

Mansfield and Lewis: Impressionism and Vorticism in the Short Story

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Poe's well known dictum that the short story can be read at one sitting, and his often quoted theory of the unique or single effect, are frequently used to draw attention to the brevity and aesthetic wholeness of the genre, but normally omit his subsequent reference to the analogy with the visual arts: "And by such means, with such care and skill, a **picture** is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction"¹. Valerie Shaw, using this observation defends that "at every stage of its development the short story reveals affinities with the style of painting dominating the period in question, but what makes the parallel between the modern short story and Impressionist art especially important is the extent to which creator and receiver share acute consciousness of form"². She indicates that the compression of many stories can be seen as a pictorial image and she exemplifies with some of Katherine Mansfield, Henry James and Virginia Woolf's most famous impressionist techniques. On the other hand, she emphasizes that there are similarities and differences between words and visual images and suggests that the relation frequently starts between specific images and the moment of creation of a short story. In this respect, she quotes Sherwood Anderson's account of the way tales presented themselves to his fancy. One face jumped out in a crowded street and this brought him a fragment, the hint of a tale to tell.³

¹ E. Allan Poe, "Review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1842)," *What is the Short Story?*, ed. Eugene Current Garcia and Walton Patrick (Glenview: Scott Foresman, 1974) 8.

² Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story — a Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1985) 13.

³ Quoted by Valerie Shaw from Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka: Notes and Reminiscences*, transl. Goronwy Rees (1953) .

Dominic Head draws attention to the limitations of the analogy. According to him literature remains, primarily, a temporal medium and painting a spatial one, and we should distinguish between the metaphorical story 'picture' and the literal spatial image on a painter's canvas. As to the question of unity, Head considers that the perception of story unit, in a spatial sense, is at odds with the inherent temporality of reading and writing because this pattern (the spatial) is grasped by accumulation as the text is read⁴. Although he recognizes that the genre has a "spatial" dimension, Head considers the visual artefact aesthetic, as formulated for instance by Julio Cortázar, somehow contradictory. Cortázar's metaphor for story composition is "modelling a sphere out of clay" in a way that "the feeling of the sphere should somehow be there before the story is ever written, as if the narrator, subject to the form it takes, were implicitly moving it and drawing it to its maximum tension, which is what makes for, precisely, the perfection of the spherical form"⁵. There is here, according to Head, an inherent contradiction between plasticity and physical perfection. This contradiction is, in his view, illuminating on the question of the apparent and much discussed formal unity of the short story. Several critics note that there is a dissonance between a higher finished complete plane where the story's essence is to be found and the complexity of unseen and minute beginnings, middles and ends this implies.

What I believe is here at stake is distance, perspective, a major element in the visual arts, and also the conception of the relationship between Art and Life. Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) and Wyndham Lewis' (1884-1957) short stories mirror these two modernist but dissonant ways to connect words and visual images, Mansfield's texts in a more spatial and impressionist way, close to the object, Lewis more aligned with the moment of creation and a distanced observation of human behaviour by the artist. In the context of the development of modernism, impressionism and vorticism define two quite different attitudes, as Michael Levenson very clearly explains in *A Genealogy of Modernism*⁶. Impressionism is partly a realism, a "frank expression of personality"⁷, though the main aim of the artist is to show his subject; in the extreme it can be seen as egotism and these two opinions have been concurrently expressed by Ford Madox Ford. "To render reality is to manifest individuality. Since they are necessarily personal, perceptions of the real are expressions of the self"⁸.

⁴ Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story — a Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 9-10.

⁵ Julio Cortázar, "Del cuento breve y sus alrededores," *Ultimo Round* (Mexico: Siglo Veinteuno, 1970) trans. Naomi Lindstrom.

⁶ Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism — a Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

⁷ Ford Madox Ford, "On Impressionism," *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Paul Olson (Lincoln: Univ of Nebraska Press, 1967) 36.

⁸ Levenson 116.

Vorticism, influenced by Marinetti's futurism, called for a more radical rupture, closer to Ortega y Gasset's concept of the "dehumanization of art":

This substituted a pursuit of abstraction for the pursuit of representation; it deserted 'life'. It inclined to primitivism and assaulted the primacy of the human form. 'Dehumanization,' wrote Lewis in *Blast*, "is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World". Or, as he would later put it, "Man was not the hero of our universe!"⁹

In literature this meant the autonomy of form, the possibility of leaving the mimetic resemblance, freedom from the need to signify, abstraction. Ezra Pound repeatedly connects literature to painting and other arts in his text on Vorticism¹⁰, explaining that "the image is the poet's pigment", but recognizing that although "the arts have some sort of common bond, some inter-recognition, certain emotions or subjects find their most appropriate expression in some one particular art"¹¹.

