SŁAWOMIR WĄCIOR

WORD, COLOUR AND SOUND:
JOHN GOULD FLETCHER'S HYBRID
"COLOUR SYMPHONIES"

A b s t r a c t. The paper undertakes as its subject the problem of complexity in the composition of a cycle of poems called "Colour Symphonies" written by an American modernist poet John Gould Fletcher in the first decades of the twentieth century. The uniqueness of composition of the entire cycle as well as its separate "colour" parts consists in combining visual representations with diverse sonic effects in a joint effort of creating in this way a singular poetic verbal equivalent. Such hybrid-like compound becomes in turn a carrier of emotional states which the poet attempts to render in successive parts of the cycle. Fletcher's sequence of colour symphonies is a supreme example of modernist hybridity of composition so characteristic for its numerous poetic groups like for example Imagism.

Key words: Modernist poetry; Imagism; John Gould Fletcher; "Colour Symphonies."

The centennial anniversary of publication of the final anthology of the Imagist poetry *Some Imagist Poets* (1917) is an appropriate moment for a re-reading of some of their most characteristic texts and re-considering the tenets of their poetic doctrine. Seen from today's perspective Imagism proved to have been quite innovative and its artistic techniques remain permanently rooted in the poetic repertoire of numerous modern poets. The Imagist's special interest and emphasis placed upon visual perception and the image in particular foreshadows tendencies in our contemporary culture which relies primarily upon pictorial representations. Yet, the most interesting feature of Imagism is its, quite characteristic for Modernism in general, inter-art proclivity, a tendency for amalgamating artistic techniques of different arts into

Prof. SŁAWOMIR WĄCIOR — Department of English Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; address for correspondence: Al. Racławickie 14, 20–950 Lublin; e-mail: wacior@kul.lublin.pl

one form of expression. Most typical and very widely exploited were the techniques taken over from the visual arts like painting and sculpture or the newly invented film and slightly older photography. Such interactions were numerous and they were well documented in the critical literature of the poetic movement.[1] However, relatively neglected remain the cross-fertilizing links between the Imagist poetry and music. Admittedly, the Imagists saw a great creative potential in emulating musical techniques in their poems. The high priest of Imagism, Ezra Pound claimed that "the art of poetry is [not] any simpler than the art of music, or that you can please the expert before you have spent at least as much effort on the art of verse as the average piano teacher spends on the art of music" (Pound 5). Likewise, he believed that a poet should "behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of [his] art which has exact parallels in music. The same laws govern and [he is] bound by no others" (Pound 6). To be exact, many Imagist poets experimented with various poetic modes and methods with a plain intention of *musicalising* their texts both sonically as well as rhythmically. It is true, however, that most of their attention was applied to a new treatment of the basic musical element, i.e. rhythm. As Modernists were interested in experimentation and "making it new," they considered rhythm "as a new prosody based on a present day world" (Perkins 312). Moreover, most avant-garde poets claimed that "rhythm has an expressive function, that it articulates emotions. They believed that emotional states are particular and unique, and that, accordingly, for every emotional state there is the one particular rhythm that expresses it" (Perkins 311). It is no wonder therefore that the Imagists, who based their poems on the concept of the so-called *visual chord,* supplemented their theory with a sonic category of the *rhythmic chord* and harnessed the two for a poetic rendering of an emotional equivalent of the scene or state represented by the poem. Frank Stewart Flint explains this theoretical point in the following way:

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[1] For a detailed discussion of cross-fertilising relations between literature and other arts see in particular: Murray Roston, *Modernist Patterns in Literature and the Visual Arts*, New York 2000; Christopher Butler, *Early Modernism: Literature Music and Painting in Europe, 1900–1916*, Oxford 1994; Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent, Modernism in Music, Literature and Other Arts*, Chicago 2000; J.A. Isaak, *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Texts*, Ann Arbor 1986; Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Princeton 1970; Wendy Steiner, *The Colours of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relationship Between Modern Literature and Painting*, New Haven 1978.

