CHAPTER - 3

HULME AND HIS VIEWS ON MODERN ART

T.E. Hulme's constructed his theory of the visual arts on a philosophical foundation. Untrained in the tools and technique of art, Hulme had an intuitive mind and interest in philosophy which gave him an insight into forms. He was able to establish himself as a critic through his various articles. This earned him respect from few practitioners like Sir Jacob Epstein, Gaudier Brzeska and Wyndham Lewis. As a philosopher who interpreted and critically approached a work, Hulme cast considerable influence on the movement, 'Vorticism.' The periodical Blast carried the ideas of Wyndham Lewis that intended to overthrow the influence of 'complacent Victorian realism.' The basic ideas of Wyndham Lewis were 'furnished' by Hulme. Though Hulme could not be counted as a radical like Lewis and Ezra Pound, primarily because he desisted from political extremism, he was definitely a strong critic who dislocated the continuing effect of Renaissance naturalism in art and sculpture. He based his judgement on the notion of classicism as opposed to humanism. His classicism was not a call to revive Greek art but a call for consciousness of man's fixed position as he thought was reflected in Egyptian and Byzantinian art. The particular style of representing a scene, figure or object in these forms of art impressed upon him the inescapable fixity of human destiny.

Erwin Panofsky defined humanism as 'the conviction of the dignity of man based on both the insistence on human values (rationality and freedom) and the acceptance of human limitations (fallibility and frailty...)'
Humanism has also been defined as a ‘set of practices and themes devoted to the process of idealizing the potential of human agents to produce and respond to certain values not typical of any social market place and not derived from some transcendental doctrine...’

If we consider humanism as a means of self-expression on the terms mentioned, then the development of Hulme’s aesthetic principles based on his notion of classicism may be viewed as a kind of self-expression. He formed practical, concrete canons of art against the background of emerging changes during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The character of modern art, Hulme declared, would have the organisation which was reflected ‘un-intentionally as it were, in machinery.’

We may ask why did machinery impress Hulme. The answer, he said, was the tendency to escape from reproducing ‘actual details of life’ and aim at recreating. Modern art was not only involved in experimenting with material and style, it also sprang from a ‘feeling for form’ and this feeling was a standard source of art at any point of time.

Similar observations by Ezra Pound fortify the authority of Hulme’s thought on modern art:

A few of us believe in the mobility of thought. We believe that human dignity consists very largely in humanity’s ability to invent... Our respect is not for the subject matter, but for the creative power of the artist, for that which he is capable of adding to his subject from himself; or in fact his capabilities to dispense with external subject altogether create from himself or from other elements.
Sir Jacob Epstein recalled that Hulme interpreted the Wilde monument in his characteristic manner. The friendship with Epstein began from this meeting and reflected the growing interest of Hulme in art. He also made friends with Gaudier Brzeska, the sculptor and kept a brass knuckleduster made by the latter, constantly with him.

The visual arts attracted T.E. Hulme and he engaged himself in writing on the contemporary art scene in *The New Age*, which were later published in *Further Speculations*. These articles reveal not only Hulme’s natural bent towards abstraction, they also project a tendency towards constructing a philosophical base which also formed the core of his poetic theory and critical outlook.

The first available account on art criticism is *Mr. Epstein and The Critics* and it was published in *The New Age*, December 25, 1913. The article itself was written in a straight forward forceful style, defending the abstract art of Epstein and condemning his detractors. Hulme wrote:

They cannot understand that the genius and sincerity of an artist lies in extracting afresh, from outside reality, a new means of expression. It seems curious that the people who in poetry abominate clichés and know that Nature, as it were, presses in on the poet to be used as metaphor, cannot understand the same thing when it occurs plastically. They seem unable to understand that an artist who has something to say will continually ‘extract’ from reality new methods of expression, and that these being personally felt will inevitably lack prettiness and will differ from traditional clichés.
As in the case of poetry, Hulme identified that a new expression in art was developing and the artist was formulating it after intense struggle to find the individuality in representation. The new expression in visual art ran parallel to the new classical verse, of which he wrote in 'Romanticism and Classicism.' Hulme's association with Jacob Epstein began in the year 1912. The year is significant since Hulme got involved in simultaneous interests: philosophy, criticism and art, and began to erect a theoretical foundation of classicism for them.

