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Awareness of the Significance of Form: The Artistic Ideas of the Bloomsbury Group and the Modernist Journey of the Crescent Moon Poetry*

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The Crescent Moon School has long been defined as the "New Metrical Poetry," thus obscuring its modernist trajectory. Tracing the thread of the "awareness of the significance of form," this paper examines the school's evolution from romanticism to modernism: from the eastward transmission of Euro-American formalism and Bloomsbury Group's formalist poetics to establishing the ontological form of new metrical poetry; from lyricism shifting from "unrestrained emotional outpouring" to "aesthetic emotional discipline"; from the depiction of physical objects through images to the adoption of "objective correlatives," and from the reconstruction of the lyrical subject into an impersonal formal function, to the dialectical evolution of "pure poetry," and "prosaic style." Ultimately, this process culminated in its indigenized adaptation: replacing the foot with the pause, connecting symbolism through implicit suggestion, and integrating dramatization into artistic conception. The school thereby accomplished the modernist turn of vernacular new poetry in the two dimensions of poetic sentiment and poetic craft.

Keywords: awareness of the significance of form, Crescent Moon School, Bloomsbury Group, localized transformation

Introduction: The Modern Trajectory of Formal Innovation

Emerging in the 1920s and 1930s, the Crescent Moon School was no accidental assemblage of poets. Instead, it arose inevitably from the maturation of the New Culture Movement, the Literary Revolution, and the Vernacular Movement. Raising the banners of "Democracy" and "Science," the New Culture Movement advocated individual emancipation and the "reassessment of all values." It laid the intellectual groundwork for writers and poets to break free from old constraints and achieve free expressions. Its affirmation of personal emotion and modern consciousness formed the very spiritual bedrock for the Crescent Moon School's preoccupation with self-expression and emotional authenticity. Hu Shi's *Suggestions for Literary Reform* and Chen Duxiu's *On Literary Revolution*, with their passionate tone, rigorous arguments, and profound contemporary influence, transformed literature from a mere vehicle for moral instruction into "literature of the human being." They promoted the thorough emancipation of literary styles and modes of expression and gave rise to demands for poetic innovation.

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The Vernacular Movement provided the linguistic prerequisite for new poetry, ultimately enabling vernacular new poetry to accomplish its dual modernist transformation in poetic sentiment and poetic craft.

The New Culture Movement and Literary Revolution made indispensable contributions in dismantling old literature, yet had little to show in addressing the aesthetic construction of New Poetry. Few realized that without defining its aesthetic characteristics and artistic norms, vernacular verse could hardly establish its legitimacy as literature. If the New Culture Movement answered the intellectual proposition of "why to emancipate," the Literary Revolution formulated the innovative concept of "what to emancipate," and the Vernacular Movement supplied the linguistic medium for "how to emancipate," then the convergence of these three inevitably demanded committed literati to seek the right way to "make New Poetry truly poetic." As the Literary Revolution deepened, the Crescent Moon poets, primarily Xu Zhimo, Hu Shi, Wen Yiduo, and Chen Mengjia, rapidly rose to prominence in the 1920s. Endowed with a keen awareness of the significance of poetic form, and the grand vision of constructing a new metrical poetry system, they introduced and localized Western modernist poetics. Their efforts not only produced numerous widely acclaimed vernacular new poems, advancing vernacular poetry from emotional catharsis to aesthetic autonomy, but also established the aesthetic ontology of modern Chinese poetry, and exerted a profound influence on the developmental direction of modern Chinese literature as a whole.

In mainstream accounts of modern poetry history, the Crescent Moon group is categorized as a "formalist school" or "Parnassian school," rendering its "modernist pursuit" a questionable proposition. This judgment harbors a theoretical misconception: commentators often interpret "formalism" as a technical preference that "emphasizes form over content," overlooking its embodiment of a modern poetic philosophy at the turn of the 20th century that precisely treated form as the artistic essence. When Clive Bell declared that the "first commandment" of art is to "create form" (Bell, 1914, p. 8), he sought to liberate art from realistic representation and moral instruction. Tracing the modernist journey of the Crescent Moon group through the central thread of the "awareness of the significance of form," this essay argues that this journey follows its inherent logic.

