In support of dualism: An exploration of the relationship between form and meaning with reference to Amy Lowell's 'Yoshiwara Lament'.

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In analysing a text, stylisticians necessarily assume a relationship between form and meaning. Wales (1989) defines the two opposing positions in this debate as monism, which 'argues for the inseparability of form and content' (305) and dualism, which argues that 'the same content or "meaning" can be expressed in various ways' (135). These two positions are important to all fields of literary criticism as an underlying assumption that governs how texts are discussed. However, as a field that approaches texts through language and explores *how* texts mean, the position is particularly relevant to stylistics. In this essay I will argue that although dualism must be considered in reference to recent theoretical debates, it is still a highly useful model. I will first discuss some recent debates surrounding the subject and then explore these ideas through an analysis and rewriting exercise of a poem by Amy Lowell.

At the extreme of monism exists the deterministic viewpoint, which argues that form and meaning are not only inseparable, but that language both shapes and constrains how the world is conceptualised. Proponents of this position such as Whorf (1940) argue that 'each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity' (117). Known as the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', this theory argues that language constrains how the world is mentally constructed. Whorf explores this assertion by considering Hopi (a North American language). He demonstrates how the Hopi methods of classifying words relate to duration of time, unlike the English division of nouns and verbs (118). Whorf argues that any discussion that attempts to define why a word is in a particular word class is necessarily conducted through language. Therefore, because it is discussed within that language's conceptual frame, the definition becomes tautologically circular. In this way Whorf claims that speakers are constrained by the conceptualising mental framework of their language.

However, although Whorf's attempt to debunk Western-centric viewpoints is admirable, his extreme position is ultimately self-validating. Fowler (1991, 30) disputes Whorf's argument because although the Hopi language conceptualises the world differently, Whorf manages to explain this difference in English. Fowler asserts that these differences in language structure are therefore ultimately translatable because English-speaking readers of Whorf's paper can understand the conceptualisations of the Hopi language. However, Fowler's deduction is misleading. Although readers of Whorf's paper may gain an understanding of the conceptualisation of the Hopi language, there is no way to verify if these readers have understood these conceptual frameworks in full. If language creates a constraining mental structure that prevents a native speaker thinking outside of it, then it is impossible to verify if this is the case because all methods of testing necessarily exist within a language's mental framework. Even a multilingual speaker who has spoken two languages

from birth can only speak from this multilingual position and so cannot compare the mental structure of speaking only one language from birth. In this way Whorf's determinist position is unverifiable.

However, many theorists acknowledge the conceptualising aspects of language without resorting to the extremism of Whorf's position. Fowler (1991, 30-31) argues for a weaker version of determinism, a 'predisposition', where language shapes but does not constrain how speakers think. In this theory, speakers tend to think within the conceptual frames of their language structure but can expand these conceptualising faculties through various techniques, such as using synonyms, words of another dialect/language or forming neologisms. Throughout Fowler's exploration of the news he takes a dualist position, arguing that representation is a constructive practice and that '[t]here are always different ways of saying the same thing' (4). Yet, Fowler is keen to assert that most stylistic choices are unconscious demonstrations of an underlying ideology, rather than a conscious, intended bias. Fowler argues that meaning in words is a contextually-dependent, interactive process; when forms of representation (such as language) are used habitually in certain circumstances, they become conventionally associated with those circumstances and so acquire meaning (25). Fowler therefore takes a historical, pragmatic view of language and asserts that meaning is a learnt and negotiated set of cultural values that both influence and are influenced by ideological factors.

This pragmatic socio-historical view is similar to the one held by Toolan (1990) who argues that meaning is a negotiated approximation between participants:

> Just as it is not necessary for a monolingual Chinese-speaker and a monolingual English speaker to carry an identical meaning for the different forms of *hwoche* and *train* respectively in order that translation can be effected, similarly intralingually, it is not necessary (or verifiable) that you and I carry an identical meaning for the word *democratic*… (46).

This quote asserts that meaning within a single language is a negotiated approximation. There is no way of verifying whether what I mean by the colour blue is the same as what any other English speaker means by the colour blue, and it is an absurd suggestion that any other speaker will have exactly the same connotations, emotional attachments or wider significances that the colour blue has for me. Yet, as Toolan observes, whether across languages or intralingually, the referential approximation (the overlap of reference) of all words is part of the conventions and negotiations that construct communicative practice. All speakers assume that there will be this referential overlap and I would argue that this assumption (held implicitly by all speakers of a language) is as culturally-formed as any other conventional interaction, such as principles of politeness or conversational maxims.