The bibliography provided by A.R. Jones in *The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme* informs us that the four articles on modern art were all published in 1914 in *The New Age*. On January 22, 1914, Hulme also delivered a lecture before the Quest Society, entitled 'Modern Art and its Philosophy.' We also learn that Hulme had almost finished a book *Jacob Epstein and the Aesthetics of Sculpture* but it perished with him in World War I.

A remarkable feature of Hulme's theory of art was the unambiguous declaration that there were distinct signs of an emerging new form. The new art was geometrical and it co-existed with the vital art or organic art. Hulme assessed the prevailing scenario and identified a confusion that referred to 'Modern,' 'Post-impressionist' and 'Cubist' as synonymous terms. The archaism of the new geometric art could be traced back to the period before the Renaissance, possibly to the geometric arts represented in Byzantine mosaics, Egyptian and Indian art. Modern Art was thus a re-emergence of archaic forms, however, the archaism ended so far as the treatment of the object was concerned. The intensity of the new geometric art was the creation of a new sensibility born of the old, no doubt; yet the thrust was towards the development of individual insight and character. Hulme says:
Expression is by no means a natural thing. It is an unnatural, artificial and as it were, external thing which a man has to install himself in before he can manipulate it... A man has to first obtain a foothold in this, so to speak, alien and external world of material expression, at a point near to the one he is making for. He has to utilize some already existing method of expression, and work from that to the one that expresses his own personal conception more accurately and naturally.¹³

Hulme maintained that there was evidence of continuity between the preceding and emerging forms in Picasso. Though there may be analogies between the geometric art of the past and the present, yet the resemblance ended with archaism itself. Archaism could not be the only standard in geometric art. It could not be the central formula, because formulae spelt stagnation and decay. The advancement of geometric art depended on creative use of inspiration from nature. Hulme was convinced that 'the new geometric art will probably not in the least resemble archaic art, nor will the new attitude to the world be very much like the Byzantine, for example... In comparison with the flat and insipid optimism of the belief in progress, the new attitude may be in a certain sense inhuman, pessimistic. Yet its pessimism will not be world rejecting in the sense in which the Byzantine was.'¹⁴

The modern geometric art would aspire for abstraction. Abstraction was the corresponding attitude towards the world and man's position in it. Abstraction evaded formula, it was a continuous process of search and representation through non-vital counters. To understand what Hulme meant by abstraction, it would be convenient to define what he meant by the opposite : vital art. He stated that
Renaissance art we may call a “vital” art in that it depends on pleasure in the reproduction of human and natural forms. Byzantine art is the exact contrary to this. There is nothing vital in it; the emotion you get from it is not a pleasure in the reproduction of natural or human life. Therefore abstraction was the distancing of the human, the natural life-like representation; it was the removal of the natural or personal references to reality. Abstraction was the rendition of a special form of reality, an insight into internal conceptualization of form and beauty. The governing principle, according to Hulme, was the classical view of man’s fixed position in this world. The subordination of man to absolute values automatically broke off from the Renaissance tradition of the spectator’s empathy with the scene represented.

The perspectivized picture was one result of the recognition by Renaissance artists that the spectator needed a frame of reference with which to understand and interpret works of art, and that the world visual experience needed to be ordered along recognizable and decipherable lines. It was a means by which the artist demanded of the viewer that he refer back to the real world, to check the fiction before him against his own experience. Primarily the experience was focused on man himself and his central place in the order of things.

The resemblance between a Byzantine mosaic and geometric art lay in the internalization of expression. Just as a Byzantine mosaic had a hierarchial order, representing Christ at the apex to convey a deep religious feeling, the geometric art emphasized a linear, straight focus on the object. There was no empathic relation between the represented form and the spectator. The delight in natural form was
absent in geometric art because the pessimistic view of man’s moral progress did not allow the establishment of a harmonious relation with the outside world. Brzéska wrote, ‘The knowledge of our civilization embraces the world, we have mastered the elements. We have been influenced by what we liked most, each according to his own individuality, we have crystallized the sphere into the cube, we have made a combination of all the possible shaped masses – concentrating them to express out abstract thought of conscious superiority.’

