POETRY AND THE POLITICAL RIGHT

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Abstract

The present paper treats the concept of modernism in poetry from the perspective of associating certain aesthetic activities with forms of power through the simple but by no means superficial connection of art to the political and the social, in spite of the fact that one of the indisputable characteristics of Modernism was that of transcending the social and, respectively, the political.

Modernism coincided with or perhaps contributed to the unfolding of a political "map" of the 20th century which, in a simple and superficial list, would enumerate: „the Red Intelligentsia", "the Ku Klux Klan", fascism and Nazism with their militants, "free speech", verse libre, "free love" etc.

The paper proposes to examine a few modern American poems from the beginning of the 20th century which engaged themselves in the field of the political and the social by their involvement exerted in the name of Art, Culture and Literature.

The paper tries to re-consider the modernist text viewing it less as a hermetic construct that would have nothing in common with the experiences of its contemporary social but as a text involved in and reflecting the social and the political, the text being thus "politically read"

The alliances of Modernism with the political Right would induce the idea that they have a common ideological discourse which, if applied to poetry, would blend notions like poetic form and value, the tradition of writing with ideologies of culture, nation, modernization and race.

One of the most problematic versions of Modernism and politics is its notorious engagement with Fascism (Blair, 1999: 158). How much of *militarism, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism* is it in a poem that is politically charged with such ideological discourse?

Some culturally conservative discourses can be traced in several of the texts produced in early twentieth century European milieu, therefore away from America. In "Modernism and the politics of culture" (in Levenson, 1999: 157-173), Sara Blair refers to several discourses produced in early twentieth century that vigorously 'flirted' with Fascism.

The first to mention are some "projects associated with its traditional wing." These are the magazine *Blast* of Ezra pound and Wyndham Lewis, *Ripostes*, Pound's collection of verse and *The Enemy* which is a review of art of Lewis. In these texts, the **energy** of formal and narrative experimentation is seen as a political force because of being directed against Victorian humanist ideals and against populism and individualism.

Ezra Pound's well-known imagist aesthetics (brevity, precision, anti-sentimentality) "bear a family resemblance to discourses of militant nationalism emerging in Anglo-American politics". (idem)

Wyndham Lewis published *Hitler* in 1931, and an essay called *"The Jews: Are They Human* in 1939. For him, the Nazi ideology could provide *the white Europe* with an *antidote* to corporate capitalism and Russian socialism.

All these **energies** meant to proselytize such ideologies derived from the **radicalism of the right**, and promoted **cultural values** linked to **ideals of racial fitness and purity**. (idem).

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Ezra Pound is a controversial figure of American literature and he gained political notoriety for being the only author of the American canon and one of the very few citizens of the USA to have been indicted for treason.

> Tireless promoter, literary midwife, editor extraordinaire, apologist for Italian Fascism, he would be described by *Time* magazine in a suitably flippant homage as "part despot, part poet, part press agent." His *Cantos* began appearing in 1917; by the mid-1920s they already smack of the strange stew of Chinese ideograms, Jeffersonian agrarianism, and the populist poetics – a mishmash of political, economic, and aesthetic theories and pseudo-theories […] Throughout the Second World War, he inveighed live on Rome Radio against then-president Franklin Roosevelt, the US, and Jews (whose extermination he publicly approved), preaching the fascist social order installed by Mussolini and Hitler. Excoriating "twenty years of Judaic propaganda, Lenin and Trotsky stuff," Pound attempted to rally "real" Americans under the banner of militant racial purity and cultural authenticity.
>
> (idem)

A very interesting view of Pound's hatred of the present and admiring of the past as well as his early anti-Semitic views is offered by Cary Nelson in *Repression and Recovery. Modern American Poetry and Cultural Memory* (1989: 194-195) notices that one of Pound's poems published in the 1914 issue of the magazine *Blast* includes the lines:

Let us be done with Jews and Jobbery,
Let us spit upon those who fawn on the Jews for their money.

The same lines appear in the volume *Personae* published in 1926 but with some evident replacements:

Let us be done with pandars and jobbery,
Let us spit upon those who pat the big-bellies for profit.

Such examples might suggest that there may be other form of anti-Semitism hidden in such substitutions and code words of his verse.

Nelson also refers to Pound's 1928 *A Draft of the Cantos XVII – XXVII*, with their illuminated letters and ornament borders of Gladys Hynes. The illustrations refer to an idealized world of medieval past or to the very modern world of oppression and death. Both illustrations refer to the law of social control offering an upper and a lower samples of 'worlds'; one of it represents the skulls of the war industry, or the battlefield filled with death above and the military industrial complex below; the other one presents the industrial monster that turns people into slaves; it displays monolithic industrial power above, and the human costs below. The bar in the letter "A", Nelson explains (idem) stands for the repression of cultural knowledge.

