

Visual Aid: Teaching H.D.'s Imagist Poetry with the Assistance of Henri Matisse

The mantra of the modernist movement, articulated by Ezra Pound, was “make it new.” Unfortunately, students don't always know how to approach “new” styles of literature, especially poetry that itself daunts many students. As we've all observed, if not experienced for ourselves, modernist poetry, upon first encounter, can be especially intimidating. In the spirit of making it new, this poetry often appears obscure in its density, perspective, and complexity. Students may look at a poem like “The Red Wheel Barrow” and ask “how is this poetry?” Of course, this is precisely the question we want to work through with them, so this is good. On the other hand, the initial discomfort of students with modernism can develop into a resistance hard to tackle.

This is a challenge I found especially difficult to address in my early attempts to teach the poems of H.D. at a small, suburban music college in Long Island, NY. For my first lesson at the start of a unit on modernism in an undergraduate 200-level, Introduction to Literature class, I would devote the entire period to H.D. because I believe that her work beautifully encapsulates many of the principles of modernism laid out by Pound in his seminal essay “A Retrospect.” Though several of my students have been fans, or even writers, of poetry and most had artistic sensibilities, many were disconcerted in their first encounter with modernist poetry via H.D., and the malaise they felt would linger in the following weeks as we read additional modernist poets. I knew I needed to try something new.

In this essay, I want to share the strategy I devised to address the particular challenge of teaching H.D.'s early imagist poetry while simultaneously introducing tenets of modernism and rendering this poetry more accessible to my students. I found that the paintings of Henri Matisse can be effective in helping students to identify and understand the poetics of imagism, a sub-

genre of modernism, in H.D.'s poems through presenting a visual correlative that may be equally disorienting but less intimidating to students in an English class.

I attempt to prepare my students for modernism, as I suppose many do, with Pound. I either assign "A Retrospect" as reading prior to this class in which we will encounter H.D. or, at the very least, present students with his definition of an image from this essay. Pound wrote: "An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. ... It is the presentation of such a complex instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth which we experience in the presence of great works of art" (4). This definition is immeasurably valuable for students in understanding H.D. and modernist poetics in general but is itself a challenge to comprehend. It differs from the understanding of imagery that most undergraduates have – *a picture in words, a mental picture, a vivid description*. Because many students begin with an understanding of the image as visual and because some students may be visual thinkers, presenting a parallel visual expression of Pound's more complex concept of the image allows me to begin where my students do.

Although Pound lauded Picasso and Kandinsky as the exempla of imagism in painting, alongside H.D. in poetry, I have found pairing H.D. with Henri Matisse to be fruitful. While there is no evidence that contemporaries H.D. and Matisse influenced one another, the similarity in the effect of their arts is striking. The art of each receives power from the force of bold, pure images, which H.D. constructs with words and Matisse with color. Both operated according to and demonstrated in their work similar modernist principles, which include an intricate intertwining of the emotional and the intellectual in which the emotional is primary; direct and simplified presentation; a mythic dimension; a balanced tension between dualities; and a

revelation of the artist's subconscious perspective of reality.¹ Juxtaposing manifestations of these principles in different media offers students with different learning styles and sensibilities multiple points of entry into comprehension.

The pairing I use to illuminate these precepts of imagism is "Oread," H.D.'s most anthologized poem and also singled out by Pound as one of the few beautiful poems and images that stick in his mind. I pair "Oread" with *La Danse, 1910*, Matisse's well-known fauvist painting² that hangs in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Matisse's painting helps illuminate the principles of a new art philosophy for the 20th century that it exemplifies and, therefore, also establishes the larger cultural context of modernism that might otherwise not be addressed in an introductory literature class.

In class, I put the short poem up on the board, and we read it aloud together. Students' first reactions usually express confusion and take the form of either silence or tentative reiterations of what the poem says. We come to a standstill. Students hesitate to speak and look to me for answers. Then, I turn to the painting.³ Again, I ask for reactions. Rather than silence, I hear exclamatory expressions of surprise ("whoa") or confusion ("huh"). Students are taken aback or propelled forward in their seats. They comment on the colors; they are attracted or repulsed by the figures. They unfailingly point out the dancer in the center of the foreground who seems to have fallen behind. They think the painting is "wild" and "weird," but many admit to liking it. The different nature of responses to poem and painting suggest that students believe,

¹ For a thorough and informative discussion of Imagism and Pound's poetics of the image analyzed in relation to various modernist writers, including H.D., see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (1973).