Hulme had distinguished realistic art from geometric or abstract art and believed that the Renaissance spirit was finally degenerating, judging by the fact that Cézanne and Picasso had already initiated a break-up with Impressionist painting. Hulme was quick to notice that Cézanne’s art was not exactly cubism but certainly could be ‘contrasted with the Impressionists,’ because there was a ‘simplification of planes, an emphasis on three-dimensional form.’ This was followed by Picasso whose constructive creativity brought an added insight into forms and reality. According to Hulme, the justification of art and its continuing development lay in the fact that abstraction of natural form was presented in an original, constructive manner; it had little to do with natural likeness of external forms. Discussing David Bomberg’s exhibition, Hulme stated that ‘the only element of the real scene which interests the artist is the abstract element... the only importance of nature in this connection is that it does suggest forms, which the artist can develop.’ It is worth mentioning that post impressionist art did not emphasize spontaneity as a creative faculty. Hulme subscribed to this view even in his poetic theory because he believed the truth of art was irrelevant outside the object. The object under consideration had to be concrete and solid; its appeal was to the eye by means of ‘mirror’ image,
‘absolutely removed from reality never to be attained.’ Rejecting the projection of nature as it exists, Hulme advocated the construction of a ‘plaster model of a thing.’ It was in this manner that Hulme stood against the tenets of naturalism and its application in fine arts. ‘Naturalism attached the greatest importance to the tangible objects of the visible world,’ and a ‘naturalist painter was one who depicted not historico-mythological or allegorical subjects, but sought to give on canvas as exact an imitation as possible of the real form of nature.’ Whether art or poetry, all creative effort was attached to a critical attitude towards the world. This attitude, in Hulme’s view was either humanistic or classicist. Humanistic philosophy rested upon the belief of man’s immense potentialities, given the right environment. All creative art springing from such an attitude naturally installed man at the centre of things. Representation in art since the Renaissance was along the vital lines. There were no mechanical lines, i.e., the lines were not straight, clean and strong. The lines were drawn in a fluid manner. Referring to Cezanne, Hulme remarked that it was against the ‘fluidity’ of the Impressionists that Cezanne reacted and it was precisely this that made Post-Impressionism ‘something solid and durable like old art.’ As Hulme observed, the visual arts were developing along very different and revolutionary lines than the existing art since the Renaissance. The straightness and simplification of forms clearly depicted that there was no empathic relation between the subject and the artist or the onlooker. It was completely an abstraction. The stiff and supposedly lifeless forms projected a rejection of life rather than the ‘einfühlung’ of illusionistic natural art since the Renaissance. The term ‘einfühlung’ means ‘empathy’ in German. In ‘The Plan for a Book,’ Hulme incorporates a chapter on German aesthetics, where ‘einfühlung’ features as a subject of enquiry.
Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Eingfuhlung* delves into the concept of empathy, to show that the doctrine cannot be applied to many historical periods of art practice. This book was published in German in 1908 and the English translation appeared in 1953.26 Hulme had read the German original and had heard and met Worringer in 1913 at the Berlin Congress of Aesthetics. He found Worringer's view on the psychology of the creative impulse matching his own to a great extent. The religious and absolute overtones behind the doctrine of abstraction and empathy provided an impetus to Hulme's anti-humanist stand and reinforced his aesthetic pursuit along those lines. The concept of empathy in Worringer follow the writings of Theodor Lipps.27 The practical application of empathy to the work of art exists in the positive and negative sense. The positive sense unites the self-volition and the demand made by the object sensuously. There is no conflict between the natural tendency of the writer and the sensation aroused by the contemplated object. When a friction occurs between the two, the negative quality of empathy gains over the natural activated mind of the artist. He surrenders to the demand made by the object. The psychology behind creation does not reach an oneness with the contemplation or sensation. Empathy, as formulated by Theodor Lipps did not assist in the understanding of art that passed from Graeco–Roman art to archaic art. Worringer adopts another theoretical framework in investigating the psychology of creation. Alois Riegl's 'absolute artistic volition' served another helpful tool which was not relative to the sensation aroused by the object.

