

# T.E. Hulme and the Beginnings of Imagism

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## Introduction

T.E. Hulme's name has for long been associated with the Imagists, the network of poets who, during the early years of the twentieth century, actively sought to re-define the standards of poetry. Hulme is understood to have played an important part in shaping early twentieth-century modernist poetics as a leading figure among the constellation of poets who gathered at the "Tour d'Eiffel" restaurant in Soho between 1909 and 1912. This group has been described as advocating proto-Imagist ideas (Carr 134); it is Hulme's contribution to the beginnings of Imagism, a movement widely credited as a starting point for modernist poetry that, for many, warrants his significance as an influence on literary modernism.<sup>1</sup> Specifically reading his "A Lecture on Modern Poetry" (1908) as the first and fullest exposition of the Imagist doctrine of poetry, it has been common for critics to cite this lecture as evidence that Hulme was an Imagist *avant la lettre*.<sup>2</sup>

Although the connections between Hulme's poetics and the Imagist doctrine (formally launched by Ezra Pound and F.S. Flint in 1913) cannot be disputed, to understand "A Lecture" as simply an early manifesto for Imagism is to risk ignoring the complexity of the argument presented in it by Hulme—and its far reaching implications for Imagist (and modernist) poetics. For Hulme's contribution to Imagism can only be clarified through examining his lecture face-on, irrespective of imposed or anachronistic interpretations.

<sup>1</sup> Eliot famously described Imagism as the "*point de repère... of modern poetry*" (162).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, King 851; Harmer 30; Jones 35; Coffman 68; Martin 7-38; McCormick 116-18; Ferguson 63; McGuinness, ed. x; and Carr 376.

“A Lecture on Modern Poetry” was delivered to the Poets’ Club in London towards the end of 1908.<sup>3</sup> In it, Hulme advocates the introduction of a new verse form in poetry designed to be in tune with the “modern spirit” (52).<sup>4</sup> “Each age must have its own special form of expression,” Hulme states, and “any period that deliberately goes out of it is an age of insincerity” (51). Because “modern” times challenged the idea that there is an “absolute truth” (an idea on which, in Hulme’s view, poetry had been based for many centuries), it was necessary for the “tendency” of poetry to change accordingly: instead of towards an absolute truth, modern poetry ought to strive “towards the production of a general effect”; this, in turn, “takes away the predominance of metre and a regular number of syllables” (53). The subject matter and tone of poetry had also to change: poetry would no longer deal with “heroic action” but with the “expression and communication of momentary phrases in the poet’s mind” (53). All things considered, Hulme concludes that modern poetry is akin to artistic Impressionism; should be written in “free verse”; and its “method” should be that of “recording impressions by visual images in distinct lines” (52).

Hulme’s insistence on replacing the “old” and “stagnant” with the “new” or “modern” shows that, as with others in his circle—Edward Storer, F.S. Flint and Ezra Pound—he was dissatisfied at

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the lecture’s chronology, see Schuchard 258. A number of critics, including Schuchard himself, have claimed that Hulme delivered the lecture a second time, in 1914. See Roberts 21-2; Hynes, ed. xii-xix; Alun Jones 122; Peter Jones, ed. 16; Sherry 38-40; and Schuchard 282. A close examination of the evidence available, however, proves that Kate Lechmere, on whose accounts Roberts and Hynes based their claims, confused Hulme’s “A Lecture on Modern Poetry” with a lecture on modern *art* (“Modern Art and Its Philosophy”) that he delivered in January 1914. This becomes evident once we compare Roberts’s and Hynes’s accounts with Lechmere’s letters to Roberts; her interview with Hynes; the descriptions of the January 1914 lecture given by Wyndham Lewis (107) and Pound (“The New Sculpture” 67); and the review of the lecture written by the art critic P. G. Konody for the *Observer* (1 February 1914: 7). Lechmere’s descriptions of the “lecture on modern poetry,” which he supposed Hulme to have delivered in the “spring of 1914” (letter to Roberts, February 1938), matches exactly the reports of the lecture on “Modern Art and its Philosophy” that Hulme gave to the Quest Society on 22 January 1914, as these are given by Lewis, Pound and Konody. It is conclusively obvious that Lechmere confused the two lectures.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, page references for Hulme’s work correspond to *The Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme*.

the state of poetry as it was being written in the early years of the twentieth century. However, in advocating for the introduction in poetry of a new form, Hulme was also implicitly rejecting certain philosophical and ideological positions, while his poetics is best read as a transposition into poetry of the “anti-intellectualist” view of language he advanced elsewhere in his work. Moreover, and equally importantly for understanding the development of his thought, many of the ideas presented in “A Lecture” also anticipate the “anti-romanticism” of “Romanticism and Classicism” (1911-12). Thus, not only must his argument in the lecture be approached independently of the Imagisms of Storer, Flint and Pound, but the fact that there is continuity between his writings shows that he is a much more coherent and consistent thinker than critics often allow.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, recognizing that Hulme developed his own brand of Imagism testifies to the plurality of Imagisms (and modernisms).<sup>6</sup> It also enlightens our understanding of the workings of the Imagist network by highlighting the complex circulation, and intricate interconnections, of ideas that combined to form the poetics of Imagism.