This referential overlap is central to dualism because it can be construed as a model that undermines plurality. Fish (1979) criticises stylistics for advocating the existence of a direct correlation between formal linguistic elements and meaning, irrespective of context. Although stylistic analysis can create the illusion of linguistic 'evidence', Fish makes the mistake of assuming all stylistic analyses are trying to prove an interpretation, instead of offering an approach to a text through language (see Toolan, 1990, chapters 1 and 2). Moreover, any viewpoint that assumes a direct correlation between formal elements and meaning also assumes a stability of reference. Because meaning exists in a negotiated system of relative difference, there are no stable categories of reference. Therefore, no formal linguistic element can be directly mapped onto meaning, because meaning is always contextually developed and negotiated between participants.

Because dualism is often oversimplified to suggest meaning exists in these stable categories, it is tempting to reject it in favour of monism's appeal. By claiming that form and meaning are inseparable, monism appears to be sensitive to the scope and variety of textual meaning. A model that is sensitive to the slightest change in syntax, diction and so on, and claims that any change to this form changes a text's meaning, appears to value texts for more than their referential function. This sense of heightened value for a text as a unique, autonomous artefact (a tendency popularised by New Criticism) seems to show great respect for the institution of Literature, that all critics, by their choice of field, clearly value highly.

Yet, as Leech and Short (2007 [1981]) insist, if the monist argument is followed to its logical conclusion, then any paraphrase, summary or elaboration becomes impossible. If form is inextricably bound with meaning, then 'one cannot discuss meaning except by repeating the very words in which it was expressed, and one cannot discuss form except by saying that it appropriately expresses its own meaning' (27). This fundamental flaw in monism leads Leech and Short to reject both monism and dualism in favour of pluralism, based on a functional model (see Taylor and Toolan (1996) for a critique of functionalist theory). However, this pluralist approach ignores the assumptions present not only in everyday metalinguistic discussion but also in literary criticism, especially stylistics, that the same thing can be said in different ways. Just because the referential overlap of meaning is not stable does not mean it does not exist. Reference, or 'meaning', exist as negotiated values which are contextually dependent and continually developed through an interactive process between participants (and through texts). Although these referential categories shift, communication rests on the assumption of an overlap and there is no reason why literary language should not rest on this assumption of a contextually-dependent, negotiated referential overlap either.

To explore this claim, I will consider the use of image in Amy Lowell's poem 'Yoshiwara Lament'. The poem was published in Lowell's *Pictures of the Floating World* in 1919 and now appears in the Jones (1972) anthology *Imagist Poetry* (89). Although Lowell played a controversial role in the movement, she organised some of the key anthologies, such as the *Some Imagist Poets* annual that ran from 1915-1917. As with all literary groups, the Imagists did not agree and their manifestos and commentaries are inconsistent. However, without the space to consider the wider implications of the movement (such as how the image was believed to become the sensation, instead of a representative symbol), I will consider an identifiably common focus; the image.

Gray (1992) in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines an image as 'a word-picture, a description of some visible scene or object' (144). Although Gray asserts that 'imagery' often refers to figurative language or other forms of sensory experience, in this context I will use image to refer to a 'word-picture'. The image is a useful example of reference because it is a visual concept that can be viewed from different angles or perspectives. As this essay will show, the image can remain the same even if the form changes, producing new conceptualisations of a scene or object. Because of the focus on images instead of the speaking subject, Imagist poems are useful in exploring how the prominence of a speaking subject can be manipulated through formal variations. Firstly, I will consider the poem's formal features and how some of its main effects are achieved stylistically. I will then consider how the speaking subject, or persona, is mediated in Lowell's poem. I will explore both of these stylistic elements through rewriting exercises.

Rewriting is a highly useful technique in understanding how texts mean. Pope (1995) argues that rewriting encourages a dialogic approach to texts and can support a growing appreciation of textual plurality and multivalency. Although his approach focusses on exposing ideological assumptions, his arguments can apply to other critical approaches. The instability of language means that every reading is, by necessity, a recontextualisation and

therefore a unique realisation of a text's potential. Rewriting helps to reduce the lasting influence of the New Critical approach, which maintains too much reverence towards a text. Considering a text as a unique, autonomous artefact ignores the fact that, as Lodge (1966, 46) asserts, words are not virgin; they arrive 'already violated'. Although conceptualised negatively, this quote suggests how meaning exists in a structure of relative, negotiated difference which writers participate in, instead of define. Furthermore, in rewriting a text, each word is viewed as a choice instead of an inevitability, which encourages a critical approach that acknowledges the skill of a writer whilst approaching reading as a constructive process.

First, I will give a brief interpretation of Amy Lowell's poem:

> **Yoshiwara Lament**
> 1   Golden peacocks
>   Under blossoming cherry-trees,
>   But on all the wide sea
> 4   There is no boat.

