, Walt. *The Works of Walt Whitman*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1995.

Williams, C.K. *Collected Poems*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006.

—— *In Time: Poets, Poems, and the Rest*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

—— *On Whitman*. Princeton; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

—— *Poetry and Consciousness*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

—— *Selected Later Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams.* New York: Random House, 1951.

—— *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Vol I., 1909-1939*. Edited by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. Manchester: Carcanet, 1987.

—— *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*. Edited by Barry Ahearn. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

—— *Imaginations*. Edited by Webster Schott. London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd., 1970.

—— ‘The Poet and His Poems.’ *Poetry* 54, no. 6 (1939): 296-297.

—— *The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*. New York: Random House, 1954.

Wiman, Christian. ‘The Parable of Perfect Silence.’ *Poetry*, December 2018. Accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/issue/148345/december-2018#toc.

Yeats, William Butler. ‘The Symbolism of Poetry. In *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 237-256. London: Macmillan, 1903.

Zukofsky, Louis. *Complete Short Poetry*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

—— ‘Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff.’ *Poetry* 37, no. 5 (1931): 272-285.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Adamczyk-Garbowska, Monika. ‘Czeslaw Milosz.’ In *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work, Vol II: Lerner to Zychlinsky*, edited by S. Lillian Kremer, 846-848. New York; London: Routledge, 2003.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Hertfordshire: Spearman, 1967.

Altieri, Charles. *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Modernism and After.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

—— ‘The Onotological Turn in Literary Criticism and Some Challenges It Faces.’ *American Literary History* 30, no. 2 (2018): 304-317. Accessed 20 Noember 2018.

https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajy003.

—— ‘Cezanne’s Ideal of “Realization”: A Useful Analogy for the Spirit of Modernity in American Poetry.’ In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Cary Nelson, 195-295. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

—— ‘Objective Image and Act of Mind in Modern Poetry.’ *PLMA* 91, no. 1 (1976): 101-114.

—— *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

—— *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Anderson, Linda, and Jo Shapcott, eds. *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002.

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. London; New York: Routledge, 1993.

Batchelor, Paul. ‘Ocean Vuong’s poetry brims with precise, surreal and erotic imagery.’ Review of Ocean Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. *New Statesman*, 18 July 2017. Accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/07/ocean-vuongs-poetry-brims-precise-surreal-and-erotic-imagery.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon press, 1969.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981.

—— *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

—— *Mythologies*. Translated by Anette Lavers. London: Vintage, 2000.

Bayley, John. ‘Contemporary British Poetry: A Romantic Persistence?’ *Poetry* 146, no. 4 (1985): 227-236.

Bellamy, Joe David, ed. *American Poetry Observed: Poets on Their Work*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Bendixen, Alfred, and Stephenie Burt, eds. *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Blau DuPlessis, Rachel, and Peter Quartermain, eds. *The Objectivist Nexus*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999.

Breslin, Paul. *The Psycho-political Muse*: *American Poetry Since the Fifties*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Brittan, Simon. *Poetry, Symbol, and Allegory: Interpreting Metaphorical Language from Plato to the Present*. Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, 1975.

Brooker, Jewel Spears, ed. *Conversations with Denise Levertov*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Burt, Stephanie. 'Chicory and Daisies.' *London Review of Books* 24, no. 5, 7 (2002): 22-24.

Cain, Sian. 'T.S. Eliot prize going to Ocean Vuong's 'compellingly assured' debut collection.' *The Guardian*, Monday 5 January 2018. Accessed 25 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/ts-eliot-prize-goes-to-ocean-vuongs-compellingly-assured-debut-collection.

Carbajosa, Natalia. 'An Interview to Rae Armantrout.' (*sic*) *Jot Down*, 2012. Accessed 27 October 2018. https://www.jotdown.es/2012/03/an-interview-to-rae-armantrout/.

Carr, Helen. *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2009.

Cavanagh, Clare, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer, eds. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Chattarji, Subarno. 'Will there be peace again?: American and Vietnamese Poetry on the Vietnam/American War.' In *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*. Edited by Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, 214-222. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Chiasson, Dan. 'The Body Artist: Louise Gluck's Collected Poems.' *The New Yorker*, 12 November 2012. Accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/11/12/the-body-artist.

Coates, Dave. 'Ocean Vuong, Night Sky with Exit Wounds.' Accessed 28 October 2018. https://davepoems.wordpress.com.

Cocking, J.M. *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas*. Edited by Penelope Murray. London; New York: Routledge, 1991.

Coffman, Stanley K. *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951.

