

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 26 (2011)

Artikel: The poetics of the avant-garde : modernist poetry and visual arts
Autor: Patea, Viorica
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-283966>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 31.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Poetics of the Avant-Garde: Modernist Poetry and Visual Arts

Viorica Patea

This essay offers a brief overview of the relationship between modernist poetry and avant-garde art and examines the way in which key concepts of modernist aesthetics – e.g., the ideogram, the vortex, the objective correlative and theories of impersonality – are poetic equivalents of the new experiments in the visual arts. The interaction between poetry and visual arts marked the beginning of the twentieth century and remained the hallmark of postmodernist poetics. Cubist, Dada, Expressionist, Surrealist and abstract painting articulated the technical repertoire that was later adopted by other artistic disciplines. American modernist poets such as Eliot, Pound, Cummings, Stevens and Williams found in the technique of visual arts the key of how to recenter poetic expression on abstract designs that put an end to poetry's reliance on mimetic principles. In the twentieth century Anglo-American poetry draws on the aesthetic principles of non-representational arts that provide the model of a new poetic language.¹

The aesthetics of twentieth-century Anglo-American poetry is based on the principles and techniques of nonfigurative arts, which it constantly seeks to integrate and translate into its own poetics. This essay considers the interaction between poetry and painting and focuses on the way in which key concepts of modernist aesthetics – the ideogram, the vortex, the objective correlative and the theory of impersonality, for example –

¹ This study is part of two larger research projects funded by Consejería de Educación y Cultura de la Junta de Castilla y León (Ref. SA012A10-1) and the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (Ref. FFI2010-15063).

are the poetic equivalents of the new experiments in avant-garde visual arts, such as painting, sculpture and photography.

Prolegomena

The two *loci classici* in the history of interartistic relationship between poetry and painting go back to classical antiquity: Simonides of Ceos's (6 BC) apothegm evoked by Plutarch, "Painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture," and Horatio's famous dictum "Ut pictura poesis" ("As is painting so is poetry").² While the former expresses an implicit impulse to overcome existing barriers in order to achieve a common language, the latter, originally intended to highlight their limitations, has come to be understood as a comparison that bases the two artistic forms on mimesis. From the Hellenistic theorists through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Neoclassical period, the analogy between poetry and painting has been linked to principles of verisimilitude and limited to a mirror-like depiction of reality. Poetry and painting share a joint visual appeal. Both evoke images, yet they address our senses by different means. The history of interartistic comparison centers on similarities – the authority of the "ut pictura poesis" argument of Pope's "sister arts" – as well as the differences between the two arts. As early as 105, Dion of Prusa noticed that painting addresses our sight and endures in space, while poetry unfolds in time through acoustic effects. He anticipated the major controversy regarding the different modes of representation of each art to be formulated later by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766), a treatise that emphasized the two different modes of artistic expression of reality. Lessing postulated the unbridgeable distinction between visual spatial arts (painting and sculpture) and the temporal verbal art (poetry).

The Romantics put an end to the semantics of the mirror and severed the connection with empirical reality, instead privileging imaginative expressive visualizations. Walter Pater's aphorism "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music" (140) is paradigmatic of the Romantic sensibility and aesthetics. The Romantics rebelled against the neoclassical distinctions between different arts and genres as formulated by Lessing. They were intent on overthrowing and transcending a range of limitations – those of their own art and those separating different art forms. For the Romantic imagination, music was the quintessential art,

² For a synopsis of the interartistic relationship between poetry and painting see Henryk Markiewicz "Ut Pictura Poesis . . . A History of the Topos and the Problem" and Wendy Steiner "The Painting-Literature Analogy."

the master art that all others strived to emulate. In the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner had attempted to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a composite art that synthesized all other arts. Music, especially opera, was the vehicle in which drama, poetry and visual symbolism converged. For Wagner music was “the work of art in which all branches of art could unite in their highest perfection.” “Poetry,” he said, “will recognize its strongest, inmost longing in its final culmination in music” (107). And music had the advantage of being a universal language cutting across different national idioms. Opera combined dramatic representation with the materialization of abstract ideas in a language that “work[s] almost immediately upon the feelings themselves” (Wagner 105). In his analysis of the unity and diversity of different forms of art, Pater concurred with Charles Baudelaire, the first theorizer of modernity, that “the arts do not so much aspire to supplant one another as to lend each other renewed forces” (Baudelaire 116-17).

