IMPRESSIONISM, POST-IMPRESSIONISM AND MODERNISM IN THE NOVEL

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Rebecca Bowler, *Literary Impressionism: Vision and Memory in Dorothy Richardson, Ford Madox Ford, H.D. and May Sinclair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) pp.256. ISBN 978-1350063914

Rebecca Bowler's *Literary Impressionism* appears in a series published by Bloomsbury entitled 'Historicising Modernism', a series already numbering more than twenty volumes. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century it is evident that modernism has become the dominant critical term in discussions of modern art from the first half of the twenteith century (if not the whole century, notwithstanding the blip of postmodernism), subsuming almost all other aesthetics and movements. But it might have been different. It is possible to imagine an alternative history in which a book on 'literary modernism' appears in a multi-volume series entitled 'Historicising Impressionism'. As a label for a broad artistic movement and an aesthetic, impressionism initially enjoyed great success. Emerging from Parisian art salons deep in the nineteenth century, the term 'impressionism' was at certain points regarded as including Symbolists, Synthetism, Fauvism, Cloisonnism and a host of other isms, even Cubism, and soon transferred from painting (Manet and Monet) to music (Debussy), poetry (Mallarmé), drama (Maeterlinck) and cinema (Gance) – across almost all the arts, including the novel (Dorothy Richardson).[1]

In the first decades of the twentieth century however impressionism fell out of critical favour. We might describe a Debussy piano prelude as 'impressionistic', but to label Debussy an impressionist composer seems far too narrow and reductive. The

[1] Mallarmé (and Maeterlinck), if categorisable at all, would probably be categorised as symbolist, but Mallarmé was closely associated with leading impressionist painters and composers and helped to establish and theorize impressionism in articles such as 'The Impressionists and Edouard Manet', *The Art Monthly Review* (London), 30 September 1876.

idea of impressionist poetry got lost somewhere between the symbolists and the imagists. In cinema we might refer to impressionist film if we are talking about a very particular strand of French silent film, but otherwise the term quickly fell by the wayside. By contrast the first thing anyone says at the mention of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* is 'Ah yes German expressionist cinema!' – expressionism rather than impressionism has survived as a recognised cinematic aesthetic. In drama impressionism never quite took off – and have you ever actually managed to catch a Maeterlinck revival? It is only in painting that impressionism has survived, lucrative blockbuster exhibitions of French impressionist painters continuing to circulate around the globe's most prestigious art museums today. Yet it was in painting that impressionism first gave way to the new aesthetic and the transition to what is today called modernism.

The reason for impressionism's fall from critical grace lies in a founding myth of modernism as the moment of *post-impressionism*; specifically, if we follow Virginia Woolf's doubtless ironic allusion to this supposed foundational moment, the 1910 London Grafton Gallery post-impressionist exhibition curated by Roger Fry.[2] It was not Monet, but Cézanne who truly represented post-impressionism and the break with impressionism; and it was followers of Cézanne – Picasso, Braque and the Cubists – who have come to represent the birth of modernism proper. Not the immediate rendering of the subjective impression of an object in a particular moment in a particular place upon the senses of perception, but the mediation of that impression by what Fry and Clive Bell called 'significant form', that form which objectifies and universalises the subjective impression. Objectifying form and design became the privileged means for rendering mere fleeting subjective impressions as universal and timeless, as both modern and classical (and 'primitive').[3] Indeed, if we follow Fry and Bell

[2] 'On or about December 1910, human character changed [...] since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910.' Virginia Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, David Bradshaw (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.38.

[3] 'There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is

and the various Platonic and Kantian turns of twentieth century modernism, form becomes the means of accessing the essential thing or being that lies behind the second-hand realm of representation. Given that modernism's founding moment has been explicitly figured as *post* impressionist, as going beyond a now passé impressionism, it is perhaps inevitable that modernism's rise to critical and institutional dominance has been accompanied at every stage by a downgrading of impressionism. The status of modernism as a critical and historical term may have endured some dramatic ups and downs over the last century and may do so again in the future, but rarely have its challenges come in the guise of impressionism.