Cosgrove, Brian. 'Murray Krieger: Ekphrasis as Spatial Form, Ekphrasis as Mimesis.' In *Text Into Image: Image Into Text: Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Bicentenary Conference held at St Patrick's College Maynooth (The National University of Ireland) in September1995*, edited by Jeff Morrison and Florian Krobb, 25-32. Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997.

Danchev, Alex. *On Art and War and Terror*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Davis, Alex, and Lee M. Jenkins, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Day-Lewis, Cecil. *The Poetic Image*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1947.

de Man, Paul. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1984.

Dennett, Daniel C. 'The Nature of Images and the Introspective Trap.' In *Imagery*, edited by Ned Block, 1-18. Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1981.

Denson, Roger G., and Thomas McEvilley. *Capacity: History, The World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*. Amsterdam: Overseas Publishing Association, 1996.

Diehl, Joanne Feit, ed. *On Louise Gluck: Change What You See*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Dijkstra, Bram. *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Donaghy, Michael. *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews, and Digressions*. Edited by Adam O'Riordan and Maddy Paxman. London: Picador, 2009.

Doty, Mark. 'Souls on Ice.' In *Words Overthrown by Stars: Creative Writing Instruction and Insight from the Vermont Collage of Fine Art MFA Program*, edited by David Jauss. Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 2009.

Douglas, Ann. 'Descending Figure: An Interview with Louise Glück.' *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 6 (1981): 116-125.

Doyle, Charles. *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem*. London; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982.

—— ed. *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

—— *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Elkins, James. *The Domain of Images*. Ithica; London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

—— *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Elkins, James, and Maja Naef, eds. *What is an Image?* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.

Emig, Rainer. *Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures, and Limits*. Michigan: Longman, 1995.

Epstein, Andrew. *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary*

*Poetry and Culture.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Flood, Alison. ‘Amy Lowell: Ted Hughes and D.H. Lawrence ‘owe unacknowledged debt’ to ‘uncelebrated poet’. *The Guardian*, Thursday 29 November 2018. Accessed 3 December 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/29/amy-lowell-ted-hughes-and-dh-lawrence-poet.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London; New York: Routledge Classics, 2002.

Frazer, Ray. ‘The Origin of the Term Image.’ *ELH* 27, no. 2 (1960): 149-161.

Fredman, Stephen. *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Furbank, P.N. *Reflections on the Word ‘Image’*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1970.

Gage, John T. *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism*. Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Gelpi, Albert. *A Coherent Splendour: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

—— ed. *Denise Levertov: Selected Criticism*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993.

George, Dai. ‘The New Intelligence: Interview by Dai George.’ *Prac Crit*, November 2014. Accessed 27 October 2018. http://www.praccrit.com/interviews/the-new-intelligence-interview-by-dai-george/.

Gray, Richard. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*. London; New York: Longman, 1990.

Greenberg, Clement. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*. Edited by John O’Brien. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Greene, Dana. *Denise Levertov: A Poet’s Life*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Gwiazda, Piotr K. *U.S Poetry in the Age of Empire, 1979-2012.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Hall, Donald, ed. *Claims for Poetry*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982.

Halpern, Nick. ‘The Uses of Authenticity: Four Sixties Poets.’ In *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, edited by Alfred Bendixeu and Stephanie Burt, 869-893. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Hama, Mark. ‘“Blue Under-Shirts Upon a Line”: William Carlos Williams and the Genesis of “The Red Wheelbarrow”.’ *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010): 176-182.

Hamilton, Ian, and Jeremy Noel-Tod, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Will Harris, 'Sometimes I feel like an ampersand': on debut collections from Ocean Vuong and Kayo Chingonyi'. *Ambit*. 14 August 2017. Accessed 27 March 2019. http://ambitmagazine.co.uk/reviews/sometimes-i-feel-like-an-ampersand-on-debut-collections-from-ocean-vuong-and-kayo-chingonyi.

Hatlen, Burton, and Demetres Tryphonopoulos, eds. *William Carlos Williams and the Language of Poetry*. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 2002.

Hatler, Peter. *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Holden, Jonathan. *The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Holler, Paul. 'An Interview with Rae Armantrout,' *Bookslut*, July 2010. Accessed 27 October 2018. http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_07_016299.php.

Hough, Graham. *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution*. London: Gerard Duckworth & Co., 1960.

Howard, Richard. *Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

Jarrell, Randall. *Kipling, Auden and Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.

Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993.

Jones, Tom. *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Kellaway, Kate. 'Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong review – violence, delicacy, and timeless imagery.' *The Guardian*, Tuesday 9 May 2017. Accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/09/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-ocean-vuong-review.