² Fauvism is an early-twentieth century movement in painting begun by a group of French artists, notably including Matisse, and characterized by bold, often distorted forms and vivid colors.

³ Logistically, there are several means of physically presenting the painting to your class. If teaching in a room with the capacity to project an image from a computer to a screen, this means is the easiest and most cost-effective. The painting can be accessed via the Hermitage Museum's Digital Collection online at www.hermitagemuseum.com. If you do not have this technological capability, art slides are relatively inexpensive, and you may be able to borrow one from the library or Art History department at your school. When I first taught this lesson, I brought in my framed print of the painting from my living room wall.

when confronted with poetry in a literature class, their task is to comprehend and analyze, but with painting, they can react instinctively. Because it is okay to not know about art in English class, stakes are lower in discussing a painting, and students are more likely to take chances in their thinking and participation. Ultimately, the painting provides an alternative entry point into comprehension, or at least discussion, of how the image works in the formal sense.

After sharing comments on the painting, I return attention to “Oread.” We read the poem aloud, perhaps several times by several different students, and then I ask students to freewrite for five minutes on their reaction to the poem and what the poem and painting may have in common. Reinitiating class discussion, I once again ask students, now with freewrites in hand and a prior discussion of the painting to fall back on, to express how it feels to say and hear H.D.’s words. I prompt students to make connections between their reactions to the painting and to the poem and Pound’s assertion that “only emotion endures” (14). Unbeknownst to them, student responses also begin to include analysis as they mention passion and power, being moved along by the waves, a tension between forcefulness at the beginning and submission at the end.

Together as a class we discuss *how* H.D. and Matisse force us to feel their works before we can think about them and to think through feeling them. I often begin by posing a simple question about subject matter to focus their attention on the directness of the images. Students can more readily identify the visual simplification of the human form in the painting before recognizing H.D.’s stormy sea in the form of trees. Matisse eliminates all distracting details of reality in presenting his five dancing figures through bare outlines against an unadorned background of color. Moreover, he uses only three colors and sparse lines to create an uncluttered image. After discussing the simplification of Matisse’s image, students are more readily able to identify the comparable economy of H.D.’s poem. She uses six lines and 26

words, plus the title, to concentrate of the force of the image in a compacted, concrete form.

Having read “A Retrospect,” students may recall Pound’s imperatives “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” and to “use either no ornament or good ornament” (4-5). These directives will be relevant later also for readings of Williams’ “Red Wheel Barrow” and Pound’s own “Art, 1910.”

The purity of the images also allows for multiple layers of meaning, generating a mythic dimension that can be gotten at through questions about the effect of simplified imagery or about subject matter in relation to reality. As readers/viewers, we enter a timeless and universal realm, Pound’s “freedom from time limits and space limits” (4), where tradition is reinvigorated and reinterpreted by new objects of attention in new combinations. These works can be discussed as existing in but also out of the contemporary world in which they were created and in which we encounter them. They take us to another realm, but what realm might that be? How might it resemble and depart from our contemporary world? These questions may lead students to recognize other mythic aspects of each work –the nude figures dancing on a hillside and H.D.’s titular nymph.

Identification of the mythic elements of both Matisse’s and H.D.’s images may encourage students to consider how the works before them take on multiple layers of meaning. The dance of *La Dance* represents a pagan Sun Dance to Apollo but simultaneously evokes both the frenetic dance of the farandole at the Moulin Rouge and the calm, serious sardana of the fishermen in seaside Collioure, France. All are circular dances that can be seen alternatively in the painting and simultaneously evoke different time periods. Similarly H.D. situates her poem in the mythic at the very beginning with her title. An oread is a nymph from Greek mythology. Nymphs were female nature spirits, usually bound to a specific location or landform; the oread is associated

with woods or mountains, as well as Artemis, goddess of the hunt and of the moon, who frequently visited realm of the oread. It is in the voice of and through the mind of this nature spirit that the image of the poem is presented. The mythic overlays a timeless, universal scene: an individual observing the powerful force of nature.

Students may not have the cultural context with which to identify these mythical elements, but this information, e.g. about the nymphs' bacchanalian sun dance to Apollo or the definition of an oread, can be provided during the lesson by the professor or prepared for via vocabulary given prior to the lesson. This is also a good place for the professor to note the modernist goal of reactivating myth in a new spirit for the new world, thereby laying the groundwork for possible future readings in modernist poetry, such as Pound's "The Return" or Eliot's "Marina."