By 'absolute artistic volition' is to be understood that latent inner demand which exists per se, entirely independent of the object and of the mode of création, and behaves as will to form.28
The 'artistic volition' is the deep seated creative urge in the artist that satisfies a particular philosophical viewpoint. The creative effort of the artist reflects the psychological inclination towards understanding the world and man's place in it. Every style and statement made by art reveals the attitude; one can venture to say, the religious attitude towards nature, phenomena, the cosmos and man.

Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. This view is quite close to the one expressed by Hulme in 'Romanticism and Classicism' in the context of the doctrine of classicism. Hulme had thought that classicism in verse was the sense of limitation of man's endeavour. According to Hulme, classicism would always impose a restraint on the poet, he would keep close to tangible, concrete objects rather than dealing with sensations that fell beyond concrete and actual experience. Classicism was the belief in man's subordinate status to absolute values and it was reflected in verse as well as the visual arts characterized by a proximity to the actual than the infinite. The modern sensibility had adopted the old sensibility in a contemporary stylistic reference.

The withdrawal from life as it is manifested in the external world was reflected in the visual art of the times. Herbert Read was also of the same opinion, for he saw 'an abrupt break with all tradition' corresponding to the artist's response to the world. This contrast in style and attitude with the preceding period signalled
an 'Avant Garde' movement. The 'Avant Garde' could be defined as 'the trends and
tendencies that possess a definite aesthetical, philosophical, in many cases, political
program starting with Italian Futurism, French Cubism, German Expressionism in
literature and painting.' Szabolcsi identifies English Imagism and New Criticism
as literary movements that possessed avant-garde traits, particularly in the concept
of the image which existed outside the poem, and language which had an
independent life of its own. Cubism definitely projected a new dimension of space
and reality. Hulme's observation was:

In Picasso, for example, there is much greater research into nature,
as far as the relation of planes is concerned... he has isolated and
emphasized relations previously not emphasized.

The simplification of lines and a reinterpretation of space through the use of flat
surfaces was visible in Jacob Epstein's and Gaudier Brzeska's work. Even in 'the
heads of the writer T.E. Hulme and the artist Muirhead Bone, two of Epstein's
stauncest champions, both dating from 1916, are pared and simplified to a point at
which shorn of all charm, they have the abrupt starkness of death masks.

The new sensibility corresponding to new stylistic modes and techniques
practised by the Vorticists, particularly by Wyndham Lewis also believed that man
was at odds with the external or natural world and thus art was an abstract of non-
representational forms. Lewis considered the psychology of creation as a
transcendent feeling over 'significance or enjoyment' while observing nature.

Art exists only in its abstraction from 'life,' or what we call life,
the spuriously alive, since our life is a sham or death of the soul.
Vorticism wanted to aim at the static point that resided within the flux of life. The abstraction of Vorticism displayed in painting and sculpture presented 'harshness, rigid metallic forms that prevent things from moving, changing place, blending and equalizing.'

The classification of Lewis' style advancing from 'stylized realism' to 'total abstraction' must have made Hulme realize the danger of removing the creative impulse to de-humanized conceptual idea of nature and man's place in it. Hulme commented:

His sense of form seems to me to be sequent rather than integral, by which I mean that one form probably springs out of the preceding one as he works, instead of being conceived as part of a whole. His imagination being quick and never fumbling, very interesting relations are generated in this way but the whole sometimes lacks cohesion and unity.

Wyndham Lewis's style has also been described as a 'curious cross between French Cubism, Italian Futurism... and a strong vein of Anglo-Saxon celebration.' The extreme form of abstraction that bore no resemblance to life or nature, the carelessness of exact detail and proportion must have conveyed to Hulme that Vorticism was alienating itself from a creative stimuli that inspire the achievement of a concrete statement. But, Hulme's lecture on 'Modern Art' reveals that Vorticism was influenced by his aesthetic ideas. The abstract geometrical shape that conveys durability and permanence was seen as an 'attempt to purify natural objects of their characteristically living qualities in order to make them necessary and immovable.' Referring to Lewis's pictures, Hulme said, 'It is obvious that the
artist's only interest in the human body was in a few abstract mechanical relations perceived in it, the arm as a lever and so on. The interest in living flesh as such, in all that detail that makes it vital, which is pleasing and which we like to see reproduced, is entirely absent. 41