Since the Romantic era the languages of philosophy, poetry and the arts have converged. The modernist aesthetic is characterized by an increasing tendency to transgress and displace the boundaries of different genres and art forms, a tendency conducive to postmodernist forms of intermediality. In order to define their artistic endeavors artists have often resorted to an analogy with another art. The Romantics cherished the nightingale or the Aeolian harp and conceived of poetry in terms of music. W. B. Yeats aspired to the fluidity of dance. Among the modernists, T. S. Eliot conceived of poetry in terms of music, Ezra Pound sought the solidity and dynamism of sculpture and painting, and William Carlos Williams and H.D. resorted to painting, photography and cinema, while Wallace Stevens invoked the eye that paints and the mind that composes.

“On or about December 1910, human character changed”

If in the nineteenth century, music was the quintessential art, at the turn of the century we can, as Reed Dasenbrock suggests, paraphrase Pater and assert that “all arts aspire to the condition of painting” (5). In the first decade of the twentieth century, painting became the master art, the paradigm of aesthetic theory and the richest source of inspiration to all other arts. Painting set the tempo of the avant-garde, the example all other arts would follow. Poetry was to be modeled on abstract art.³ To

³ The formulation of abstract artistic principles was greatly influenced by Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908) and Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), excerpts of which were published in the Vorticist journal *Blast*. In surveying the

its original theorizer, Wassily Kandinsky, abstraction “consist[ed] of the endeavor to eliminate, apparently fully, the objective (the real), and . . . to embody the content of the work in ‘unmaterial’ forms” (“On the Problem of Form” 162). Abstract form was predicated on “the outer expression of inner content” (162); it expressed “an inner experience” (165), “a striving of liberation of old forms,” that captured “the inner resonance” of objects (166). This constant process of “shifting of [cultural] barriers” breaks up “the soul-less material life” and envisages “building up the psychic-spiritual life of the twentieth century” (“On the Problem of Form” 170).

Modernist literary doctrines are modeled on contemporary philosophical trends as well as theories of painting and sculpture. Poets share the pervasive idea in modernist painting and philosophy that truth is fragmentary, relational and complex. Hence the modern form must embody this multiform, prismatic reality, which can no longer be encompassed in a single unified scheme. Modernism also inherits the rhetorical propaganda of Dada’s “destruction is creation,” while the Futurist exaltation of dynamism and simultaneity shares modernism’s desire to shock the bourgeois and disrupt conventional thinking. The destructive element becomes thus part of the twentieth-century ethos.

A forerunner of the modernist convergence of poetry and painting is Guillaume Apollinaire, who used to write poems on the paintings of his Cubist friends and introduced the *calligramme* and the visual poetry technique. He created poetic equivalents for the theories of painters. His *calligrammes*, an extension of the concrete poem or painting poem already illustrated in 1897 by Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés* (1897), drew on the possibilities inherent in the Simultaneism and Orphism of Robert and Sonia Delaunay (Cook 64-85). Apollinaire’s Dadaist concrete poem explored the visual possibilities of words and letters, turning them into images and reproducing the form of objects so as to make a picture. Apollinaire summed up thus the spirit of the avant-garde: “We are moving towards an entirely new art, which will stand with respect to painting as envisaged heretofore, as music stands to literature” (115). Apollinaire’s *calligrammes*, Pound’s ideogrammatic method, and the Italian Futurists’ *dipinti paroliberi* (free word-paintings) – for example, Carlo Carrà’s “Festa patriottica” (1914), a collage of painted papers on cardboard with phrases cut out of newspapers, and Francesco Cangiullo’s “Fumatori

history of art Worringer distinguished two opposing impulses: the drive towards empathy with nature, exemplified by the organic humanistic art of ancient Greece and the Renaissance, and the drive towards abstraction, caused by a feeling of unrest and fear of the surrounding world, and typical of the stylized geometric art of primitive archaic, Egyptian or Byzantine cultures.

II,” a poem visually evoking the lengthened form of smoke – began to turn twentieth-century poetry into a hybrid affair, an array of “intermedial text[s] between literature and visual art” (Higgins 206).