### The “modern spirit”

Hulme opens his lecture with a jeer directed against Henry Simpson, the Scottish banker who acted as the President of the Poets’ Club and who “told us last week that poetry was akin to religion” (49). He then moves on to berate the anonymous critic in the *Saturday Review* (venue for writers such as Anthony Trollope, George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells) for holding that poetry is “the means by which the soul soared into higher regions, and... a means of expression by which it became merged into a higher kind of reality” (49). Hulme is here referring to an unsigned article in the *Saturday Review* from November 1908, which described Storer’s poetry as “slag,” the anonymous critic claiming that Storer’s poems are “a spiritual equivalent to the sucking of chocolate” (“Versicolor” 612).<sup>7</sup> What the anonymous critic of the *Saturday Review*,

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<sup>5</sup> Critics who have separated Hulme’s career into distinct periods or phases include Roberts 139-40; Levenson 83ff; and Csengeri, “The Chronology” 109.

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of recognizing the plurality of modernisms within “modernism”, see Nicholls vii, 1-3 and Friedman 493-513.

<sup>7</sup> Hulme’s reference to the article in the *Saturday Review* has been identified by Schuchard in *Last Minstrels* 258.

Simpson, and William Watson, the author of *Wordsworth's Grave* (1890) and *Lachrymae Musarum* (1892) who is described later on in the lecture as more of “a political orator than a poet” (53), have in common, is their harbouring of “out-dated” ideas regarding poetry, its function and its method of composition. As Hulme puts it, they all make “mysterious passes and mumble of the infinite and the human heart”; this is in reality a “bluff,” which can be compared to “the way medieval scientists spoke of God. When entirely ignorant of the cause of anything they said God did it” (49).

Distancing himself from these critics, Hulme claims to be one among a “number of modern people” (50), using an adjective that, as Hobsbawm has noted, has from the late nineteenth century onwards been used by various artists seeking to dissociate themselves from the establishment (226-27). Hulme was certainly not alone in turning against established notions of poetry and in demanding a distinctly “modern” poetry. Storer, Flint and, to a lesser extent at this stage, Pound, were all registering their dissatisfaction with existing poetry. In “An Essay,” appended to his collection of poems *The Mirrors of Illusion* (1908), Storer argued that “at the hands of her priests and disciples poetry has suffered the most” (78). It was time, Storer suggested, for poetry to break from those “restrictions” of the past that “run counter to the current of life” (81). Flint shared Storer’s views on poetry. Reviewing *Mirrors of Illusion*, Flint praised Storer’s rejection of old techniques. Although he did not find Storer’s poems especially successful, as Storer, Flint insisted on “the need for revaluation of all poetical values” (“Book of the Week, Recent Verse” 26 Nov. 1908: 95). Pound, too, was determined to modernize poetry. Writing to William Carlos Williams on 21 October 1908, he rallied against the “materia poetica & metrica... of Milton’s or Miss Austin’s [*sic*] day” and the “didacticism [*sic*]” of the past (8, 11). Stock, Kenner, Tytell and, most recently, Moody, have separately shown how Pound devoted the best part of his early career in opposing the dominant conceptions of poetry and criticism.<sup>8</sup> As the unnamed figure in the opening of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Storer, Flint and Pound all felt “out of key” and “out of date” with the poetry of their time (lines 1, 6); they were determined to change it.

In “A Lecture,” Hulme bases his argument about the necessity of change in poetry on two related ideas: that poetry had reached

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<sup>8</sup> See Stock 29-41; Kenner 121-44; Tytell 35-111; and Moody 68-126.

in 1908 a state of stagnation and that only the introduction of a new verse could rejuvenate poetic activity; and that poetry had a *duty* to change, in order to accommodate the modern spirit that was so distinctly different from that of the nineteenth century. In the first case, despite his rejection in the lecture of all poetry “more than twenty years old” (50–51) and in contrast to the swagger and blast of Flint’s and Pound’s Imagist and Vorticist manifestos, Hulme presents his argument for change from a fairly dispassionate standpoint. He is keen on showing that his reasoning is based on elaborate empirical and historical observations concerning the nature of poetry. In the second instance, he criticizes the “nineteenth century” on what are mainly ideological grounds.

“The principle on which I rely in this paper,” Hulme announces early on in the lecture, “is that there is an intimate connection between the verse form and the state of poetry at any period” (50). The introduction of a new poetic form, in other words, is a necessary prerequisite for the production of new and original poetry: for “arts like poetry... must find a new technique each generation” (51). Indeed, poetic activity, Hulme argues, cannot be explained by external factors; rather, empirical and historical evidence suggests that poetic activity flourishes only when a new form of poetry is introduced: for “[t]o the artist the introduction of a new art form is... like a new dress to a girl; he wants to see himself in it. It is a new toy” (50).<sup>9</sup> The logic described here, according to which the introduction of new verse forms and the composition of new and original poetry are coextensive, is a fairly established position within literary history. It forms part, for example, of Kirby-Smith’s analysis of the development of modern verse (44). More importantly, it helps us understand why Hulme and his fellow poets were so eager to welcome a modern form of poetry in 1908.