K. Mansfield's impressionism has been widely studied¹². In her letters and diaries¹³ she explains that as Art and Life are inseparable, the artist should take a long look at Life and, in an impersonation process, try to become the things before he/she recreates them. "It is only by being true to life that I can be true to art"¹⁴, she writes in her diary. The work of art should not be a copy of reality but the expression of a subjective truth, which is the result of vision, imagination and the artist's emotion. This leads to an intense search for truth, which can only be perceived in glimpses, moments of suspension and to the defence of sincerity, to the desire to be "crystal clear"¹⁵. The "defeat of the personal"¹⁶, another of Mansfield artistic aims, reveals her will to make writing more objective. In her *Journal* she writes:

Why must thinking and existing be ever on two different planes?
(...) It is the special art and object of thinking to attain existence by quite other methods than that of existence itself. That is to say, reality cannot become the ideal, the dream; and it is not the business of the artist to grind an axe, to impose his vision of life upon the existing

⁹ Levenson 125.

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," *The Modern Tradition — Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1965) 145-152.

¹¹ "Vorticism" 147.

¹² See Julia Van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990).

¹³ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Vincent O' Sullivan and Margaret Scott, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984-96); *The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. M. Murry (London: Constable, 1939); *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. John Middleton Murry (London, Constable, 1962).

¹⁴ Mansfield, *Journal*, 237.

¹⁵ Mansfield, *Journal* 271.

¹⁶ Mansfield, *Journal* 195.

world. Art is not an attempt of the artist to reconcile existence with his vision; it is an attempt to create his own world in this world. That which suggests the subject to the artist is the unlikeness to what we accept as reality. We single out — we bring into the light — we put up higher.¹⁷

Wyndham Lewis has a bitter view of this relationship. In his important, critical essay “Inferior Religions”, published in the short story book *The Wild Body* (1927) and probably meant as an introduction to the collection, he says:

Life is invisible, and perfection is not in the waves or houses that the poet sees. To rationalize that appearance is not possible. Beauty is an icy douche of ease and happiness at something suggesting perfect conditions for an organism: it remains suggestion. (...) We can aim at no universality of form, for what we see is not the reality.¹⁸

The book represents a systematic application of the Vorticist programme to the short story, and in the essay, in consonance with this vision of life, Lewis talks about his “puppets”, the “wandering figures” he will use in “a new human mathematics”, “simple shapes”, “shadows of energy, not living beings” or creations, that is, the characters of his stories. They are, if we remember Ezra Pound’s definition, a vortex, that is to say, a radiant node or cluster from which and into which ideas are constantly rushing. “The vortex itself is a dynamic form: the flux only has meaning in relation to the still point around which it must necessarily take shape”¹⁹. The expression wild body refers to these primitive figures which have great similarities with Lewis’ drawings, and which, according to him, originated as “complementary creations” when he was painting. In his words “the short story was the crystallization of what I had to keep out of my consciousness while painting and there has been no mixing of the genres”²⁰. This is interesting because one of the most important differences between Mansfield and Lewis in their application of painting principles is that she “adapts” the painting techniques to writing, while he does not apply dynamic vorticist principles to structure or semantic organization of

¹⁷ Mansfield, *Journal* 273.

¹⁸ W. Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982) 153-4. This book is composed of two parts. The first presents a reprinting in full of Wyndham Lewis’ 1927 book, *The Wild Body*, a selection he made of his stories and related material, most of which had appeared in various reviews from 1909 to 1917. The second part of the book, under the heading “The Archaeology of the Wild Body”, includes the first published versions of each piece, notes calling attention to the variants in intermediate versions, early texts of associated material and a story and diary, unpublished during the author’s lifetime.

¹⁹ Head 142.

²⁰ “Beginnings,” *The Complete Wild Body* 374. See also António Feijó, *Near Miss — a Study of Wyndham Lewis (1909-1930)* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) Chpt I.

the stories; he applies them only to patterns of activities of the characters under observation, leaving the reader with few comparable technical effects. If these characters are not creations or living beings they cannot be analysed as literary elements of a narrative, they are just immobile images, closer to painting than Mansfield's characters, carved from the same block as his drawings, but inert as far as the short story dynamic is concerned. Their interaction determines the pattern of the story. As Lewis says in his just quoted 1935 essay "Beginnings"²¹, he wrote his first short story while he was painting the subject of it with hog-hair brushes, and the short story was shorter than the painting.

The most important literary use of "the waste product of every painting as ideal material for the pure writer"²² is Lewis' exploration of satire. For him, the fundamental answer to the dichotomy between mind and body is Laughter and the artist must be a master of humour, whose detachment allows him/her to stand in the still centre of the vortex, observing and trying to understand his/her modern world. In the essay "The Meaning of the Wild Body"²³, considered by some critics a landmark in the history of the theory of the comic, Lewis explains more clearly his use of the external absurd. Kerr-Orr, the narrator of the stories, plays not only this role, but stands for more: also being a character, his self-knowledge makes him see the division that others are unconscious of, thus paralleling the position of the Vorticist artist. This is what happens in the first short story, "A Soldier of Humour" when he says:

I am a large blond clown, ever so vaguely reminiscent (in person) of William Blake, and some great american boxer whose name I forget. I have large strong teeth which I gnash and flash when I laugh (...) I know much more about myself than people generally do. For instance, I am aware that I am a barbarian. (...) My body is large, white and savage. But all the fierceness has become transformed into laughter.²⁴

Mansfield's narrator stands in the opposite position. She is usually extradiegetic and narrates the story trying to be as little omniscient and intrusive as possible, aiming to give the characters' perceptions, experiences, thoughts and dreams, frequently through free indirect discourse as in the short story "Miss Brill" (1922)²⁵, trying, in a word, to convey to the reader an overall and strong impression of the character's point of view. The impressionist painting's blurred outlines are given partly through clusters of images and partly through

²¹ "Beginnings," *The Complete WB* 373.