After students have observed how multiple planes of time and meaning coexist in each work, representing a relationship between past and present, I then try to move the discussion toward an examination of other dualities in the works and how they contribute to the emotional and intellectual fusion within each image. With *La Dance*, this tension can be seen most forcefully in the central figure in the background who appears to be dancing in place to restore equilibrium of the forward and backward movements and centripetal and centrifugal forces of the circular dance. Moreover, some students may observe a brilliant tension between colors. Bold blue, green, and red elicit strong differing emotional responses and also conjure up intellectual associations students may explore that will reconnect the image to the mythic: blue – celestial; green – earth, life; red – fire, passion. Astute students may be able to point out that Matisse's figures do not actually form a circle. The Apollonian dance would be a perfect dance with six dancers to complete the circle; however, Matisse's dance includes only five dancers. As a result,

the circle is stretched into an oval, perhaps by a misstep. A tension is created between the dualities of perfection and imperfection, leading, perhaps with guidance, to a consideration of the relationship between divinity and humanity. Matisse's dancers do not form a perfect circle, but they do create a perfect oval, and the dance, in this eternal moment, exists only when danced so. Finally, students will likely question the gender of the figures, enabling them to consider another balanced duality that will become important in discussing "Oread", the balance between masculine and feminine. Matisse's figures are androgynous, beautiful and feminine yet simultaneously strong and muscular. Students may be asked whether or not the indeterminacy of gender contributes to or detracts from the force and import of the image.

In "Oread," the dualities of land and sea, easily identified by students, are fused in the perception of the oread as waves are described as composed of pointed pines and pools, of fir. Students can also point to the forces of life and death that converge as the vitality of the sea assaults and covers the shore in seeming-death welcomed by the oread. And similar to the androgyny of Matisse's dancers, "Oread" also presents a tension between masculine and feminine that may require more guidance from the professor in order for students to grasp. Attention can be focused on the verbs and the physical action being described to shed light on the sexual undertones of the poem: the sexual rising of waves pounding rhythmically against to shore to culminate in climactic submission and calm. This phallic action is held in tension with a sense of feminine submission by the oread who identifies with both the masculine sea and the feminine land. Thus the emotional energy in this case is violent, passionate, and even suicidal in its urgency while also expressing yearning and pleasure.⁴ Recognition of this paradoxical emotional state may lead students toward an exploration of the powerful force of nature that

⁴ See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (1981) and Jeanne Kramer in Gilbert and Gubar's *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (1979) for readings of the poem that address sexuality in the poem.

confronts the human world; of the power of life and death, or death in life; of the intense pleasure and violence of sexual experience; of preconceived notions of gender in relation to power, nature, human perception.

Within this discussion of movement, I may also ask students to consider whether the form of each work is “solid” or “fluid” in content, drawing again upon Pound’s language in “A Retrospect” (9). A conclusive answer is elusive; students can identify the movement, or fluidity, in each work but also the suspension of movement, or solidity. *LaDanse* and “Oread” both represent an ephemeral moment arrested in time and, thereby, rendered eternal. The artists transform a fleeting instant into a permanent image, captured in words or paint strokes. In *La Danse*, the movement of the dancers has probably already been noted by students in their observation of the figure in foreground rushing forward. They should be encouraged also to notice the figure in the upper center of the canvas who counters the forward movement by pulling back. In “Oread,” the movement is captured in the action of the image (the whirling, crashing sea) and in the violent force of the verbs (whirl, splash, hurl). Moreover, the rhythm of short descending lines that begin with trochees generates a dynamic energy that recreates the passing moment of the waves’ surge and crash upon the shore.

The role of consciousness is the final element of modernist art that I discuss with students in relation to “Oread” and *La Danse*. These works, as well as others by H.D. and Matisse, testify to the construction of a new world-view embraced by modernism that appreciated and plumbed the depth of the newly discovered subconscious.⁵ As I mentioned earlier, these artists present not simply reality observed but rather reality filtered through thought and feeling and, therefore, open to the possibility of profound discovery in everyday observances. Such discovery was an

⁵ H.D. was a patient of Freud in the 1930s.

important objective of modernism, and again discussing the concept as part of this lesson can lay the groundwork for later readings like William's "The Red Wheel Barrow" or Steven's "The Snow Man." According to his letters and journals, Matisse saw his function as an artist to mediate between reality of the world and his own reflections on the divine beauty and nature of that world. He would find his image in the recovery of the emotional experience of a first impression by working back to it in his subconscious through a series of "objective views" – sketches and studies in different material and from different perspectives – until the moment subject and subjectivity crossed again.⁶ Observation became image, matching not the real object but Matisse's internal and psychic perception of the object. Reality served as a point of departure for an image but was ultimately subordinated to the image itself.

