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Andrew S. Gross, *The Pound Reaction. Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2015. 262 pp., ISBN 978-3-8253-6470-0)

Andrew S. Gross's book, *The Pound Reaction. Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature*, is not actually a Pound monograph. Better said, it is one – but not only that. Indeed, taking Pound's case as its starting point, it aims at much more than just re-reading Pound's poetry – even though this would have already been a major and applaudable task. But Gross's ambition is much higher: his study sets as a goal the examination of the *Bildung* of a whole cultural context, the formation of the post-war *Zeitgeist* in American literary studies. More precisely, his book tries to answer not a single question ("What does Pound's poetry look like if re-read now?"), but a whole set of questions, which the author explicitly asks early on his study:

The questions I ask are: How did postwar writers understand Pound's politics in relation to his poetics? Where did they place Pound in relation to existing cultural and legal institutions? Where was he located in the shifting political and cultural alliances of the Cold War? Where did midcentury writers locate themselves in relation to the arguments, institutions, and politics of the postwar cultural landscape? (36)

As one can already see from these questions, what Gross intends to do is see how Pound's poetics and politics influenced the poetics and politics of the Cold War intellectuals – and how they had thus a decisive influence on the construction of what Gross calls "the liberal aesthetic," which he finds definitive for contemporary American culture.

Before seeing in detail how Gross thinks that these influences took place and shape, I must pause for a moment and revere his intellectual courage; discussing so openly the relation between Pound's writing and his political madness is still a highly delicate and flammable undertaking. I experienced this myself at the Rotterdam poetry festival last year, when, after presenting the project of the Romanian Pound edition which I have been translating, under the coordination of Romania's foremost essayist and philosopher, Horia-Roman Patapievici,¹ I elicited two types of

reactions: either radical enthusiasm, or radical enragement. For half of the audience, Pound was a wonderful poet, the very inventor of poetic modernity, whose political *dementia* did not count at all; for the other half, he was a Fascist scoundrel, whose poetic skills were at best an alibi, and at worst an aggravating circumstance. What I find most remarkably courageous in Gross's approach is his subtle and yet straightforward lucidity of understanding and stating clearly that, in Pound's case, his poetics and his politics are indeed inseparable – they originate in each other, they influence each other, and the best empirical proof that they stand or fall together is the fact that, as soon as Pound's politics failed and ended, his poetry failed and ended too.

Embracing this position also means that one admits that there existed a precious prelapsarian portion of Pound's poetics which, prior to and against his political madness, has shaped and defined American poetics. Banal as it may seem, this rational and poised position also elicits hysterical anti-Pound reactions even from great minds, such as Harold Bloom's, *par exemple*. Now, Bloom's anti-Poundian vein is notorious; his aversion is already manifest in *The Anxiety of Influence*, his 1973 book, where his Freudian morphogenetical theory of poetry from Shakespeare to Hart Crane lists all Pound's significant contemporaries, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, Crane etc., but fails to mention Pound at all. (As a matter of fact, it does once – when it cites from a letter sent by Stevens to Richard Eberhart, where Pound's name is mentioned.² But it is not Bloom's intention to bring him into discussion – and he never does it in any part of the book, actually). And this aversion is also manifest in Bloom's monumental panorama of English poetry – where Pound, even though discussed extensively in terms of poetic ideology, is only present with two minor poems, *A Pact* and *Planh for the Young English King* (which makes Pound the most underrepresented poet in Bloom's anthology, placed on the same level with ultra-minor poets such as Isaac Rosenberg or Trumbull Stickney, who, for that matter, are also present with two poems each). Eliot, on the other hand, is given twenty pages, more than any other modern poet (two pages more than Wallace Stevens, Bloom's favourite besides Hart Crane).³ Pound is the daemonic figure (a daemonic absence, as a matter of fact) of Bloom's monumental anthology. He is simply “not humanly acceptable.”⁴

The aversion has in the meantime turned into a hysterical reaction in Bloom's otherwise wonderful book from last year, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*. While openly saying that it does not attempt to present *an* American canon, the book nevertheless attempts to be *the* American canon itself, "the dozen creators of the American sublime," as Bloom straightforwardly puts it:

This book is about the dozen creators of the American Sublime. Whether these are our most enduring authors may be disputable, but then this book does not attempt to present an American canon. ... Yet my own selection seems more central, because these writers represent our incessant effort to transcend the human without forsaking humanism.⁵

This book, "more central" than a canon, in Bloom's own words, pairs these twelve essential American writers in six doublets: Whitman and Melville, Emerson and Emily Dickinson, Hawthorne and Henry James, Mark Twain and Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, Faulkner and Hart Crane. Even though Eliot is present in this canonical dozen, one immediately notices the contemptuous tone in Bloom's critical commentary: those who dare admire his poetry are even accused, at one particular point, of participating "in murderous attitudes towards Jews and Judaism":

Despite this achieved splendor, what is most humane in me just does not allow more than a cold admiration. Stevens has helped me to live my life, while Eliot brings out the worst in me. ... I dismiss the exegetes who defend him and Ezra Pound; at best they are misguided, at worst they participate in murderous attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. We do not read only as aesthetes – though we should – but also as responsible men and women. By that standard, Eliot, despite his daemonic gift, is unacceptable once and for all time. (Bloom, *The Daemon* 402)

It is quite surprising to see that the aversion is now also directed towards Eliot – both poets have become now "unacceptable," they both "bring out the worst" in Bloom, they are now both "not humanly acceptable," to use Bloom's words from his monumental and yet idiosyncratic poetic panorama.

I have mentioned Bloom's case just to show the idiosyncrasies with which the Pound scholar has to contend if he is willing to take Pound's

poetry seriously alongside his politics. Of course, there are also important critics who dare to see Pound as a central poet of modernity – sometimes *the* central poet of American modernity, as Marjorie Perloff sees him, for example. Unlike Bloom, for whom Pound is at best an absence (and usually simply a *bête noire*), for Perloff Pound is the very poet responsible for the radical divide of American literary studies; as she puts it, the fundamental split parting the academic rivalries has Pound as its epicentre:

This is neither an idle quarrel nor a narrow sectarian war between rival academics (e.g. Bloom, Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, Frank Kermode in the Stevens camp; Kenner, Donald Davie, Guy Davenport, Christine Brooke-Rose among Poundians) who just happen to have different literary and political allegiances. This split goes deep, and its very existence raises what I take to be central questions about the meaning of Modernism – indeed about the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory.⁶

Thus, while Pound is an absence (or a “humanly unacceptable” presence) for Bloom, he is the origin of “the Pound tradition” for Perloff. As I was saying in the beginning, Gross’s endeavour has to navigate between radical rejections and radical enthusiasms. And it is remarkable to see how subtly and intelligently he manages to build up his case. He starts from the 1949 Bollingen Prize – which was famously granted to Ezra Pound, then an inmate of St. Elisabeth’s psychiatric ward. Pound was at the time a war criminal, charged with treason, but who – found mentally unfit to stand trial – was institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital with a military regime. The scandal was unavoidable – and Pound was defended by his supporters with the argument of free speech; ironically, a fascist poet was thus made “the symbol of democratic culture, a prisoner the spokesman of free speech” (1). Gross’s thesis is that the aftermath of this scandal, which involved the relation between poetry and politics, helped create what Gross calls “the liberal aesthetic,” or the separation of the poetic from the political (213).

Gross structures his book as a diptych: in its first part, he builds a theory of this liberal aesthetic, as constructed in the interventions contemporary with or subsequent to the 1949 Bollingen Prize scandal; the second part comprises six essays devoted to seven writers, all of them representing an essential piece in the construction of this “liberal

aesthetic.” The seven writers are (in the order in which they are discussed in the book) Ezra Pound, Karl Shapiro, W.H. Auden, Peter Viereck (a writer almost forgotten now, but curiously significant for Gross’s case study), Katherine Anne Porter and Leslie Fiedler (taken together in this fifth essay) and John Berryman. I will discuss in what follows, in this fatally limited review, the theory of the “liberal aesthetic,” leaving aside the illustrative essays – which are all convincing and quite well-informed. (Bibliographically speaking, the only important flaw I could detect was the absence of Philip Coleman’s superb book on John Berryman – which, discussing Berryman’s “public vision,”⁷ namely his concern with the public sphere, not only challenges the dominant confessional labelling, but also profoundly rhymes with the demonstration Gross is making in his own book. It really is a pity that these two books did not get to communicate – even though Coleman mentions twice Gross’s 2009 article on Berryman.)