External Sources of Formal Poetics: The Bloomsbury Group and Euro-American Formalism

In 1920, Xu Zhimo went to study at the University of Cambridge in Britain. Through the recommendation of Lin Changmin, he met G. Lowes Dickinson, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, H. A. Giles and other members of the Bloomsbury Group. Their interactions facilitated the "unofficial" transmission of British formalist poetics to China, which served as an external condition for the modern trajectory of the Crescent Moon School. In the preface to his *Tiger Collection*, Xu wrote, "A decade ago, I was swept by a peculiar wind, and perhaps illuminated by some peculiar moonlight, and from then on my thoughts leaned toward broken-line expression" (Xu, 2013a, p. 157). The peculiar "wind" and "moonlight" precisely refer to his discussions on the ontology of art with Bloomsbury Group members during his studies at Cambridge, while the "broken-line expression" signifies his turn to poetry-writing against his father's wish for him to study finance. The Bloomsbury Group was an elite intellectual circle in early 20th-century Britain, whose formalist poetics centered on three propositions. First, form itself is ontology. In his 1914 book *Art*, Clive Bell asserts that the "significant form is the one quality common to all works of visual art," because "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions" (Bell, 1914, p. 65). Thus, form is not subordinate to content nor determined by it; rather, it constitutes the essential definition of art, and possessed an ontological existence. As early as in his 1909 "Essay in Aesthetics," Fry argued that visual perception must submit to overall design,

claiming that art should not only strip away the utilitarian value, but also reject the mere imitation of life. Just as Fry states, "We may even suspect that complete likeness to a living thing will deprive it of the feeling of vitality," and "the vitality of an image—its power of communicating to us the feeling that it has an inner life of its own—is not at all dependent upon its being a likeness of a living thing" (Fry, 1939, p. 42).

Second, the formal autonomy of aesthetic emotion is a must. Bell and Fry delineated the boundary between aesthetic emotion and everyday emotion. They argued that aesthetic emotion is evoked solely through pure formal relationships, independent of content, historical narrative, or moral doctrines. Fry once used perfume as an example to illustrate that profound aesthetic emotion stems from form itself, not pointing to any external concepts (See *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*). Their idea of "aesthetic emotion" forms the core of formalist lyricism. Third, art is an end in itself. This stance possesses robust philosophical underpinnings: Kant's aesthetic disinterestedness provided aesthetic grounding for artistic autonomy. Moore in *Principia Ethica* (1903) states, "No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves" (Moore, 1903, p. 186). The Crescent Moon School effectively elevated this principle to be their "pocket Bible." Naturally, the Bloomsbury Group's formalist poetic concepts were also influenced by French Symbolism and later Russian Formalist thought. Notably, the formalist poetics of this group directly benefited from their formalist interpretations of classical Chinese art.

Taking the critical significance of form as the key driver for the development of their new poetry, the Crescent Moon School reversed the tendencies of early vernacular poetry toward prosaic style and its emphasis on didacticism over aesthetic experience. By centering on the theory and practice of new metrical poetry, it established an ontological awareness of poetic form and created workable metrical frameworks for modern Chinese poetry. This not only liberated new verse from the constraints and conventions of classical poetry, but also steered it away from straightforward prosaic writing, which completed the transition from vernacular experimentation to aesthetic construction. Rather than simply transplanting modern Western poetic concepts from sources like the British Bloomsbury Group or French Symbolism, the school integrated China's poetic traditions as well. Through continuous dialogue, revision, and reconfiguration, it pioneered such techniques as replacing metric foot with pauses, interpreting symbols through implication, and blending artistic conceptions. These innovations forged an effective path for new poetry's modernist evolution. Furthermore, the creative practices of Crescent Moon poets revolutionized the lyrical paradigms of vernacular poetry. By restraining emotion, they shifted from emotional outpouring to the self-discipline of aesthetic emotion. Their experiments with objectified imagery and impersonality expanded poetry's expressive scope, which laid theoretical and creative groundwork for the rise of Modernist Poetry of the 1930s. The school thus played a pivotal role in the transition of modern Chinese poetry from Romanticism to Modernism.