The modern verse is composed of a constant of any number of syllables, plus an element numerically variable, which gives it an individuality closely adapted to the sense. The rhythmic constant has no fixed place in the verse; it may begin it, support it in the centre, or terminate it. (Flint 111)

Important as the rhythm was, the sonic quality of the poem became one of the central preoccupations of experimental poets of the Modernist period. John Gould Fletcher, who considered literature as "a less pure art" because of its hybrid-like multi-art structure, maintained that "not only is a word a definite symbol of some fact, but also it is a thing capable of being spoken or sounded. The art of literature, then, in so far as it deals with definite statements, is akin to painting or photography: in so far as it deals with sounded words, it is akin to music" (Fletcher 3). Admittedly, Fletcher's preface to his collection of poems called *Goblins and Pagodas* which was published in 1916, is a supreme elucidation of the subtle inter-relationship between the poetic word, its auditory quality and the pictorial image it creates in order to finally generate specific emotions. In it, he expounds his theory of literary composition stating authoritatively that style in prose and poetry should essentially bring out this "musical quality of literature" and generate "the magic that exists in the sound-quality of words" (Fletcher 3). Later, he goes on with a clarification of his peculiar theory of poetic composition which sees the appreciation of poetry as "a succession of curves … wavy and spiral" (Fletcher 3). For Fletcher, the structure of the stanza "tends to the spherical" (Fletcher 3). Eventually, he justifies the hybrid-like pattern of a poem and its complexity "by making one sphere contain a number of concentric, or overlapping spheres" (Fletcher 3). Part VI and VII of Fletcher's "Introduction" to *Goblins and Pagodas* are the most interesting and informative sections of his theoretical exposition. In the former part, he explains that his purpose in writing the "Symphonies" was to create a poetic Künstlerroman in which he would be able to represent in verse a growth of an artist in his intellectual and emotional capacities. Interestingly, he attempted to "stage each phase in the terms of a certain colour, or combination of colours, which is emotionally akin to that phase. This colour, and the imaginative phantasmagoria of landscape which it evokes, thereby creates, in a definite and tangible form, the dominant mood of each poem (Fletcher 6). Further on, Fletcher notices that the interaction of form, colour and sound in literature has not so far been sufficiently analyzed and exploited by different writers. While painters have their well justified theory of hot and cold col-

ours and their subtle combinations used for representing specific emotions, many musicians have noticed a similar specific relation between colour and sound "when certain notes, or combinations of them, are sounded, certain colours are also suggested to the eye" (Fletcher 6). Accordingly, literature, being "a less pure art and a combination of sound, image and word, should amalgamate the qualities of other arts in producing a total and unified statement. Fletcher's "Colour Symphonies" are in his words "dramas of the soul" in which he has "used colour for verity, for ornament, for drama, for its inherent beauty, and for intensifying the form of the emotion that each of these poems is intended to evoke" (Fletcher 6). The idea of writing, what he called 'colour symphonies', i.e. hybrids of colour, sound and words must have been very precious for Fletcher as he wrote eleven cycles of such verse: blue, black and gold, green, white, white and blue, orange, red, violet, and grey. Hilda Doolitle and Richard Aldington who were the editors of the second Imagist anthology entitled *Some Imagist Poets* (1915) selected Fletcher's "Blue Symphony" as an example of Imagist's experiments with the use of sensory perception in composition as well as an instance of a fine manifestation of Modernist's inter-art proclivity. It was a manifestation of the synergy between senses and arts, a union so important that the poets to come would take up this issue in their texts and the critics would investigate the intricacies of their inter-relationships in their monographs in decades to come.