Instead impressionism has been disdained as an overly subjective surrender to the passing superficiality of the sensory or as a stylistic mannerism for the rendering of a dreamy mental state – 'impressionistic' has become an adjective denoting something decorative but hazy; perhaps wistful and a little sentimental. In many ways imagism as practised by Ezra Pound and H.D. should have been poetry's impressionism: the presentation of the image as an impression of an object, scene, situation or mood, without recourse to abstraction or intrusive commentary. Yet Pound theorized imagism, for largely polemical reasons, as not just post-impressionist but as the negation of impressionism. Where impressionism was hazy, dreamy and decadent – a fuzzy subjective evocation of the thing – imagism was to be dynamic, direct, mean and lean, a no-nonsense objective representation of the subjective perception of the thing.[4]

this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible – significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "Significant Form"; and "Significant Form" is the one quality common to all works of visual art.' Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', in *Art* (Frederick A. Stokes Publishers, 1914). The text is available online at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16917/16917-h/16917-h.htm.

If Anglo-American modernism was founded upon post-impressionism in painting and imagism in poetry, then both defined themselves in opposition to impressionism. Of course, it has been a long time since critics took the polemics of Pound and co. at face value; that impressionism is a crucial part of the genealogy of modernism rather than something defined by its exclusion has been generally accepted for some time, but Bowler's book attempts to update this argument and to show how much modernism owes to its sometimes fraught dialogue with impressionism and to show this by focusing on the novel rather than painting or poetry.

So what about the novel? Readers may have thought that it was rather forward, even for a journal dedicated to the study of Dorothy Richardson, to nominate Richardson at the outset as the exemplary novelist of literary impressionism. Surely the list above should have named Ford Madox Ford, not Richardson, as the premier impressionist novelist? In fact Ford was the *only* writer who self-identified as impressionist (Richardson certainly didn't) and he also wrote several influential articles outlining his theory of literary impressionism and how it supersedes the old realism. However, towards the end of his career, in his 1938 retrospective survey *The March of Literature*, Ford reasserts his belief in literary impressionism as being the highest form of modern realism – and he nominates Dorothy Richardson and *Pilgrimage* as having been the definitive example of what he had been advocating (Bowler, 20). Richardson was flattered if slightly perplexed by the praise. Nevertheless the interesting fact remains that Ford was the driving

[4] The apologetic attitude towards impressionism in favour of modernism is not confined to academia but is current in the wider culture. For example, a recent *Guardian* review of a 2017 recording by pianist Stephen Osborne of Debussy admonishes: 'Forget any cliches of hazy impressionism, Osborne brings directness and muscle, and the boldest aspects of texture, form and image stand out in ultra high definition as a result. […] But what makes Osborne's interpretations so revelatory is his willingness to state in plain terms what many pianists make blurry. It shows up the astounding modernism of Debussy's piano music.' Kate Molleson, 'Debussy: Images, Estampes, Children's Corner CD Review – High-Definition Impressionism', *Guardian*, 12 October 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/oct/12/debussy-images-estampes-childrens-corner-cd-review-steven-osborne-hyperion.

force behind the idea of literary impressionism and looking back he endorsed Richardson and *Pilgrimage*, so Rebecca Bowler is justified in revisiting the idea of literary impressionism and Richardson's relationship to it.

Bowler's book gives a useful and accessible account of literary impressionism and its historical context, selecting four novelists for detailed discussion: Richardson, Ford, May Sinclair, and H.D. Given that Bowler is a noted critic of both Richardson and Sinclair, she is ideally placed to write this study and it quickly becomes apparent that Richardson is the central figure, much of the book consisting of chapter by chapter close readings of Richardson 'with' one of the other writers – Ford, Sinclair, or H.D. Throughout the book Woolf and Katherine Mansfield (and Marcel Proust) are present as additional reference points, as are Henry James and Joseph Conrad. The readings of the novels and other writings by the selected novelists are consistently enlightening. Apart from *Pilgrimage*, the key novels discussed in some depth include *Parade's End*, *The Good Soldier*, *Mary Olivier*, *The Three Sisters*, *Bid Me to Live* and *Palimpsest* (H.D.'s fiction not her poetry is the focus here). Bowler also attends to some lesser known texts such the two fascinating 'documentary' memoirs, Ford's *Ancient Lights and Certain New Reflections: Being the Memories of a Young Man* (1911) and Sinclair's wartime *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915). These two texts blur the lines between multiple genres in ways which help to throw into relief the complexity of the idea of 'impressions' and their relationship to actual events, memory and writing.