The Starting Point of Modernity in New Metrical Poetry

The Crescent Moon School took its first step toward modernity through the awareness of the significance of poetic form. Xu Zhimo firmly believes, "Poetry is an instrument for expressing human creativity, and shares the same nature as music and fine art," and that a poet's "responsibility is to craft suitable vessels for this (creativity), that is, to discover new forms and new rhythms in poetry and other forms of art" (Xu, 2013a, p. 126-127). In the same essay, he asserts that "the perfect spirit can only be expressed through perfect form." Here, "vessels" and "form" clearly refer to the formal properties of poetry corresponding to its content. This perspective not only dissolves the binary opposition between content and form but also implies that the inner poetic spirit

cannot exist independently of form, as emotions and thoughts must rely on linguistic, metrical, and rhythmic elements to manifest. Undoubtedly, this view absorbed formalist aesthetic ideas from the Bloomsbury Group while undergoing creative adaptation. In his 1911 essay "Post-Impressionism," Roger Fry argues that the Impressionists revealed an entirely new aesthetic world built of meaningful and expressive forms only. It is well known that, in canonical Impressionist paintings like Monet's "Water Lily" series (totaling 181 canvases), no single lotus leaf resembles those in reality; instead, they form a fantastically beautiful whole through the artistic use of color and light. This likely captures the essence of what Fry meant by pure form that builds an unprecedented aesthetic realm (See Fry's "Post-Impressionism"). If Clive Bell's "significant form" elevates form to ontological heights, then Xu Zhimo's belief that a poet's duty is to "craft suitable vessels" for thought, not only established the aesthetic value of form, but also laid a crucial ideological foundation for the Crescent School's "Three Beauties" principle by Wen Yiduo: the musical beauty (sound), the pictorial beauty (diction), and the architectural beauty (symmetry of stanzas).

Whereas Xu Zhimo's poetic thought leaned toward the conceptual dimension, Wen Yiduo's formal aesthetics offered clear practical applicability. In "The Metrical Rules of Poetry," he proposed the renowned "Three Beauties" principle: musical beauty focusing on the coordination of syllables, tonal patterns, and rhyme; pictorial beauty emphasizing the evocation of vivid diction and artistic conception; and architectural beauty pursuing symmetry and balance in stanzas and lines. Regarding rhythm and cadence, Wen introduced the term "sound foot," modeled after the iambic pentameter of English poetry, and conducted his most successful experiment in "Dead Water." As he admits, "Beginning with the first line, every subsequent line consists of three 'two-character feet' and one 'three-character foot'" ("The Metrical Rules of Poetry"). This deliberate cultivation of "sound foot," "pause," and "cadence" established an analyzable, replicable formal framework for modern poetry. Wen Yiduo translated "metrical verse" as "form," and advanced the equation "meter = rhythm = form," a concept closer to the "meter" of traditional English verse. This equation amounts to an ontological declaration: the "meter" of modern poetry is its "form," its mode of existence, closely paralleling Clive Bell's proposition that form is essence. Simultaneously, this view of form did not demand mechanical symmetry: "Dead Water" "achieved organic unity through internal variation rather than fixed positioning of three-character foot within lines" (Wang & Li, 2023, p. 45). It emphasizes "relational form" over "symmetrical form," resonating profoundly with the conception of "significant form."

The second phase of the Crescent Moon School's modern evolution involved transforming romantic lyricism into an aesthetically self-disciplined mode of poetic expression. Digging deeper beyond external meter into the inner spirit of poetry, Liang Shiqiu distinguished between "verbal form" and "ideational form." He argued that phonological patterns and sentence structures could be flexibly adjusted, yet thought, emotion, and imagination must be contained within rigorous formal norms to construct a "limited whole" (Cheng, 2003, p. 54). Chen Mengjia also defined "pure essence, meticulous craftsmanship and strict meter" as the shared artistic pursuit of the school (Chen, 1931, p. 1). In short, poets were expected to deploy multiple artistic techniques to turn vernacular poetry into a self-contained and coherent aesthetic organism. Though romantic lyricism formed the underlying tone of the Crescent Moon School, "the rational restraint of emotion" gradually became its core principle. As Liang Shiqiu states, "The rational discipline of sentiments and imaginations constitutes the most fundamental literary order" (Liang, 2002, p. 145). Xu Zhimo expressed a similar view in "The Attitude of the *Crescent Moon*," "We maintain that feelings unrefined by reason are a turbid spring, whose aimless gushing is at least a squandering of spirit. We certainly do not oppose the liberation of emotion, but on the back of this

