

# Landscape and Affect, or the 'Primal Scene' of Romanticism: The Aesthetics of Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf

Fuhito ENDO

## I

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the relationship between British modernism and Romanticism, thereby redefining some modernist aesthetic discourses as a radical critique of modern literature and painting. More specifically, Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry's aesthetic theories on Post-impressionism will be re-interpreted as a post-romantic intervention in 19th century bourgeois arts as Romantic legacies. What is crucial in this discussion is what can be termed the 'affective intensity' of their language. My contention is that such an affective dimension of their theories has a great deal to do with what they call the *'thing itself'*—some kind of affective materiality. This decisively significant word—*'thing'*—is actually used by Woolf and Fry in the important parts of their texts. Equally significant is the way in which they use the words 'feeling' and 'emotion': their usage suggests that these words signify something in *excess* of their usual definitions. Precisely in this sense, Woolf and Fry's aesthetic theories remind us of the recent 'turn to affect' or 'affect theory,' of which the most crucial element is an essential differentiation between 'affect' *and* 'emotion' or 'feeling' as the discursive product of 19th century middle-class subjectivities. Here is a perspective from which to reconsider their modernist affective aesthetics as a post-romantic critique of modern literature and painting, or a fundamental questioning of bourgeois subjectivities. In order to examine their shared modernist intervention as a critique of modernity itself, it is necessary to refer to three critics: Kojin Karatani, Paul de Man, and Fredric Jameson. It is through their arguments that Woolf and Fry's art criticism can be reread as a critical return to the origins of modern literature and painting as the repression of their 'real' origins.

## II

Kojin Karatani's focus is on a certain fundamental division between 'the medieval' and 'the modern.' The latter—the modern—is a historical period that witnessed the semiotic collapse of the Christian representational system that had structured 'pre-modern' experience and perception. What caused this semiotic gap or chasm was modern bourgeois humanism and individualism, after which what Karatani terms 'a semiotic constellation' (57) underwent a radical disintegration to the point where 'the figurative' as Christian allegory lost its pre-modern meanings, thereby 'suddenly' disclosing itself as a 'naked' thing. This is the historically traumatic situation in which—Karatani argues—'the human was presented as alienated from the landscape, and vice versa.' Indeed, as Karatani stresses in reference to T.S. Eliot's essay on Dante, what was lost can be seen as 'the figurative nature of Western medieval thought, in terms of which conceptions of the transcendental belonged to the realm of the visual'; therefore, 'allegory, however abstract, was thoroughly visual' (53).

This representational crisis of pre-modern semiotics made it crucial to reconstruct another modern epistemological 'constellation.' This crisis is also an existential one, where 'the human was presented as alienated from the landscape, and vice versa.' In order to overcome this modern alienation, a new type of subjectivity must appear, the kind of subjects who try 'to name that which they had no way of naming' (30), a sort of existential agent to re-define the landscape that alienated him/her. It is here that the modern division of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' emerged, while at the same time accompanying the exactly same kind of division of 'subject/inside' and 'object/outside.' These psychological and spatial metaphors are crucially important in any re-historicisation of modern literature, painting, and even psychology. Important here is thus the simultaneous emergence of the subjective inside (psychology) and the objective outside (landscape) as a modern epistemological and existential structure.

## III

In his reading of Wordsworth, De Man draws our attention to the historical

and literary progression from scenic descriptions ‘firmly controlled by an inherited typology’ to ‘the romantic condition of landscape naturalism.’ In the midst of this process, we can find the same kind of traumatic scene we have just observed, where a ‘naked’ things—in this case ‘places’—‘suddenly’ disclose themselves. In the case of Wordsworth’s landscape, ‘a mere name’ (99) exposes, or decontextualises, itself from its original semantic, geographical, and Christian significance, as a *naked* signifier without any signified. Of particular importance here is De Man’s critique of ‘contemporary criticism’ and, by extension, modern literature as ‘post-romantic’ language that ‘[shrank] back from the full impact of their findings,’ thereby arguing that ‘this recurrent pattern’ can be ascribed to ‘the feeling of crisis that comes over all thought when it comes into close contact with its own source’ (97). Hence De Man’s suggestion that ‘[i]t might be that between the later eighteenth century and ourselves stands a long period that is regressive, in terms of self-insight, in relation to romanticism, and that we have to overcome this obstacle before we can reestablish contact with the real source’ (98). This is precisely what I meant in the first paragraph by ‘the origins of modern literature and painting as the repression of their ‘real’ origins.’ De Man mentions ‘an empirical psychologism’ (97) as one example of such repression of the traumatically ‘real’ origins of modernity. The implication is that the modern/bourgeois division of the subjective inside (psychology) and the objective outside (landscape) serves as an evasion of the traumatic encounter with the ‘real’ thing itself.