As well as being a useful introduction and overview of the topic and an engaged set of close readings from the novels of Richardson, Ford, Sinclair and H.D., *Literary Impressionism* also contains original research, particularly with regard to Richardson and Sinclair. Bowler has evidently spent many fruitful hours in various American libraries (not just the Beinecke archive) and a great deal of the supporting material here draws on drafts, manuscripts and unpublished or little known correspondence, containing much that will surprise and intrigue even longstanding Richardsonians. There is a particularly fine extended reading of

March Moonlight looking at the drafts in relation to the *Saturday Review* 'middles' (articles) from 1908. There is also an attempt to link literary impressionism to film by way of Richardson's writing on cinema from sources which go beyond the *Close Up* articles (although *Close Up* is of course discussed in relation to Richardson and H.D.). For example, Bowler connects up the basics of Ford's idea of impressionism in the novel to the new aesthetics of cinema by way of the following 1929 letter from Richardson to Josephine K Piercy:

> In so far as my 'method' came to me innocently and took me by surprise, it is my own. Setting out to present, at the beginning of Pointed Roofs, the girl Miriam going upstairs I was, as far as I know, ready to supply descriptive information about her and her family, but found it immediately impossible to step aside for the purpose of chatting to the reader. I realised the restrictions involved in this sacrifice and also what was to be gained thereby in vividness of presentation. It is the pursuit of this clue that gives some of my work the quality of scenes thrown on a screen and caused it to be called first kaleidoscopic and later cinematographical. (29)

Richardson's 'method' seems fairly clear from this, but things soon start to get more complicated. Bowler provides a commentary on Ford's various theoretical statements and summarizes his version of literary impressionism as follows:

> The key tenets of this impressionism were the rendering of experience as multiple and fragmentary, the suppression of authorial commentary, and a concern with the subjective and objective: the objective rendering of subjective experience. [...] The impressionist project is then to try to encapsulate and represent reality, which is perceived in the moment as multiple, fragmentary and bewildering. There is an emphasis here on what life is 'really like', and the importance of capturing that reality with absolute fidelity. Life as it is lived does not have the narrative coherence of a realist novel, and so any attempt to render it as it appears to the subjective perceiver must necessarily be more realist than the realists. (18-19)

Impressionism is therefore not anti-realist but a higher or more accurate realism, a realism which presents the immediacy of perception and subjective consciousness, but does so in an 'objective' way, an objectivity achieved through implicit form (and selection) rather than intrusive authorial or omniscient narration and commentary. This suggests an immediacy of perception in the moment, followed by the processing of and reflection upon that moment in the consciousness of the artist (and in time and memory distinct from the immediacy of the original moment). It also necessitates the development of an artistic style and form which captures *both* the immediacy of the original moment of perception *and* its passing into consciousness, time and memory. This emphasis on objective form is clearly modernist and an acknowledgement that the 'immediacy of perception' is a kind of 'reality effect' created by artistic form rather than an unmediated record or document of actual perception. As Ford puts it in his 1914 essay 'On Impressionism':

> One is an impressionist because one tries to produce an illusion of reality – or rather the business of impressionism is to produce that illusion. (Ford quoted in Bowler, p.18)

So, in fact, Ford is implying that the immediacy of the original moment of perception might be an 'illusion', a fabrication, might never have happened. Literary impressionism is therefore primarily a textual effect, a writer's stylistic and formal ability of producing the 'illusion' of such an immediacy of perception and its passing into consciousness and memory. In addition Ford acknowledges that there is never one moment of perception, one impression; or as Bowler puts it 'one moment of perception is not a single unit, but rather is composed of many perceptions and impressions' (19). These multiple impressions can come in sequence or, as Ford indicates, they can come simultaneously; impressions superimposed upon impressions. This contrast between sequence and superimposition is part of what gave rise to the conflict between Sinclair and Richardson over whether consciousness should be depicted as a sequential continuous 'stream' or as a synthesising 'still point'. Perhaps Monet really did go out into the

garden at Giverny in the light of dawn or dusk and paint his impressions of the water lilies exactly as he perceived them in the moment. But for novelists the rendition into language assumes a temporal gap, a fissure, between perception and the writing of the perception and the translation of the visual and sensory into language. It is not surprising that, for Ford, in literary impressionism it is the writing that produces the 'illusion' of the immediacy of perception: writing takes precedence over any actual immediacy of perception.

