

# “Fireworks That Make Figures”: Virginia Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* and the Bloomsbury Group’s Post-Impressionist Aesthetic

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## I. Introduction

My aim in this paper is to trace the historical and theoretical developments of Post-Impressionism in the early twentieth century and how its discourses were adopted in Virginia Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*. I explore how the Bloomsbury group’s Post-impressionist aesthetic—especially that of Clive Bell and Roger Fry—influenced Woolf’s art world but at the same time she struggled to distance herself from their excessively formalistic or schematic approaches towards the nature of human beings and reality. The intimacy between the Bloomsbury group’s art aesthetic and that of Post-Impressionism is first conveyed through Bell’s “Aesthetics and Post-Impressionism,” in which he celebrates the essential features of Post-impressionist art and explains that the very standard to divide good and bad art depends on their invention of new form of art (Bell 38). Fry in “The French

Post-Impressionists” also celebrates the Post-Impressionists’ art aesthetic and especially their clear and logical structure of the art medium: “They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life” (Fry, *Vision and Design* 239). Until now, many critics and scholars have noted the theoretical connection between modernist writers’ narrative techniques and the art aesthetic of the Impressionists. For instance, Adam Parkes in *A Sense of Shock* explores how some modernist literary figures in the early twentieth century such as Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Woolf were greatly influenced by the stylistic practices and technical inventions of Impressionism. Jesse Matz, in *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, also analyzes how modern British literature closely relates to the Impressionist aesthetic of Walter Pater and other phenomenologists such as Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But I have not encountered many modernist scholars who attempt to correlate Woolf’s literary works and the Post-Impressionist aesthetic. This paper, however, argues that Woolf, to a greater or lesser degree, shares the Post-Impressionists’ emphasis on intellectual or linguistic form, or the scientific pattern in chaotic sense-data and that some essential features of the Post-Impressionist aesthetic are found in Woolf’s works such as *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse*. I further explore how Woolf, unlike the Post-Impressionists, displays ideologically differing, or even conflicting, approaches towards the nature of human subjects, art, and reality through her female characters in *The Voyage Out*. Although she was much influenced by the formalistic aesthetic of the Bloomsbury Group, especially Fry and Bell’s concepts of “Significant Form” and “art for art’s sake”—art regarded as an end in itself—she does not entirely agree with their “significant form” and its pedagogical aesthetic establishing the standard of absolute “rightness”—through which an ultimate sense of the reality of art objects is revealed (Bell 50, 51). For instance, Woolf is well known for her skepticism about the “concept of an essential human identity” and therefore often distanced herself from the notion of an intact and unchangeable nature of human beings and objects; therefore she designed constant shifts and changes in her characters’ minds, as in the mind of Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage*

*Out.*

Bell says one of the major characteristics of Post-Impressionism is that the artist no longer cares “about representation . . . [but] minds about creating significant form” (Bell 38). Fry also celebrated the intensive colors and radical forms of the Post-Impressionists that are entirely cut off from conventional standards of beauty. The interest of these critics in the Post-Impressionists’ depersonalized or disinterested art form cut off from conventional beauty or natural reaction to reality further developed into their famous slogan “art for art’s sake,” the art form that is “self-contained.” Besides Bell and Fry, I conclude in this paper that the thinkers who were also inspired by the Post-Impressionist aesthetic were T. E. Hume and Francis Herbert Bradley. They sought the geometrical and abstract “form” of art through which we might glimpse the true nature of reality or human subjects. I thus first summarize Bell and Fry’s definitions of “significant form” and “art for art’s sake,” then explore how Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was influenced by their formalist aesthetic but at the same time she distanced herself from the notion of an intact and unchangeable nature of human beings, art objects, and reality.