#### IV

Given such a historical perspective, we can reinterpret Roger Fry’s aesthetic theory as a radical critique of modern art as a ‘post-romantic’ discourse in the De Manian sense. Worth particular attention is the way in which and the degree to which Roger Fry’s exhibition of post-impressionist paintings in 1910 brought about almost traumatic responses. The following is a quotation from Woolf’s biography of Fry:

It is difficult in 1939, when a great hospital is benefiting from a

centenary exhibition of Cézanne's works, and the gallery is daily crowded with devout and submissive worshippers, to realise what violent emotions those pictures excited less than thirty years ago. The pictures are the same; it is the public that has changed. But there can be no doubt about the fact. The public in 1910 was thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter. They went from Cézanne to Gauguin and from Gauguin to Van Gogh, they went from Picasso to Signac, and from Derain to Friesz, and they were infuriated. The pictures were a joke, and a joke at their expense[...]. The pictures were outrageous, anarchistic and childish. They were an insult to the British public and the man who was responsible for the insult was either a fool, an impostor or a knave. (122-23)

This is really symptomatic of the fact that the subjectivities of English middle-class people in the early twentieth century were fundamentally and traumatically subverted.

In this vein, Fry's criticism of impressionism is revealing. The following quotation shows that his argument is similar to Fredric Jameson's critique of impressionism, in the sense that they both regard it as a total reduction of everything outside to subjective impressions and perceptions:

As against these great advantages which art owes to impressionism we must set the fact that the pseudo-scientific and analytical method of these painters forced artists to accept pictures which lacked design and formal co-ordination to a degree which had never been before permitted. They, or rather some of them, reduced the artistic vision to a continuous patchwork or mosaic of coloured patches without architectural framework or structural coherence[...]. When once representation had been pushed to this point where further development was impossible, it was inevitable that artists should turn round and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the

moment the question was fairly posed it became clear that the pseudo-scientific assumption that fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no longer logical foundation. (7)

Worth recalling is that Jameson's historiography is a revelation of the process from realism to modernism or impressionism as 'a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world' (210). From our point of view, it can be said that impressionism is the final form of repression of the real origins of modern art and literature, the traumatic encounter with the real 'thing itself.'

More crucially, what Fry terms 'post-impressionism' can be regarded as an intervention in the impressionism thus defined. It is in this context that his key word 'design' assumes great significance. The quotations above and below are Fry's explicit and commonsensical criticism of impressionism as a confusion of the subjective and objective. Hence his privileging of post-impressionism as a strong introduction of architectural designs into this total mess and indulgence of subjective perceptions and impressions:

It was this revolution that Cézanne inaugurated and that Gauguin and van Goch continued. There is no need here to give in detail the characteristics of this new movement: they were sufficiently familiar. But we must summarise them as the re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance—the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony. (8)

More importantly, what Fry calls a 'design' is something radically un-representable and something uniquely material. As these quotations indicate, Fry's 'design' or 'form' is of course something visible; simultaneously, however, any aesthetic experience of this 'form' or 'design' also requires us to experience 'rhythm' as something by definition acoustic and invisible. This implies an impossible effort to see something invisible materialised in

something visible:

In such circumstances the greatest object of art becomes of no more significance than any casual piece of matter; a man's head is no more and no less important than a pumpkin, or, rather, these things may be so or not according to the rhythm that obsesses the artist and crystallises his vision. (34)

But he may like objects which attract by some oddity or peculiarity of form or colour, and thereby suggest to him new and intriguing rhythms. (35)

This materialisation of some acoustic and invisible image (this itself is an impossible phrase!)—rhythm—is at the same time charged with a certain type of affectivity or rather can be generative of some excessive emotion:

It will be seen, then, that the graphic arts arouse emotions in use by playing upon what one may call the overtone of some of our primary physical needs. They have, indeed, this great advantage over poetry, that they can appeal more directly and immediately to the emotional accompaniments of our bare physical existence. (23)