How should one read Pound's poems? Deliberately by distinguishing aesthetics from politics? Or by translating and transposing his *brevity, precision and anti-sentimentality*, as well as his *repulsion and scorn* for *the exacerbated modern world* as **discourses of the same conservative, yet reactionary ideologies of the right wing**? If pleading for the latter question-answer, then it is understandable how early twentieth century literature, poetry, and modernist formalism especially, did political and social work.

The case of T. S. Eliot is not declaratively political. He fashioned his poetics in less militant lineaments. His "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is his "cultural politics" of tradition central to the canon of poetry; he called himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion"; he also converted to Anglicanism in 1927 and

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when pleading against *Secularization*, he called for a Christian society. In his 1933 lectures at the University of Virginia, published only once under the title *After Strange Gods*, Eliot warns:

> on the dangers of 'free-thinking Jews' – a virtual trope for Eliot for 'adulterat[ion]' and Europe's 'inva[sion] by foreign races' – to the continuity of that Western cultural tradition.
>
> Eliot alone of this group had no formal ties to English or European Fascist groups. But as Anthony Julius has recently argued [in *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, 1995], his poetry and poetics during the 1920s turn on some of the least apologetic, most virulently anti-Semitic images in all of that same Western tradition. In "Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with Cigar," Eliot's signature preoccupation with the decadence and enervation of modernity takes the form of a Jew-baiting all too common to the right-wing critiques of modernity's social forms […] "*The rats are underneath the pile./ the jew is underneath the lot"*. Here, as in fascist propaganda in Germany, England, France, and the US, the Jew could conveniently be invoked to signify all the worst excesses of modernity: capitalism, spurious production divorced from a realm of value, sexual degeneracy or impotence, the perversion of "true" cultural (or racial) characters, histories, ideals.
>
> (Blair, 1999: 160)

Another essay that comes in support for linking aesthetic endeavor with politics is Peter Dale Scott's "The social critic and his discontents" (in Moody, 1994: 60-74): "Great visionary poets have usually had visionary politics as well". Their social criticism is understood as a redefinition of their relationship, and of their age, to the cultural authorities of the past; by doing so, their tradition is both progressive and reactionary. In their claim upon the future, they could be seen as practitioners of cultural politics, that is, of considering temporal politics as subordinated to the requirements of culture. (idem, 60) He is referred to in terms of royalism, dogma, free-thinking Jews, but also for his critique of liberalism, exploitation and secular progress.

Just like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot perceived the cultural **alienation** of modernism, which made him leave their culturally defective land, to look for spiritual insights in Europe.

> It may be that no author nor reader can quite reconcile in prose the competing social claims of the permanent and the progressive, of the irrational and the rational. And yet this cultural task […] continues to be urgent; and Eliot's failed efforts in particular, for want of a better alternative, still influence and **perplex cultural critics of the left and the right alike**.
>
> (idem, 61)

Peter Dale Scott also writes about Eliot's exclusionary tradition and its connection to the "integral nationalism" of Charles Maurras' L'Action Française. Maurras stated that the French Republic and its democracy was only a façade as what it sought to do was not as much to overthrow aristocracy as to follow some industrial and financial interests. In this, the writers were those who did no longer write for a cultured audience but depended on the masses, or on the capitalists who hired them to write for some newspapers. Maurras stated that only a nation united behind a monarchy could restore the balance of power between landed and bourgeois interests, and only in that equilibrium could the intelligentsia become independent again. L'Action Française promoted anti-Semitism,

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xenophobia, it was anti-parliamentary and very authoritative. It is said to have anticipated the Nazi and Fascist ideologies. Eliot's affinities with the nationalist French movement were connected with the dogma of the movement and with its plea for a European Catholicism that would establish order.

Anti-Semitism and Intolerance is the subject of *After Strange Gods*, as the critic mentioned above affirms. This is T. S. Eliot's effort to visualize a positive alternative to the society that was "worm-eaten with Liberalism":

> You are hardly likely to develop tradition except where the bulk of the population is relatively so well off where it is that it has no incentive or pressure to move about. The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exists in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large numbers of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.
>
> (in Moody, 1994: 67)

This was published when Hitler's boycott of Jewish shops had been proclaimed. The fear of contamination, his anti-Semitism, his explicit xenophobia are similar to Maurras' L'Action Française. Tradition, in his view, was endangered by the increase of foreign populations. His insistence on the deprecation of excessive tolerance is also one of the values that the extreme-political ideology formulates, and it is opposed to any democratic and consequently non-discriminatory discourse.

After the war and the revelations about the Holocaust, T. S. Eliot regretted his pronouncements and refused to publish *After Strange Gods* again; he never stated such remarks in public. He insisted not so much on the free-thinking Jews, but on the invasion of foreign races and pleaded for religious unity in a Christian society. Nevertheless, his lack of tolerance is discriminatory, and is evidently directed against one of the most unifying feature of his native American culture: that of multi-culturalism.