Although brief, the poem has a set of clear images centred around Yoshiwara, a Japanese red-light district until 1958 when the Japanese government outlawed prostitution. The district burned down in 1913, and the poem was printed alongside others focussed around Japan in Lowell's 1919 collection. However, even without this historical information, I believe most readers would find a sense of sadness in the poem.

This sadness is achieved through several elements, the most important being antithesis. The blossoming cherry-trees not only establish a time of year but also imply the hope and renewal associated with spring. The contrast of this positive, hopeful component with the melancholy description of a wide sea and the absent boat creates the sense of sadness and makes the poem a lament. Without something to lament for, the poem would not be so sad and it is the antithesis of hope and sorrow that create its effect. This can be demonstrated with a rewrite:

> Golden peacocks
> Under tall cherry-trees,
> But on all the wide sea
> There is no boat.

Here, I have exchanged 'blossoming' for 'tall'. This removes the hope of the springtime associations and so makes the absence of the boat on the wide sea less poignant; without contrast, there is not such a sense of loss. This rewrite is a useful demonstration of how changing a word alters the antithesis and so the 'feeling' of a poem, a difficult thing to identify, and one contingent on different readers' responses. Yet the rewrite also demonstrates how central the metre, rhythms and sounds of the poem are to its success.

Lowell's poem centres around the pivotal conjunction 'But' at the beginning of the third line. This contrastive conjunction is where the antithesis hinges, and the opposition is complemented by the metre and rhythms. Despite the Imagist tendency towards *vers libre* or a style that refers to speech rhythms, there is a metrical pattern in the poem. The first and fourth lines are written in dimeter and the second and third in tetrameter, creating a mirror reflection of metre. Exchanging 'blossoming' for 'tall' in the rewrite disrupts this metrical pattern. The mirror effect also appears in the half-rhyme of 'trees' with 'sea', making them a central semi-couplet.

Moreover, in the original poem the first and second lines contain polysyllabic words and the third and fourth lines contain only monosyllabic words. The shift from the lyrical flowing sounds of the first two lines to the abrupt monosyllables of the last two enhances the antithesis of themes (the hope to loss) by creating two differing rhythms. The sense of sadness is emphasised by the finality of the last line. Attridge (1982, 103) claims that masculine endings create a strong sense of closure or completion. The final stress on 'boat' in the poem constructs this sense of finality, as if the boat's absence is an unchanging cause of sadness.

The patterns within the poem, established through metre and lexical rhythms, are part of how the poem constructs its antithesis. The experience of reading the poem, especially out loud, is complemented by the sounds and metrical patterning. This is one of the strongest supporting arguments for monism and why poetry is often described as untranslatable. Lodge (1966, 25) disputes this claim by arguing that prose writers also exploit the sounds of words. But Lodge does not identify the cultural conventions that encourage readers to perceive poetry in this way. It is not only that fewer words encourage closer consideration (compared to a novel for example), but in the genre of poetry the expectation has been developed (by writers and readers interactively) that sounds will be important to a poem's meaning. There is nothing intrinsic in the words of poetry that make their sounds meaningful, only their contextual use. Moreover, although the experience of the poem is altered by changes in sounds and rhythms, the images (or reference) remain the same. In this rewritten version, the cherry-tree is still there but is conceptualised differently, focusing on its height instead of conjuring blossom.

The opposition within the poem also exists structurally; there is a parallelism in the presentation of images. The peacocks and the cherry-trees are orientated by the preposition 'under' and the sea and boat (or its absence) are orientated by the preposition 'on'. All of the noun phrases are concrete, fall at the end of each line and are premodified with adjectives; 'golden', 'blossoming', 'wide' and 'no' respectively. This creates a regular pattern of premodified noun phrases. The negative particle in the final line conforms to this internal pattern grammatically and structurally, but deviates from it by creating negative erasure of the image.

This negative erasure helps to create the sadness of the poem by simultaneously conjuring an image of the boat and its absence. The suggestion of what could be there, but is not creates sadness in a similar way to the antithesis; conjuring the image of the boat creates something to lament for. There is also a focus on the vastness of the sea, constructed by the descriptive adjective 'wide' alongside the determiner 'all'. The combination of these two lexical items emphasises the vastness of the sea and so implies a viewing subject. Although descriptive adjectives do not indicate subjectivity as strongly as evaluative adjectives, the focus on the wideness of the sea creates a wistful tone and implies an emotional perspective. How the combination of negative erasure and the two lexical items 'wide' and 'all' create sadness is usefully demonstrated by a rewrite:

> Golden peacocks
> Under blossoming cherry-trees,
> But on the sea
> There is not a boat.

In this rewrite, the aforementioned metre and rhythm, and the pattern of premodified nouns are disrupted and so the success of the poem is decreased. However, shifting the negative participle to modify the verb instead of the noun has reduced the force of the boat's absence; the image is no longer conjured and erased so vividly when the existential verb is

negated. Similarly, removing the focus of how wide the sea is reduces the sense of sadness because it reduces the prominence of the speaking subject viewing the scene. This concept of persona is a useful demonstration of how changes in style can reconceptualise images, even when the images remain the same.

