

## The Curious History of Imagism: Of Hulme, Bergson, Worringer, and Imagism's Readers. A Response to Andrew Hay\*

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Imagism has long occupied a curious position in the history of Modernism. Many modernist scholars have regarded imagism as central, even essential, to the development of twentieth century poetics, yet, at the same time, its short lifespan calls its very centrality into question.<sup>1</sup> The American literary critic and dramatist Glenn Hughes made an early case for the significance of Imagism in his study *Imagism and the Imagist* (1931). However, it was T. S. Eliot's claim, made in a 1953 lecture, that granted primacy of place to a movement which had all but faded from view by the time of his remarks: "The *point de repère*, usually and conveniently taken, as the starting-point of modern poetry, is the group denominated 'imagists' in London about 1910" (Eliot 58). Indeed, as Andrew Hay notes in his recent, perceptive reengagement with Imagism: "When contextualised in the history of Modernism, Imagism might seem to be little more than an ancillary concept" (304). How can Imagism be both essential and ancillary? An answer, as Hay's article suggests, can be found in the tension between the poetics of Imagism and the product of those poetics as well as in the (re)construction of those tensions by critics over the last one hundred years or so.

Hay's article begins with a return to the debates surrounding Imagism. It provides a useful exposition of the poetics of the movement and reminds us of its historical context. Not surprisingly, he revisits

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\*Reference: Andrew Hay, "On the Shore of Interpretation: The Theory and Reading of the Image in Imagism," *Connotations* 21.2-3 (2012/2013): 304-26. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debhay02123.htm>>.

the pivotal roles that T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound played in establishing this new poetics, and he also examines the theories of some of the writers and thinkers they drew on in the process of developing their approaches. Familiar names make appearances—the German aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, and the French poet Remy de Gourmont, to name three prominent contemporaries of the Imagists. Hay goes on to update the familiar Imagist “talking points” by relating them to the works of mid- and late twentieth century critics/scholars such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Geoffrey Batchen. In doing so, he not only emphasizes the continuing relevance of Imagist poetics, but also implicitly points to the coded ways in which they have been integrated into subsequent aesthetic debates.

Hay’s article is an engaging and engaged reappraisal of Imagism, and though I might quibble with a few of his characterizations or readings, I think it is a commendable piece of scholarship. What drew my attention, and what I would like to respond to, are two comments he makes which I think deserve to be teased out more fully.

While I fully appreciate that the length and scope of Hay’s article necessitates a somewhat abbreviated assessment of Imagism, at least as a starting point, I find overly schematic his assertion that “[w]here Pound’s rhetoric prescribes the image in poetic practice as distinctly non-representational, Hulme’s insistence upon clear visuality as the stylistic apotheosis of the best new poetry means that the poetic is fundamentally and inescapably intertwined with the mimetic” (308). I don’t think their positions (or implicitly, their roles) are as clear-cut as Hay claims. Greater nuance is called for with respect to both Pound and Hulme’s role in the genesis of Imagism and their understandings and use of the image. This is particularly true given the different trajectories the two men’s careers had after the initial, formative period of Imagism. However, my comments are constrained by space, just as Hay’s were, so my own response precludes a full engagement with this line of his argument. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that a more nuanced account of Hulme’s engagement with Bergson

and Worringer, in particular, would reveal a somewhat different assessment of Hulme. I am especially interested in the way that Hulme blends Worringer's ideas with Bergson's to arrive at his own views on the image.

The second comment that drew my attention is Hay's conclusion—"the proliferation of labels in Imagist theory gives way to a more diverse form of poetic practice, with multiple conceptual/interpretative possibilities" (323)—which strikes me as opening a fruitful avenue for further discussion, particularly in light of Hay's incorporation of post-structuralist thought into the discussion.

### 1. Bergson and Worringer

Turning to the first point, we know that the usual narration surrounding Hulme's aesthetics shows him picking up Bergson's theories only to discard them later in favour of Worringer's. This standard approach also claims a parallel in his movement from Imagism towards Vorticism, from intuition to the clarity of geometric art. The situation, however, is far more complex than this, as critics as diverse as Samuel Hynes, Alun Jones, Michael Levenson, Patricia Rae, Mary Ann Gillies, Karen Csengeri, Andrew Thacker, Helen Carr and Rebecca Beasley, amongst others, have noted over the years.<sup>2</sup> But let's start with the familiar narrative.