In the twentieth century the superiority and vitality of avant-garde visual arts is an indisputable fact. The artistic relationship between poetry and visual arts is manifest in the works of the great modernist poets – from Pound’s *Cantos*, Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Williams’s *Spring and All* to the poems of H.D., Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens or E. E. Cummings and Gertrude Stein, who was more interested in painting than in the literary texts for which she is known today.

The great revolution in the visual arts occurred between 1908 and 1914. By then Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Constantin Brancusi had already shaped the principles of nonrepresentational art. Painting became the most fertile metaphor for aesthetic theory, which opened the avenue of artistic experimentalism. It articulated the revolutionary language of twentieth-century artistic expression. Three of the earliest abstract artists – the Romanian sculptor Brancusi, the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and the Russian Kazimir Malevich – viewed art in visionary terms, as an attempt to discover the reality lying behind the surface of appearances. In an early instance of intermediality, Kandinsky was concerned with the musicalisation of painting. He believed that art could visually express music and named many of his paintings after musical terms and compositions. Artists searched for the essence of things, which could be discovered only once the distracting outward elements – that is, their objective appearance – was stripped away. Reality had to be discovered in its most basic elements: line, color and form. Kandinsky argued, “The ‘artistic’ brought to the minimum, must be recognized here as the most strongly working abstract” (“On the Problem of Form” 162). While Mondrian was reducing everything to a line, Malevich resorted to dashes of color, circles, lines, and tilted rectangles in his desire to bring art to a geometric simplicity and absolute austerity, wanting to free art from “the burden of the object.” Kandinsky endeavored to eliminate the real, the object itself, so as to capture its “inner resonance” and the “life” that exists beyond the physical form (“On the Problem of Form” 155-70). These artists’ autonomous compositions of lines, planes, colors and forms were impregnated with occultism and hermeticism.

The Image and the Vortex

To T. E. Hulme, the theorizer of Imagism, whose conception of art was to have a lasting impact on Pound, poetry was analogous to abstract art, in which he discerned an aspiration for immortality and the desire to transcend the flux of nature. He believed that the modernist sensibility was akin to primitive cultures and that the language of concrete geometric shapes adequately reflected the spirit of the modern age. In turn, Pound declared, "The image is the poet's pigment," and decided that Kandinsky's theories on form and color could be applied to poetry (86). He prescribed a new poetic language based on the sort of hardness and clarity of outline found in geometric-abstract art. Significantly, Pound explained his Vorticist aesthetics in a memoir on his sculptor friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Pound equated spaces and axes with the rushing of ideas and conceived the image in terms of Gaudier's planes, fields, axes or "the more complex Cubist designs of [Wyndham] Lewis' 'Timon'" (26).

Influenced by Ernest Fenollosa's theories on the Chinese written character, Pound found in the ideogram the poetic equivalent of the collage. The ideogram illustrates the pictorial possibilities of Chinese script, rooting abstract notions in concrete elements. It also enables nonlinear readings that evade full narrative and sequential interpretations. Pound turned the ideogram into the structural device of his *Cantos*, a compositional technique that allows for concision, fragmentation and epic amplitude.

In their treatment of the image, modern poets looked to visual arts for inspiration and example. The literary text became a visual object. By means of their association with painting, "poets find a way to break poetry's reliance on statement and formal convention and to re-center their project on abstract designs" (Costello 167). The modernist quest for a new poetic idiom is premised on the aesthetic of the "image," the key concept of all poetic programs of the twentieth century. Founded by Pound together with Hulme, F. S. Flint, H.D., Richard Aldington and Ford Madox Ford in 1912, the first "-ism" of modernism was Imagism, a movement that defined itself as a "school of images," overtly affirming its visual, concrete and pictorial character. Hulme argued that poetry was "a visual concrete" language that "endeavor[ed] . . . to make you continuously see a physical thing" (131).