> The critic Michael North has noted how this goal of cultural reintegration is one shared by his *semblance* Georg Lukacs, and how one can only work for this goal "through modernism, through what Habermass calls 'the subversive force of modern thought itself'." He points to Eliot's praise of Joyce's mythical method as a destructive step toward the "order and form" that is "so earnestly desired."
>
> (idem, 68)

Regardless the doubt about Eliot's poems as politically charged, his famous *The Waste Land* remains a ground for literary allusions, and images of cultural dislocations and dissolutions, or a cubist collage, or a musical counterpoint of themes (Nelson, 1989: 239). All readings, both those that stress *form*, and those that refer to *content* involve textual support. Today, the poem can be seen in at least two different ways; it could be a revolutionary, code-shattering text that uses collage as main method – and this would become central to the modernist literary technique; it could also be seen as a conservative, reactionary text that refers to the horrors of modern life only in order to condemn it and to formulate some possible solutions: either an invigoration of the past with its solid values – which would see the poet as conservative and an adept of traditions, or a form of

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power to install order and discipline, even by force if necessary – which would induce the idea that there is subversive message in poems, encoded in metaphors and verses. Such contradictory analyses are the result of applying different discursive practices provided by different generations of theoreticians.

Modernism has been reconstituted and re-evaluated with new movements that have rearticulated some already existing practices. The example here is that of the *Fugitives*, a group that elaborated a collection of essays: *Fugitives: An Anthology of Verse* (1928), *I'll Take My Stands* (1930). As Cary Nelson states (idem, 241), they:

> "mixed **traditional tastes in poetic form with an anti-industrial agrarianism** that drew on a history of rural organizing and social advocacy but rearticulated it to positions that were largely **conservative**. Some of the members of this group, including Ransom, Tate, and Warren, gave the New Criticism, with its emphasis on **ahistorical literary analysis**, its initial impetus. In doing so, they drew on some of Eliot's critical essays and thereby reinforced a disciplinary inclination to view the fragmented **modernist text as a purely aesthetic object**, its linguistic fragmentation purified of social influence and critique. In a remarkable reversal of the revolutionary strain in modernism, a reversal that is still empowered today, literary theory thereby covertly fused the disjunctive modernist poem with the **idealized view of poetry in the genteel tradition**.

In the 1930 (idem, 169), past and present discourses underwent a realignment to form new meanings and these are read contextually and relationally in the light of the 1930s and of the interests and resistances of readers' times. **The left** did not provide the single articulation of literature in the USA in the period. The issues are appropriate when interpreting the **conservative political poetry of this period.** It is the case of the conservative counter-reaction that took form in opposition to modernism and of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, or the **Southern Agrarians** who were all academicians and they produced several book reviewing in the light of the *Humanist Controversy* promoted by the Harvard teacher of French, Irving Babbitt, a disciple of Maurras. The effects of their poetry were less tremendous than those who chose to write texts *of their times* with evident insertions of the social and the political. As Kenneth Rexroth states in *American poetry in the Twentieth Century* (1971: 107-108):

> As the economic crisis deepened, American society became as highly polarized as German or French, and almost all writers to greater or lesser degree moved to the Left. There had to be some writers around the Right pole, but America, where everybody is liberal and progressive, was very short of Right members.

Ransom was the senior member of the group that met at Vanderbilt University to read their poems and to discuss philosophy. They all argued for a return of the **classical formal verse**. Yet, Allen Tate still defended the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane (Nelson, 169). Then, they realized that there was antagonism toward modern culture and the increasing science and industrialization. The Crash of 1929 confirmed their believes, and feeling alienated from their South, they urged for a turning back to the **traditional southern values**.

Allen Tate's poems can be detached form the social context and treated as emblematic *wasteland*. He contributed to the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* which pleaded for an agrarian, Jeffersonian tradition as an alternative to the horrors of the industrial revolution in the north. With his *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* and *Reason and* Madness, he

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delineated an attack against abstract ideas that come from outside poetry, both from the social and from the biographical. To him, the complexities of imagery and emotion were important in the poetic text, and the "tension within a poem which complicates literal meanings with the subtleties of figurative speech" (Gottesman, 1979: 1336). History in his view has to be preserved and credited because historical dramatization placed the critic in the position of participating as a living imagination in a great work of literature. To this *historical imagination*, he added *the religious imagination*. These would contribute, in his view to a redefinition of the Southern Agrarian tradition whose strength derived from a sense of the provincial and regional community of custom:

I myself saw furious with blood
Neoptolemeus, at his side the black Atridae,
Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam
Cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires.
In that extremity I bore me well,
A true gentleman, valorous in arms,
Disinterested and honourable. Then fled:
That was a time when civilization
Run by the few fell to the many, and
Crashed to the shout of man, the clang of arms:
Cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up
The old man my father upon my back,
In the smoke made by the sea for a new world
Saving little – a mind imperishable
If time is, a love of past things tenuous
As the hesitation of receding love.