Gross uses as the starting point of his demonstration William Barrett’s identification of the crux of the issue: “How far is it possible, in a lyric poem, for technical embellishments to transform vicious and ugly matter into beautiful poetry?” (9). The tension of the Cold War contributes to the creation of a cultural and political context which is favourable, in particular, to the transformation of a fascist poet into a symbol of free speech and aesthetic autonomy, and in general to the radical separation and even excision of the political from the poetic. Literature was separated, almost brutally, from the politics – just like “Pound was separated from his poetry” (20). With the institutionalization of Pound, literary studies were in their turn institutionalized; with the depoliticization of Pound, literature and the methodology of literary studies were depoliticized.

This is, in a nutshell, how the liberal aesthetic was built – from the separation of politics from literature, in an attempt to build “an institutional space” which would “secure freedom from the threat of totalitarianism” (23). A “postwar cultural landscape” is thus constructed in which “lyrical individuation was linked to the institutionalization of Pound (in a mental hospital) and of literary studies (in universities)” (37). Catalyzed by the Bollingen Prize scandal and the reaction (either positive or negative) to Pound’s poetics and politics, an enormous argument was built, stating that literature had to be separate from politics in a free

society. As the poets and critics involved in the construction of this argument were almost all academics, the result was that “the modernism that established itself in universities soon began to seem more bureaucratic than revolutionary” (130). This is the final point of the liberal aesthetic – which has succeeded in isolating the dangerous politics from art at the price of transforming itself into a bureaucratic language.

It is most interesting to observe that the anti-communist discourse of the Cold War in the United States is extensively coincident with what liberal writers captive in the communist countries in Eastern Europe strived to do, facing serious and sometimes fatal risks: namely to keep art separate from politics. The return to personal lyricism (namely what Pound was supposedly doing in *The Pisan Cantos*) was something forbidden in communist countries; totalitarian regimes put into act an elimination of the private space and of the secret (Derrida: “If a right to a secret is not maintained, then we are in a totalitarian space”⁸); therefore, private and secretive lyricism had no right to exist in the cultural space in communism. Poetry *had* to be political in communist regimes; “political” meaning, in this case, not against the system, but glorifying it. The general reaction of all important writers captive in communist totalitarianisms was to slyly avoid, by all stylistic means, the compulsory political writing and to aim at the reconstruction of a personal lyricism. Coming from another direction, these anti-communist writers captive within the European communisms shared the same ideal – namely that of building an institutional space which would secure freedom from the threat of totalitarianism; of creating a strange sort of cultural autonomy in a space where all autonomy was denied.

Matei Călinescu, the American literary theorist originating from Romania, has written in his memoirs about this generalized “horror of politics.” He observes that communism, despite its obsessive insistence on politics and on pan-politicization, has as a result a “genuine political lobotomy,” a “severe atrophy of the political sense.”⁹ For almost two decades, more precisely from 1948 to 1964, this political lobotomy was the leading rule of the Romanian literary system. The emancipation from the pan-politicization and the transition to a sort of “liberal aesthetic” (insofar as it was possible within a totalitarian space) took about ten years – and it was perhaps the main cultural war inside the Romanian communism.¹⁰ Eventually, after the mid-1960s, Romanian literary studies

managed to build that institutional space which kept literature almost separate from the intrusions of communist politics; it was not called “the liberal aesthetic,” but rather “the autonomy of the aesthetic”; nevertheless, its profound meaning was exactly that described by Gross in his apt book: the separation of the art from politics, in order to preserve the personal freedom of the artist.