As explained in “A Lecture,” the introduction by Wordsworth of the “Modern lyrical impulse... in good set terms as a new method” accounts for the great amount of original poems written by the British Romantics in the nineteenth century. This was also the lesson to be learnt from developments in France in the late nineteenth century, where Gustave Kahn’s new technique of *vers libre* resulted in “the appearance of a band of poets perhaps unequalled at any one time in the history of French poetry” (52). In

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hulme’s claim in “Romanticism and Classicism” that the “blank verse” introduced in the Elizabethan rimes was “new and so it was easy to play tunes on it” (63).

his essay on *vers libre*, published as the “Préface” to *Premiers Poèmes* in 1897, Kahn suggests that only the introduction of a new form of poetry could accommodate the “plus complexe” and “plus difficile” modern thought; more crucially for Hulme, Kahn revealed to him that only a new verse form could truly reinvigorate poetry. Repeating Kahn’s argument almost in verbatim, Hulme uses it in his lecture in support of his claim that it is necessary to replace old verse forms:

It must be admitted that verse forms like manners and like individuals develop and die. They evolve from their initial freedom to decay and finally to virtuosity. They disappear before the new man, burdened with the thought more complex and more difficult to express by the old name. After being too much used their primitive effect is lost. All possible tunes have been played on the instrument. What possibility is there in that for the new men, or what attraction? (50)<sup>10</sup>

Detecting in the poetry of the early twentieth century a similar decay and lack of virtuosity as the one described by Kahn’s in his “Préface,” Hulme concludes that the introduction of a new form of poetry is necessary if poetry were to exit the state of stagnation in which it had fallen.

At the same time, Hulme bases his argument in support of change on the idea that poetry had always to be in line with “the spirit of our times” (53). This is another idea that can be understood through Kahn. As Kahn, who advocated *vers libre* on the grounds that it was better suited to express the “pensée plus complexe” [more complex thought] of modern times (23), Hulme maintains that twentieth-century English poetry has to adapt to the “trend of the modern spirit” (52). He explains what he means by “spirit” in his review of Tancredi de Visan’s *L’Attitude du lyrisme contemporain* (1878), published in the *New Age* in August 1911:

It starts out from this thesis. That there is in each generation... a ‘temperature morale’ [a moral “temperature”], which is to be found at the same epoch in all the different orders of mental activity, and which constitutes ‘l’état gé-

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Kahn 23. For further discussion of Hulme’s appropriation of the ideas of Kahn in “A Lecture,” see Csengeri, “T.E. Hulme’s Borrowings from the French” 16-27.

néral de l'esprit de moeurs environnantes' [the general spirit of the moral standards of the external environment]. (57)

This view, that poetry and art more broadly are inextricably linked with the general worldview or attitude of the time in which they are produced, stayed with Hulme throughout his career. It is a central part of the critique of the romantic "critical attitude" in "Romanticism and Classicism," dismissed in this later lecture as a trend that "outlasted the thing from which it was formed" (65). It also features prominently in Hulme's defence of abstract art in "Modern Art and Its Philosophy" from 1914, where the geometric art of Epstein is offered as evidence of "the break up [*sic*] of the Renaissance humanistic attitude" (269).

What was the specific nature of this "modern" or "new" spirit, then? And how did it differ from the spirit of previous times? According to the argument presented in "A Lecture," a dramatic change in the way humans perceived the world occurred in the modern era and, as a result of this change, the moderns have ceased to believe in absolute truth. They instead now "acknowledge the relative":

As the French philosopher Guyau put it, the great poems of ancient times resembled pyramids built for eternity where people loved to inscribe their history in symbolic characters. They believed they could realise an adjustment of idea and words that nothing could destroy.

Now the whole trend of the modern spirit is away from that, philosophers no longer believe in absolute truth. We no longer believe in perfection, either in verse or in thought, we frankly acknowledge the relative. We shall no longer strive to attain the absolutely perfect form in poetry. (52-53)

In a discussion about the future of poetry in *Les Problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (1884), Jean-Marie Guyau described how his contemporary "naturalistes" prose writers chose prose over poetry as their preferred art medium. Guyau found that prose represented "ce qu'il y a de plus relatif et des plus mobile dans le langage [that which is most relative and most flexible in the language]": as the most "relative [relative]" and most "mobile [flexible]" medium, prose was best suited for modern ideas. Unlike poems of the past that "ressemblent à ces pyramides dressées pour l'éternité, où les

vieux peuples aimaient à inscrire leur histoire en caractères merveilleux et symboliques [resemble pyramids erected for eternity, on which the ancients loved to inscribe their history by producing fantastic and symbolic characters]”, modern prose dealt with ideas that “succèdent si vite pour nos cerveaux fatigués que nous avons à peine le temps de les transcrire à la hâte [succeed one another so quickly for our tired minds that we only have time to translate them in haste]” (176). More intriguingly, in *L’Art au point de vue sociologique* (1889), Guyau stated that “[l]’art moderne doit être fondé sur la notion de l’imparfait, comme la métaphysique moderne sur celle du relative [Modern art ought to be based upon the idea of the imperfect, in the same way as modern metaphysics proceeds on the idea of the relative]” (86). This obviously chimes with Hulme’s remark that the defining characteristic of the moderns was that they acknowledged the “relative” (53). However tempting it may be to conclude that Hulme was “borrowing” his ideas from Guyau, though, Csengeri is right to point out that Guyau’s statement in *L’Art au point de vue sociologique* features as part of an argument demonstrably different to the one put forward by Hulme. For in this work the Frenchman was specifically discussing the modern realistic novel, suggesting that the modern author should avoid presenting characters that were “perfect,” as that produced unrealistic and, therefore, ineffective art (“Hulme’s Borrowings” 25).