Imagism (1912) and Vorticism (1914) drastically changed the poetic language of the twentieth century. Imagism initiated a campaign against the mimetic principle of art that was later to be continued by Vorticism. Pound argued that Imagism had "an inner relation to certain modern paintings and sculpture" (82). Defined by Pound "as an intellectual and

emotional complex in an instant of time" (86), the image violated traditional canons of representation by presenting not an existing reality but a set of relations that lie behind the mere appearance of things. The image was not a mirror reflecting the given world but a lens, a tool with which to refashion the world anew. Imagists shared the common impulse of the avant-garde to dehumanize art, to challenge rational discourse and to frustrate the intellect's capacity for translating everything into recognizable patterns. The new poetic strategies were those of direct presentation, juxtaposition, breaking of syntax, suppression of connectives, ellipses. Pound claimed, "The image is at the furthest possible remove from rhetoric" (83). Like painting and sculpture, poetry was intent on creating a new metalanguage with a logic of its own. This elliptical style is the poetic equivalent of the suppression of perspective in Cubist painting. This compositional method is based on bringing together disparate elements that do not belong to the same semantic field, and the impact created by their connection is directly proportional to their usual distance from each other; a similar impact was created by the strange, shocking objects, such as pieces of newspaper, statues or bottle racks, that were introduced in the pictorial space of the Cubist collage.

Vorticist literature defined and developed its aesthetic in terms of the visual arts, especially painting and sculpture. Founded in 1914 by a poet (Pound), a painter and novelist (Wyndham Lewis), and a sculptor (Gaudier-Brzeska), the journal *Blast* became the forum of this interdisciplinary movement, which gathered abstract sculptors such as Jacob Epstein and painters such as David Bomberg and Edward Wadsworth. Vorticism consciously attempted to formulate a "correlative aesthetic" between literature and visual arts and to promote a "sort of poetry where painting and sculpture seems as it were 'just coming into speech'" (Pound 82). Pound defined Vorticism as "expressionism, neo-cubism" (90), in opposition to Futurism, with which it maintained polemical relations. In fact, Vorticism was an original variant of these three artistic movements. The image developed towards the more dynamic, active and explorative vortex, defined as "a radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing" (Pound 15). In a Vorticist's hands the image gained in dynamism, simultaneity, intensity. It had to record "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (Pound 89). The poem was above all an energetic construct that relinquished even more resolutely the mimetic conception of art. Vorticist literary principles stress creative imitation and the fashioning of new art from old. Pound's Vorticist poems – *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *Sextus Propertius*, *Cathay* – became an exploration in other languages and

literatures, a pastiche and reinterpretation of different past traditions, a Cubist collage of diverse cultural alignments.

It "Must Be Abstract"

The tradition of abstract art draws on the post-Impressionism of Paul Cézanne and his conception of reality "in terms of the cylinder, the cone, the sphere" (Cézanne 18-19). Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse advocated an aesthetics in which color loses its mimetic association. Abstract sensuousness of form, rational geometry and intuitive perception of color lie at the root of the modernist revolt.

Through their exposure to visual arts, poets found a way to break their dependence on discursive conventions. The poetry of the modernist avant-garde shows a filial relationship with abstract art, especially with Cubist painting. As the Mexican poet Octavio Paz remarks, the poetic language deforms and reforms itself when exposed to the new pictorial and sculptural aesthetics (531). Roman Jakobson has elsewhere observed that the influence of Cubist painting had a greater impact than atomic physics in the thought of the first wave of structural linguistics, while for Wendy Steiner Cubism is "the master-current of our age in painting and literature" (177-97). Cubism marked the great break with the Western tradition of representational art since the Renaissance. Going against the fixities of the perspectival point of view, it introduced the free association of visual elements into painting. In Cubism, objects are not fixed anymore in a spatial continuum; they are broken apart and distributed freely on the canvas. Perceptual images are recombined in nonrepresentational structures in which profile, frontal or back views, external and internal elements of an object coexist in the same plane. Images recombine in nonrepresentational structures. Reality becomes an arrangement of geometrical forms. Like Cubist artists, Cummings thought of art in terms of "Composition[s] by Angles, and Planes" (Houghton Notes, qt. Cohen 187). In his Notes he formulated thus his aesthetic principles: "The symbol of all Art is the Prism. The goal is unreality. The method is destructive. To break up the white light of objective realism into the secret glories it contains" (Houghton Notes, qt. Cohen 157).

