LITERATURE, CULTURE AND POLITICS – THE 20s and 30s IN AMERICA

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Abstract

This paper explores the social, political, economic and cultural context during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, focusing on the literary aspect. The „New-Historicism" perspective on the literary area throws another light on the relationship between the social and the literary. The stress is put mainly on the modern literary text, especially on poetry, which is often classified as a simple exploitation of the significant and form, placing social and political hopes in the background. The poem is shaped like a discourse which articulates the ideologies of the time, of the cultural aims and practice, of the social and the political.

The beginning of the 20th century in America meant the "overthrowing of the sterile genteel tradition" (George Santayana's terms) and a new order in art and society. The uniquely American inflection of a revolutionary moment, from its radical readings of the meaning of democracy to its adaptations of the modernist style, but also a literature engaged with issues like the dangers of the workplace, the dynamics of race relations, and the experience of war and poverty are all no less relevant now than they were a century ago. As Sara Blair stated in "Modernism and the Politics of Culture", instead of relying on traditional political and social makers (the war of 1914 – 1918, the inauguration of Prohibition and the Jazz Age in 1919, the Great Depression in 1929), the focus is on the engagement of American modernists with explicitly social-political activity, having in view the interest for art, culture, and the literary. Culture, by what constitutes it, whose property it is, and by how it identifies or informs national or racial bodies, is a deeply political issue. Being a debate upon the relations between the literary and the social, the theses will try to reconsider the social-political aspirations of modernist texts often viewed as formal literary innovations that are indifferent to contemporary experience (Blair in Levenson, 157-158).

The literary work offers an answer to those oppositions and polarities that are at the very basis of a historical situation. "The literary response represents a solution for the dilemma of certain historical periods; it is faithful to the anxieties and uncertainties of people, it purifies and balances them, transforming them into the Greek urn", as Virgin Nemoianu stated in *A Theory of the Secondary* (Nemoianu: 17). Harmony and order are reactionary, producing historical disorder and social movements. Instead of denying, as historical progress does, art combines.

Literature contains certain elements of the "old" in its trying to rebalance the most opposite ideologies of the time. Ideology, in Nemoianu's words, is the "theoretical justification of a social, political trend, an intellectual discourse that, unlike philosophy, remains connected to the concrete orientations of history, without being able to stray from them" (Nemoianu: 17). If literature is both compromise and synthesis, than it is, because of its nature, a balance of oppositions. By the time literature appears, it will have already been "old" because historical movement will have surpassed ideological contradictions that have already been given solutions. The synthesis between the old regime and the modern epoch represents a reservoir of both conservative and progressive

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ideologies. However, from the perspective of its own epoch, it is profoundly conservative because of being dominated by aesthetic impulses.

What would be the effect of aesthetics on political, historical and scientific attitudes and discourses? Does such an influence exist? Is it more than an intercession with reality by means of language? Society patterns, in the view of the same aesthete (Nemoianu: 73) are literary constructs that filter and mould reality in literary texts, and indirectly in language.

In *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry* (114-116), David Buchbinder speaks of poetry and history explaining that the poem, as well as the literary text, addresses historical, political and social issues through their very material saturated with ideological signification. Texts are more than simple personal statements of writers. They make a type of discourse that transforms from a private utterance into the articulation of the concerns and practices of culture. The literary text is part of a much wider cultural, political, social and economic dispensation. Instead of transcending its own time and place, the literary text is a time- and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or another political. The literary reflects relations of power and participates in the construction of discourses and ideologies. Thus, it functions as an instrument in the construction of identities at individual, group or even national level. The ideological dimension of the literary makes its politics. On Marxist base, the politics of the text addresses the politics of the world outside the text, interrogating "societies" in terms of certain specific social – political issues: class, race, attitudes shared within a given culture.

In his *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, Samuel P. Huntington explains that in order to define the American identity, one needs something measurable and identifiable: the political and national values and beliefs (Huntington: 26-27). Thus, beginning with the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, some fundamental political ideas formulating the "American Credo" started to exist: liberty, equality, individualism, democracy and the supremacy of justice – all of these materialized in the Declaration of Independence and The Constitution of the USA. These inaugural acts are a means of a group needing to represent itself, which is, according to Paul Ricoeur, the first step in formulating an ideology (Ricoeur: 208). The perpetuating of this initial energy enabled this American credo to strengthen itself with constructed images and interpretations of certain social, economical and cultural metamorphoses of the American idiom. The values of the credo needed to be re-considered in the 20s and the 30s when people woke up and started to get involved in politics.