Ford's basic account of literary impressionism raises more questions than answers, but interestingly so, questions or problems that continue to vex readers of *Pilgrimage*. It is as if the idea of literary impressionism automatically generates the interrogation and problematisation of perception and the accuracy of its depiction, which is why the question of how immediate perception is 'processed' by the reflective consciousness quickly surfaces and with it the question of time and memory becomes paramount, along with the question of how all this is to be then turned into writing, into narrative. Bowler addresses at some length the paradox that literary impressionism attempts to foreground the immediacy of perception in the present only to produce narratives with complicated temporal structures marked by memory, retrospection and distance. She sees this paradox as producing a split self:

> In the impressionism of the writers discussed in this volume, the old self does the initial work of perceiving and processing the impression; saving it as a memory, and then the later self re-processes the impression, refraining as much as possible from the temptation to alter or edit unnecessarily, but nevertheless translating these primary perceptions, shaping them, ordering them by 'relative prominence' from a distanced perspective. (10)

Far from being a rendering of impressions perceived in the present, literary impressionism is actually more concerned with the workings of memory and critical self-reflection, not so much the 'processing' of the present but the endless 'reprocessing' of the

past. As Bowler implies, this 'reprocessing' on the part of a central character such as Miriam Henderson merges with the reprocessing on the part of the author, Richardson, in the writing of the book, in the aesthetic of non-intrusive distance and in the selection and structuring of the text as a whole. On the one side merging and superimposition and on the other side splits and division.

Bowler discusses the 2001 critical study by Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, in which Matz figures the divisions at the heart of literary impressionism as a series, initially a split in time between immediacy of perception and reflection, and between past and present (the present of narration):

> [T]he immediate impression takes time to decipher, and so it is not effectively immediate; the immediacy comes only after the work of deciphering, only after some mediation occurs. (Matz quoted in Bowler, p.10)

So immediacy is not necessarily an attribute of the original (perception) impression but rather something that occurs *after* the deciphering of the object and the reflection upon it. As Matz suggests, therefore, the acts of deciphering, of mediation, of reflective consciousness can themselves be rendered in their immediacy. And is not Richardson throughout *Pilgrimage* trying to capture Miriam's thinking, her reflective consciousness in its immediacy? Other qualifications might be added: can't the past, memory, also be experienced in the immediacy of the present? This is surely the point of the 'bee garden' memory in *Pilgrimage*, it belongs to the past, to childhood, but (like the involuntary memory triggered by Proust's madeleine) it is always experienced in the immediacy of its present – Miriam's childhood self and her present self co-exist 'superimposed' in the immediacy of the recurring memory. And it might be questioned whether there is such a thing as an 'innocent' act of perception – isn't the perception of an object 'always already' influenced by preconceptions? If Miriam notices the sublime evening light over the Alpine mountains in *Oberland*, is this because (having read German romantic literature and philosophy) she already has a concept of the Alpine light as sublime? The object is already

culturally constructed before she perceives it – in fact that is why she perceives it. The poor Alpine farmer who has always lived in the mountains might not ever notice the light in such a way. Bowler notes that, predictably, Nietzsche was sceptical about the idea of perception as distinct from reflective consciousness, in all likelihood the very idea of perception was, he suspected, 'purely imaginary' (Nietzsche quoted in Bowler, p.93).

For Matz the temporal division wrought by the act of deciphering, by mediation, is further embodied as a split in the subject within the text (the central character or centre of consciousness) and within the subject writing the text (the narrator / author):

> Proust reconfigures the old opposition between sense and intellect as a collaboration between past and present selves, and this self division appears in the work of every literary Impressionist. (Matz quoted in Bowler, p.10)

The self divided is resolved through 'collaboration' or different selves merged and superimposed – something explicitly depicted in H.D.'s *Palimpsest*, the superimposition of multiple selves in time. But is this notion of merging and superimposition, of resolution and collaboration, a little too one sided? Might there be something to be said for retaining a sense of the splits and division? Bowler argues that in Richardson and Sinclair both immediacy and the 'collaboration' of past and present selves are achieved by a kind of disinterested contemplation of memory, of the past, and rendered via an aesthetic of cool distance. But some readers might see this aesthetic of detached objectivity as marked by the stasis of repression, unresolved alienation, the division within the self as an impasse.