## II. The Post-Impressionist Aesthetic in the Early Twentieth Century

In the early twentieth century, the Post-Impressionist aesthetic made radical and innovative changes in how the world was perceived and represented. At the heart of this movement, one can find Fry and Bell’s doctrines of “significant form” as well as “art for art’s sake,” or art regarded as an end in itself. Their aesthetic established new ways of viewing and understanding art objects, deeply affecting the work of contemporary modernists in the fields of literature and painting. For example, Woolf, after seeing a painting by Vincent Van Gogh at Fry’s first exhibition of Post-Impressionist art, comments that “on or about December 1910,

human character changed.” Whereas Impressionism had emphasized the pure and visual empiricism of the observer and believed in the artist’s faithful expression of personality, Post-Impressionism instead attempted to invent intellectual substitutions such as abstract, scientific, and metaphysical art formulas, or patterns in chaotic human sense-data. The Post-Impressionists did so in order to reach the metaphysical world of Truth, or an ultimate sense of the knowledge of things. For instance, Bell says that the most important historical change from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism was that the artist’s work was no longer “about representation . . . [but] . . . about creating significant form” (Bell 38). Bell’s definition of “significant form” here should therefore be understood as a mold that catches a sense of the ultimate reality of an art object and through which viewers can share the same rare moment of inspiration that the artist felt.

Bell and Fry also had negative attitudes toward humanistic values and emphasized the necessity of intellectual substitutions instead of subjective perceptions (an impression). For this reason, they often threw doubt on the Impressionists’ moment of “Oneness” where the observer, the art object, and the internal vision of the artist cannot be separated from each other. Instead the critics argued that this “Oneness” is nothing but “self-mystification through which we dream of the coincidence with substance of the object” (Matz 50). Therefore, one of the common threads running through the Post-Impressionist thinkers is the aesthetic of impersonality, a “separation of objective knowledge from the mind which perceived it” (Waugh 19). In other words, the most crucial characteristic of Post-Impressionism is the artist’s tendency to express a depersonalized and disinterested intensity of emotions cut off from natural responses to reality. In contrast, the Romantics had attempted to evoke natural human feelings through art and the Impressionists placed more importance on the observer’s subjective feelings, especially what the visual senses received from nature. For instance, literary Impressionism is mostly concerned with how art represents the artist’s subjective perception of external sensory stimuli and encourages the readers’ sensory participation in forming an impressionistic response to the text. To

Impressionists, not the cannon of expression but the artist’s immediate vision or perceptual senses are more important, because these artists believed that these senses constitute practical reality. The ways in which the Impressionists transcribed reality are also demonstrated in Walter Pater and Ford Madox Ford’s “aesthetic of moments.” In “On Impressionism,” for instance, Ford questioned what makes modern art different from the Naturalists, answering that Impressionist art should be “the record of the impression of a moment” (Ford 267). Pater’s *Renaissance* also begins with the question of the true responsibility of the art critic in the modern era. He says such a critic should be faithful to seeing the world, recording its effects on the mind of the artist and disentangling the impression of the world from the chaotic entanglement of emotions.

Unlike the Impressionists, Fry’s celebration of Van Gogh’s revolutionary paintings is derived from the artist’s ability to create a new art style that did not fit conventional standards of beauty (Fry, *Transformations* 187). Fry in “The French Post-Impressionists” also applauded Matisse’s “disinterested” contemplative skill. This “disinterestedness,” or detachment from the practical functions of everyday life, is well illustrated in Matisse’s paintings, especially in his use of vivid colors and bold outlines that downplay the conventional representational style. Matisse’s entirely new use of colors and spatial relationships—contrary to reality—fulfilled the expectations of Bell and Fry’s Post-Impressionist doctrine. Fry’s interest in the Post-Impressionists’ disinterested emotions developed further in *Vision and Design* into his famous slogan, “art for art’s sake,” or the art form that is “self-contained.” He says that modern art should be understood as the pure “expression of emotions regarded as ends in themselves” without having any practical purposes in reality (27). Moreover, for the audience to have spiritual experiences, he argues that artists should create “a purely abstract language of form” that preserves the artists’ vivid emotions (239). Bell also remarks that the true moment of inspiration of art comes only when the artist perceives “the object as pure forms” and not as a practical item associated with our daily lives or our daily emotions (Bell 44). Bell’s concept of art also requires us to bring to it “nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and

affairs, no familiarity with its emotions” (Torgovnick 52).

This does not mean that Bell and Fry did not have any representational sympathies, or that they invented a totally non-representational style. Furthermore, these Post-Impressionist thinkers shared some fundamental core ideals that cannot be entirely distinguished from Impressionist ideals. Both movements, in differing ways, attempted to manifest the pure vision of the artist. But in the Impressionists’ aesthetic, it no longer matters whether the experiences of the outside world lead into the abstract truth of reality or not, because the artist’s impression itself becomes the very essence of reality and there no longer exists anything called “metaphysical truth” except for the artist’s perceptual senses. Consequently, the definition of reality or the essence of the object in Impressionism is more intimately related to “the perception of the highly sensitive mind and the personality of the artist,” not an abstract and objective notion of thingness (Pater, *Selected Writings* 105).