powerful wild steed, we must carefully fasten the reins of rationality" (Xu, 2013b, p. 141). From a formalist perspective, this "rational discipline" refers to the formal filtering of everyday emotion by aesthetic emotion. It means poets must avoid raw outpouring of feelings, and transform emotion into aesthetic experience through formal reshaping. Wen Yiduo was right when he criticized Guo Moruo for Guo's outburst of emotions, "What is natural is not always beautiful; beauty is not ready-made. In fact, there can be no art without selection, for without selection there is no way to distinguish beauty from ugliness" (Wen, 1923). This statement perfectly embodies that principle. Rational restraint is less a compositional rule for new poetry than a modern awareness of literary autonomy. In the later phase, such restraint further evolved into intellectual meditation: poetry was no longer merely a vessel for lyrical expression. Instead, it became an artistic form through which poets began to "reflect" on the dilemmas of human life and the meaning of existence. For vernacular poetry, this represented a modern consciousness of literary autonomy. By its later stage, this restraint evolved into intellectual contemplation: poetry ceased to be merely a vessel for lyrical expression, but became an art form wherein poets began to ponder the predicaments of human existence.

The third stage of the Crescent Moon School's modern trajectory lies in expanding the connotations of imagistic symbols to endow them with deeper symbolic significance. Influenced jointly by Bloomsbury poetics, French Symbolism, and Euro-American Modernism, Crescent Moon poets prioritized inner introspection over emotional outpouring, intuitive impressions over plain realistic depiction, and the crafting of symbolic suggestions over simplistic metaphors. For instance, Wen Yiduo in "Dead Water" and "The Miracle" employs abundant symbolism and suggestions, hence greatly enriching the aesthetic function of imagery. Disillusioned with reality, Wen Yiduo pinned his hopes on an absolute, complete aesthetic world. In his contemplative lyrical sensibility, all partial beauty in the world appeared only as fragments of this ultimate beauty, thus rendering "Miracle" a pure poem celebrating the supreme, perfect beauty that transcends all earthly forms. In the poem's conclusion, the poet yearns for the miracle to arrive elegantly, yet it never comes. The entire work expresses a sense of anxiety, anticipation, and uncertainty, and its tone is devoid of the confidence and passion often found in romanticism, but is packed with skepticism prevalent in modern Western poetry. In his writing, imagery becomes, in T. S. Eliot's term, an "objective correlative" for emotion.

Likewise, in his poem "Autumn Moon," Xu Zhimo employs personification and symbolism to shape an attractive yet uncanny autumn moon as the central image of the whole poem. Breaking from the dark clouds, the moon drifts across the sky like an ancient specter, and overlooks the mortal world from the ancient city wall. It symbolizes some unknown mysterious cosmic force, profound yet ambiguous, beautiful but depressing, reminiscent of Baudelaire's style. The lucid moonlight symbolizes pure spiritual ideals; the stillness of moonlight stands for a tranquil and transcendent aesthetic realm; the innate coldness of moonbeams suggests the sense of alienation between the ideal world and reality. Such secondary images as dark clouds, ruins of tombs and roosting birds respectively symbolize chaotic and oppressive reality, the vicissitudes of life and death. "Reconciliation" and "the infant's smile" in the poem symbolize the real state of being that transcends opposing contradictions such as joy and sorrow, resentment and affection. Clearly, "Autumn Moon" differs from the classical poems that are built around the image of the moon, for Xu Zhimo endows the autumn moon with multiple symbolic connotations. He hints at inner philosophical reflections through physical objects and achieves the depersonalization of imagery. The cool, hazy tone of the poem embodies the Crescent Moon School's pursuit of implicit poetic craft. It serves as a representative practice of the school's integration of romantic lyricism and symbolic techniques in its transition toward modern poetry.

Likewise, the image of the "bright star" in Xu Zhimo's "To Seek a Star" embodies his lofty ideals. Using a concise fable, this poem portrays the journey of the poet's spiritual quest. The boundless dark night and wilderness symbolize the oppressive darkness of reality, the rider represents the arduous pursuit of ideals, the lame and blind horse signifies the frailty of the power to seek, and the star hanging high in the sky symbolizes the poet's ultimate ideal of love, freedom and beauty that the poet chases. Skillfully employing imagery to express inner emotions, the poet converts the abstract predicament of ideals into a concrete narrative. The tragic ending, in which the rider sees the star only upon his death, symbolizes the insurmountable chasm between ideal and reality, which highlights the tragedy that the ideal can be seen yet never reached. Integrating symbolism into new metrical poetry, this poem represents the Crescent Moon School's exploration of the transition from romantic lyricism to meditative modernist poetry. Its technique lies in "deliberately evoking the emotional resonance of others through private perceptions to achieve the 'depersonalization' of imagery" (Liu, 2024, p. 166). Thus, the Crescent Moon School completed its modern innovation from imitation to symbolism in artistic technique.