In distinguishing between the ancients who “believe in perfection” and the moderns who “frankly acknowledge the relative,” Hulme is almost certainly harking back to ideas expressed in the set of rudimentary notes published as “Cinders” (begun in 1906–7), where he presents two antithetical views of the world. On one side stand those who try to impose an artificial unity on the flux of experience and whom Hulme derides as “counter” philosophers (8). On the other, there are those who endorse a view of the world as “cinders.” As in “A Lecture,” in “Cinders” Hulme sides against the idea that there is an absolute truth, unity or beauty in the world (8–10). Instead of reducing the world to “theories of the world, which satisfy [us]” (14), as one entry puts it, we must recognize, it is claimed in another, that “The world is a plurality” (9). Likewise, rather than postulate philosophical views that are “flattering to our sense of power over the world” (11), it is more accurate to recognize that the world is “essentially imperfect, chaotic, and cinder-like” (9), and thus accept the view that there is “No average or real truth” (13). The modern poet in “A Lecture” who does not be-

lieve in absolute truth recalls the Hulme of “Cinders,” who happily acknowledges that the only reality is the experiential “flux.”

Hulme further elaborates on this view—that there is no “absolute” truth and that the world is imperfect—in the *New Age* essays he wrote between 1909–11. In “The New Philosophy,” he argues that the tendency to seek “perfection” in philosophy begins with the ancient Greeks, specifically Plato, for whom “reality consisted of ‘essences’ or ideas” (86; cf. 111). This tendency can also be seen at work in neo-Hegelian philosophers such as J.B.S. Haldane, whose philosophy is based on “order and organisation” (93); it can also be seen in the theories of positivist philosophers in general, who vouch to rationalize reality through scientific methods (101).

For Hulme, two philosophers who satisfactorily rejected the “ancient” view of the world as “perfect,” moving away from constructions of “perfect” systems, are Jules de Gaultier and Henri Bergson. Gaultier demonstrates that philosophy is in reality “a means of expressing certain attitudes to the cosmos” and that, moreover, thinking the opposite implies “humbly groping after the truth” (99–100). The lesson from Gaultier is that the struggle of science for “certitude” and for “systematic structure” is misguided, as “[a]ll philosophy is bound to be untrue, for it is the art of representing the cosmos in words, which is just as much a necessary distortion as the art of painting, which represents solidity in a plane of two dimensions” (103). Metaphysics should instead resemble art: it must combine “freedom and chance,” “bold speculation,” “lightheartedness” and “idiosyncrasy.” It must be seen, as Hulme puts it otherwise, as “an elaborate means for the expression of quite personal and human emotions” (101). Similarly to Gaultier, Hulme praises Bergson for offering an alternative approach to metaphysics. By understanding the world in terms of experiential “flux” and not as a unity of laws, Hulme maintains in “Notes on the Bologna Congress” that Bergson provides a more accurate and more sincere view of reality, which is attuned to the modern spirit. Citing Bergson in support of his argument, Hulme rejects the belief that “Somewhere at a great distance, Truth is hidden” and that “She is always waiting to be discovered” (105).

There is thus an obvious link between Hulme’s description of the modern poet in “A Lecture” and his discussion of Gaultier and Bergson in the *New Age* articles. Just as Gaultier and Bergson understand the world without imposing any “artificial” unities over it (87; 101), so the modern poet in “A Lecture” rejects all notions of “perfection” (cf. 52). In arguing in the lecture that the moderns

“acknowledge the relative” (cf. 53), Hulme seems to be referring to view expressed in “Cinders,” and which in his articles for the *New Age* he attributes to the philosophical methods of Gautier and, especially, Bergson.

There is, finally, another aspect to Hulme’s claim that the moderns “acknowledge the relative,” which is less immediately apparent. The lecture’s opposition to notions of “perfection” and to the tendency of creating God-like structures and inventing theories of “absolute” truth (52) anticipates Hulme’s critique of romanticism, defined in “Romanticism and Classicism” in 1911-12 as the belief that “man is a god” (62). It is also in line with Hulme’s criticism in this lecture of Ruskin, who “wants to deduce his opinion like his master, Coleridge, from a fixed principle of the cosmos” (62). Both the modern poet in “A Lecture” and his “classic” counterpart in “Romanticism and Classicism” recognize that it is not the job of poetry to make claims to an “absolute truth” (cf. 49, 52, 62, 66). This is not to say that the arguments in the two lectures are identical: in “Romanticism and Classicism”, Hulme directs his critique primarily at the romantic *weltanschauung* as he detects it not only in literature but also in politics.<sup>11</sup> Despite the crucial change in terminology and focus, however, the poetry that Hulme criticizes in “Romanticism and Classicism” is the same as the poetry he opposes in his early lecture. This is evident from the way that in both these lectures, Hulme directs his criticism towards the same poets. Thus in “A Lecture” he lists Tennyson, Shelley, Keats and prominent members of the Edwardian literary establishment, such as Simpson and Watson, as examples of poets guilty of chasing “perfection” and of using empty rhetoric, while in “Romanticism and Classicism,” even though he adds Lamartine, Hugo, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Swinburne on his list of poets whose poetry he dislikes, Hulme also includes Tennyson, Shelley, Keats and the critic who “takes up the thing at least a couple of notes in pitch” (cf. 62-63).