The influence of Hulme on Vorticist aesthetic, Hansen mentions, never found mention in the 'pages of BLAST' though 'the principles advocated by the Vorticists were, after all, closer to those of Hulme than to anyone else's' 42 Lewis admitted that he agreed with Hulme's preference for 'anti-naturalist and 'abstract art' over nineteenth century naturalism, in pictures and statues. He added, 'It must suffice for me to say that Man was not the hero of our universe, we thought he required a great deal of tidying up before he was presentable; both he and I preferred to the fluxuons in stone of an Auguste Rodin (following photographically the lines of nature) the more concentrated abstractions from nature of the Egyptians.' 43

Thus, so far as Lewis's paintings depicted the geometric abstract form along the lines of machinery, there was no break with Hulme's theory of art. In his 'Lecture on Modern Art,' Hulme formulated the future development of abstract art. According to him art would increasingly reflect the organization of machinery. The tendency towards mechanical representation would confirm to the special philosophical attitude to the world. Its inorganic, neat, simple lines would be close to organized machinery, not necessarily imitating the technical qualities or reflecting the technical environment, but creating an objectified perspective of a form.

The confusion in art that Hulme mentions in the lecture on 'Modern Poetry' was also echoed by Herbert Read in Art Now. There were so many forms of art being practised and propagated that it was difficult to exactly draw a line across
them. Hulme did not include Futurism or Analytical Cubism when he spoke of the geometric abstract art gaining a distinct identity at that time. A critic like Miriam Hansen, however, is of the opinion that the Vorticist aesthetic could be linked to Futurism, in so far as the "militant style, anti-liberalist politics and anti-humanist philosophy of art, its metaphysics of energy and violence, its primitivism and cult of technology, its aestheticization of politics and finally, to totalitarian bias" was concerned.

Hulme's thesis was clear:

I admit that the artist cannot work without contact with, and continual research into nature, but one must make a distinction between this and the conclusion drawn from it that the work of art itself must be an interpretation of nature. The artist obviously cannot spin things out of his head, he cannot work from imagination in that sense. The whole thing springs from misconception of the nature of artistic imagination. ...Both realism and abstraction, then, can only be engendered out of nature, but while the first's only idea of living seems to be that of hanging on to its progenitor, the second cuts its umbilical cord.45

Thus the apparent distortion of space and reality was in actual a more intensive research into nature or reality itself.

Geoffrey Wagner expresses the same sentiment. He thinks that it is heartening to observe 'Hulme engage in this controversy so much ahead of his time.'46 Hulme's idea was not to reinterpret nature but to objectify the contradiction existing in nature by utilizing the very same opposing forces.
Hulme had considered Futurism as the 'last efflorescence of impressionism'. Indeed, Futurism did have a brief relation with Vorticism and Hulme, but it ended due to its excessive emphasis on mechanistic violence and distorted pictures of speed. Interestingly, we learn that the author of the Futurist Manifesto, Fillippo Tommaso Marinetti delivered a lecture to a gathering of Hulme's Poet's Club on January 17, 1913. Sir Jacob Epstein did not think much of Marinetti and his ways. Marinetti would use tremendous energy while reciting his poems, 'pouring with perspiration.' He would then 'proceed to initiate the chatter of machine guns, the booming of cannons, and the whirr of aeroplane engines. On this occasion, one of our 'rebels' beat a big drum for him at appropriate moments.... Personally I had no sympathy with his nonsense and show.'

The uproar and excitement of Futurist meeting must have also affected Hulme in a similar way for he had a reputation of being intolerant of pretensions. As a critic, Hulme aimed at establishing a strong theoretical base for his views on art, poetry and philosophy.

The new poetry, Hulme was convinced would resemble sculpture. The reference to sculpture was made in the light of hard and solid visual representation. His own poetry it would seem could be linked with impressionism since impressionism directly recorded the outside world, pictorially. However the rules of poetry laid down by Hulme insist upon a concrete stable impact. The avoidance of regular metre, the emphasis on fixation of impression, verbal compression through the image can all be cited as devices aimed at abstraction in poetry. The visible world was there no doubt, as a scene from Turner's or Constable's landscape, but the effect was towards the fulfillment of an altogether different purpose. Abstraction
as a kind of spiritual satisfaction sought in the static permanence of the 'moon.' The coalition of two or more distinctive images to create or suggest an image which is independent of the two, have similarities with Cubist painting, where the object is not spread out in space, but the multi-dimensional perspective heaped together generate another intellectual but elusive reality.