As the story goes, Hulme was drawn to Bergson's theories upon the return from his sojourn in Canada. What Hulme found most attractive in Bergson's thought, at least initially, was the Frenchman's concept of intuition. Hulme would have been familiar with Bergson's concept from attending the philosopher's lectures and reading his early work, including *Time and Free Will*. The degree of his familiarity with Bergsonian intuition is perhaps most clearly evident, however, in Hulme's translation of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, where he notes in the "Preface" that in it "M. Bergson explains, at greater length and in greater detail than in the other books, exactly what he means to

convey by the word *intuition*" (iii-iv). The crucial facet of Bergsonian intuition for Hulme was the way it cut through the restrictions of conceptual thinking and the structures such thought erects, permitting direct contact with the flux of reality. 1907 found Hulme attending Bergson's lectures in Paris; from 1909-1912 he was writing articles about Bergson for the *New Age*; and in 1912-1913, he was translating Bergson's *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. But by 1912, Hulme was reconsidering Bergson's theories, in part because of their growing popularity, particularly amongst women, and in part because he detected in them a strand of romanticism that was antithetical to his own thought. He began to move away from Bergson, seeking an aesthetic more in keeping with his evolving ideological views.

Although the exact date that Hulme was first drawn to Worringer's work is unknown, we do know that Hulme was in Berlin in October 1913 where he attended Worringer's lectures.<sup>3</sup> What drew him to Worringer is better known; Hulme was attracted by the German's contention that there were two basic kinds of art, abstract and empathetic. Abstract art—what Hulme was to call geometric art—was non-representational and associated by Worringer with a more "primitive" world-view.<sup>4</sup> Empathetic art—what Hulme called vital art<sup>5</sup>—was realist art in the mimetic tradition that had held sway in Western Europe since the Renaissance. Worringer's insistence that abstract art was not of lesser stature or value than empathetic art was controversial, but it struck a sympathetic chord in Hulme. What likely appealed even more to Hulme was Worringer's contention that they represented fundamentally different world-views. Hulme's series of articles on "Modern Art" published in *The New Age* in 1914 make clear his debt to Worringer. He opens the first of these by remarking "I am attempting in this series of articles to define the characteristics of a new constructive geometric art which seems to me to be emerging at the present moment" (263). Hulme's emphasis on the (re)emergence of geometric art and his tying it to contemporary sensibility echo Worringer's theories. As Helen Carr suggests, "Worringer gave Hulme a new direction" (104), for in Worringer's theories, Hulme

found a means of addressing a fundamental conflict that permeates his thought. Carr underscores this point when she writes: “Empathetic or mimetic art is practised by those who feel at home in the world, confident of their place in it,” while “[a]bstract art is practiced by those who find the world a baffling, inexplicable, fearful place; they turn to abstract, geometric, and patterned forms to create order and stability in a universe in which they find none” (103). By using sharp, geometric shapes to arrest the flow of perceptions, order could be imposed on chaos without sacrificing an essential emotional connection with the flux of reality.

Tellingly, though, Carr also maintains, even while advocating Woringer’s aesthetics, “[Hulme] still does not explicitly abandon his belief in Bergson” (104). Indeed, his late art criticism is subtly marked by his long immersion in Bergson’s philosophy. Take, for example, “Modern Art IV: Mr. David Bomberg’s Show” which appeared in the *New Age* in July 1914. Ostensibly a review of Bomberg’s one-man show, it provides Hulme with the opportunity to articulate his theory of form and its relation to feeling or emotion. He concludes his assessment of Bomberg by remarking:

I should add that as yet his use of form satisfies a too purely sensuous or intellectual interest. It is not often used to intensify a more general emotion. I do not feel, then, the same absolute certainty about his work as I do about Epstein’s. In Mr. Epstein’s work, the abstractions have been got at gradually, and always intensify, as abstractions, the general feeling of the whole work. (309)

Both the passage’s language and its concern with the adequacy of form (or language) to represent a direct experience (or feeling) would not have been out of place in Hulme’s earlier work on Bergson. For example, in notes for a lecture on Bergson’s theory of art—edited by Herbert Read and published posthumously in *The New Age* in 1922—Hulme writes that, while Bergson “has not created any new theory of art,” what he “does seem to me to have done is that by the acute analysis of certain mental processes he has enabled us to state more definitely and with less distortion the qualities which we feel in art”

(287). Feeling and form are foregrounded here as much as they are in later discussions.