### The New Form of Poetry: Impressionism & Free Verse

Halfway through the lecture, Hulme describes the difference between old and modern attitudes in poetry by pointing to “analo-

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<sup>11</sup> See my article in *Literature & History* 25-41.

gous” developments in painting. He finds that there is an “analogous change in painting, where the old endeavoured to tell a story, the modern attempts to fix an impression” and suggests that “[w]hat has found expression in painting as Impressionism will soon find expression in poetry in free verse” (53). There are two things to note here, both of which merit further scrutiny. The first relates to the role played by Impressionist painting in Hulme’s formulation of modern poetry; the second to the form that modern poetry would take.

As Carr points out, “before Roger Fry’s first Post-Impressionist exhibition [in late 1910], Impressionism still represented all that was most modern in art” (198). This was certainly the impression of Storer, who wrote in 1908 that “[t]o argue for or against impressionism at this time of the day would be as foolish as to write a treatise proving the circulation of blood” (“An Essay” 101). Understood in its broadest definition, as the art practised by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Sisley, as well as Cézanne, Degas, Manet and Whistler, Impressionism challenges many nineteenth-century conceptions of art, thereby acting as a source of inspiration and influence for twentieth-century writers.<sup>12</sup> However, rather than offering Impressionism as a blueprint for modernist literature (in the manner of Ford’s “On Impressionism,” for example), it is more accurate to claim that Hulme is here using developments in art in support of his diagnosis that a distinctly modern spirit was making itself evident in all cultural spheres: he felt the same about developments in music (54). What Hulme seems to be valuing specifically in Impressionism is Impressionism’s choice of subject matter and its creative method. Thus, in the passage cited above, Impressionism is described as art that is not interested in presenting a story or a narrative—this is what Hulme means when he says that Impressionism avoids “epic subjects”—but that is, rather, only interested in the momentary presentations of the artist’s inward feelings. As he puts it earlier in the lecture, the aim of Impressionism is “the maximum of individual and personal expression” (53). In this sense, Impressionism constitutes a transformation into art of the idea that Hulme professes in his article on Gaultier, according to which modern philosophy should be “simply an elaborate means for the expression of quite personal and human emotions” (101). More crucially, Hulme seems attracted to the way Impressionism avoids presenting

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<sup>12</sup> See Adam Parkes’s recent study of Impressionism and modernist literature.

ideas of “absolute truth,” looking instead for inspiration in material reality (53). This is evident from the way he juxtaposes the Impressionist method of representing feelings induced by “the vision of a London street at midnight” or the “the flat spaces and wide horizons” of the Canadian prairies with the “lyrical impulse” of Tennyson, Shelley and Keats (53). This regard for material reality, which both Compton and Eitner identify as a central component of Impressionist art, can also be seen in his early notebooks “Notes on Language and Style” (c. 1907), where in one entry it is stated that “[a]ll emotion depends on real solid vision or sound” (24), and in another that “[t]he art of literature consists exactly in this *passage from the Eye to the Voice*” (31; emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> It can also be seen in “Romanticism and Classicism,” where Hulme argues that a poem should always be built around “an actually realized visual object” (71).

Hulme concludes his discussion of Impressionism by saying that, just as the “modern spirit” found its expression in art as Impressionism, the “modern spirit” in poetry will find its expression as “free verse.” For many critics, Hulme’s demand for “free verse” is the central requirement that he bestows on modern poetry.<sup>14</sup> Yet the obvious problem with describing Hulme’s definition of modern poetry as “free verse” is that, as various scholars have showed, “free verse” is an often misused term that, unless it is defined each time it is used, runs the risk of being a misnomer.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in neglecting to explain what they mean by “free verse,” critics from Taupin and Read, through to Rodway and Wacior have failed to add to our understanding of Hulme’s position regarding the form of modern poetry in “A Lecture.” For this reason, it is necessary to consider in some detail Hulme’s argument in favour of “free verse” or *vers libre*, two terms that are used interchangeably in his lecture. As I argue here, Flint’s suggestion in “History of Imagism” that Hulme proposed “pure *vers libre*” needs substantial qualification (70).

Hulme’s first mention of either term occurs early in the lecture:

I came to the subject of verse from the inside rather than the outside. There were certain impressions which I wanted to fix. I read verse to find models but I could not find any that seemed exactly suitable to express that kind of impression ...

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<sup>13</sup> See Compton n.pag. and Eitner 338.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Taupin 245; Read 129; Rodway 96; and Wacior 26.