In reference to *La Danse*, Matisse translates his observation of the exterior into an image of human and divine worlds, classical and modern man bridged within his mind's eye and, through the use of color and form, solidified in a single image. Students can think about how the actual circle dances referenced, the sardana and/or farandole, become a reflection and reconfiguration of the sun dance to Apollo, how what they see is actually Matisse's perception, why watching cabaret dancers or fishermen might evoke this mythic precursor, and what this connection suggests about Matisses's view of human life.

Just as Matisse's image provides a view of his interior world, H.D.'s image also opens a window to her mind. H.D. aimed not to recreate a complete, realistic rendering of the world around her but to create her understanding of and reactions to that world in poetry. In "Oread," in particular, the mind of the perceiver overwhelms the object as subject of the poem. As students will be able to recognize with no trouble, it is the title character's perceptions and emotional

⁶ For my understanding of Matisse's process and artistic philosophy, I draw upon Pierre Schneider's *Matisse* (1984).

response to a tempestuous sea we are presented in the poem. The woods nymph conceives of the sea in her own terms, in terms of the land, and in doing so fuses the apparently opposite entities of land and sea into a non-rational equilibrium. Land and sea become one, containing all the contradictory characteristics of each, as the Oread identifies herself with the stormy sea. Moreover, the image of the whirling sea of pine is also expressive of the intense inner life of the Oread, or of H.D.

By the end of the class period devoted to analyzing this poem alongside Matisse's painting, students are often able to connect the violent exhilaration and self-destructive attraction to the menacing sea already discussed back to the Oread's internal world, clearly demonstrating how in modernism the external world is filtered through the artist's perceptions.⁷ Students might discuss how the image of the waves composed of pine trees defies reality and emerge, instead, from the subconscious of the Oread, what it means to configure sea in terms of land, the psychic advantages and/or costs of conflating land and sea, masculine and feminine, life and death.

This pairing of H.D. and Matisse not only reveals them to be kindred artists, who share the power of the image and a devotion to fusing self and art, but also and more importantly for teaching purposes, helps to delineate the art of the image that constitutes a "new fashion of poetry" and art in the early 20th century. I've found this specific pairing to be especially useful in providing students intimidated by H.D.'s concise and dense poem on the page with an alternative entry point into comprehension or at least discussion. Matisse's painting certainly does not illustrate the poem, but it serves to elucidate the poetics that may be murky to undergraduate students who have little or no past exposure to poetry in general or modernist poetry in

⁷ The professor might also choose to point out to the students the connection between the oread and H.D. herself, whom Pound associated with trees and referred to as a dryad (a tree nymph) and whom William Carlos Williams associated with storms – two elements of her identity that perhaps she struggled to integrate or that perhaps she indeed saw as integrated while her friends (lovers?) saw as incompatible.

particular. As I result, I have found this technique of introducing modernism via a juxtaposition of poem and painting especially helpful in teaching undergraduate survey courses.

Many other pairings of poetry and painting are no doubt possible, from the oeuvres of H.D. and Matisse (“Evening” from *Sea Garden* and Matisse’s portrait of his wife called *The Green Line* come to mind) and also between other imagist or modernist poets and painters: Eliot and Picasso, Kandinsky and Pound, or Williams and Warhol perhaps. Those among the professoriate with a background or interest in other arts may be able to develop connections between poets and sculptors, poets and musical composers, poets and architects, poets and choreographers.

Not only do myriad possibilities exist in regard to poet-artist pairings, but also in classroom applications of such pairing. I use the verbal-visual pairing as a means to alleviate student anxiety over poetry and introduce key principles of modernism. However, I can envision other uses also. Although I have not had the opportunity to test this hypothesis, I imagine that this approach in general, if not my pairing in particular, could also be used, perhaps with less professorial prompting and guidance or even as challenging independent or group projects, in upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses to stimulate in-depth and/or critical discussions of modernism and its tenets as a global, interdisciplinary movement in the arts.

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Appendix



Henri Matisse. (French, 1869-1954). *Dance (I)*. Paris, Hôtel Biron, early 1909. Oil on canvas, 8' 6 1/2" x 12' 9 1/2" (259.7 x 390.1 cm). Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. © 2008 Succession H. Matisse, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Oread, H. D.

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines.
Splash your great pines
On our rocks.
Hurl your green over us—
Cover us with your pools of fir.

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