The stillness of sculpture is suggested in 'Above the Dock,' the form of the 'moon' and the 'balloon' maintaining a stable relationship and also imparting a third dimension in its totality. The objective presentation has a closed, compressed look, a similar concentrated effect is brought about by the use of 'flash of gold heels' simultaneously followed by 'the hard pavement' in 'The Embankment.' The hardness of these poems however, encounters what Natan Zach has called 'Religion of Beauty.' This encounter 'will always provide characteristic Imagist work with the uneasy 'soft' streak which no desired or affected hardness ever manages to eliminate entirely.'

The encounter with the perception of beauty does not reduce the suggestion that Hulme's conception of the image can be connected to early Cubist painting. The overlapping of images from individually held positions and their gradual emergence into a general effect does have something in common with the fragments of impression that seem isolated but assembled in Cubist painting. The statement on beauty remains dependent upon the attitude and understanding of the viewer.

Acknowledging the similarities between Cubism and 'The Wasteland,' David Tomlinson has detected traces of analytical and synthetic Cubism in it. He admits that the view has not yet been firmly established judging by the fact that even
after fifty years of 'The Wasteland,' there has been only one occasion of such a reference in its anniversary.

For us, it suffices to say that the parallels keep coming to mind, as one reads the poems in the backdrop of Hulme's theory of art.

The understanding of art can be built upon on a fundamental premise: primarily a philosophical attitude towards life and existence. There are definite indications in Hulme's concept of art that he wished to combine an attitude towards life, a personal outlook and external available evidence. His aestheticism arose from this, framing a new form of critical conceptualization. The movement from the inward to the outward and again a return to the inward intellectual sector created a value, perhaps not usually thought or conceived of. The abstractionism located isolated significance in the objects of art, thereby endowing meaning to both the object and the artist's creative ability. The validity of working from what is known to what is not, i.e. from the concretely evident to abstract idea may be considered as T.E. Hulme's journey to seek and find meaning in modern art.
Notes:


6. In the foreword to the *Speculations*, Epstein remarked ‘I was at work on the Wilde monument. Hulme immediately put his own construction on my work – turned it in to some theory of projectiles. My sculpture only served to start the train of his thought. Abstract art have a extraordinary attraction for him: his own brain worked in that way.’

   Hulme was energetic and full of vitality, who never cared for personal fame. He also wrote, protecting Epstein from unkind criticism in *The New Age*, XIV (8): 1913.


   Julien Spalding remarks that the ‘famous Door knocker, began life as a purely abstract pendent, acquired innuendoes of sexual intercourse and child birth that may well have delighted T.E. Hulme for whom it was made, but not explicit enough to have inspired a really convincing sculptural idea.’


11. This information is provided by the editor, H. Read, in *Speculations*, 75.


15. Hulme, ‘Humanism,’ *Speculations*, 53.


19. Hulme, ‘Modern Art IV : Mr. David Bomberg’s Show,’ *Further Speculations*, 141-142.


    Hulme refers to the meeting with Wilhelm Worringen in the Berlin Congress of Aesthetics in 1913 in ‘Modern Art II. A Preface Note and Neo-Realism,’ *Further Speculations*, 120; and ‘Modern Art and its Philosophy,’ *Speculations*, 82.

27. Worringen, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy*, “This theory has been clearly and comprehensively formulated in the writings of Theodor Lipps. For this reason his aesthetic system will serve, as *pars pro toto*, as the foil to the following treatise,” London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 4, 1953.


32. Hulme, *Further Speculations*, 128.


40. Hulme, *Speculations*, 86.

41. Hulme, *Speculations*, 106.


The 'controversy' centred around the question whether nature was a valid source of inspiration for abstract art or not, when the advocates of the art had rejected the realism of the external world.

47. Hulme, *Speculations*, 94.