<sup>15</sup> See Hough 87; Pratt 39; Duffell 187; Malof 146; and Hartman 44.

until I came to read the French *vers-libre*, which seemed to exactly fit the case. (50)

He soon returns to the subject of *vers libre*, now elaborating on what he means by it:

The new technique was first definitely stated by Kahn. It consisted in a denial of a regular number of syllables as the basis of versification. The length of the line is long and short, oscillating with the images used by the poet; it follows the contours of his thoughts and is free rather than regular... it is clothes made to order, rather than ready-made clothes. This is a very bald statement of it and I am not concerned here so much with French poetry as with English. The kind of verse I advocate is not the same as *vers-libre*, I merely use the French as an example of the extraordinary effect that an emancipation of verse can have on poetic activity. (52)

Hulme's definition of *vers libre* is, in its essence, a summary of the argument presented by Kahn in his "Préface" to *Premiers Poèmes*. According to Kahn, *vers libre* allows the poet to "écrire son rythme propre et individuel au lieu d'endosser un uniforme taillé d'avance et qui le réduit à n'être que l'élève de tel glorieux prédécesseur" [write his own individual rhythm, rather than follow pre-fabricated restrictions, and thus reduce himself to being simply a follower of so-called glorious masters]" (28). Yet, however, despite his reliance on Kahn, Hulme quickly makes it clear that he does not want to offer French *vers libre* as the principal form of modern poetry. What are we to make of this?

Tempting as it may be to conclude that Hulme is guilty of contradicting himself, another explanation seems fairer. Hulme is simply making the point (which is also a point Storer, Flint and Pound also made) that what makes *vers libre* primarily a modern form of poetry is that it does not follow any prescribed rules.<sup>16</sup> This is the

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<sup>16</sup> See Flint, "Book of the Week: Recent Verses" 212-13 and "Contemporary French Poetry" 358; and Storer 102, 107. Pound's principle of *melopoeia*, according to which form has "truly to bear the trace of emotion which the poem... is intended to communicate" ("The Serious Artist" 244), certainly shares something with the type of verse advocated by Flint and Storer. See Pound, "The Tradition" 93; "The Approach to Paris" 340; and "How I Began" 213-14. In a letter to Alice Henderson from 1913, Pound writes: "Vers libre is various

only definition of *vers libre* that can be got out of “A Lecture” and it is, in fact, the only satisfactory definition that can be given to the terms “*vers libre*” and “free verse” as they are used in English poetry. For Hough, “free verse” as adopted by English poets in the early twentieth century is more correctly understood as *vers libéré*, not *vers libre*: whereas *vers libre* refers to verse that is “born free,” *vers libéré* denotes verse that “has been liberated from some pre-existing chains” (87). Kirby-Smith makes a similar point to Hough, suggesting that the only common characteristic of “free verse” poems in English is that “they escape or deviate from traditional meters” and that they thus “run counter to expectations of various sorts” (43, 47).

That Hulme favours a verse form that is not prescriptive but only abandons strict conventions is made evident from his poetry, which is an example of what Malof calls “fragmented free verse,” or, in Kirby-Smith’s terms, “vers-libristic” form, “a loosening up of poetic structure into lines of irregular length” but which retains, as Kirby-Smith explains, “a certain regularity of syllabification and use of rhyming endings” (44). Consider, for example, “The Embankment”:

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. (3)

A rhyming structure persists: “ecstasy” with “poesy”; “I” with “sky” and “lie.” In “Above the Dock,” the iambic pentameter ensures that the rhythmic structure is much more fluid:

Above the quiet dock in mid night,  
 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. (3)

Consider also his unpublished poem “Sunset,” with the primary

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things. there’s ‘Vers Libre’. And ‘our vers libre’ and ‘their vers libre’ [sic]” (4).

metrical stress marked on its original manuscript:

I love not the Sunset  
That spréad like a scarlet sóre  
O'er hálf a sick sky,  
Or flaunts a tráiled red globe  
Along the fretted edge of the city's roofs  
Abóut the time of hómeward going crows  
Calling aloúd for all to gape  
At its beauté  
Like a wanton. (n.pag)

“Autumn” is similarly unrhymed, but written in a much freer form:

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—  
I walked abroad,  
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge  
Like a red-faced farmer.  
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,  
And round about were the wistful stars  
With white faces like town children. (3)

Here, the conventions of rhyme and metre are loosened as the modern poet is left free to express himself. Instead of trying to achieve a “perfect” representation, in “Autumn” Hulme simply presents a series of impressions. He does not speak, but nods; in the terminology of “A Lecture,” he possesses a “tentative and half-shy manner of looking at things” (53-54).

In a fluid, “imperfect” form that allows the poet to express himself without giving the impression that an absolute beauty or truth exists, Hulme found the possibility for poetic rejuvenation. Ultimately, however, and above everything else, what concerned him the most in “A Lecture” was not so much that modern poetry should be composed in “free verse,” but that it is “visual.” What he means by “visual” is examined in the next and final part of this essay.