Reconstructing the Lyrical Subject

The modern transformation of Chinese new poetry was not merely a breakthrough of vernacular language over the classical writing-system. More crucially, it involved the modern reconstruction of the lyrical subject. The Crescent Moon School became the first and most important poetic group that achieved this metamorphosis. Before its emergence, the lyrical subject of classical poetry remained so bound to traditional ethics and Confucian doctrines that the persona rarely broke free from the established paradigms of scholar-officials expressing emotions through depicting landscapes or retreating into historical nostalgia. Thus, it lacked independent self-awareness. Although early vernacular poetry during the May Fourth period shattered the formal constraints of old-style poetry, it failed to cultivate a mature modern lyrical subject. Consequently, the vernacular poetry of that era often reduced itself to a tool for enlightenment propaganda. Their emotions were flat and hollow, bereft of depiction of individuals' lived experience, which deprived the earliest vernacular new poetry of its independent aesthetic value. Against this backdrop, the Crescent Moon School, represented by Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo and Chen Mengjia, achieved the transition from stylistic emancipation to aesthetic modernity by reconstructing a brand-new lyrical subject. They first dismantled the stylized lyrical patterns of classical poetry, and the didactic nature of early vernacular verse. Embracing modern Western artistic and literary thought, they affirmed the independent aesthetic value of personal affection and lived experience. By shifting the core mission of poetic lyricism from the traditional "conveying moral principles and serving the society" to the exploration of modern individuals' personal sentiments and spiritual quests, they established an independent and self-conscious modern lyrical subject.

Unlike the classical poets who dissolved the self within their lyrical expressions, the Crescent Moon poets established a lyrical subject with stark self-awareness. Their works both articulated individual love and grief, aspirations and confusions, and bore their acute reflections of modern life as intellectuals. Xu Zhimo's quest for a romantic, pure essence of life in his poetry, and Wen Yiduo's critique of a decaying society in "Dead Water," both transcended traditional lyrical paradigms. They observed the world from the perspective of autonomous individuals, and enriched their poems with a genuinely modern spirit. Simultaneously, the Crescent Moon School advocated the core principle of "rational restraint over emotion," shaping an aesthetic lyrical subject characterized by discipline and self-control. This decisively rejected the rampant sentimentality and crude clamor of early vernacular poetry. Opposing unrestrained emotional outpouring, the Crescent Moon poets asserted that emotion

should be reined in by reason, and expression, disciplined by formalism. Leaning on their "Three Beauties" theory, they crafted structured poetic forms, allowing intense individual emotions to flow naturally only after undergoing aesthetic concentration and artistic refinement. In "Dead Water," the poet, filled with loathing and indignation towards the old China, does not cry, though. Instead, he employs strict, condensed meter to portray the ugliness of the stagnant water, and presented his impassioned feelings into cool, aesthetic criticism. This lyrical approach endowed the lyrical subject with a dual identity: both experiencer of emotion and reflector of aesthetics. Within this new paradigm, as Zhang Zao observed, Crescent Moon poets, "whether utilizing anthropomorphism or objectification, sought to depersonalize and reify the poetic subject... aiming to expound on reality from a broader, deeper perspective by creating virtual objective correlatives" (Zhang, 2018, p. 94).

Conclusion

The modernist pursuit of the Crescent Moon School starts its journey with the awareness of the significance of form. It established a formal ontology through new metrical arrangements (starting point), achieved poetic self-discipline through "rational restraint of emotion" (poetic transformation), revolutionized images and symbols via symbolism and objectification (artistic innovation), reconstructed the lyrical subject through depersonalization (subject transformation), and deepened its formal concepts through the dialectic of "pure poetry" versus "prose-style." These formed a complete trajectory from Romanticism to Modernism. Just as the Bloomsbury Group used classical Chinese art as a mirror to achieve a self-affirmation for its modernist aesthetics, the Crescent Moon School adopted the Western formal poetics as a mirror to accomplish the modern renewal of indigenous poetics. For this reason, the modernist trajectory of the Crescent Moon School was neither a mere imitation of the West, nor a conservative preservation of tradition. Instead, it emerged as a unique formation from the two-way transformation that "responds to global trends externally," and "inherits national traditions internally." This is perhaps the most crucial message this journey bequeaths to modern Chinese poetry.

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