²² *The Complete WB* 374.

²³ *The Complete WB* 155-160.

²⁴ *The Complete WB* 17.

²⁵ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin, 1981).

narrative irony, generated by the reader's progressive awareness that the views presented are subjective, unreliable and imprecise as happens in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1922). Mansfield renders the story from more than one point of view (narrational parallax), juxtaposes two or more restricted perspectives or contrasts, one of these with the omniscient narrator's. Her use of paradox and irony is clearly, much more elaborate in narrative terms than Lewis'. On the contrary Lewis' painter's eye²⁶ is very clearly displayed throughout the stories, especially in "Bestre", although never used for more than showing the character's physicality and his piercing glances, with which Kerr-Orr learns a great deal. I think it is obligatory to quote this:

His very large eyeballs, the small saffron ocellation in their centre, the tiny spot through which light entered the obese wilderness of his body; his bronzed bovine arms, swollen handles for a variety of indolent little ingenuities; his inflated digestive case, lent their combined expressiveness (...) with every tart and biting condiment that eye-fluid, flaunting of fatness (...) could provide (...) his brown arms were for the moment genitals, snakes in one massive twist beneath his mammillary slabs, gently riding on a pancreatic swell, each hair on his oil-bearing skin contributing its message of porcine affront.²⁷

As I said before, this clearly shows the rupture with impressionist evocative patterns, obliqueness, indirection and symbolism, also typical of Mansfield. However, the "denial of the person"²⁸, of the mind, conducted by Kerr-Orr is not completely successful. In "The Death of the Ankou", that the author claimed to be his first short story, Kerr-Orr merges the mental and physical world, the internal and external. He reveals that his mind was lying so open that an image forced its way in. Looking up from his book, he sees an apparition that he momentarily takes for the Ankou and he experiences a fleeting sensation of mortal fear. In reality it is a blind beggar called Ludo that he sees and whom he will try to be friend. But Ludo is unwell, does not want to hear about the Ankou and finally dies. Lewis satirizes credulity and superstition through a narrator who participates as an important character, sets an atmosphere of some mystery and closes with an unexpected and ambiguous ending. Another example of the questioning of the mind/body philosophy and of the detached role of Kerr-Orr is the short story "A Soldier of Humour". Here Kerr-Orr is a major participant in the action and his involvement seems incompatible

²⁶ See Timothy Materer, "The Short Stories of Wyndham Lewis," *Studies in Short Fiction* 3 (1970): 615-24.

²⁷ *The Complete WB* 78-79.

²⁸ "The Meaning of the Wild Body," *The Complete Wild Body* 158.

with his detached role. As he says "I exist with an equal ease in the abstract world of principle and in the concrete world of fact"²⁹. In these two stories Lewis comes nearer to the conventional plotted short story, but the vorticist detachment collapses and the contradiction between detachment and commitment produces no creative solutions. The conflicts are still mechanized. This can be interpreted as a hesitation between writing and painting, a difficulty in plunging into the heart of short fiction strategies because you are following painting principles. António Feijó, in his study of the author, comments on Lewis' concern about art and literature as a double life, which, to be successful, has, in the painter-writer's words "to be thoroughly double — one mode must not merge in, or encroach upon the other"³⁰. The examination of *The Wild Body* shows, as Feijó points out, that Lewis is at pains to sever these "two disparate aesthetic domains"³¹. But these words do not apply if we have literary impressionism in mind. The term was first recorded in 1879 and has been the object of comprehensive studies and excellent examples in literature such as J. Conrad and H. James. This could lead us to think that, in Pound's words, certain emotions or subjects find their most appropriate expression in some particular art, but it could also lead us to Ortega y Gasset's example of the dehumanized picture, with which it is impossible to relate, because the painter has cut the bridges to our accustomed world, leaving us in an abstruse universe³². In the short story the controversial question of formal unity, still related to our old, customary world, keeps haunting us and making it difficult to evaluate Lewis' wild vorticist laughter.

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²⁹ *The Complete WB* 18.

³⁰ Lewis quoted by António Feijó from *Wyndham Lewis on Art. Collected Writings 1913-1956*, ed. Walter Michael and C.J. Fox (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969) 291.

³¹ Feijó 12.

³² Ortega y Gasset, *La Deshumanización del Arte* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1960) 21.

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