

# What Was Modernism?

## Part 3: Modernist Poetry

### Lecture 9: Imagism into Vorticism

#### 1) A Brief History of Poetic Difficulty

#### 2) Imagism

#### 3) Vorticism

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#### 1) A Brief History of Poetic Difficulty

“How can the language act most charged with the intent of communication, of reaching out to touch the listener or reader in his inmost, be opaque, resistant to immediacy and comprehension?”

(Steiner 1978, 18)

“[[I]f poetry is to achieve the precision or fidelity that it seeks we must be resigned to indirectness, to a certain difficulty. And yet it is not just in spite of, but because of the unfamiliar or ‘hitherto unknown’ inhabiting its difficult idiom that poet and poem make their paradoxical claim to a higher or more penetrating form of ‘at homeness’ or commonality, their claim to ‘speak out of the centre of each one of us’.”

(Christie 2000, 541)

poetry = ideolect vs. sociolect? (cf. Easthope 1983)

## Romantic Conflicts:

### Processes of Naturalization:

Subjectivity/Culture  
(Iambic pentameter/blank verse)

The Romantic Construction of "The People"  
(ballads/songs)

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### Processes of Individualization:

Originality/Innovation  
(formal experiment:  
sonnet, hymn, ode, pastoral,  
romance, epic  
+ 'composite orders',  
cf. Curran 1986)

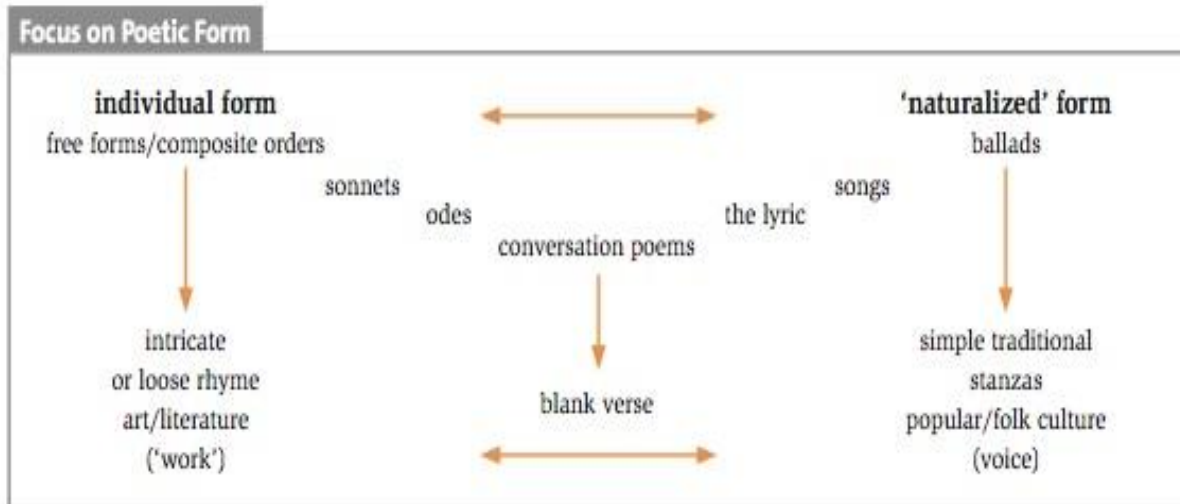
## Form?

embodied essence  
(complete product,  
unified perfection,  
fixed object)

vs.

material process  
(sensible effects,  
dynamic shaping,  
empty ceremony)

> Idealism vs. Irony  
(cf. Slinn 2000, 51)



Christoph Reinfandt, "Romanticism." In: Martin Middeke et. al., eds., *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012, 46-55, 52.

## The Apogee of Formal Innovation: Free Verse

[apogee:

1 the point at which the moon, the sun, a space vehicle etc., is farthest from the earth

2 the highest point of power or success]

“to break the pentameter, that was the first heave”

Ezra Pound, “Canto LXXXI” (1941)

“I believe in an ‘absolute rhythm’; a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable.”

Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect” (1918)

### Types of Free Verse:

- 1) free verse hovering intermittently around, in, and out of meter, alluding to and playing off of conventional measure.
- 2) long-lined, syntactically repetitive free verse modelled on the translations of the Psalms in the King James Bible: a sense of rhythm is established by parallelism/anaphora, a sense of closure is signalled by departing from this scheme of repetition.
- 3) short lines corresponding to syntactical units: line divisions reflect the syntactical current, grammar is compressed and urgent.
- 4) short lines with lots of enjambment: to facilitate run-ons, lines end in mid-phrase – with prepositions, conjunctions, articles, attributive words, or with adjectives whose nouns appear at the beginning of the line below. Effects: makes the verse paragraph rather than the line the basic unit, facilitates visual structures.  
(cf. Steele 1999, 260-264)

## 2) Imagism

### T.E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism” (1911)

When I say there will be another classical revival I don't necessarily anticipate a return to Pope. I say merely that now is the time for such a revival. Given people of the necessary capacity, it may be a vital thing; without them we may get a formalism something like Pope.

When it does come we may not even recognize it as classical. Although it will be classical it will be different because it has passed through a romantic period [...]

[W]hile romanticism is dead in reality, yet the critical attitude appropriate to it still continues to exist [...]

The thing has got so bad now that a poem which is all dry and hard, a properly classical poem, would not be considered poetry at all [...]

The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description [...] It is no mere matter of carefulness; you have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise – that which is common to you, me and everybody. But each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language, whether it be with words or the techniques of other arts [...]

In prose as in algebra concrete things are embodied in signs or counters which are moved about according to rules, without being visualized at all in the process [...] Poetry [...] may be considered as an effort to avoid this characteristic of prose. It is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily. It always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process. It chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new, but because the old cease to convey a physical thing and become abstract counters [...] Visual meanings can only be transferred by the new bowl of metaphor [...] Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of intuitive language.

### **T.E. Hulme, “The Embankment”**

(The fantasia of a fallen gentleman on a cold, bitter night)

Once, in finesse of fiddles found I ecstasy,  
In a flash of gold heels on the hard pavement.  
Now see I  
That warmth's the very stuff of poesy.  
Oh, God, make small  
The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,  
That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie.  
(1909)

### **T.E. Hulme, “Above the Dock”**

Above the quiet dock in midnight,  
Tangled in the tall masts corded height,  
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away  
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.  
(1912)

### **Three principles of Imagism**

(Ezra Pound, H.D., Richard Aldington 1912)

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

### **Introduction to “A Few Don’ts”** (Ezra Pound 1913)

An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...]

It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation, that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.

### **Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”**

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

(1913)

### **H.D., “Oread”**

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.

(1914)

### 3) Vorticism

Vorticism was a significant art movement in Britain for several reasons. It was:

- the first British modern art movement
- the first British art movement to use modern multi-media methods
- the first British art movement to include abstraction

([www.vorticism.co.uk](http://www.vorticism.co.uk))

**[*Blast* No. 1 (1914):**

**Cover, Title Page, 'Long Live the Vortex', 'Manifesto', 'Vortex. Pound.'**

**[ *Blast* No. 2 (1915): Cover, Title Page]**

**[Wyndham Lewis, "Workshop" (1913)]**

### Bibliography Lecture 9:

*Blast* No. 1 (1914)/No. 2 (1915)

quoted from Brown Digital Library Reader:

[http://dl.lib.brown.edu:8080/exist/mjp/show\\_series.xq?id=1158591480633184](http://dl.lib.brown.edu:8080/exist/mjp/show_series.xq?id=1158591480633184)

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