The search for a new realism in which perception, consciousness and memory are accurately rendered via impressionist methods led to a proliferation not only of split selves but unreliable narrators. It is the unreliability of narration rather than its accuracy that becomes the key feature of the impressionist novel. With *The Good Soldier* Ford wrote one of the most famous novels of unreliable narration, and in Conrad and James narrative is invariably

destabilised by the unreliability of perception, narration and memory. While this might not be so explicit in Richardson, Sinclair and H.D., the interrogation of the relationship between perception, narration and memory is a crucial aspect of their novels, and the problems raised in the theorisation of literary impressionism provide us with a fresh perspective from which to view this aspect of *Pilgrimage* and other early modernist novels.

Bowler necessarily presents her commentary in relation to the close readings of her chosen texts but, as we have seen, a set of broader perspectives constituting what might be described as a 'problematic' of impressionism gradually emerges from the book as a whole. Rather more crudely than Bowler does in her book, the main features of this problematic can be outlined, with *Pilgrimage* in mind, as a series of moments or stages. There is the Platonic ideal or Kantian thing-in-itself which could be God, spirit, love, will, death and so on but, if we read *Pilgrimage* as a proto- existentialist novel, then for Miriam it is 'being' or existence itself that is the 'thing', the essence which lies behind all representation.[5]

The object is a manifestation or embodiment of being. The objects selected and described in *Pilgrimage* manifest or situate this being and can be appropriately sublime like the light at dawn over the Alps in *Oberland* or a bee garden experienced in childhood, but more often than not are everyday mundane objects and places, such as the things in a room in a rundown lodging house. First there is *perception of the object* (by Miriam); impressions of the object upon the senses. Then there is a *reflection* on this act of perception of the object in consciousness, a kind of processing or what Matz called 'deciphering' of the object in thought, followed by *secondary reflection*, multiple and intellectual, including the interpretation of the impressions (e.g. as a manifestation of being) and as marked by time, as having shifted into memory, and as mediated by memories. Perception, reflection and secondary reflection combine to produce a (critical) *self-reflexivity* of consciousness. Finally there is

[5] On *Pilgrimage* and existentialism and for a different analysis of the relationship between perception, first and secondary reflections, see Adam Guy, 'Gabriel Marcel Reads *Pilgrimage*' in this issue of the journal.

the *objective artistic representation* (by the artist, Richardson) of the play of subjective perceptions and reflections.

At the end of her book Bowler concludes that it is this final stage, the writing of the text, which incorporates, transforms and objectifies all the previous stages; *Pilgrimage* and *A la recherche* are 'not time regained but time reshaped' (232). However, in her analysis Bowler discusses how the stages outlined above as a sequence are open to redefining, reordering and overlaps. As already mentioned, it is possible that perception itself is culturally constructed in advance or, as Nietzsche suggested, 'purely imaginary'. Bowler cites Derrida as the most extreme example of such a critique, presenting an argument that 'the writing that constitutes memory "supplements perception before perception even appears to itself"' (210).

Still, it can be proposed that in *Pilgrimage* the impressions passing through Miriam's senses and consciousness range from the initial impressions 'received' through sensory perception to a series of reflections in Miriam's consciousness which 'process', 'decipher' and interpret the impressions via chains of associative thought and memory, generating a critical self-reflexivity. Impressions stimulated by the immediacy of sensory perception play an important role in *Pilgrimage* but a role which, as the series develops, decreases as the role of memory and critical reflection in Miriam's consciousness increases. In his 1935 *London Mercury* review of *Clear Horizon* 'New Literature: Quintessential Feminism', R. A. Scott-James writes:

> In summing up all the impressions that have gone into the making of Miriam as she is now, in minutely exposing the mature subtleties of apprehension with which she takes in every situation, her record has acquired an intellectual character; Miriam is no longer merely perceiving; she is seen severely reflecting upon perception. It is perhaps natural that at this stage her mind should be filled with memories; and memories, for her, evoke criticism of past thought. (5).

If *Pilgrimage* is an example of the method of literary impressionism, then Bowler sees Scott-James as having given a more precise account of this method and its complexity than Ford did in his praise for Richardson around the same time – although in Bowler's gloss it might be argued that the pronoun 'she' covers a more interesting than usual slippage from Miriam to Richardson:

> What Scott-James has unwittingly pinpointed here is Richardson's literary impressionism. Miriam wanders the world with her eyes wide open, delivers to us her perceptions and delivers to us too her reflection upon these perceptions: she then retrospectively orders these impressions through memory. She aims for, and then achieves, an objective rendering of subjectivity. Scott-James's assumption that this 'intellectual character' is new is perhaps understandable: the later volumes of *Pilgrimage* feature, as Richardson points out in her annotation, a more mature Miriam, one capable of more critical reflection. But reflection upon perception, and analysis of the problems of perception, representation and memory have been present in *Pilgrimage* from the very beginning. It is this continual self-reflection that makes *Pilgrimage* a tour-de-force of modernism, and of literary impressionism (5-6).