The Cubist techniques of fragmentation, multiple perspectivism, juxtaposition and collage were to become standard practices of literary modernism, characterizing works such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As Octavio Paz rightly observes, in a Cubist painting as in a Symbolist poem, the visible reveals the invisible, although the revelation operates through opposed methods: the symbol

evokes without naming, while in a Cubist artwork, forms and color present an object without representing it: "Symbolism (Mallarmé) was a transposition: Cubism is a presentation" (534). By representing an object simultaneously from different angles, Cubist painters replace it with a system of plastic relationships. They create a multiperspectival reality liberated from the limitations of a unique point of view. As with the concurrent experiments in the visual arts, modernist poets also break up the illusion of a one-point perspective and the convention of a single lyric personality. In *Prufrack* (1914) and *Mauberley* (1920) Eliot and Pound became the first to do away with the notions of the lyrical "I" as a unitary entity. The *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* present a plurality of consciousness, an ever-expanding series of points of view.

If Pound pointed the way to the visual possibilities of twentieth-century poetry, Eliot's formulations regarding the extinction of personality, the impersonal theory of art, the objective correlative, and the notion of the artistic process as a continual self-sacrifice helped develop an abstract poetic imaginative space similar to that which theorists of abstraction created in modernist painting. By means of this strategy Eliot rescued art from its mimetic representations and invented a new means of rendering the dramatization of psychic forces and inner conflicts. As Charles Altieri (189-209) convincingly argues, Eliot's notion of impersonality and that of the objective correlative are inseparable from the contemporary experiments in nonfigural visual arts. The strategy of the objective correlative and the theory of impersonality enabled Eliot to create the syntax of a new subjectivity that transforms the poetic text into a Cubist site where complexes of feelings and cultural representations are in play. Eliot recomposes subjectivity into a new geometry of interpenetrating, intersubjective elements that shape the nondiscursive, nonlinear space of interior life. While the objective correlative unites subjectivity with its objects, impersonality allows for a perspectival embodiment of psychic forces and tensions that undermine the ego's effort to impose a single interpretive strategy onto the flux of reality. Impersonality, or the *via negativa*, offers the literal representation of the interplay of psychic forces free of the impositions of a univocal interpretive strategy. It is on the grounds of the theory of impersonality that Eliot discards the convention of a stable lyric voice. He conceives of personality as a "zone" or a "field of consciousness" (Kenner 35-36), an assemblage of many psychic registers and historical and cultural identities. The "I" is a collage of voices, masks, registers and points of view. Instead of direct self-exposure he stages the conflicts of a consciousness at odds with itself.

More than any other poem, *The Waste Land* represents the modernist quest for a new form. Eliot's technique recalls a Cubist collage depicting different cultures, eras and geographical spaces. The poem is a series of layered planes that defy formal completeness and do away with categories such as plot, narrative sequence and the notion of a single lyric consciousness. Eliot resorts to Cubist aesthetics and privileges a complex mode of ever-shifting temporal dislocations and narrative and rhetorical discontinuities. The poem is an ensemble of fragments, segments, polyphonic variations of interrupted voyages, unfinished sagas and disconnected adventures. Their multiple strands are different phases of a quest that continues in different contexts, time periods and geographical latitudes at the frontier between myth and reality (Langbaum 95-128). Within the framework of these montages, dramatic action loses its linear progression and ceases to relay mere sequences. Eliot tells one story by telling different stories whose arguments have no beginning, no middle and no end. Eliot's allusive strategies, the poem's textual and textural suggestiveness, do not advance the narrative thread; rather, they establish a web of new associations. The poem progresses not by way of its dramatic action but by way of its digressions, analogies, allusions and repetitions. As Michael Levenson aptly remarks, the poem proceeds not forwards but "sideways"; it evolves "by enlarging contexts, by situating motifs within an increasingly elaborate set of cultural parallels" (201). Eliot's world is discontinuous and disrupted, yet his fragments are dynamic elements that seek to find their correspondences in other contexts and cultures, opening new perspectives and setting up bridges between isolated points of view. Eliot's "mythical method" targets the simultaneity and atemporality of the collage technique, by means of which chronological and consecutive temporality is replaced by a visual spatial form. *The Waste Land* also presents a quest for the continuum of modern consciousness that encompasses the fragments of its past culture. Moreover, the underlying structure of the collage endows the composing fragments with a dynamic character and preserves the great diversity of the culturally heterogeneous elements it brings together without imposing a uniform order.