### The Use of Images and “Visual” Poetry

Hulme explains the aims and method of composition of modern poetry through the following example:

Say the poet is moved by a certain landscape, he selects from that certain images which put into juxtaposition in separate lines serve to suggest and to evoke the state he feels... Two visual images form what one may call a visual chord. They unite to suggest an image which is different to both. (54)

He then moves on to describe modern verse as “read and not chanted,” adding that its effect depends on “arresting the attention, so much so that the succession of visual images should exhaust one” (54). And, returning toward the end of the lecture to elaborate on how exactly modern verse can be said to be “read,” Hulme states:

This new verse... appeals to the eye rather than to the ear. It has to mould images, a kind of spiritual clay, into definite shapes. This material... is images and not sound. It builds up a plastic image which it hands over to the reader, whereas the old [chanted] art endeavoured to influence him physically by the hypnotic effect of rhythm. (56)

For both Carr and Kirby-Smith, the emphasis on the “eye” not the “ear” anticipates (at least in its spirit) the typographic experimentations of e. e. cummings, Apollinaire and the Dadaists (Carr 179; Kirby-Smith 46-47). For Schuchard, Hulme’s definition of modern poetry as “visual” distances his brand of Imagism from the popular chanted verse of the time, but also from the Imagisms of those around him, who were attracted to chanted verse. Indeed, Hulme’s description of the “old art” of chanting in “A Lecture” (which he found so ineffective) fits perfectly the profile of the chanted verse popularised by W.B. Yeats and Florence Farr in the early 1900s. Farr’s “cantilating” captured the imaginations of many poets in the early twentieth century, including leading members of the Poet’s Club, and Hulme’s distinction can be read as a reaction to the art of Yeats and Farr.<sup>17</sup> Here, I want to focus on another way of understanding Hulme’s “visual” and “read” poetry, through Théodule Ribot’s “logique des images.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Schuchard 256-83. An idea of the kind of chanted verse that Yeats and Farr were promoting can be found in Farr’s *The Music of Speech* 19-26.

<sup>18</sup> Martin identified Ribot as a possible “source” for Hulme’s poetic theory as early as 1970. See “The Sources of the Imagist Aesthetic” 198-204. Years later,

The single most important feature of Hulme's modern poetry is its method of presentation of different images in distinct lines. As many critics have recognized, Hulme owes this method to Bergson, specifically Bergson's key suggestion in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* that many diverse images can lead us "to the precise point where there is certain intuition to be seized" (28). In a well-known passage in this essay (which Hulme translated for publication in 1912), Bergson explains that, although it is very difficult to "reproduce" the "inner life" or duration despite the fact that, as he puts it, "[n]o image can replace the intuition of duration" (27), different succinct images may succeed in triggering our attention towards intuition, which is the means through which we can access duration. An important requirement for intuition, however, is that it requires an effort on the part of the individual: "consciousness must at least consent to make the effort" (28). The idea is that, precisely because intuition (which can lead us to duration) requires effort from our consciousness, it cannot be given to us, but only be suggested to us.

Bergson was not, of course, referring to poetry here. But read through his suggestion in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, the juxtaposition of images in modern poetry that Hulme proposes in "A Lecture" appears to be designed to facilitate the process of intuition. The modern poet presents a series of brief and distinct images or metaphors designed to lead the reader to an intuitive moment. This logic is enacted in Hulme's poetry, where metaphors are presented successively, with no image privileged over another, and where, as suggested by Hulme in "A Lecture," the reader is encouraged to make out of them as he wants and to unify them into a new image (54). In "Above the Dock," for example, the image of the hanging moon is followed by that of a balloon held by a child; the two images carry equal weight and

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in "Hulme's French Sources," Rae suggested that Ribot provided Hulme with a basis on which to develop his model of art, according to which the purpose of poetry is that of "presenting some reality directly rather than attempting to explain it to the intellect with the 'chiffres' [tokens] of highly abstract language: a reality that, transcendental or otherwise, forever resists explication in such terms" (81). Rae's emphasis is not on Hulme's account of language or poetics, but on the way that, read via Ribot's scepticism about the existence of a transcendental realm, Hulme's "classical" poetry can be interpreted in terms of "the aesthetics of Pragmatism" (97). Rae elaborates on this view in *Practical Muse*. See 12, 47-64.

unify into an image of the moon floating like a balloon held by the child. Likewise, “A Sunset” begins with the image of the sunset “spréad like a scarlet sore,” but the poem then moves rapidly through the images of the “hálf a sick sky,” a “traíled red globe,” “the city’s roofs,” and the “hómeward going crows.” Finally, in “Autumn” Hulme associates the “ruddy moon” with a “red-faced farmer” and “wistful stars” with the “white faces” of “town children,” as the mind of the reader shifts suddenly from one image to the next, the two images fusing and uniting into new ones. In the terminology of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Hulme invites the reader to make the effort required by intuition; he must suspend any “particular and clearly-defined disposition” (28) he may have.

Hulme expresses a similar idea in his 1914 lecture on “Bergson’s Theory of Art,” where he explains that the poet must always aim to invent original metaphors—“because language will not carry over the exact thing you want to say,” Hulme claims here, “you are compelled simply in order to be accurate to invent original ways of stating things” (200)—only to then stress that the presentation of metaphors and epithets alone does not suffice. What matters most in poetry is not so much “the accidental fact that imagery conveys over an actually felt visual sensation, but the actual character of that communication, the fact that it hands you over the sensation as directly as possible” (201). The presentation of images in poetry is not enough; images, rather, must serve to generate communication between the poet and the reader. Making the point that poetry has to consist in “fresh metaphors and epithets,” Hulme stresses that the most important quality of verse is this direct method of communication. Importantly, he clarifies that this “same quality is exhibited in the other parts of verse, in the rhythm and metre” (198). This is an important qualifier, for it offers one explanation as to why Hulme did not abandon such conventions as rhythm or rhyme in his poetry: for as long as these “conventions” aid communication, then they have a part to play in modern poetry.