(from "Aeneas at Washington", in Gottesman, 1979: 1342-1343)

John Crowe Ransom was preoccupied with dignified problems like mutability and the inevitability of death, the denial of the body by the intellect, the consecration of the past, and the frustration of idealism. Instead of the intellectual abstraction instilled by industrialization and science in the modern mind, he proposed a regionalism that was to strengthen full sensibility and traditionalist community. He claimed that poetry should exclude the abstract modes of scientific and rational thought, and it should aim for the traditional fusion of morality and aesthetics with their effects on readers. Images, meter and connotations would lead the reader into a type ok knowledge that was more extensive than philosophy (Gottesman, 1264).This emphasis on verbal and formal features of poems, in opposition with historical and philosophical contexts, was to delineate one of the principles of what came to be known as New Criticism:

As an intruder I trudged with careful innocence
To mask in decency a meddlesome stare,
Passing the old house often on its eminence,
Exhaling my foreign weed on its weighted air.
[…]
Emphatically, the old house crumbled; the ruins
Would litter, as already the leaves, this petted sward;
And no annalist went in the lords or the peons;
The antiquary would finger the bits of shard.

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But on retreating I saw myself in the token,
How loving from my foreign weed the feather curled
On the languid air; and I went with courage shaken
To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world.

(from "Old Mansion", in Gottesman, 1979: 1270- 1271)

The range of poetry written in early twentieth century was terribly diverse with styles and subject matters that varied. Thus, poetry marked as "political" is continually called into question.

The issue at this point of the thesis is to see how much of the politically formulated ideology does or does not influence literary discourses and the other way round. Again, to take for instance the case of Ezra Pound, if admitting that it contains history, than it would mean that **his poems** have read and re-written and represented the history of those ages the same way American history of early twentieth century is represented in political rhetoric. It is known that national cultures tend to suppress awareness of poverty, inequality, prejudice, oppression, sexism and racism in order to promote an idealized self-image. Suppression of such awareness operates in the case of the modernist poetical discourses as well. One of the problems that have been called into question is if there is a relationship of determination and displacement between personality and writing. Cary Nelson offers an explanation:

> […] between Pound's political believes and his poetry, there will be partial and mixed relations of compensation and identity. Bound up with diverse other cultural influences, poetry and personality become an intractable but necessary arena of thought. Just as one cannot simply set aside Pound's politics so as to indulge oneself in the supposed lyrical and idealized literariness of the poetry, so too the politics of the *Cantos* may not be consistent or finally determinable. Their major discursive strains, however, include fascism and sexism of the worst sort.
>
> (Nelson, 1989: 242-243)

In the 1920s and the 1930s there was no boundary to political subjects; in the social environment of the time, **the avoidance of the context** – understood as the social and the political – **was constitutive of poetry** at the level of discursive formation and at the level of individual choice in its network of determinations (Nelson, 171). In its insistence on *form* and *text* to the detriment of the *context***,** it reinforces a-historical literary interpretations through the lenses of some theories that view the modernist text as nothing more than an aesthetic object, and this is consequently a traditional, therefore **conservative issue**.

And yet, if admitting that there are relationships of determination between **personality and writing**, then such a view would change perspectives on poems that are *just* some *aesthetic objects*. As Cary Nelson states (idem, 242), there is a totally contradictory idea hidden behind New Criticism's traditional rejection of authorial psychology as irrelevant to literary analysis. And this is that of the "wholly naïve view of the **psychology of writing**", which cannot exclude the psychology of the writer. If admitting that these two overlap, than this would mean that human personality is in the text unitary and coherent, with "an unchanging and retrievable essential core of meaning."

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Both in the case of Pound and Eliot, personality encompasses political believes that, even if being just collateral information, still constitute some forms of discourse that share an ideology which is transposed in the literary, therefore in the poetic.

The social function of poetry is a domain open to discussion and dispute. Still, poetry is a cultural domain that has been constantly repositioned. "There are some serious questions to be raised about the relation between that ideology [of Modernism, which separates aesthetics form politics] and modernist texts, and some equally serious questions about how that ideology continues to inflect our notions of what literature is and how it makes sense, makes ideals, for its readers"(Blair, 1999: 161).

The **deliberate avoidance of the political** in the case of poems**,** and the insistence on formal expression to the detriment of social commitment, **is in itself a political issue.** Specific literary performances, such as the modernist literary formal experimentation or the insistence on preserving traditions and conventions in the literary field as result of an alienation derived from excessive modernization, explicitly formulate their author's commitments to the matrix of modern social and political life.

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