Fletcher introduces his "Colour Symphonies" with an explanation of the emotions he intended to convey by means of his sequence of eleven poems. He sets the following context for the cycle:

> Let us take an artist, a young man at the outset of his career. His years of searching, of fumbling, of other men's influence, are coming to an end. Sure of himself, he yet sees that he will spend all his life pursuing a vision of beauty which will elude him at the very last. This is the first symphony, which I have called the "Blue," because blue suggests to me depth, mystery, and distance. (Fletcher 6)

In the limited space of this essay we shall be able to investigate only two symphonies of Fletcher's sequence. For the sake of symmetry we shall concentrate upon "The Blue Symphony which opens the cycle and "The Grey Symphony" which closes it.

"The Blue Symphony"[2] is, as Fletcher admitted himself in an essay published several years later, a pictorial representation of an overwhelming feeling of "my modern loneliness, exile, despair." (Christy 158) The poem's title and the musical accolade, in which the poem begins and closes with the word "darkness," suggests that the symphony is in a minor key. The melancholy mood of the following part of the poem is mostly conveyed through a subtle interplay of adjectives, all suggestively connoting the feeling of sadness:

> *Palely* the dawn
> Leaves me facing *timidly*
> Old gardens sunken:
> And in the gardens is water.
>
> *Somber* wrecks—*autumnal* leaves;
> *Shadowy* roofs
> In the *blue* mist,
> And a willow-branch that is *broken*.
>
> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 4–11, my stress)

The emotionally charged images of mist-covered gardens full of autumnal leaves are enhanced with a musical unison of vowels and consonants of equal force of allusion. The echoing repetition of the diphthongs [ou] in various combinations with long [u] and [i] bring to "mind's ear" the sounds of moaning, of groaning of someone who is feeling blue. Likewise, the accumulation of *vertical* images—old pagodas, green trees, puffs of smok—may imply the speaker's state of rapture and near-mystical trance he experiences at that moment. The ecstatic nature of the sensation is strengthened by other vocalic patterns like anaphoric repetition of the consonant [b] in three successive monosyllabic words followed by the plosive consonants [p], [t], [k] in consecutive words:

> O old pagodas of my soul, how you glittered across green trees!
> Blue and cool:
> Blue, tremulously,
> Blow faint puffs of smoke
> Across sombre pools.
>
> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 12–16)

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[2] This poem has been discussed in Sławomir Wącior, *Modernist Mutations – The Morphology of the Imagist Poem. Text – Context – Intertext*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2003, pp. 111–115.

The episode concludes with an almost Joycean epiphany dimly reminiscent of similar pictures of enlightening quality to be found in *Ulysses* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. More interestingly, its elusive meaning has been amplified with a synaesthetic amalgam of touch, sight, and smell:

> The damp green smell of rotted wood;
> And a heron that cries from out the water.

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 17-18)

Part II, which is an extended description of a lonely walk through the meadows, reveals to us the source of the speaker's "blue elation": "For I have dreamt of someone last night/Who is waiting for me." He is desperately in search of her presence. Yet, the more we read the more we realise the painful truth about his emotional state. The futile questions shouted in the air are returned with a deadening silence:

> Flower and blossom, tell me do you know of her?
> Have the rocks hidden her voice?
> They are very blue and still.

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 23–25)

Impatient and resolved to continue his peregrination he envies the clouds which are able to cross all boundaries of "steep slopes," "black valleys," "jagged unwrinkled mountains" and transcend "ranges of death":

> O blown clouds, could I only race up like you,
> Oh, the last slopes that are sun-drenched and steep!
> Look, the sky!
> Across black valleys
> Rise blue-white aloft
> Jagged, unwrinkled mountains, ranges of death.

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 33–38)

"Solitude" and "Silence—the two stranded words which conclude this episod—are the most apt comment on the emotional state presented by means of these images: love which has died and can only be remembered in dreams.