The Poem and the Machine

On the American side of the Atlantic, the close relationship between poetry and painting was emphatically acknowledged from the very beginning. Those poets who, like Williams, Stevens, Hart Crane and Marianne Moore, did not choose to become expatriates proudly claimed that they had modernized their poetic idiom not so much due to the

influence of Pound and Eliot, the daunting and towering figures of the literary European scene, as to the influence of visual arts and the effervescent artistic milieu of New York, where the works of Cézanne, Brancusi, Picasso and Matisse were first introduced by art collectors in small galleries such as Alfred Stieglitz's at 291 Fifth Avenue. In 1913 the Armory Show was the major event that introduced post-Impressionist and Cubist art to New York. With the outbreak of World War I, the presence of European artists in the United States – Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Jean and Yvonne Crotti, Albert Gleizes, Juliette Roche, Edgar Varèse and Henri-Pierre Roché, among others – was to become another decisive factor in the evolution of modern art. Between 1915 and 1921, Walter Conrad Arensberg, an art collector and a friend and patron of Duchamp, used his New York apartment as a salon where European and American avant-garde artists would meet.

Stevens, Williams and Moore were heavily influenced by the experimentalism of the avant-garde; in many instances the distinctive character of their poetry can be traced back to their contacts with and exposure to the latest visual arts developments in New York (MacLeod "Visual Arts" 194-216). Williams was friendly with New York painters like Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler and Marsden Hartley and photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand and others associated with the magazine *Camera Work*. From them and the Precisionist movement he learned how to make his own poetic language visually precise, how to sharply focus on a scene, and how to charge it with atmosphere, narrative and symbolism. He resorted to the technique of visual arts in order "to return to and to renew specifically *literary* traditions and modes," such as pastoral lyrics and irregular odes (Schmidt 7). A nativist American movement, Precisionism, comprised painters and photographers who believed in the myth of America as a potential industrial Arcadia. They exalted the new industry and technology in paintings that depict industrial scenes and skyscrapers in an attempt to create a superior nationalistic aesthetic, which transposed Emerson and Whitman's Adamic notions to a contemporary industrial setting. As Peter Schmidt argues, Precisionist pictures had to present an "equivalent" for emotion. As photographic versions of Eliot's "objective correlative," they had to depict the visible as well as the invisible, while the artist's own presence had to be as impersonal and "objective" as possible, a "selfless lens" (10-47).

Williams defined the poem "as a Field of Action" (*Essays* 280-91). The poetic space becomes a moving field, "[t]he stream of things . . . that move in one fixed direction" and that the poet opposes "at right angles," cutting across the "current" to achieve tension (*Essays* 15). In many of his poems the perspective is turned into an abstract field of

form and color patterns. Williams conceived of his poems in terms of an arrangement of planes capable of expressing emotional contents: "I amplify 'planes' to include sounds, smells, colors, touch used as planes in the geometric sense, i.e., without limits, except as intersected by other planes" (qt. Dijkstra 57). These were also the elements he appreciated in paintings. He praised Charles Sheeler's *Classic Landscape*, a painting about which he wrote a poem with the same title, for its "effectiveness," which resulted from "an arrangement of cylinders and planes in the distance" (qt. Dijkstra 148).

Influenced by experimental concerns with structure and multiplicity of form, the modernist poet seeks to achieve a serial equivalent to Cubist multiple perspectives. This is Stevens's favorite technique, evident in poems such as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "Metaphors of a Magnifico" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in which a landscape, a narrative or the portrait of a blackbird is viewed from different angles and rendered by a series of variations and rhetorical riddles. "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is an experiment in serial landscapes in which the same seascape is presented in a series of metaphors that capture the changing mood of the speaker and the changing aspect of the sea and clouds.

Stevens's and Williams's poems embraced the experimentation then taking place in modern painting, especially Dada, Cubism and Surrealism. Williams's compositions are in many ways "visual texts" (Sayre) in terms of their formal design and structure. In *Kora in Hell* (1919) and *Spring and All* (1923) he produced his own version of Dadaist or automatic writing. Williams avowed, "I didn't originate in Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it. *Spring and All* (1922) shows that" (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 48). Along the same line, many of Stevens's puns, nonsense words, wordplay and word invention, and the odd conjunction of objects that transgress the limits of meaning, translate into a fascination with the irrational that adumbrate the influence of Dada and Surrealism.