I don't want to wade too far into a discussion of the vagaries of Hulme's aesthetics, however; suffice to say I agree with Carr's observations. The philosophy or aesthetics of both Bergson and Worringer were necessary ingredients in Hulme's articulation of his own aesthetic, and their very contradictions speak to the opposing forces at work within Hulme's construction of the image and within Imagism itself. This is a point that I think might have been teased out more fully by Hay, particularly in light of the conclusions he draws at the article's end.

## 2. Central but Marginal—Imagism's Place in Modernism

I turn now to my second point, arising from two comments with which Hay concludes his article. I quoted the first passage above—"the proliferation of labels in Imagist theory gives way to a more diverse form of poetic practice, with multiple conceptual/interpretative possibilities" (323). The second occurs immediately before it: "By recognising the relative ephemerality of Imagism as a 'school,' and resisting the urge to inscribe a false correlation between voluminous Imagist theory and the more diverse Imagist practices, the critic can avoid the perils of the Imagist 'crypt'" (322-23). Together they open the possibilities to not only a richer reading of Imagism—theory and praxis—but they also allow us to address its ambiguous place as simultaneously central and ancillary in the "contextualised [...] history of Modernism."

The initial observation I would like to make about both quotations is Hay's assertion of a disjunction between the theory promulgated principally by Hulme, aided by Pound and others, and the poetry produced most notably by H. D., though also by Pound, F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, and others.<sup>6</sup> This kind of disjunction is not unusual in modernist writing, where the praxis often deviates from

the theory. The different approaches of the “founding fathers” of Imagism as well as the subsequent effect this has on Imagism’s place in literary history is one of the aspects that makes Imagism such a fascinating study. For Hulme, the nascent philosopher, what was important was to arrive at an understanding of how reality—however it might be understood—functioned and then derive an art form which captured that as precisely as possible. For Pound, Modernism’s foremost propagandist, what was important was the art; certainly, he also took on the task of promoting that art via articles and manifestoes, but I would argue that those functions were secondary concerns to Pound. Hulme and Pound were united in their drive to find new ways of using language to express the experience of modern life, but their disparate approaches result in what Hay refers to as “the proliferation of labels in Imagist theory,” and it is this very proliferation that calls into question what lasting contribution Imagism makes to twentieth century poetics. For how can one movement have such contradictory methods? How can it offer multiple possibilities to its practitioners? Can something as “fissile” (308) as Imagism was, to quote Hay again, actually be called a movement?

My second observation helps to answer these questions. Scholars starting as early as the 1930s, aided and abetted by modernist theorists and promoters such as Pound and Eliot, have imposed order on Imagism retrospectively: they have insisted that its theories have a logical coherence and that the poetry matches the poetics. They have maintained this position despite sometimes torquing both to ensure that they fit this portrait, and they have done this in service of imposing an orderly history on the evolution of poetics in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> But these efforts at shaping the narrative notwithstanding, that isn’t what happened. It is well known that for not only Hulme and Pound, but also for most of the writers associated with it, Imagism was one stage in their poetic or aesthetic development. By the time Harriet Monroe published Pound and Flint’s essays proclaiming Imagist theory in *Poetry* in 1913, the founders of the movement had already begun to move on—Hulme was becoming

ever more preoccupied by art and aesthetics, and Pound was already involved with Wyndham Lewis and the beginnings of Vorticism. By early 1915, the initial group had fractured, and the arrival of Amy Lowell and her assumption of a central place in the movement is sometimes seen as signalling the end of Imagism's innovative phase. Ironically, it is at this moment that the impulse to affix a label and offer an "official" narrative gains momentum, and the subsequent place that Imagism assumes in the "contextualised history of Modernism" thus takes shape. However, as Hay's article usefully reminds us, if we can sidestep the interminable debates about the theory of Imagism, we can see, instead, the importance of its "diverse form[s] of poetic practice, with multiple conceptual/interpretative possibilities" (323).