T. E. Hulme shared similar notions to Bell and Fry. The kinship between them is understandable given that Hulme thought that transcendental and ultimate reality was irrelevant to an artist’s unstable feelings/emotions, and that the consciousness of the human subject is incapable of understanding the world without falsifying the subject’s own nature. Hulme also shared a negative view of human subjectivism with Bell and Fry and celebrated abstract, scientific, geometrical patterns or art forms and the consequential fixed moments of symbolism that downplayed the conventional representational style. Hulme assumed that human intellect, emotion, and thought were nothing more than the construction of illusions and that subjective experiences were immediately broken up into abstract ideas and concepts in the common-sense world. In order to solve this problem, he placed a higher priority on anti-subjectivism, unintentionality, impersonality, and the necessity of abstract and geometrical art forms. He thus distinguished Post-Impressionism from Impressionism based on the question of whether artists use “geometrical and archaic classical form[s]” of art to pierce through the veil between the artist’s mind and reality (*Speculations* 100).<sup>1</sup> In “Modern Art and Its Philosophy,” Hulme also states

that the most important tendency among Post-Impressionists was their use of the abstract forms of art or the “archaic but permanent formulae” (*Speculations* 100). He thus celebrated Cézanne’s art for having a different ambience than that of the other Impressionists, using pyramidal shapes and human figures that are distorted to fit them (100).

Michael H. Levenson in his *Genealogy of Modernism* also demonstrates how Hulme’s quest for the collective and general idea of truth further influenced the aesthetic of the Bloomsbury Group. Levenson explains that Hulme’s emphasis on the “geometrical art form” and search for collective and general truth beyond human subjectivity also somehow influenced G. E. Moore’s emphasis on intrinsic worth over the instrumental values of objects, Bertrand Russell’s mathematics, and the Bloomsbury Group’s “Significant Form.” According to Levenson, there are many grounds for seeing that Bell and Fry’s formalistic aesthetic—revolving around “significant form”—is intimately related to Hulme’s notions of “impersonality” and geometrical art form. Levenson also makes some parallels between these contemporary thinkers and Bradley’s concept of “the Absolute” or its consequential moments of “synthesis of all diversity” or the “supra-rational state past the reach of common sense which integrates and transcends the contradiction” (178).

From what have been discussed so far, we can conclude that Post-Impressionism is related to simplified art forms, symbols, or abstract artistic/linguistic formulas that help us break through to a deeper level of art—an art full of objects not readily accessible to the writer’s or artist’s observation or immediate perception. When the appeals of these post-Impressionist thinkers to the artist’s “disinterested and contemplative imagination” (qtd. in Smith 153) came to the literary field, they often changed the field’s direction to highlight the formalistic structure of stories, the use of symbols, the characters’ impersonality, and the rarely

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- 1) Hulme’s notion of “geometrical” form is thereby fundamentally different from the vital art of the Renaissance, which uses metaphor for the representational meaning inside. As with Post-Impressionist thinkers, Hulme’s meaning is more related to a simpler art form, “the archaic yet permanent formulae,” to express the more intense, complicated sensibility of the modern era governed by principles of impersonality and unintentionality (100).

perceptible moments when characters accidentally come across their secret hidden selves (Smith 153-55). As previously discussed, the Post-Impressionists usually believe that there exists a metaphysical or transcendental reality beyond the observer's subjectivity. The aforementioned thinkers' emphasis on the symbol of "pure form" thus became a radical tool to encode and decipher not the chaotic sense-data perceived by an artist or writer but a more transcendental and deeper level of the Truth of the object. The Post-Impressionist aesthetic in the field of literature is also demonstrated through avoidance of direct description of the inner consciousness or feelings of the characters, who can only see a "partial" truth of the world. This way, in the Post-Impressionist aesthetic, humanistic values such as human consciousness, conventional ego, and knowledge ceased to constitute the center of reality. The transcendental Reality or Truth became irrelevant to an artist or writer's consciousness, and the human subject became no longer able to understand the world, as it is falsifying the true nature of Being or Truth.

