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Review of a Critical Article

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Interdisciplinary Shell Game: A Critical Review

Steve Nathaniel’s article, “Engineering the Ideal: Applied Modern Poetics as Applied Science” seeks to examine poetic embodiment of well known applied scientific processes of the early twentieth century (302). His examination argues that studying the poetic application of the theoretical scientific ideal of optimisation and systematisation and the ideal itself reveals methodology with which interdisciplinary literary critics can describe the tools employed by poets that fill in the gaps which language cannot (Nathaniel 315).

Nathaniel contextualizes the aforementioned argument first by establishing a framework of applied scientific refinement processes with the professional opinions of engineer and theorist Fredrick W. Taylor (302). The science-based definition of optimisation and systemisation generated by Taylor provides Nathaniel a framework in which he can compare and contrast the qualities of Imagism and Objectivism that exemplify scientific approaches to systematisation and optimisation. With Taylor’s theoretical applied science framework, Nathaniel presents close readings of works by Hilda Doolittle and Charles Reznikoff as examples of Imagist and Objectivist poetry respectively.

Nathaniel draws primarily on authoritative testimony from Taylor in junction with close readings of Imagist and Objectivist poetry to elicit an array of insights thus reinforcing his central argument. Because Nathaniel’s central argument hinges on the importance of analysis methodology, specifically interdisciplinary analysis that draws on scientific theories as applied to poetry, Nathaniel needs to convince his reader that this methodology is significant. Interestingly, he does not reveal what exactly he argues until the final paragraph of the article, leaving the reader to wonder as to what Nathaniel’s purpose for conducting his study of the expression of scientific processes within poetic tradition (303). Taylor’s testimony as an engineer and scientific theorist becomes evermore pertinent to understanding the epitome of Nathaniel’s study narrative when attention is garnered towards the interdisciplinary quality of the article’s Imagist and Objectivist analyses.

One of the rhetorical strategies featured in Nathaniel’s article is the inclusion of close readings of poetic works themselves. These are some of the more convincing aspects of his argument because they are as close to a live demonstration of the very interdisciplinary analysis, he argues for that can be elicited on paper. This is best exemplified after his analysis of *Sea Garden,* where he highlights how “the materialities of language and industry begin to show incongruence”, after establishing that optimisation and systematisation as per Taylor’s definition is not achieved by H.D.’s Imagism (Nathaniel 308).

Nathaniel plants seeds throughout his article that are examples of this very interdisciplinary analysis. For instance, when he examines H.D.’s Imagist poetry through the interdisciplinary lens, he comes to the conclusion that H.D. and her entourage of Imagists fail to achieve their own goals of systematisation and optimisation. Yet, he reveals that this failure is in and of itself is a significant if not profound conclusion. Equating the Imagist’s theories to hyperbole, Nathaniel states, “we cannot but expect Imagist poets to fail – and, given this inevitability, should not our first enquiry attend to how they fail?” (306). Thus, planting a seed of authorial intention that is fully realised in the article’s last paragraph where the crux is revealed. Where Nathaniel posits that it doesn’t matter if Imagists or Objectivists achieve their supposed goals of literary and poetic systematisation and optimisation, but it matters how they manifest elements of systematisation and optimisation within their work.

The article’s rhetorical features are sustainably persuasive for its exemplary portrayal of the methodologies that Nathaniel’s central argument is concerned with. Not only does Taylor’s professional opinion provide meaningful context and background information, but it establishes the theoretical framework that is pertinent to Nathaniel’s central argument. Additionally, providing both Imagist and Objectivist examples furthered his argument’s persuasiveness. For, the theoretical methodologies that Nathaniel describes would be difficult to experience or visualize with any significance otherwise.

The rhetoric Nathaniel employs involves a narrative in which he explores various points from examining H.D.’s Imagist and Reznikoff’s Objectivist works through the lens of the scientific ideals of optimisation and systematisation as defined by Taylor. Because of the narrative style that encompasses the article, Nathaniel reveals the importance and clearly evidences the efficacy of his argument that emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary analyses between science and poetry. For instance, by expressing that H.D. falls short of Pound’s ideal process, the reader is forced to ask the questions of how and why. Which Nathaniel answers, stating,

H.D.’s process calls into question the ideals of uniformity and control at which applied science aims, and her failure to attain them also helps reconcile the overarching qualities of transgression and compliance that have largely divided H.D. scholars… As an engineer-poet she trains readers to become efficient, but far from simply translating Taylorist labour methods, her efficiency processes serve to magnify their own imperfectability (309-310).

This capitalises on the previously mentioned seed of his overarching argument that hints it is about much more than simply analysing Imagism and Objectivism in comparison to Taylor’s scientific principles of optimisation and systemisation.

The most persuasive aspect of Nathaniel’s work lies in the seeding of his central argument. By refraining from outright stating that the article is going to argue this point and instead leading the reader on to believe it is a mere analytical study of theories, Nathaniel generates a shell game where his rhetoric is most powerful in the final section as it is not fully realised until this point. Effectively, his shell game leads the reader to think that he is arguing that Imagists and Objectivists can never truly achieve Taylor’s definitions of optimisation and systematisation. While this is true and in H.D.’s case and, “as an engineer-poet she trains readers to become efficient, but, far from simply translating Taylorist labour methods, her efficiency processes serve to magnify their own imperfectability”, the shell is lifted an no this is not where the proverbial prize is, but part of it (Nathaniel 310).

Work Cited

Nathaniel, Steve. “Engineering the Ideal: Applied Modern Poetics as Applied Science.”

European Journal of English Studies, vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 302-16. Taylor and Francis, doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2018.1513721