In the twentieth century art was no longer to be conceived of as a copy of reality; rather, it was to be regarded "as an independent object with the same degree of thingness as the objects" (Steiner 18). Modern poets do not copy reality, but compose a reality. They no longer represent reality; they only create a portion of it – a "mundo," in Stevens's phrase. The more self-sufficient a work of art becomes, the more it resembles the world of objects. Poems are verbal objects made solely of words. For Williams words meant things, objects, facts: "The poem is a small (or large) machine made of words" (*Selected Essays* 256). Whereas Whitman's chief aim was "to construct a poem on the open principles of nature" (*Complete Writings*, IX, 34), his romantic conception of organic form being based on the growth of plants and seeds (Preface 1855, 716),

in the prose passages of *Spring and All* Williams claimed that the poet not only imitates nature's creative mode, but produces poetic objects just like "electricity and steam" (*Collected Poems* 207). Williams's theories are consonant with Marcel Duchamp's concept of readymades, which draw not on nature but on industrial technology. Duchamp's *objets trouvés* reflect the crisis in the conception of art and its function. Furthermore, they express the artist's conscious will to elevate ordinary or scandalous objects (bottle racks, urinals) to the category of art, hereby opening the debate into the very nature of art while mounting enigmas against the possibility of revelation. Cubist tropes, readymades, and *objets trouvés* reappear in modernist poems about humble ordinary objects: the underground train ("In a Station of the Metro"), a wheelbarrow ("The Red Wheelbarrow"), a number ("The Great Figure"), a jar ("Anecdote of a Jar"), a grocery note ("This Is Just to Say"). Hulme argued that "it is essential to prove that beauty may be in small, dry things" (131).

Like Williams, Stevens believed that vanguard art should have a distinctly nationalistic character, rooted in a sense of place that alone can prevent it from losing its concreteness. Stevens too sharpened his poetic voice through modern paintings, visited art galleries and was himself an art collector. Moreover, painting became an analogy for his artistic endeavor. He imagined the world in aesthetic and compositional terms: to Stevens pictures were worlds and the world conveyed itself as a picture. As Bonnie Costello suggestively argues, Stevens modeled his poetry on analogies drawn from the contemporary art world. In his "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" Stevens postulated that modern art is a substitute for God and "Must Be Abstract" (Stevens 380), as with the spiritual content of Mondrian's purely geometric paintings (Glen MacLeod *Wallace Stevens* 103-21). One of Stevens's major poems, "The Blue Guitar" (1937), is an extended dialogue with Picasso's pre-Cubist painting "The Old Guitarist" (1904). Stevens also cultivated the nonsensical and the irrational, trends that link him to Dada and Surrealism. There are many ties between Stevens's poetry and Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. His poems also refer to several genres of paintings, such as the nude, still life and landscape (Costello 169).

The close relation between poetry and painting is best exemplified in the person of E. E. Cummings, who produced 950 poems and 1,600 paintings and drawings. Cummings considered himself a "poetand-painter," an author of pictures and a draftsman of words (qt. Gidley 179); he believed that "The day of the spoken lyric is past. The poem which has at last taken its place does not sing itself" (Kennedy xiv). He applied his perceptual pictorial theories to his poems. Cummings's poems are based on iconicity. They are poempictures that demand to be

looked at. His poems respond to Poe's statements regarding artworks' brevity: most of them are short, contained on a single page, and can easily be visualized at a single glance. In the typographic design of the text Cummings was a visual artist who avowed that his poems "are essentially pictures" (Norman 28-29). Cummings's verse opens up many perspectives that disrupt conventions and break narrative progression and linearity:

sense may move in other directions than horizontal, and in latter from right to left as well as v.v.; and may change its direction at suitable times (e.g. perpendicular down to up, zigzag, right angle (90°) etc.