I believe Woolf's works were, to some degree, influenced by the aforementioned thinkers and their notion that human consciousness is an imperfect tool for understanding the true nature of the world and thus we need intellectual substitutions that can help us reach "the unseen world of persisting objects, of enduring forms" (Banfield 274). For instance, Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, emphasizes the value of impersonality, the anti-subjectivism of many of her characters, the autonomous function of symbol and metaphor, and the avoidance of directly describing the characters' inner feelings or the transcendental voice of "I." Of course, there is some danger of generalization in linking Post-Impressionism to Woolf, given that she did not share any singular notion of an artistic aesthetic, nor was she in complete agreement with Bell and Fry's formalistic aesthetic, as previously mentioned. But the reasons that I put her in the Post-Impressionist group, influenced mostly by Bell and Fry's concepts of an ultimate sense of reality and knowledge, is because she does not seem to entirely abandon her belief in the existence of transcendental moments where the permanent and fixed natures of art objects or the secret nature of human subjects are revealed in themselves. I now



examine in more detail how these Post-Impressionist theories associated with abstract art or linguistic form influenced Woolf’s art world.

### III. Virginia Woolf’s Post-Impressionist Aesthetic in *The Voyage Out*

As is well known, Woolf once compared her work to Post-Impressionist painting, celebrating its vivid colors and bold techniques. In “Pictures and Portraits,” for instance, she described how “the very paint on the canvas begins to distil itself into . . . sluggish, slow dropping words . . . [and stains] the page with colour” (qtd. in Sim 71). She even wrote to her sister, Vanessa Bell, insisting that her writings had “the beauty of colors [like Post-Impressionist paintings] which is . . . very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if I poured a large jug of champagne over a hairpin” (Goldman 138). Her interest in the visual art, or her equation of the world with colors, is close to Vanessa’s views. Diane Gillespie therefore argues that Vanessa’s colorist aesthetic dovetails with Woolf’s language theory and especially her political deployment of radical color. Although the use of bold and vivid color was a metaphor for Woolf’s descriptive power, she also emphasized the importance of the ultimate artistic form, or its epiphanic moment that helps us grasp the true reality of things.

For instance, in *The Years*, she emphasized the directly apprehended logical form, “a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible” that fixes and makes permanent, which recalls Bell and Fry’s aesthetic (398). Especially, she seems to be influenced by her sister’s husband, Clive Bell, and his aesthetic of “significant form”, through which the ultimate reality of things “reveals itself through pure form” (Bell 54). Woolf in “A Sketch of the Past” also said one should get through the “cotton wool” of objects to find a certain pattern beneath, and here she equated “cotton wool” (“cotton ball” in American English) with the external façade or “non-being” of the object or event outside. In this way, Woolf seems to celebrate the moment when

the external façade of the things is taken off and the kernel of essential life is revealed and “provides an equivalent for, rather than an imitation of, life,” as Fry had similarly emphasized (Smith 157). This affinity connecting Woolf and Fry’s notion of “form” is also reiterated through her works such as *The Voyage Out* and *To the Lighthouse*. In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, Mrs. Ramsay plays the important role of a fixed center that holds together her family, composed of her philosopher husband, their eight children, and an artist figure, Lily Briscoe. Because of her presence, even among the disorderly rush of time, there exists the fixed moment, “the still point,” that integrates different visions of people into one point. Mrs. Ramsay also leans on Mr. Ramsay’s “masculine intelligence,” often depicted as “cubes and square roots” (159). Thus, one can say that her dinner party functions as a Post-Impressionist creation, a unifying tool that unites all the characters’ different thoughts and ideas. Moreover, her complete vision naturally leads into Lily’s painting, whose “pauses” and “strokes” form “rhythmical movement” (236). At the end of the novel, Lily solves her problem by “draw[ing] a line there, in the centre [of the canvas],” and this line seems to be another Post-Impressionist attempt to assemble and reconstruct the sensible world into a specific shape, as Bell emphasized in *Art* (310).