In the 1st decades of the 20th century, the 'impartial' state was replaced by the 'providential' state. Some social groups that were displeased with the inequities they had to face asked for the intervention of the state. The dichotomy liberty-equality was and still is the dilemma of any modern society. The welfare state required social reformist legislators that refused any kind of inequities; it required the recognition of unions and the introduction of gradual taxes. It took the Great Depression to test the limits of dual federalism. No other had had a greater effect on the thinking and the institutions of government in the 20th century. This was the moment when ideological values were questioned (Bragdon, McCutchen: 744). Some call the New Deal era "revolutionary" or "reactionary". But perhaps the most significant change was in the way Americans thought about their problems and the role of the national government in solving them. Difficulties that at one time had been seen as personal then became national problems, requiring national solutions. The general welfare, broadly defined, had become a legitimate concern of the national government.

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Culture is seen by Virgin Nemoianu as secondary, whereas economics and politics are primary. Yet, these intermingle and make the very basis of an ideology of the time. Since social protest implies discontent, the great conflict is in the way in which the experiencing of reform denies the primacy of individualism, self-reliance and the pursuit of material success. This tradition substitutes altruism, a concern for the communal well-being and the commitment to group action. Both individualism and collective action are important, or as Walt Whitman said articulating both sides of the conflict: "One of the problems presented in America these times is, how to combine one's duty and policy as a member of associations, societies, brotherhoods or what not, and one's obligation to the State and Nation, with essential freedom as an individual personality, without which freedom a man cannot grow or expand, or be full, modern, heroic, democratic, American. With all the necessities and benefits of association (and the world cannot get along without it), the true mobility and satisfaction of a man consist in his thinking and acting for himself. The problem, I say, is to combine the two so as not to ignore either." (Luedtke: 378).

To take into account the significance of culture in understanding the social problems doesn't mean to consider that the political and economic problems were less important; just that culture offered a certain point of view in order to estimate the narrow commercialism in society. For the critics of the 20th century, culture was a system made up of some middling values that could not follow the economic progress. Suspicion became an intellectual position, a very alluring one defining itself as a reaction to a previous epoch within which many convictions and conventions had been considered valid. Most of the signs of subversion were evident even before World War I.

Literary experimentation was part of the matrix of modern social and political life. It responded to modernist ideals that were also a social act, in and through which cultural value was constructed. In the 20s and 30s in America, literature did extremely political work promulgating fascist, liberal and/or communist ideology, the promotion of collective activity and it increased access to cultural and civic heterogeneous institutions (Blair in Levenson: 170). Sara Blair explained in "Modernism and the Politics of Culture" that Modernism had experienced certain inclinations towards the right and left (Blair in Levenson: 158, 167). The energy of formal and narrative experimentation is understood as political force directed against Victorian humanist social ideals, the contemporary versions of populism, individualism and liberalism. Ezra Pound is known for his fascists interest and his imagist principles (brevity, precision, anti-sentimentality) bear a family resemblance to discourses of militant nationalism emerging in Anglo-American politics(Blair in Levenson: 160).T.S. Eliot had no ties to fascist groups but his poetry and poetics during the 20s turn on some of the most virulently anti-Semitic images (idem). America turned to be the very milieu of anxieties about the social, psychic, spiritual effects of modernity and modernization, the symbol of the new, culturally 'other'. During the 10s, 20s and 30s, literary and social experimentation were explicitly linked with political activism and magazines as *"Masses", "Broom", "Smart Set", "Little Review", 'New Masses"* – all engaged radicals for whom aesthetics and politics were inseparable. Some formed the 'red intelligentsia': Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, E.E. Cummings, Archibald MacLeish, Carl Sandburg;

If the twenties are to be seen as an epoch marked by intellectual alienation, and political dryness, creating suspicion about real political, social and cultural values, the thirties meant the contrary. Intellectual influences, popular radicalism and political

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leadership contributed to a new perception of culture from the perspective of modernist experiments: social, political, economic and aesthetic experimental practice.

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