Keller, Lyn. 'An Interview with C.K. Williams.' *Contemporary Literature* 29, no. 2 (1988): 157-176.

—— 'An Interview with Rae Armantrout.' *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 2 (2009): 219-239.

Keniston, Ann. ‘Recipient Unknown: Terrorism and the Other in Post-9/11 American Poetry.’ In *Terrorism and Literature*. Edited by Peter C. Herman, 469-485. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Kennedy, David. *The Ekphrastic Encounter in British Poetry and Elsewhere.* Surrey: Ashgate, 2012.

Kenner, Hugh. *The Art of Poetry*. Holt, Reinhart and Winston: New York, 1959.

—— *The Pound Era*. London: Pimlico, 1991.

Kermode, Frank. *Romantic Image*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.

Kirsch, Adam. *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

—— ‘The New World of Williams Carlos Williams.’ *The New York Review of Books*. 23 February 2012. Accessed 7 December 2018. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/02/23 /new-world-william-carlos-williams/.

Krauss, Rosalind. ‘A Note on Photography and the Simulacral.’ *October* 31 (1984): 49-68.

—— *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 1993.

Larrissy, Edward. *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

—— *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry 1945-2010*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Lecercle, Jean-Jacques, and Denise Riley. *The Force of Language*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan: 2004.

Lerner, Ben. ‘Rae Armantrout.’ *BOMB* no. 114 (2010): 78-82.

Lewis, Ethan. *Modernist Image*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

Lifschitz, Avi, and Michael Squire, eds. *Rethinking Lessing’s* Laocoon*: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the ‘Limits’ of Painting and Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Lindsay, Jack. *William Blake: Creative Will and the Poetic Image*. London: Fanfrolico Press, 1927. Reprinted New York: Haskell House, 1971.

Logan, William. *The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in an Age of Tin.* Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Longenbach, James. ‘Modern Poetry.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, edited by Michael Levenson, 99-127. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

—— *Modern Poetry After Modernism*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

—— *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Marinetti, Filippo. 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature.' Edited and translated by Lawrence Rainey. In *Modernism: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Maxstead, Luke. 'When the Martians Landed: From the Archives: Craig Raine and the Birth of Martian Poetry.' *New Statesman*, 28th February 2013. Accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.newstatesman.com/books/2013/02/when-martians-landed.

McGann, Jerome. *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Melville, Stephen, and Bill Readings, eds. *Vision and Textuality*. Houndmills; Basingstoke; Hampshire; London: Duke University Press, 1995.

Merchant, Preston. 'The Poet's Prose.' *Contemporary Poetry Review*. 14 July 2010. Accessed 26 November 2018. http://www.cprw.com/the-poets-prose.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

—— *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Mlinko, Ange. 'More than Meets the I.' Review of *Next Life* by Rae Armantrout. *Poetry* 191, no. 1 (2007): 56.

Mobilio, Albert. 'A Note on Hanging and the Uselessness of Verse.' In *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, 9-10. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010.

Moran, Richard. 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force.' *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1989): 87-112.

Morson, Gary Saul, and Caryl Emerson, eds. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Mukařovský, Jan. *The Word and Verbal Art*. Translated by John Burbank and Peter Steiner. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1977.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. *How Are Verses Made?* Translated by G.M. Hyde. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.

Nadel, Ira B., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Nelson, Cary, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2012.

Nelson, Howard. *Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 'Vietnamese and Vietnamese American Lit: A Primer from Viet Thanh Nguyen.' *Literary Hub,* 10 February 2017. Accessed 4 October 2018. https://lithub.com/vietnamese-and-vietnamese-american-literature-a-primer-from-viet-thanhnguyen.

North, Michael. *Novelty: A History of the New*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

O'Brien, Sean. '*The Casual Perfect* by Lavinia Greenlaw.' *The Guardian*, Friday 14 October 2011. Accessed 24 November 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/casual-perfect-lavinia-greenlaw-poetry-review.

O'Driscoll, Dennis. 'Beyond Words: The Poetry of Robert Hass.' *The Poetry Ireland Review* no. 43/44 (1994): 163-165.

Perloff, Marjorie. 'Avant-garde Tradition and the Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry.' *Revue française d'études américaines* no. 103 (2005): 117-141.

—— 'Can(n)on to the Right of Us, Ca(n)non to the Left of Us: A Plea for Difference.' *New Literary History* 18, no. 3 (1987): 633-656.