And it is in Part III that we move to a dream where "sour sprites" "chuckle," "whisper" and "spread cold ripples … enticingly," but this is not

a magic forest from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where chaos leads eventually to order. This is a place of mortality, where "dry reeds" rattle "a faint shiver in the grass." This well-suited image of barrenness and cold oblivion is most appropriately rendered by the hushed whisper of the wind and ghosts in which we hear how:

> In the palace of the blue stone she lies forever
> Bound hand and foot.

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 55–56)

Death and the agonising pain connected with it find yet another visual representation in an absorbing image of dark trees which ripple in the lake like wet paint smeared down a canvass, possibly calling forth in this way and image of mourning tears:

> The vast dark trees
> Flow like blue veins
> Of tears
> Into water.

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 48–51)

In its cryptic visionary expressiveness Part IV of "The Blue Symphony" resembles Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous "Kubla Khan". Both poems, however different in meaning, share similar imager—temples, palaces, rivers, and nature—and were composed as dream-like visual representations of specific emotional states. Coleridge aimed at capturing the intricacy of the process of poetic creation; Fletcher on the other hand ruminates about the cyclicity of our existence, mortality and the solitude of man. In his poem we witness a constant ritual, a never-ending procession of "foot passengers in scarlet" who cross the border of oblivion and:

> Pass over the glittering tide.
> Under the bridge
> The old river flows
> Low and monotonous
> Day after day.
> I have heard and have seen
> All the news that has been:
> Autumn's gold and Spring's green!

> ("The Blue Symphony," ll. 63–70)

Strong awareness of time with its cyclicity of seasons is underlined by the use of the present perfect tense and the emblematic use of contrasting seasons of autumn and spring. From the above it should hardly be surprising that Fletcher concludes this part with a truly Imagist image of "Lotus pools; /Petals in the water./Such are my dreams." The image of petals of lotus, the sacred plant in most Oriental religions, strewn on the water, may signify decay and fading both bearing close associations with death.

The final episode brings to our eyes a fine image of sunset where, paradoxically, the sun is stable but the tree is moving, like the speaker who realizes that he must depart:

> And now the lowest pine-branch
> Is drawn across the disk of the sun.
> Old friends who will forget me soon
> I must go on,
> Towards those blue death-mountains
> I have forgotten so long.

<div align="center">("The Blue Symphony," ll. 81-86)</div>

In its cyclic movement, time is also merciless. Now it is lifeless winter time which in conjunction with pictures of darkness and departure ominously evoke the presentiment of approaching death:

> The ice is glazing over.
> Torn lanterns flutter,
> On the leaves is snow.

<div align="center">("The Blue Symphony," ll. 91–93)</div>

Especially suggestive is here the image of torn lanterns fluttering in an ice cold wind. Although most visual, the images are enhanced with an auditory accent when we hear a sound similar to that which opens Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

> In the frosty evening
> Tolls the old bell for me
> Once, in sleepy temple
> Perhaps my soul will hear.

<div align="center">("The Blue Symphony," ll. 94–97)</div>

In both these poems the assonance of diphthongs, so reminiscent of the sounds of funeral bells during the ritual of burial, is used to suggest the

feeling of the imminence of death, and of man's ultimate mortality. The impending cyclicity of this process is emphasized by concluding the whole poem with the same image and words as those which begin the poem: "before the stars peep/I shall creep out into darkness" the speaker realizes as the curtain/shroud covers the stage/the body.

