

# Research Proposal for a PhD thesis in English Literature

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*Provisional Title: Visual Perception and the Visual Imagination in the Poetry of Jo Shapcott, Selima Hill and Lavinia Greenlaw*

In Edward Larrissy's *Reading Twentieth Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects*, only two female poets, Marianne Moore and Sylvia Plath, are analysed in a study of perception that spans from Ezra Pound to John Ashbery. More recent criticism has similarly undervalued women poets' contribution to the scope of the visual in contemporary poetry. Ian Gregson's study 'Post/Modernist Rhythms and Voices'<sup>1</sup> is indicative of the trend for exploring matters of voice over vision in women's writing, particularly in the influx of criticism on dramatic monologues,<sup>2</sup> whilst even Deryn Rees-Jones' chapter on science and objectivity in *Consorting With Angels* focuses on the quest for a gendered writing self rather than the poets' interest in the mechanics of perception.<sup>3</sup> This thesis aims to act as a corrective to this critical neglect, analysing the poetry of Jo Shapcott, Selima Hill and Lavinia Greenlaw and the ways in which they engage with contemporary theory on visual perception, the relationship between 'eye' and 'I', and the gendered implications of observing and being observed.

This research will begin by exploring how each poet represents the science of seeing, drawing on neurological studies such as Oliver Sack's *The Mind's Eye*<sup>4</sup> to reveal areas of overlap between contemporary visual theory and each poet's oeuvre. This chapter will argue that Margaret Livingstone's assertion that 'the most primitive or necessary visual information

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Gregson, 'Post/Modernist Rhythms and Voices: Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith to Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill' in Jane Dowson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish and Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 9-23.

<sup>2</sup> In Ian Brinton's *Contemporary Poetry: Poets and Poetry since 1990*, the two chapters given to 'Modern Women Poets' are on 'dramatic monologues' and 'fairytale and myth'.

<sup>3</sup> Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Mind's Eye* (London: Picador, 2010).

about a scene is found in luminance variations'<sup>5</sup> finds its counterpart in Greenlaw's *Night Photograph* and *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* in which studies of light and radiance suggest an intense focus upon the minutia of visual experience. Moreover, I will suggest that Shapcott's *Electroplating the Baby* and Hill's *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* utilise scientifically accurate portrayals of vision in order to mediate between objectivity and a more destabilising surrealism, allowing these poets to document both the physical world and the landscape of the psyche.

Chapter 2 will focus on the way these poets expand upon techniques learned from Elizabeth Bishop, whose detached, 'objective' eye and capturing of the 'mind-in-action'<sup>6</sup> have been a defining influence on each poet's presentation of vision. Like Bishop, Hill interrogates what Linda Anderson has called the 'complicated rhetoric of seeing',<sup>7</sup> as well as similarly drawing on the 'Surrealism of everyday life'<sup>8</sup> to explore vision in relation to mental illness, romantic relationships and memory. I will compare Hill's approach to that of Greenlaw, who in *Minsk* eschews Bishop's surrealism in favour of her forebears' examination of 'the blank space' where vision falters' and [...] the eye's capacity for blurred or 'distorted' vision'.<sup>9</sup> Greenlaw's awareness of the limits of vision contrasts with Shapcott's approach in *Of Mutability* in which shifting, uncertain perspectives become a form of liberation rather than confinement, providing release from restrictive modes of looking at the world.

Chapter 3 will explore the ways these poets manipulate the gender/ power relations implicated in looking and being observed. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* has commented that:

A woman must continually watch herself[...]And so she comes to consider the surveyor

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Livingstone, *Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing* (New York: Abrams, 2002), p.38.

<sup>6</sup> Open Yale Courses, ENGL 310: Modern Poetry, Lecture 24: 'Elizabeth Bishop', [www.yale.edu/english](http://www.yale.edu/english).