For Bowler literary impressionism is therefore not merely an exercise in recording and presenting the immediacy of perception, the important thing is how the impressions of sensory data are (re)processed by memory and reflection. Contrary to some negative views, *Pilgrimage* is not a mass of data recorded by Miriam's perceptual apparatus, it is a novel of continual (critical) self-reflection. This self-reflexivity is not given via a commentary as in Proust and it is not limited to Miriam's own thoughts, it is largely an effect of the *structure* of the novel – the way chapters, episodes and scenes are selected and juxtaposed.

The shift from impressionism to post-impressionism is accompanied by a greater degree of abstraction (Cézanne) and it is abstraction as an indicator of a predominant formalism that marks the point at which modernism overlaps with and emerges from post-impression (Cubism). 'Abstraction' suggests deriving some

formal 'essence' from the perceived object, but in practice means imposing abstract form (as a stylistics) and this has as much to do with the 'autonomous' developments of form (within the work of an artist or art movement) as it has to do with impressions derived from perceiving a given object. Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach* (c.1912) is almost certainly derived from impressions of a Bloomsbury outing to the Dorset seaside and possibly informed by earlier memories of Stephen family holidays in Cornwall. Photographs of such scenes exist in the Woolf archives. Perhaps the painting is based on sketches of a scene Bell was looking at or memories of having seen such a scene or, more likely still, the painting is derived from composite memories. But the painting and its degree of abstraction is obviously influenced by Bell's engagement with post-impressionism and the 1910 London exhibition. It was only during this relatively short period in her long career that Bell experimented with such extreme formalism, a period coinciding with the high point of post-impressionism in London. In other words, *Studland Beach* is as much a product of formalist developments in European painting at this time as it is the impression of an actual scene. Or to put it another way, the painting is determined by the abstract turn in Bell's painting, the development of her own formalist style. Through form and structure Bell has successfully 'abstracted' something enigmatic and haunting from what was probably a banal scene. For readers of Woolf the picture cannot help but evoke *To the Lighthouse*, and for many will suggest interpretations in terms of death, specifically the death of Mrs Ramsay or Julia Stephen. In language-based arts such as the novel there can be no equivalent to the complete abstraction possible in painting, sculpture and music, however in the case of *Studland Beach* and post-impressionism it is a question not of total abstraction, but of abstracting something essential from everyday scenes, from realism, through the filter of abstract form and this is what could be seen as analogous to what Richardson is doing in *Pilgrimage*.

At the 1910 London post-impressionist exhibition uninitiated viewers were perplexed by the level of abstraction in the paintings: the foregrounded formal arrangements of shape and colour obstructed the thing being represented, obstructed the meaning.

There is nothing inherently difficult about *Pilgrimage* – it is a realist text using recognizable language (although the syntax and punctuation is sometimes a little unusual); it is not *Finnegans Wake* or even *Ulysses*. The difficulty might be that readers can easily discern that the text is realistically describing everyday scenes, but the *form* of the novel obstructs conventional reading. *Pilgrimage* operates at a high level of abstraction in the sense that every scene is selected because it contains something 'essential' and the way each scene is written is intended to abstract that essential thing from what is secondary or irrelevant; the purpose of a selected scene is to 'realise' (to use Richardson's own term), what is essential in it in relation to *Pilgrimage* as a whole and to the underlying proto-existentialist vision. The meaning of a narrative 'unit' – a passage, chapter or volume – is mediated by its structural position in relation to other narrative units. And *Pilgrimage* as a whole is structured by episodic scenes, fragmentation, juxtaposition, superimposition and ellipsis; there is a complete absence of authorial commentary, narrative explanation and narrative transition between narrative units. Because of Richardson's overriding 'organic' aesthetic, this level of formalism appears abstracted from the narrative content, 'immanent' rather than imposed upon it. Nevertheless the degree of formalist abstraction probably accounts for the difficulty many find in reading in *Pilgrimage* for the first time.