I agree with Hay that Imagism "becomes a practice that fails to fit or coalesce with its own theoretical precepts" (315) and would add that this is not a bad thing. Hay's point of view is well-supported by the post-structuralist theories he brings to bear in his engagement with Imagism, and this is where a very fruitful avenue of thought is opened. While many might argue the point, I believe Imagism's legacy resides not in its theory, in the "dos and don'ts" of an *Imagiste* that we continue to pass along to our students as the essential qualities of the movement, but rather in the possibilities Imagist poetry affords writers (and readers) searching for new modes of expression. The theory—appropriated and refashioned as it was by New Critics and subsequent generations of scholars—seeks to provide a container for experience, to "fix" the approach to the poetry, to insist that it must be read in a certain way in order to grasp what the poet was doing. The crystalline image took on the qualities of an art object, which, no matter how beautiful and arresting it was, had still to be decoded—preferably by the initiated or by expert critics—in order for its meaning to be grasped. The poetry, however, defies this formalist approach, reaching out towards its readers beyond the boundaries imposed on it by the theory. Hay suggests just this tension between the two when he comments that "both Pound and H. D. exhibit a far



more intersubjective aesthetic within the reading mechanics of their poetry than Imagist theorisations of reading might permit. This is not to disallow aesthetic theorising within the context of Imagism's self-situation, nor to delimit pertinent theorising of an Imagist aesthetic, but rather to urge a productive and generative tension between theory and practice, collectivisation and singularity" (317).

In his article's concluding sentence, Hay makes an interesting gesture towards the possibilities Imagism opens up: "the images of Imagist poetry are as active as the interpretative energies of that poem's reader" (323). This observation is telling because it speaks to the seismic shift in the reader's role vis-à-vis the poem and it also implicitly critiques the Formalist and New Critical constructions of literature that carved out such a strong foothold in literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth-century. I believe that Hulme and Pound would have resisted the extremes of New Criticism, maintaining that poetry, even stripped to its essentials as per Imagist tenets, was still an act of communication between poet and reader, one where an essential truth was transmitted.

When Hulme wrote in 1908, "the first time I ever felt the necessity or inevitableness of verse, was in the desire to reproduce the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of western Canada" ("A Lecture" 53), he encapsulated this very situation: the difficulties and the opportunities which co-existed in Imagism. As he explained in the same lecture, new verse "has to mould images, a kind of spiritual clay, into definite shapes" (56), and these shapes convey that "peculiar feeling [...] induced" not solely by the Canadian prairies, but by the poet's experience of modern life. He announced the arrival of a new era in poetry when he concluded the essay with the assertion that the new verse "builds up a plastic image which it hands over to the reader" (56). On the face of it, what is crucial here is the Image. But the phrase "hands over to the reader" cues us to the shift in sensibility that I'm suggesting is the lasting Imagist legacy: the shared responsibility

between poet and reader in the (re)construction of the experience that the Image attempts to convey.

To remain a viable art form poetry must communicate. Since, as Hulme reminds us, “[w]e can’t escape from the spirit of our times” (“A Lecture” 53), new ways of communicating are required for new eras. For Hulme and Pound, as theorists, and for Pound and H. D. as practitioners, modern verse “has become definitely and finally introspective and deals with expression and communication of momentary phases in the poet’s mind” (“A Lecture” 53). The Imagist poet takes the base clay of these “momentary phases in the poet’s mind,” moulds them into shapes/images that fix or arrest, momentarily at least, the essence of the experience, and then presents the images to the world. What happens to it afterwards is out of the poet’s control, much to the dismay of those who wanted art to provide some order in the midst of the chaos of modern life. However, the more effort the reader puts into the act of engaging with the poem, the more likely it is that he or she will get at least a glimpse of “the peculiar quality of feeling which is induced by the flat spaces and wide horizons of the virgin prairie of western Canada.” Hay’s conclusions remind us of this, providing a valuable capstone to an insightful and provocative essay. At the same time, he challenges us to re-examine our institutional portrait of Imagism, with an eye to how we might (re)conceive it if we were to resist “the urge to inscribe a false correlation between voluminous Imagist theory and the more diverse Imagist practices” and embrace, instead, our roles as readers, bringing our interpretative energies to bear in each act of engagement with Imagist poetry.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>One way of assessing the impact of the narrative that sees Imagism as a centrally important poetic movement is to note how it has been presented in influential reference texts on modernism. Works such as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's seminal *Modernism 1880-1930* (1976) situated Imagism at the heart of modernist experimentation. The ninth edition (the most recent) of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. F: *The Twentieth Century and After* (2012) continues to position Imagism as central to the development of twentieth century poetics. There is also a large body of scholarly work that traverses this territory indicating the continuing importance of this short-lived movement in the development and history of modernism. References to some of the work may be found in this article's works cited.