Although Bergson’s suggestion in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* provides a useful lens through which to read Hulme’s method of composition, Bergsonian philosophy does not immediately explain how modern poetry “appeals to the eye rather than to the ear” or that, moreover, “It has to mould images, a kind of spiritual clay, into definite shapes” (56). The requirements that Hulme postulates here for modern poetry can be understood through Ribot’s theory

of imagination, specifically through Ribot's discussion in *Essay on the Creative Imagination* (1900).

According to Ribot, there are two main types of reasoning involved in the processing of "abstract" and "general" ideas: reasoning from particular to particular, and reasoning by analogy. Both are needed to pass from the known to the unknown. The difference is that, whereas in the first case the mental progress is of the simplest form (as the mind simply passes from the immediately given to that suggested by experiential association), reasoning by analogy is of a far higher order: it presupposes mental construction. Ribot shows that analogical reasoning, which is a spectrum ranging from valueless likeness to cognitive resemblance, leads to different kinds of creative imagination. In cases where analogies are valueless, the operation involved is "diffluent imagination." As Ribot explains, this process consists of "vaguely-outlined, indistinct images... evoked and joined according to the least rigorous modes of association" (195). When analogies approach cognition, however, they give rise to what Ribot terms "plastic imagination." This "plastic imagination," Ribot explains, "has for its special characters clearness and precision of form," adding that its "material [sic] are clear images, approaching perception, giving the impression of reality" (184).

In various entries in "Notes on Language and Style," Hulme writes that "poetry" (or "direct" language, as opposed to "prose" that is "indirect") must be made up of "analogies," in a way that invites comparison with Ribot's definition of plastic imagination as the process of "reasoning by analogies."<sup>19</sup> In one fragment in "Notes," for example, we read that "the poet is forced to use new analogies, and especially to construct a plaster model of a thing to express his emotion at the sight of the vision he sees, his wonder and ecstasy" (24; cf. 22, 25, 26, 30, 31, 42). Elsewhere, in a fragment entitled "Example of Plastic Imagination," Hulme writes:

The two tarts walking along Piccadilly on tiptoe, going home, with hat on back of head. Worry until could find the exact model analogy that will reproduce the extraordinary effect they produce.

Could be done at once by an artist in a blur. (28)

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<sup>19</sup> On Hulme's distinction between "prose" and "poetry," see his entries in "Notes on Language and Style" 24-27.

In Ribot's terms, the logic in both these fragments is that, through cognitive analogies, it becomes possible for the poet to present accurately that which he has in his mind: to give an impression of reality. The idea that the success of a poem depends on the ability of the poet to use "exact" analogies features also in "Romanticism and Classicism," where a similar example to the entry in "Notes"—of someone "walking behind a woman in the street... the skirt rebounds from her heels" (70-71)—is used to explain the creative process involved in "classic" poetry. To represent the emotion produced by the movement of the woman, Hulme maintains in "Romanticism and Classicism," it is necessary that the poet have in his mind an "actually realised visual object." More importantly, the analogy used by the poet must be "every bit necessary for accurate description... sincere in the accurate sense" (71). The same idea can be found in "A Lecture." For in explaining in "A Lecture" that, unlike chanted verse, modern poetry "mould[s] images... into definite shapes" and "builds up a plastic image which it hands over to the reader" (56), Hulme is essentially stating the case he was later to make in "Romanticism and Classicism": that the poet must aim to capture the feeling he wants to express through clear and accurate analogies.

In *Essay on the Creative Imagination*, Ribot locates the process of diffident imagination in the "art of the 'symbolists'," by which he means art that "despises the clear and exact representation of the outer world [and] replaces it by a sort of music that aspires to express the fleeting inwardness of the human soul" (202). By contrast, "plastic imagination" is involved in those arts that present images in a precise and detailed way, for example the literature of Hugo, in whose works we find "a stream of glittering images" (188). Quoting Mabillean and Gautier, both of whom discussed Hugo's art, in approval, Ribot claims that Hugo "wants to *see the words*"; because for Hugo "a book is made to be read, not to be spoken aloud," Ribot continues, "Hugo never spoke his verses but wrote them out... as if he needed to fixate the image... to find the appropriate word" (189; emphasis in original). As well as explaining Hulme's emphasis on the use of accurate analogies, therefore, Ribot's theory of creative imagination provides a different way of understanding Hulme's distinction between "chanted" and "visual" art. Despite Hulme's dismissal of Hugo as a "Romantic" later on in "Romanticism and Classicism," the modern poet in "A Lecture" resembles Ribot's Hugo: they both aim at creating visual, not aural, analogies

because, as explained above, they hold visual images to be the only means of approaching perception.

### Conclusion

A close and independent analysis of Hulme's "A Lecture on Modern Poetry" shows that, as with the poets in his circle—notably Storer, Flint and Pound—Hulme was dissatisfied at the existing state of poetry in 1908. Although there are clear continuities between his poetics and the Imagist doctrine—the emphasis on poetry free from restrictions, the use of "direct" language, and the juxtaposition of distinct images—Hulme's demands on modern poetry are more accurately understood when examined independently of the poetics of other Imagists. This is not to devalue the merit of studying Imagism as a unified poetic doctrine, but to highlight the advantages of paying attention to the individual ideas and personalities that form intricate networks.

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