—— 'From Image to Action: The Return of Story in Postmodern Poetry.' *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (1982): 411-427.

—— *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

—— *Poetic License*: *Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990.

—— *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

—— Review of *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* by Joseph N. Riddel. *The Modern Language Review* 71, no. 1 (1976): 156-158.

—— *21st- Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

Packalen, Malgorzata Anna. Interview with Czeslaw Milosz. Krakow, 10 December 2003. Accessed 9 November 2018. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1980/milosz/interview/.

Pinsky, Robert. *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and its Traditions.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Plumly, Stanley. ‘Chapter and Verse.’ *The American Poetry Review* 7, no. 3 (1978): 21-32.

Pollard, Natalie. *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

—— ‘Stretching the Lyric: The Anthology Wars, Martianism and After.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, edited by Edward Larrissy, 99-115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Quartermain, Peter. *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrud Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Raine, Craig. ‘Babylonish Dialects.’ *Poetry Review* 74, no. 2 (1984). In *A Century of Poetry Review*, edited by Fiona Sampson, 163-167. Manchester: Carcanet, 2009.

Rainey, Lawrence. *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture.* New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998.

Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996.

Regan, Matthias. Review of *A Wild Salience: The Writing of Rae Armantrout* by Tom Beckett. *Chicago Review* 47, no. 1 (2001): 121-127.

Remnick, David. ‘A Conversation with Robert Hass.’ *Chicago Review* 32, no. 4 (1981): 17-26.

Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language.* Translated by Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.

Riddel, Joseph N. *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams*. Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1974.

Rodgers, Audrey T. *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement*. London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993.

Sadoff, Ira. *History Matters: Contemporary Poetry on the Margins of American Culture*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

Samson, Peter. *Writing Poems: Bloodaxe Poetry Handbooks: 2*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994.

Schjeldhal, Peter.‘The Dark Final Years of Mark Rothko.’ *The New Yorker,* 19 December 2016. Accessed 8 December 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/19/the-dark-final-years-of-mark-rothko.

Shapiro, Alan. *In Praise of the Impure: Poetry and the Ethical Imagination, 1980-1991.* Evanston; Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

Shucard, Alan, Fred Moramarco, and William Sullivan. *Modern American Poetry: 1865-*

*1950.* Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, 1977.

Soto, Christopher. 'Night Sky with Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong.' *Lambda Literary*, April 4 2016. Accessed 28 October 2018. www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/04/04/night-sky-with-exit-wounds-by-ocean-vuong.

Spiegelman, Willard. *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

Stanley, Sandra K. 'The Link between Williams and Zukofsky.' *Journal of Modern Literature* 17, no. 1 (1990): 53-72.

Sutton, Walter. 'The Literary Image and the Reader.' *Journal of Modern Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, no. 1 (1957): 112-123.

Thacker, Andrew. *The Imagist Poets*. Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2011.

Thurley, Geoffrey. *The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid Century*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

Trotter, David. *The Making of The Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry*. London; Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1984.

Valéry, Paul. *The Art of Poetry*. Translated by Denise Folliot. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Varney, Jennifer. 'The Imagist Poet as Cultural Mediator.' In *Event or Incident: On the Role of Translation in the Dynamics of Cultural Exchange*, edited by Jon Naaijkens, 71-105. Berlin; New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010.

von Hallberg, Robert. *American Poetry and Culture, 1945- 1980*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Warner, Ahren. 'C.K. Williams: Obituary.' *The Guardian*. Tuesday 6 October 2015. Accessed 25 October 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/06/ck-williams.

Watts, Rebecca. 'The Cult of the Noble Amateur.' *PN Review* 239, 44, no. 3 (2018). Accessed 28 October 2018. https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10090.

Weigl, Bruce, ed. *Charles Simic: Essays on the Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Weinberger, Eliot, ed. *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders: an Anthology*. New York: Marsilio, 1993.

West, Andrew Christopher. 'Metaphor in Rae Armantrout's Veil.' *Amerikastudien / America*

*Studies* 56, no. 3 (2011): 403-423.

White, Alan R. *The Language of Imagination*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

White, Gillian. *Lyric Shame: The "Lyric" Subject of American Poetry*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Williamson, Alan. *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*. Cambridge, MA; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Wimsatt, W.K. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954.

Winters, Yvor. 'The Testament of a Stone, Being Notes on the Mechanics of the Poetic Image.' *Secession* 8 (1924): 1-21.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Cosimo, 2007.

Wolfreys, Julian, Kenneth Womack, and Ruth Robbins, eds. *Key Concepts in Literary Theory,* 3rd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.