<sup>2</sup>Hulme's complicated relationship with Bergson is a subject that scholars have returned to repeatedly over the years. Hynes's influential work on Hulme in the 1950s discussed Bergson's role in Hulme's thought, as did Jones in his biography of Hulme. Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* catalogued three phases of Hulme's career, demonstrating the threads that were woven throughout them, including Bergson's place. Rae's work on Hulme sought to provide a more balanced view of his "borrowings" from philosophy, and from Bergson in particular. Gillies's *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* looked briefly at Hulme's use of both Bergson and Worringer. More recent work re-examines the Hulme-Bergson relationship, for the most part attending more closely to the complex place the French philosopher holds in Hulme's thought. See, for example, Ferguson's biography, Beasley's *Theorists of Modernist Poetry*, and Thacker, Carr and others in their contributions in *T. E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*. I'm not suggesting that these critics share a common view, just that they have all examined the Bergson-Hulme connection.

<sup>3</sup>Hulme's involvement in art criticism is a complex subject. Rebecca Beasley makes an interesting and convincing case that, in addition to Worringer, by 1912 Hulme was also engaged with the contemporary art world in London and that the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, amongst others, struck a similar note and resonated with Hulme. See Beasley "'A Definite Meaning': The Art Criticism of T. E. Hulme."

<sup>4</sup>Worringer published his doctoral dissertation *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*) in 1907; it outlines his concepts of abstract and empathetic art which Hulme subsequently incorporated into his own art theories.

<sup>5</sup>Hulme used this phrase notably in his article "Modern Art II—A Preface Note and Neo-Realism" which appeared in *The New Age* in February 1914.

<sup>6</sup>Hay is right to comment on what he calls "the fissile nature of the Imagist movement" (308) given the many different configurations the movement took over its short lifespan. Most accounts of Imagism, however, cite Hulme, H. D., Pound, Flint and Aldington at the core of its cadre of poets. This view was early on promoted by Pound himself, who in his important 1918 article "A Retrospect" acknowledges Aldington's role but curiously omits mention of F. S. Flint. Flint

contributed “Imagisme” to the same 1913 issue of *Poetry* in which Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” appeared—in fact Pound’s essay followed Flint’s. The piece by Flint not only contains the same three “rules” of Imagism cited by Pound in “A Retrospect,” but also introduces an American audience to the group’s existence and aesthetic. Pound’s successful shaping of the narrative is seen in the degree to which subsequent accounts—including those in widely disseminated works such as Bradbury and MacFarlane’s *Modernism: 1880-1930* and *The Norton Anthology* that I’ve cited above—echo his. One might add Amy Lowell to either of the categories—or even both, and one might also take issue with the list of core poets. I take the position that Lowell’s late arrival on the scene places her in a secondary role in the sense that the important theoretical issues had been sorted out and her poetry does not approach the quality of the four poets I’ve named.

<sup>7</sup>As suggested in previous notes, the history of Imagism has been shaped to some extent by the needs of its various founders and by the use to which Imagist theory was put by subsequent critics or poets. Pound and Amy Lowell, for example, both used Imagism to establish/consolidate their own positions in the literary field. Glenn Hughes’s *Imagism and the Imagists* was the first book-length study of the movement and as such it sets out what becomes the standard history of the group; this narrative was repeated by other influential scholars. Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era* recounts the history of Imagism in the terms set out first by Pound and then by Hughes, for instance. More recently, Andrew Thacker’s *The Imagist Poets* (2011) challenges the customary history of Imagism, reinserting Flint, John Gould Fletcher, and Amy Lowell as significant figures. Thacker’s intervention is as much indicative of current scholarly concerns as Hughes or Kenner’s reflect those of their eras, which supports my contention that Imagism is still a very much contested movement in part because of the way it speaks to central twentieth-century aesthetic and poetic issues.

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