(Houghton Notes, qt. Cohen 187)

In short, the interaction between poetry and painting marked the beginning of the twentieth century and became the hallmark of postmodernist poetics. Cubist, Dada, Expressionist, Surrealist and abstract painting articulated the technical repertoire that was to be adopted later by other artistic media and defines the intermedial nature of our postmodern age, marked by the symbiotic relationship of hybrid verbal-pictorial-musical-digital art forms. Pound's ideogrammatic method and Eliot's objective correlative and theory of impersonality, together with Williams's objects, created the conceptual premises that enhanced the spatial and visual possibilities of the poetic word. They had a bearing not only on the poets of their own generation but also on representatives of many other movements – Objectivists, Projectivists, and New York School and Language poets, to name a few – whose poetry crosses more and more into the fields of visual art, nontraditional media and public settings. Furthermore, the technological advances in domains of communication such as the computer and the Internet and have extended the boundaries of poetry to areas of sculpture, performance, photography, commercial advertising forms, and so on. Computerized language has brought into existence "Digital Poetry," cyber-poems, and electronic, holographic and hypertext poetry.⁴ The incorporation of visual and digital media within the poetic text is contributing to the creation of new forms of artistic intermediality.

⁴ The Electronic Poetry Center (founded in 1995 and directed by Loss Glazier) and the international *E-Poetry Festivals* that have been organized since 2001 all around the world are an eloquent example of the intermedial condition of postmodern art forms.

References

- Altieri, Charles. "Eliot's Impact on Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Ed. A. David Moody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 189-209.
- Apollinaire, Guillaume. "Pure Painting." *The Modern Tradition*. Ed. Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. 112-19.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "The Life and Work of Delacroix." *Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne. New York: Da Capo Press, 1964. 116-17.
- Bohn, Willard. *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Cézanne, Paul. "Excerpts from Letters." *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book of Artists and Critics*. Ed. Herschel B. Chipp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. 16-23.
- Cohen, Milton. *Poet and Painter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings's Early Work*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987.
- Cook, Albert. *Figural Choice in Poetry and Art*. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1985.
- Costello, Bonnie. "Stevens and Painting." *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*. Ed. John N. Serio. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 164-79.
- Dasenbrock, Reed Way. *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*. New York: New Directions, 1978.
- Fenollosa, Ernest, and Ezra Pound. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919). Ed. Haun Saussy et al. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Gidley, Mick. "Picture and Poem: E. E. Cummings in Perspective." *Poetry Review* 59.3 (Autumn 1968): 179-95.
- Higgins, Dick. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Hulme, T. E. *Speculations: Essay on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*. Ed. Herbert Read. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. "On the Problem of Form" (1912). *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book of Artists and Critics*. Ed. Herschel B. Chipp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. 155-70.
- . *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912). New York: George Wittenborn, 1972.
- Kennedy, Richard. Introduction to E. E. Cummings, *Tulips and Chimneys*. Ed. George Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1976.

- Kenner, Hugh. *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1959.
- Langbaum, Robert. "New Modes of Characterization." *Eliot in His Time*. Ed. Walton Litz. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. 95-128.
- Levenson, Michael. *A Genealogy of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- MacLeod, Glen. "Visual Arts." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Ed. Michael Levenson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 194-216.
- . *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Norman, Charles. *E. E. Cummings: The Magic Maker*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1972.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance*. New York: Macmillan, 1905.
- Paz, Octavio. "Los Hijos del limo. Del romanticismo a la vanguardia." *La casa de la Presencia*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 1991. 401-584.
- Pound, Ezra. "Vorticism." *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*. New York: New Directions, 1970. 81-94.
- Sayre, Henry. *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983.
- Schmidt, Peter. *William Carlos Williams, the Arts, and Literary Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.
- Steiner, Wendy. *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Wagner, Richard. "Literature as Music Drama." *The Modern Tradition*. Eds. Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965. 101-7.
- Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*. Eds. M. Bucke, T. B. Harned, and Horace Traubel. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902.
- . "Preface 1855 – Leaves of Grass, First Edition". *Leaves of Grass*. Eds. S. Bradley and H. Blodgett. New York: W. W. Norton. 711-31.
- Williams, Carlos William. *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. New York: New Directions, 1977.
- . *Selected Essays*. New York: New Directions, 1954.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Vol. 1, 1909–1939. New York: New Directions, 1986.
- Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy*. New York: International University Press, 1953.