In *The Voyage Out*, the longing for this “still point” is further illustrated through the protagonists such as Rachel and Terence Hewet. For instance, Rachel believes that beneath the superficial and continual flux of the mundane human events, there exists a real life independent of everything else, “the life that went on beneath the eyes and the mouth and the chin” (298). For example, when Rachel goes around the hotel corner and comes out into the sunlight after Mr. Bax’s tiresome sermon, she suddenly experiences that everything appears “with startling intensity, as though the dusty surface had been peeled off everything, leaving only the reality and the instant” (245). Moreover, when she returns from the expedition to the Amazon river, in the midst of the silence, she feels that a certain pattern of our life slowly “form[s] itself out of nothing” and delivers her the true meaning of life: “things formed themselves into a pattern not only for her, but for them, and

in that pattern lay satisfaction and meaning” (297). Even when she is affronted by St. John Hirst’s sarcastic comments on female sexuality and women’s incapability of understanding the classic literature and she comes out of the banquet hall, her eyes are suddenly caught by defamiliarized “forms of great black trees” (142) and she experiences how the continual flux of human life such as marriage or strife between men and women becomes trivial and strange. This symbolic moment of “timelessness” or “the still point” also allows her to imagine that she has become “a Persian princess . . . riding her horse upon the mountains alone” (142).

Another character that embodies Bell and Fry’s formalistic aesthetic is Hewet. He always seeks a certain artistic form or pattern that can synthesize the scattered light across the world:

“We want to find out what’s behind things, don’ we?—Look at the lights down there,” he continued, “scattered about anyhow. Things I feel come to me like lights. . . . I want to combine them. . . . Have you ever seen fireworks that make figures? . . . I want to make figures. . . . Is that what you want to do?”

Now they were out on the road and could walk side by side. (207)

Of course, Hewet, like Woolf, seems to well recognize the limit of the conventional language or other artistic medium but still retains a belief that a well-wrought poetic style or structure can reveal a kind of reality of art object or event and connect us to those realities beyond their surfaces: “oh, no, we’ve exploded all that. Read poetry, Rachel, poetry, poetry, poetry!” (276). He therefore always occupies himself by finding the most appropriate form of poetic language that best represents the world, adding that John Milton’s poetic style with its “substance and shape” is perfect not only in itself but as its own end, and therefore it is “not necessary to understand what he was saying . . . [since] one could merely listen to his words; [and] . . . handle them” (308).

That with most curb sways the smooth Severn stream.  
 Sabrina is her name, a virgin pure;  
 Whilom she was the daughter of Loocrine,  
 That had the sceptre from his father Brute. (308)

Moreover, when Hewet, who is suffering from Rachel's illness, comes out into the garden, his eyes are suddenly caught by "the shapes of trees" (323). After that, he is driven by the strong desire to escape the world of the human senses. In this scene, he regards how the world of his bodily senses such as "fret and anxiety" and the external world that exists beyond them are separate, which is reminiscent of Bell or Fry's emphasis on observers' incomprehensibility of the universe, their impersonality or distance from the Impressionists' inner feelings and consciousness.

Surely the world of strife and fret and anxiety was not the real world, but this was the real world, the world that lay beneath the superficial world, so that, whatever happened, one was secure. The quiet and peace seemed to lap his body in a fine cool sheet, soothing every nerve; his mind seemed once more to expand, and become natural.

But when he had stood thus for a time a noise in the house roused him; he turned instinctively and went into the drawing-room. (324)

Hewet thinks there exists a certain form of truth out there or beyond the world of immediate senses, and a thought of penetrating it through an artistic form always gives him profound satisfaction and content.

Besides him, a longing to penetrate the unknown and hidden kernel of other characters or art objects is strongly reflected in many male characters in *The Voyage Out*. Richard Dalloway, for instance, emphasizes the policy line of the Conservative Party, such as the concepts of "continuity" and "integration," by means of which people can be connected to each other (156). Mr. Pepper is always curious and wants to know about the "white, hairless, blind monsters lying curled on the ridges of sand at the bottoms of the sea" (16). Similar to Mr. Pepper, St. John Hirst tries to see only the "circles of chalk between people's feet" (205) and