<sup>7</sup> Linda Anderson, 'The Story of the Eye: Elizabeth Bishop and the Limits of the Visual' in Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (eds.) *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), pp. 159-174, at p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.<sup>10</sup>

This description is particularly relevant to Hill's collections '*The Accumulation...*' and '*Aeroplanes of the World*' in which notions of looking and being looked at are entwined with anxieties regarding failed relationships and an unstable sense of self. In contrast, I will argue that in Shapcott's poems 'I'm Contemplated by a Portrait of a Divine' and 'Venus Observes Herself', the poet harnesses James A. Hefferman's notion that ekphrastic literature creates 'a dual between male and female gazes'<sup>11</sup>, creating a playful antagonism between male and female modes of looking rather than allow for a single objectifying 'male gaze'.

Building from this discussion of gender and ekphrasis, Chapter 4 will examine the 'visual imagination' of each poet by viewing the poetry as engaged in a dialogue with painting and the visual arts. An analysis of Hill's *Portrait of my Lover as a Horse* will explore Fiona Sampson's assertion that the collection encapsulates 'the way that lovers see the entire world through their beloved in order to reconfigure that world',<sup>12</sup> an assertion also relevant to Shapcott's animal and vegetable poems. Moreover, this chapter will discuss the ways in which Greenlaw's research into Dutch seventeenth-century painting has impacted her use of defamiliarising techniques, as well as suggest that her interest in the art of Kazimir Malevich has influenced the more abstract approach to visual perception seen in the later collection *The Casual Perfect*.

Finally, this thesis will consider the extent to which these poets undertake a literal interpretation of Adrienne Rich's concept of 'Re-Vision'. Rather than simply revising myths about womanhood, these poets use the 'transformative power of metaphor'<sup>13</sup> to suggest new

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<sup>10</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1972), p.46.

<sup>11</sup> James A. Hefferman, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012), p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken': Writing as Re-Vision' in Barbara Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (eds.) *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

modes of vision, particularly evident in Shapcott's mad cow poems and those in which she inhabits the bodies of classical female figures. This chapter will argue that Hill's distinctive metaphors can be illuminated by Wittgenstein's theories on aspect perception and 'seeing as' in the *Philosophical Investigations*, whilst suggesting that Greenlaw's use of 'inverse metaphor' becomes a means of articulating a Wittgensteinian scepticism regarding the ways in which language 'always turns away from what it represents'.<sup>14</sup>

This research thus aims to undermine the trend for dismissing both the importance of vision in contemporary women's poetry and their poetic output in general. Arian Rice has described the poems in Shapcott's *My Life Asleep* as 'slight and occasional, even workshop-ish',<sup>15</sup> whilst criticism of Hill has often failed to look beyond a superficial concern with playful juxtaposition to engage with the what she has called her "ruthlessly accurate"<sup>16</sup> vision. In *Consorting With Angels*, Rees-Jones places Hill in the chapter 'Myth, Fairytale and Feminism after the Women's Movement' rather than considering her alongside Shapcott's and Greenlaw in a discussion of 'Science, Nature, Femininity and the Poetic Process'; a categorisation mirrored by Sampson in *Beyond the Lyric* who sees Hill as a poet of 'Post-surrealism and Deep Play' rather than the 'Expanded Lyric' of Greenlaw. This thesis aims to reverse the tendency to see Hill as a poet divorced from the concerns of her contemporaries, using close-readings from each of these poet's collections to reveal their prolonged interrogation of 'objective' and 'subjective' ways of seeing, the relationship between visual art and the physical world, and the language used to document visual perception.

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Philips, 'Review: *Minsk* by Lavinia Greenlaw', *Poetry*, 184/3 (2004), pp. 242-244, at p.244.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Rice, 'Review: *My Life Asleep* by Jo Shapcott', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 61(1999), pp.61-67 at p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Lidia Vianu, 'Interview with Selima Hill' November 13 2002, *Desperado Essay-Interviews*, Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2006.

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