The poem constructs a viewing subject in a specific place. The place is identified by name, 'Yoshiwara' which now indicates a non-present day setting (it was renamed after prostitution was outlawed), the cherry-trees and the sea create a sense of place and the blossom suggests an approximate temporal location. The definite article preceding 'sea' could suggest a sense of specificity and so persona, but the noun is unusual in that no matter the location, English-speakers tend to refer to 'the' sea instead of 'a' sea, and so the article does not have a function as a deictic element. Although so far I have attempted to retain the poem's syntactic structure in rewriting exercises, here it is useful to deviate from this in discussing the prominence of a subjective viewpoint:

> Golden peacocks are strutting
> Under blossoming cherry-trees,
> But on all this sad sea,
> Is there no boat?

Here, I have added the finite progressive verb phrase 'are strutting'. This changes the syntactical structure of the poem because the opening is no longer simply a noun phrase. However, this alteration also demonstrates how the progressive aspect suggests a temporal perspective. Wales (1989) asserts that the progressive aspect 'normally implies that the action is not yet finished' (377). This creates the impression of an ongoing activity and so suggests an immediacy to the temporal perspective. Similarly, the proximal deictic marker, 'this' (replacing 'the') suggests that the water is nearby, which creates a spatial perspective and emphasises the immediacy of the scene. Likewise, the evaluative adjective, 'sad', chosen to retain the metre, replaces 'wide' and so diminishes the sense of vastness in the sea. Instead, it accentuates the subjective speaking position by showing evaluation and so accentuates the emotional perspective in a different way to the descriptive adjective. This emotional perspective was clearly present in the original poem but was expressed implicitly by the conceptualisation of the image of the sea.

Finally, the interrogative construction of the final line modalises the clause by introducing uncertainty. Epistemic modality indicates a psychological perspective because it shows a degree of certainty or knowledge. Overall, these stylistic techniques accentuate the presence of a speaking subject. Of course, the sadness of the poem and the implied presence of a subject viewing the scene gives the original poem an implicit persona, but these elements in the rewrite increase the prominence of a subjective consciousness.

This demonstration can be stretched further if the poem is rewritten with greater structural freedom:

> I watch
> Golden peacocks strutting
> Under blossoming cherry-trees,
> But on all this sad sea
> (so wide—)
> Is there no boat?

In this rewrite, the speaker is made explicit as a viewing subject, 'I watch'. This fundamentally disrupts the fragmented structure of the poem (as the finite verb of the

previous rewrite did) but is useful in analysing the difference between an explicit and implicit speaking subject. The interjection '(so wide—)' is an unfinished syntactical construction and so is reminiscent of an orality feature. This changes the prominence of the persona by creating a sense of a speaking voice. This affects the interrogative of the last line; if the interjection sounds like a speaking voice, the interrogative is more likely to be interpreted as a possible orality feature and so emphasise the presence of a persona. Notably, by making the speaking subject more explicit, much of the quietness of the poem is lost. Yet it is important that although the experience of the poem is clearly different in this rewrite, partly because the metre, sounds and rhythms have been changed, the images — the peacocks, cherry-trees and a sea with no boat — remain the same.

The example of the image can be used as an analogy for reference in language. When words are used in a specific context different aspects of their meaning are drawn out and the referential overlap is negotiated by speakers. Similarly, an image can be of the same scene or object but can be conceptualised differently. It could be argued that when an image is reconceptualised, it is no longer the same image because it is creating a different word-picture. For example, by describing the cherry-trees as tall in the first rewrite, the blossom is no longer conjured and the image is different. This is a flaw in the use of image as an example of reference. Yet, it can also be agreed that the cherry-trees are still present and the set of objects and the scene they construct in the poem is still, for the most part, the same in each rewrite. The change in form only draws attention to different aspects of an image. Similarly, the plurality of meaning-potential in all words is negotiated through context, but there is still an assumed referential overlap in order for participants to communicate.

As these rewrites have demonstrated, changes in form reconceptualise images. Language shapes how the world is mentally constructed, but does not necessarily constrain it. By understanding meaning as a contextually-dependent, negotiated overlap of reference, the model of dualism can still be usefully applied; an image can be reconceptualised formally but remains the same. Dualism therefore remains a useful assumption in understanding texts; reference may be unstable but this does not undermine its existence. As these analyses have shown, form can reconceptualise meaning, but language is neither a tautological constraint nor a simple map of correlations, but a complex negotiated system of differences. As this essay has shown, a model of dualism that takes this into account remains a valid assumption.

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