Quite evident here is that Fry makes a clear distinction between the physical affectivity of 'design' or 'form' and literary representations, here typified by 'poetry.' As has already been evident, what is meant by 'poetry' is the impressionistic and subjective side of modern literature. The following are examples of Woolf's biographical use of free indirect speech in representing Fry's thought:

Of course the English was incurably literary. They liked the association of things, not things in themselves. They were wrapt in a cocoon of unreality. (131)

Design, rhythm, texture—there they were again—in Flaubert as in Cézanne.... He greatly admired E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*. "I think it's a marvellous texture—really beautiful writing. But Oh lord I wish he weren't a mystic, or that he would keep his mysticism out of his books....[sic] I'm certain that the only meanings that are worth anything in a work of art are those that the artist himself knows nothing about. The moment he tries to explain *his* ideas *his* emotions he misses the great thing." Then "poetisation", making things out more interesting than they really are, that imposition of the writer's personality for which there is no exact critical term, was another sin that he discovered in the work of another friend. (194)

Of particular importance here is Roger Fry's representation of 'design, rhythm, texture' as 'things in themselves' and 'the great thing'—something material and affective that is repressed by writers' subjectivity. Fry calls this 'poetisation.' This 'thing' is also something we cannot help but 'miss' the moment we try to explain it.

## V

Fry's foregrounding of 'design' or 'form' can thus be reconsidered as a historical project of returning to the origins of modern art and literature as the repression of their traumatic encounter with 'thing itself,' the effect of which is well demonstrated by the traumatic panic of his audience of the 1910 exhibition. As we have discussed, Fry's 'thing itself' is a materialisation of something invisible, affective, acoustic, and impossible. It is interesting to note that Fry considers this aesthetic theory as a kind of 'mysticism' in the above quotation. Its possible historical referent is the contemporary 'spiritualism'—a scientific and religious project of visualising and observing 'spirit.' Of course, the basic assumption of this discourse is that spirit as something invisible does exist; hence the possibility of visualising the invisible. But, in the following quotation, Fry himself says that he stops 'on the edge of that gulf,' thereby suggesting his essentially atheistic or at least agnostic stance in the final

paragraph of his book:

As to the value of the aesthetic emotion—it is clearly infinitely removed from those ethical values to which Tolstoy would have confined it. It seems to be as remote from actual life and its practical utilities as the most useless mathematical theorem. One can only say that those who experience it feel it to have a peculiar quality of “reality” which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop. (199)

In this sense, Virginia Woolf's biographical account of Roger Fry is quite revealing in the sense that its last sequence is a foregrounding of his transcendental effort to represent that which cannot be represented empirically but at the same time structures our everyday experiences and perceptions:

But in either case there was no conclusion, only the perpetual need for fresh effort. The thing itself went on whatever happened to the artist—in books, in pictures, in buildings and pots and chairs and tables. (195)

[...] a man of profound sensibility but of exacting honesty, who, when reason could penetrate no further, broke off; but was convinced, and convinced others, that what he saw was there. (212)

Fry's post-impressionism can thus be re-interpreted as a transcendental intervention in the contemporary arts and literature of his day as a 'post-romantic' repression of what both Woolf and Fry name 'the thing itself.' The prefix 'post' here signifies something after impressionism but simultaneously something before it or its repressed origins. What essentially connects Woolf and Fry's aesthetics is their shared desire to represent something



un-representable as what is repressed by post-romantic aesthetic discourses. Precisely in this context, I contend that what can be termed the existentialisation of landscape in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*—Part II of the former and the ‘interludes’ of the latter—can be re-historicised as Woolf’s transcendental critique of her own post-romantic and impressionistic language. There is no doubt that the landscape there serves as what fundamentally structures, decides, and alienates the characters’ subjectivities in a transcendental way, and therefore by definition is beyond the scope of their representational capability. This kind of affective materiality is something fundamentally traumatic and therefore something that is always and already repressed by any institutionalised art history as a post-romantic evasion of this very trauma.

This paper is a revised version of the presentation at Romantic Legacies: the 13th Wenshan International Conference at National Chengchi University, Taipei on November 18 2016. I should like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Barnaby Ralph for his insightful comments then and after the meeting.

### Works Cited

- De Man, Paul. *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminars and Other Papers*. Ed. Andrzej Warminski et. al. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Fry, Roger. *Vision and Design*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1920.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconsciousness: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 1981. London & New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Karatani, Kojin. *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*. Fwd. Fredric Jameson and Trans. Brett De Bary. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Roger Fry: A Biography*. Ed. Diane F. Gillespie. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.