thinks that he can explain the female nature as a certain image or symbol: “they’re all types. Don’t take us—take this hotel. You could draw circles round the whole lot of them, and they’d never stray outside” (97). When Hirst stops thinking about Rachel’s death and Hewet’s suffering, he also experiences that the voices and movements of the world suddenly “draw together . . . to combine themselves into a pattern before his eyes” and watches “the pattern before build itself up” with satisfaction (352). Since human emotion and intellect cannot understand the world as it is without falsification, these male characters seem to heavily rely on the logical and abstract forms of mind, and they function as a powerful unifying tool for the perception of the world, like Mr. Ramsay’s “cubes and square roots” in *To the Lighthouse*. Moreover, their longing for the essence of the external world, impersonality, distance from their inner feelings and emotions, although restrictive, “resembles those of Roger Fry and Clive Bell . . . [since they also] had a belief in ‘significant form’ . . . ‘form behind which we catch a sense of ultimate reality’” (Bell 46). Moreover, these symbolic moments of revelation and their lingering imageries—which recall Ezra Pound’s Image—are very different from “Impressionist” moments of “Oneness”—where the internal vision of the artist and art object cannot be extricated from each other.

#### IV. Woolf’s Distance from Post-Impressionist Aesthetic

*The Voyage Out*, however, simultaneously questions whether it is possible to peel off the “cotton wool” of the external world and penetrate into the essence of art object or event through an artistic form. Of course, in the novel, there exists a strong yearning for the moment of revelation, which can further detach characters from their mundane life events and feelings. But most of the time, this moment of insight—which shows a kind of reality beyond our everyday life processes—is always hidden underneath characters’ conscious mind or fluctuating senses, and there lies a deep abyss in the path from one man to another or from a person to

an art object. As Rachel and Hewet become more involved with each other and their relationship deepens, they also begin to feel that they don't know each other at all or what they want their lives to be any more. Although Hewet tries to conjecture her nature or personality, he reaches the conclusion that "[h]e did not know her, and he did not know what she felt, or whether they could live together, or whether he wanted to marry her" (230). Even when he sails up the Amazon river in a small steamboat and stands close to her, he confesses that "[Rachel] made it as impossible for him to think about her as it would have been impossible to see her" (252).

Besides that, the characters often show that they have impaired or distorted visions and cannot see through things. Rachel always feels that she can "see and hear a little of everything, much as a river feels the twigs that fall into it and sees the sky above, but her eyes were too vague" (247). Even at the moment of revelation, or the moment that they believe finally brings them a certain vision of the world, its organic harmony or unity generated through the moment is often intruded into, or broken, or keeps being delayed by their incomprehensibility of the world or the difficulties of communication between them. Here, Woolf seems to imply that the moment of incarnation of the "Truths" cannot be effectively expressed through any artistic medium or linguistic form. And Woolf seems to believe that this is because the current representative system that bridges one person to another is prejudiced and adheres only to the conventional idea of masculinity. Of course, among the female characters, there are some passive and conservative ones, such as Mrs. Elliot or Susan, who simply mimic the conventional language and whose minds are always taken up with trivial domestic things such as dogs, garden, children, tennis, "letters to write for father, and a thousand little things," etc. (247). For instance, when she hears Mr. Bax's sermon, Susan immediately sympathizes with the "satisfactory order of the world"—that male-dominant system has assigned to her—with mechanical respect and pretends to feel what she has never experienced (214). Rachel, however, expresses a deep discontent and complains that this hegemonic language system always misrepresents her ideas and

feelings and one would “never get what one wants out of any of them” in such acquiescent and submissive ways of using it (249).

Rather, Rachel wants to express her feeling and desire, not by the patronizing voice of male-dominant language and its certain form—that “naturalize[s] male economic and political dominance” (Vincent 174)—, but through her own language that makes a crack in the world that has been set as a default condition. Rachel’s inner mind is always filled with all sorts of bodily senses, which are constantly influenced, disturbed, and reconstituted by unexpected encounters with others or through communion with nature, such as sunlight, the continuous but irregular sounds of waves, and the wind blowing through the trees. In the steamboat sailing up the river, Rachel even says that she often feels like “the world is composed entirely of vast blocks of matter, and that we’re nothing but patches of light” like “soft spots of sun wavering over the carpet and up the wall” (276). Her description of the image here even resembles Impressionist paintings such as Claude Monet’s, in which patches of indistinct colors and forms delivers nothing objective or substantial about external objects. Especially, in the male-value system and reality, Rachel often feels that these fluctuating feelings and thoughts become isolated and remain as “sort of physical discomfort . . . [like] a film of mist,” without having any firm linguistic agency (216). To Rachel, expressing or sharing her thoughts and feelings with others by using the same hegemonic language sounds strange and frustrating: “[t]hat any one of these people had ever felt what she felt, or could ever feel it, or had even the right to pretend for a single second that they were capable of feeling it, appalled her” (277). Rachel was even appalled to realize that she “produce[d] phrases which bore a considerable likeness to those which she had condemned” (279), when replying to the letters congratulating her engagement to Hewet:

She was struck by it herself, for she stopped writing and looked up; looked at Terence deep in the arm-chair, looked at the different pieces of furniture, at her bed in the corner at the window-pane which showed the branches of a tree filled in with sky, heard the clock ticking, and was amazed at the gulf which

lay between all that and her sheet of paper. Would there ever be a time when the world was one and indivisible? (279)

Not only Rachel but other female characters in *The Voyage Out* have a natural reaction against the conventional language system in which female subjects have been ruled out from expressing their own thoughts. For instance, Rachel, Mrs. Flushing, and Helen Ambrose often give full play to their imagination by painting, playing the piano, or embroidering with “a thread from the vari-coloured tangle . . . sew[ing] red into the bark of a tree, or yellow into the river torrent” (25). However, Rachel, in order to express her constantly fluctuating feelings in language, begins to defamiliarize the conventional language and seeks alternative ways to view and interpret her surrounding world. In other words, her disruption of hegemonic language becomes a new way to approach the world, well shown in her exotic and defamiliarized language, made when she sails up the river, such as “star-shaped crimson blossoms,” “air . . . in languid puffs of scent,” and “the vast green light [that] was broken . . . by a round of pure yellow sunlight” (256). Even when Terence compliments Milton’s poetic style as having a perfect shape, Rachel feels that it is also another incomplete linguistic medium that can mean “different things from what they usually meant” (308) and experiences that the strange sounds of the words such as “curb” and “Brute” bring unpleasant sights before her eyes “independently of their meaning” (309). Timothy Vincent argues that Woolf’s language is tolerant of rather diverse meanings, and her “image/text” often allows her female characters to have “perceptual freedom” (176), “transform the visual cliché” (190), and show how the male value system has disenfranchised women from expressing their voices (178).

At this point in our examination of the novel, the pattern of Rachel and Terence’s conversation in the woods is worth paying attention to. Rachel responds to Terence’s sentence by repeating the same sentences over and over again, which even reminds us of Gertrude Stein’s famous verbal technique of repetition. When the characters repeat their sentences to each other, their voices even sound as if



they had joined in “tones of strange unfamiliar sound which formed no words” (257).

“We are happy together.” He did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing.

“Very happy,” she answered.

They continued to walk for some time in silence. Their steps unconsciously quickened.

“We love each other,” Terence said.

“We love each other,” she repeated. . . .

“We love each other,” Terence repeated, searching into her face. Their faces were both very pale and quiet, and they said nothing. He was afraid to kiss her again. (257)

Especially when Rachel reaches out her hands and touches his face, she feels as if nothing except her bodily senses exist in the world, and everyday life processes such as getting married and having children suddenly become insignificant and trivial. At that moment, she repeats Terence’s sentence again: “[w]e sat upon the ground” (267). This repetitive pattern of conversation could be seen as a significant moment of perfect understanding and bonding between them. But given that the repetitive pattern occurs when her mind is full of all sorts of indescribable feelings and emotions, we could also say that she has reached a limit where she can no longer express her feelings with the male-dominant language and compulsively attempts to break its wall through the repetition.

Moreover, her physical pain also hinders her clear recognition of the surroundings and ability to familiarize herself with the hegemonic system outside. In this scene, she no longer classifies the people’s faces and she experiences that the nature of everything constantly changes:

The nature of what they were doing changed incessantly, although there was always a reason behind it, which she must endeavour to grasp. Now they were among trees and savages, now they were on the sea, now they were on the

tops of high towers; now they jumped; now they flew. But just as the crisis was about to happen, something invariably slipped in her brain, so that the whole effort had to begin over again. The heat was suffocating. (322)

Rachel's moments of seeing in this scene seem to be undefinable, and the world around her constantly transforms and reconstitutes its nature, as if resisting the constitution of fixed or permanent moment of being proposed by Bell and Fry. Although Rachel, in the midst of physical pain, tries to attend the sights and grasp their true meaning, she fails to see the reason behind them. Here, the clear outlines of objects are consistently blurred and become indistinguishable from one another. They are also described as visions whose inner cores we can never access. The narrator's voice is also felt as if it hangs in the air and delivers nothing substantial about the objects. Rachel's "moments" here, rather, appear to be phenomenological and transient moments of perception which no longer resembles the Bloomsbury group's emphasis on the ahistorical and metaphysical moments of truth of art objects or their underlying law.