The successive colour symphonies which follow the "Blue Symphony" narrate the other stages of a spatial and temporal progression of the poet through his life as an artist with equally absorbing visual and sonic representations of emotional states he goes through. In the "Symphony in Black and Gold" he is all alone "in a great city surrounded by noise and clamour" which represent nothing but empty illusions (Fletcher 7). In the "Green Symphony" he escapes the deadening city to the country with its greenery of springtime. Yet, he is haunted there by visions of perfection in the form of half-Oriental, half-Yeatsian golden city of art. The motifs of life and rebirth and immortality run through this part to strengthen the mesmerising vision. The "White Symphony," which Fletcher calls the central poem of the sequence, is devoted to "the artist's struggle to attain unutterable and superhuman perfection" (Fletcher 7). Such a never-ending, unfulfilled chase is followed by a "Symphony in White and Blue" dominated by representations of dream-like sensual existence to which the poet succumbs. The state of serenity and gay abandon is interrupted by war which becomes an emotional and artistic upheaval for the poet in the "Orange Symphony". During the "years of struggle and neglect" represented in the "Red Symphony," the illusory golden city becomes a red "phantom mocking his impotent rage" and artistic endeavours (Fletcher 7). In the penultimate part of the sequence, the "Violet Symphony," the poet is old and resigns himself to a life of "regret and remembrance" where past experiences and dreams take all his time (Fletcher 7)

In its finale, Fletcher's collection of colour symphonies culminates with the "Grey Symphony". In the "Introduction" to *Goblins and Pagodas* the poet explains how his emotional peregrination meanders in colour and sound to the point when "all things fade out into absolute grey, and it is now midwinter. Looking forth on the world again he still sees war, like a monstrous red flower, dominating mankind. He hears the souls of the dead declaring that they, too, have died for an adventure, even as he is about to die." (Fletcher 7) Again, it is Nature in all its manifestations that represents visually the emotional states of the speaker.

Part I shows a fragment of an arborous landscape with "a long row of larches" covered with "grey-blue melting ice-slabs". The trees which usually represent nature's grandeur and vitality convey negative connotations as they "seem driving greyish vapour /Over the snow." The whiteness of the snow is smeared with the grey patches of shade and its morbid tincture. The clouds, like perennial messengers of storm, in ominous colours shape-shift: "in pearl and violet arches/They break and shape again."

Part II introduces two leitmotifs which run through the entire cycle with added force: the motif of cyclicity and of illusion. The speaker sees how in the falling darkness:

> The greyish-violet clouds
> Roll wearily back from northward
> To the place whence first they came.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 26–28)</div>

Emotions and memories come back to the speakers and they go full circle in its never-ending cycle of natural revival and destruction. He has experienced the ups and downs of this tug-of-war affected by the "wind [which] has driven [him] too many winters." In order to intensify the semantic load of this motif, Fletcher engages here the sense of hearing with the sounds the speaker hears in his vicinity. It is the music of the trees woken up by the wind and they "sing/The song of the snow buzzing and screaming/On its one string." It is a dreary and dull tune, almost a funereal dirge of illusory chase which terminates in frustrated hopes. He realizes that his:

> …songs are snowflakes whirling about my breast.
> I will wrap my frozen and bitter songs about me,
> In one grey drift, and rest.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 42–44)</div>

The accolade of sensory perceptions which Fletcher gathers here is truly impressive as the frozen (touch), bitter (taste) song (hearing), becomes a grey (sight) drift. It is no wonder, therefore, that his hopes and expectations for the future come to nothing and he feels that:

> …within my heart
> Crocuses, purple and gold,
> Drop cold and dead and colourless
> Beneath the snow.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 35–38)</div>

Colours fade away as coldness freezes the flowers. Characteristically, Fletcher like a true Imagist, uses in Part II of the sequence a contextualizing image which renders the dominant emotions mentioned above. Here, it is the image of "One or two orange lamps [which] burnt low,/Against deep purple hills... Vain memories."

Part III continues the wintry scenery as it opens with a picture of fluttering, swirling soft snow which the speaker tries to catch sadly in vain and realizes that "when I try to seize it/The wind tears it away". What image could be a better representation of the motifs of futility and illusory nature of human endeavours? In the climactic stage of Part III the heart-broken speaker intrusively comments in a state of enlightening self-awareness:

> It is all I have, the snow,
> And I know
> That when I chase it, it will fly from me;
> Beyond the lifeless green,
> Beyond the low blue hills,
> Beyond the pale straw-coloured glare,
>   Down in the west it goes;
>   Straight southward where the purple-orange flare
>   Of sunset flows,
>   And into the blackened heart of my last rose
>   Pours its despair.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 64–75)</div>