All of which brings us, inevitably, to Lily Briscoe. In the first part of *To the Lighthouse* Lily sets up her easel on the lawn and makes her first attempt to paint Mrs Ramsay sitting reading on the steps of the holiday house with the young James. Lily's two attempts to paint her picture of Mrs Ramsay, at the beginning and at the end of the novel, provide a portrait of the artist negotiating the path from immediate perception through reflection to the creation of the art work – in this case a painting – which abstracts from and 'objectifies' both the original perception and the reflections upon that perception *and* the (critical) self reflections upon the process of trying to paint the picture. The final art work must also represent the passing of time and accretion of memories that accompanies these reflections. Bowler's commentary brings out

how the intense subjective perception is objectified by an aesthetic of abstracted form:

> In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's Lily Briscoe as fictional artist is a good example of this tendency to the narrativization of reflection upon perception. Lily sees the world with such intensity, as 'the colour burning on the framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral', that she cannot fall back on traditional realist modes of painting and must instead create her own. Her creation of the 'triangular purple shape' as a figure for Mrs Ramsay and her son comes about through an abstracted method of seeing: 'subduing all her impressions as a woman to something much more general; becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had clearly seen once [...] – her picture'. Woolf here seems to be stressing that the artistic eye, the way of seeing that comes closest to reality is a mixture of both the subjective and objective vision. The vision Lily sees is subjective, a creation consisting of light and shade, and abstractions. However the method by which she attains this is an objective one. She casts off her individual impressions, and becomes instead 'an artist': a decorporealized eye. (6)

Bowler's reading presents us with the immediacy and intensity of Lily's perception and her reflections on the scene in front of her and on how she abstracts from that scene a set of formal arrangements of mass, shape, light and colour that will cohere as a painting, a composition, a work of art.[6] Lily will try to explain this to Mr Bankes when he comes over to look at the painting and she reflects further on how to rearrange the formal elements in her picture while staring at the tablecloth that evening during the climactic dinner scene.[7] Bowler's reading shows how it is the act of painting rather than the actuality of the original scene that matters,

[6] 'The question being one of the relations of masses, of lights, of shadows […] It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken': Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.74.

but that something from the original scene will be represented through a kind of *sublimation* into form in the finished picture. Lily must abstract what is essential from the scene and render that essence through abstract form. The figure of Mrs Ramsay and her son become a 'triangular purple shape' and Mr Bankes (who is in love with Mrs Ramsay) finds this disappointing and alarming. Lily explains to him that something essential about Mrs Ramsay will manifest itself in the completed picture, which she says will be a 'tribute' to Mrs Ramsay.[8] But only if the formal arrangement of the abstract elements in the picture coheres will the sublimated realist element in the scene be realised.

In the final section of *To The Lighthouse* Lily rejoins the surviving members of the Ramsay clan, including Mr Ramsay and the children, at their holiday home and she decides to resume her painting of the now long dead Mrs Ramsay sitting on the steps of the house. The impressions drawn from the immediacy of perception – Lily gazing at Mrs Ramsey sitting on the steps – actually occurred ten years earlier. Lily began the painting in the immediacy of Mrs Ramsay sitting in front of her, but even then Lily reflected on the scene and her attempt to paint it. Now, ten years later, Lily resumes her painting. Lily experiences the immediacy of the scene not once but twice – first in the presence of Mrs Ramsay and then in her absence. But the second scene incorporates the memories of and reflections on the first and the time that has passed between the two scenes.

On the last page of *To the Lighthouse* the picture is finally finished and Lily has her 'vision' after she adds a line across the centre of the composition. It is this purely abstract line that balances the 'greens and blues' and 'lines running up and across', makes the picture cohere and completes it so that the sublimated realist

[7] 'In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That's what I shall do. That's what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in the pattern on the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree': *To the Lighthouse*, p.115.

[8] 'By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form': *To the Lighthouse*, p.72.

element in the picture – the impression of Mrs Ramsay – is realised.[9] And it is this foregrounding of a particular early twentieth century stylistics of form that aligns Lily's painting with Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach* and marks the transition from impressionism to post-impressionism and, with that, the transition to modernism. According to the analysis in Bowler's book, the same transition can be discerned in *Pilgrimage*, *Parade's End*, *Mary Olivier, Palimpsest* and of course *To the Lighthouse* itself.

[9] *To the Lighthouse*, p.281.