It is obvious now that Gross’s book is not a Pound monograph *per se*. Instead, it is the monograph of a cultural war – the first (and maybe the most important) cultural war after the end of World War II –, having as an objective the edification of an autonomy of the aesthetic in relation to politics. This cultural war was a successful attempt to “refuse the study for their politique,” as Emerson wrote in a wonderful poem 170 years ago; and it made possible the transition from a lyrical individualism to a lyricism of identity. It is a cultural war which was not specific to the United States only, and not to liberal cultures only, as we have seen; it has instated in its right “the free speech argument which distinguished poetry from politics in the name of liberal individualism” (227), “the free speech equation between lyricism and liberalism” (230) called by Gross “the liberal aesthetic” (and dubbed as “the autonomy of the aesthetic” in the East-European tradition); and it was probably the cultural war necessary for all cultures trying to enter postmodernity. It was the first postmodern cultural war; and it has constructed a massive cultural continuity, making possible the reinitiation of a major dialogue after it was brutally interrupted by the war.

RADU VANCU,
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Notes:

¹ The Romanian edition of Pound, due to be published by the Humanitas publishing house, is designed by Patapievici to comprise four volumes, for which I will provide the translation and Patapievici the critical apparatus. So far, only the first volume has been published: Ezra Pound, *Opere I. Poezii 1908-1920 / Works I. Poems 1908-1920*, ed. by Horia-Roman Patapievici, transl. by Mircea Ivănescu and Radu Vancu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2015). The second volume, comprising *ABC of Reading* and *Guide to Kulchur*, is currently forthcoming.

Volumes 3 and 4 will comprise *The Cantos*, and perhaps a 5th volume will contain a selection of Pound's essays.

² Harold Bloom, *Anxietatea influenței. O teorie a poeziei / The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008: 53).

³ *The Best Poems of the English Language. From Chaucer through Robert Frost, selected and with Commentary by Harold Bloom* (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Harper Perennial Books, 2007. 896-916).

⁴ "Pound's major poetic work is *The Cantos*, which seem to me to anthologize badly, nor do I have much esteem for them, or for Pound, whether as a person or poet. ... *The Cantos* contain material that is not humanly acceptable to me" (Bloom, *The Best Poems* 858-859).

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows. Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (Oxford University Press, 2015. 3).

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996. 2).

⁷ Philip Coleman, *John Berryman's Public Vision. Relocating the Scene of Disorder* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2014).

⁸ Qtd. in Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011. 103). In the same respect, see also the acute observation of Alain Finkielkraut: "The great contribution of modern times to civilization was *the art of separation*: the separation of Church and state, the separation of civil society and the political community, the separation of public and private life" (Alain Badiou and Alain Finkielkraut, *Confrontation. A Conversation with Aude Lancelin*. Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2014. 89).

⁹ See Matei Călinescu, *Itaca*, in Matei Călinescu and Ion Vianu, *Amintiri în dialog / Memories in Dialogue*, (Iași: Polirom, 1998. 280). Călinescu had also written in his diary that, after his emigration to the United States in 1973, he was shocked to see the American academics insisting so much on the political nature of literature. He had fled away from a country and a literature intoxicated by politics in order to enter a free country and a free literature just as interested in them. It took him a whole decade (as he writes in another diary entry) to understand that the political nature of literature was something completely different than what he was taught in Romania: it was about reactivity and courage, about reacting to a system, instead of adulating and glorifying it. See Matei Călinescu, *Un fel de jurnal / A Kind of Diary* (Iași: Polirom, 2005).

¹⁰ This cultural war in communist Romania was most eloquently documented in two massive studies: M. Nițescu, *Sub zodia proletcultismului. Dialectica puterii / Under the Sign of Proletcultism. The Dialectics of Power* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995); Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului / Criticism in the Trenches. From Socialist Realism to the Autonomy of the Aesthetic* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2011). Goldiș's book is the most precise and informed reconstruction of this cultural war, excavating from the archives of those dark times all the necessary pieces of the puzzle.