The colour palette used here to render the emotional disintegration of the speaker as he passes from cold, death like colours of "lifeless green" and "low blue" through warmer, but equally spectral "pale-straw" and "purple-orange" tints all the way down to his "blackened" despair. Also sonically we move from the sound of the snow which "*hums*/Through the *woof*/Of the lower branches" until "the earth *hushes*/Its movements". The culminating image in this section resembles the Suprematist's experimental painting of Kazimir Malevitch entitled "White on White". Fletcher's picture, however, becomes rather "Grey on Grey" as the whiteness of the snow in his part of the poem turns into "grey in the grey twilight".

Part IV concludes the sequence with ghastly images of spectral blackness of the speaker's memories of the past which become "black scarves all dusted over with silver" and "black screens on which I made those pictures /That fade out next day." A strong awareness of impermanence and futility of man's actions permeate his thoughts as he realizes that of all his days:

> I only know
> They slipped and fell,
> Like too-brief sunsets,
> Into the hill-ravines that held the snow.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 92–95)</div>

Again, the intense emotional load has been expressed by Fletcher by means of a unifying image which, this time, turns into a scene in which "three lofty pines/at the corner of my heart/waited, apart." The trees stand apart like mute, patient witnesses of the passage of time and aware of the mystery:

> Of the grey sky,
> The jagged clouds that fly,
> Endlessly.

<div align="center">("The Grey Symphony," ll. 101–103)</div>

With this image of "jagged clouds that fly endlessly" we go back in full circle to the opening stanza of the "White Symphony" which begins the whole sequence. As "the darkness rolls upward. / The thick darkness carries with it/Rain and rave; of cloud." The cycle starts again, as if from scratch, enclosed in a loop of a Mobius strip of repetitive yet futile in its progression actions.

John Gould Fletcher's reputation as a major poet and innovative theoretician has been widely acknowledged at the moment of the publication of *Goblins and Pagodas.* His method was admired and his collection of colour symphonies was characteristically described as "spreading life before one in a rare pattern of words, certainly marked by a new genius." (Carpenter & Leighton 5) Fletcher's volume of *Collected Poems* published in 1938 won him a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry the following year and literary critics far and wide applauded his verse calling him "one of the three or four greatest living American poets." (Carpenter & Leighton 7) Fletcher, like a true Imagist by nature, understood that the new poetic technique of composition refers to the *manner* of presentation, not to the subject matter. Therefore, his greatest contribution to the development of modern poetry lies in his hybridising technique of organising poetic texts in which the sensory perceptions of sight and hearing are spliced together to form a verbal sign—an equivalent of emotions to be represented in the text.

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SŁOWO, KOLOR I DŹWIĘK —
JOHNA GOULDA FLETCHERA HYBRYDOWE „SYMFONIE KOLORÓW"

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę złożoności kompozycyjnej poetyckiego cyklu wierszy pt. „Colour Symphonies," napisanego przez modernistycznego poetę amerykańskiego Johna Goulda Fletchera. Unikalność budowy całego cyklu, jak również jej poszczególnych „kolorowych" części polega na sprzęgnięciu obrazowania wizualnego z rozlicznymi efektami dźwiękowymi i stworzenia w ten sposób ich poetyckiego ekwiwalentu słownego. Tak utworzony konstrukt hybrydowy staje się w konsekwencji nośnikiem stanu emocjonalnego, który poeta odwzorowuje w poszczególnych sekwencjach cyklu. Cykl ten wpisuje się w programową hybrydowość strukturalną, postulowaną przez poetykę wiersza modernistycznego, a w szczególności jej odmiany zwanej imagizmem.

Streścił Sławomir Wącior

Słowa kluczowe: poezja modernistyczna; imagizm; John Gould Fletcher; „Colour Symphonies".