## V. Conclusion

Through Rachel's character, Woolf seems to imply that human beings are dynamic, complex, and constantly changing, and therefore probably incapable of ever being fully defined even through the perfect artistic or linguistic form. For instance, in *A Writer's Diary*, Woolf criticizes how "no critic ever gives full weight to the desire of the mind for change," which also seems to suggest that the true nature of being constantly changes (188). We looked at how Post-Impressionism made radical and innovative changes in artistic form. Whereas Impressionism emphasized the pure visual empiricism of the observer, Post-Impressionism attempted to discover the intellectual form, or the scientific pattern in chaotic sense-data, in order to reach the metaphysical world of Truth. Although Woolf, to

a greater or lesser degree, shares the notions of their art aesthetic, she is also well known for her skepticism about the “concept of an essential human identity” and thus designed constant shifts and changes in many of her female characters’ minds, as in Rachel’s in *The Voyage Out*. Woolf also cynically remarked that Bell and Fry “wished to align art with science,” and Fry’s desire to “pull apart and to analyse” the essential nature of the object is “too active or too separate to let him submit as perhaps an artist must submit, completely and unconsciously to the [artistic] experience itself” (Banfield 250-51). Vincent argues that “Woolf turned away from her Fry-inspired formalism of the teens and twenties” (176). However, the nature of many of her male characters, such as Mr. Ramsay’s or Pepper’s blindness to ordinary things and their concerns only about extraordinary things like the symbols in *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out*, still embody the characteristics of Bell and Fry, who only see “the things thus in skeleton outline, bare of flesh” (251). Moreover, Rachel and Terence are constantly attracted to the romantic conception of the epiphanic moment and never abandon the belief that the truer self, more continuous and permanent, is buried deep down in oneself and we can encounter such symbolic moments when they reveal themselves through a certain artistic or linguistic form.

But we can also see that Woolf distances herself from the notion of an intact and unchangeable nature of people and art objects. Goldman also states that Woolf distanced herself from Bell and Fry’s “a single perfectly organic aesthetic whole and his readiness to center this within the comprehensive theory of Significant Form and the nature of perception” and more importantly she had the confidence to convert it into her own artistic theory (116). Instead of following the Omega workshop’s mission of seeking the metaphysical truth of reality, Woolf sometimes chose to adopt a more phenomenological and empiricist idea of multiple truths and realities, as in the characterization of Rachel in *The Voyage Out*. Not all of her artistic theory can be discussed in this paper, but it is clear that Woolf’s moments of beauty are very different from Fry and Bell’s fixed moments. I believe that her moments of beauty are, rather, related to the constantly changing and undefinable

moments of life such as the sky that changes its hues every each moment (Wolf, *The Voyage Out* 206), or the murmur of the sea with its soothing sound of waves that constantly “broke and spread . . . and withdrew to break again,” or the green light falling from the leaves of the tree and leaving little shapes of diamonds upon the tablecloth (304).

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**Abstract**

“Fireworks That Make Figures”: Virginia Woolf’s  
*The Voyage Out* and the Bloomsbury Group’s  
 Post-Impressionist Aesthetic

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Clive Bell says one of the major characteristics of Post-Impressionism is that the artist no longer cares “about representation . . . [but] minds about creating significant form.” Roger Fry also celebrated the intensive colors and radical forms of Post-Impressionists that are entirely cut off from conventional standards of beauty. These critics’ interests in the Post-Impressionists’ depersonalized or disinterested art form cut off from conventional beauty or natural reaction to reality further developed into the famous slogan “art for art’s sake,” the art form that is “self-contained.” In this paper, I first summarize Bell’s and Fry’s definitions of “significant form” and “art for art’s sake,” and afterwards explore how Virginia Woolf was influenced by their formalist aesthetic but at the same time distanced herself from the notion of an intact and unchangeable nature of people and objects. My response in this paper highlights Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*.

■ **Key words**: Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace, Terence Hewet, Significant Form, The Bloomsbury Group, Post-Impressionist Aesthetic

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