When has politics made good poetry?

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Inspired by the utopian dreams of the French Revolution, Romantic poets, like Wordsworth, produced a kind of poetry of great scope and power; a poetry that, in many ways, reflected the poetic ambition to perform the work that political action seemed to have failed to do. In the face of the historical wrongs that succeeded the Revolution, and the consequent loss of hope in political action to effect social change, poets “looked to poetry to carry the burden of spiritual and cultural enlightenment” (LONGENBACH, 1999, p. 109). In this regard, Longenbach claims that since Wordsworth, “major public events have provoked poetry’s ‘internalization’ of practical politics time and time again.”

Modern poetry, in various ways, sought to restrain the singing voice and the lyric voice of romantic poetry as received through nineteenth-century poetry. The great claims made for poetry by the romantics seemed stale and no longer practicable in the modern world. Imagist poetry, for instance, with its minute objects and its concern with radical condensation and precision, is probably the most extreme reaction to the romantic discursive breadth and its poetic ambition. Unlike its Romantic predecessors, Imagism sought to make the universe of poetry as condensed as possible. However, such small world and limited ambitions proved not to be sufficient for modern poetry.

According to Longenbach’s view, “modern poetry’s response to the First World War plays out a drama that was enacted by romantic poetry’s response to the French Revolution.” (LOGENBACH, 1999, p. 109) He argues that modern poets’ wartime predicament was the challenge to be confronted with an epic subject, “one that seemed to cry out for the power and scope of the kind of poetry that Wordsworth wrote […]”. Ezra Pound seemed to be the most ambitious of the modern poets. Paraphrasing Shelley, who thought himself as an “unacknowledged legislator”, Pound desired “to be the acknowledged legislator of the world” (LOGENBACH, 1999, p. 118).

Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, perhaps more than any other modern poets, embody modern poetry’s will to make poetry culturally central and powerful and to reposition it, to achieve for

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it the power to define and describe culture. *The Cantos*, the longest poem in modern poetry, a poem Pound would write all his life, intended to include history. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) not only describes the post-war sense of uncertainty and desolation but it also has a broad symbolic significance which, combined with Eliot’s skilled use of formal innovations, resulted in what was considered a major statement of modernist poetics. Yeats’s *The Tower* (1927) “with its assumed mythology, its self-conscious textuality, its cast of historical and literary characters, its echo chamber sonorities in which a literary tradition lives [...] can be read as a companion work of [...] *The Waste Land*” (BROWN apud RAINEY, 2010, p. 302).

In many different ways, modern poetry sought to master reality. William Carlos Williams’s archetypal plot borrowed from Biblical myths in *Spring and All* (1923), Hart Crane’s American myth in the long poem “The Bridge” (1930), Marianne Moore’s idea of the genuine, Wallace Stevens’s notion of a supreme fiction, are some examples of how Modern poetry searched for absolutes. This idea of a quest for the fiction of an absolute finds resonates with Longenbach’s argument that even the modern poets who resisted the epic challenge, that is, who refused to respond to the social and aesthetic challenge of the war, felt it and were affected by it (LOGENBACH, 1999, p. 103).

W. H. Auden, who is a later modernist poet, positioned as an endpoint to modernism, is a good example of a poet who offers imaginative alternatives that open the over-sized cultural ambitions of modern poetry to critique. In his essay “The Poet and the City”, Auden states that “[p]oets are, by the nature of their interests and the nature of artistic fabrication, singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics” (AUDEN, 1975, p. 84). He goes on to explain that, “politics and economics are concerned with large numbers of people, hence with the human average [...] and with impersonal [...] relations”. On the other hand, he claims, poets’s “natural interest is in singular individuals and personal relations” (AUDEN, 1975, p. 84).

In the same essay, Auden addresses the issue of what the social effectiveness or responsibility of art in the modern world might be. He argues that the characteristic style of Modern poetry ought to be an intimate tone of voice, whereas the typical hero should be the common man or woman with a personality:

The characteristic style of ‘Modern’ poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience; whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds
phony. And its characteristic hero is neither the “Great Man” nor the romantic rebel, both doers of extraordinary deeds, but the man or woman in any walk of life who, despite all the impersonal pressures of modern society, manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own. (AUDEN, 1975, p. 84)

The above passage indicates that Auden certainly disparages the poetic ambition of some of the most representative modern poets, such as the ones mentioned earlier, Pound’s *The Cantos*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Yeats’s *The Tower*, or even Stevens’s “supreme fiction”; a kind of poetry that presents itself as astounding, enormous, visionary.

In the same essay, Auden criticises Tolstoi’s proposition that there can be no art “when the gratuitous and the utile are divorced from each other” (AUDEN, 1975, p. 75). Auden blames Tostoi for believing that utility, even a spiritual utility, but utility without gratuity was sufficient to produce art. For Auden, in the modern society, where the poets do not have a public status as they used to in the past, art should not be based on utility. Therefore, he criticises “l’art engagé”, “art as propaganda”. He also reproves of the godlike poet, who “endow[s] the gratuitous with a magic utility of its own” (AUDEN, 1975, p. 76), and creates his own subjective world. When giving an account of the function of poetry, Auden states that:

> The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and of the world around us. I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient. I hope not. I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive. (AUDEN, 1988, p. 371)

This purpose is related to Auden’s attitude towards poetry as a means of knowledge capable of freeing oneself, especially by being conscious of the socially constructed, artificial nature of the ideological discourses by which we shape an identity.

Auden sought to make poetry a disenchanted knowledge, like science, and he was fundamentally concerned with poetry as a form of knowledge, a way to know the world. His poetic practice was engaged in fostering a constant alertness to absolutist discourses and many of his poems have the effect of deconstructing the premises of a definite history, which he sometimes achieves by causing the reader to be disoriented by the unexpected uses of preconceived poetic formulas. John R. Boly remarks that, for Auden, “if poetry does have an external purpose, it is to disenchant and disintoxicate” (BOLY, 2004, p. 149).

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2 Idem, p. 75.
Art... is not Magic, i.e., a means by which the artist communicates or arouses his feelings in others, but a mirror in which they may become conscious of what their own feelings really are: its proper effect, in fact, is disenchancing. (AUDEN apud SMITH, 1997, p. 53)

In Auden, disenchantment or disillusionment is, therefore, the result of becoming conscious and ultimately freeing oneself through knowledge. However, to achieve its “disenchancing” effect, a poem should have the power to enchant. According to the poet’s view, through the beauty and formal perfection of a poem, poetry provides an access to a kind of order that inspires hope and joy. This enchanting-disenchainting effect is accounted for in the following extract:

[We] want a poem to be a beautiful object a verbal Garden of Eden which, by its formal perfection, keeps alive in us the hope that there exists a state of joy without evil or suffering which it can and should be our destiny to attain. At the same time, we look to a poem for some kind of illumination about our present wandering condition, since, without self-insight and knowledge of the world, we must err blindly with little chance of realizing our hope…. (AUDEN apud SMITH, 1997, p. 17)

Auden was very interested in knowledge as a way of understanding how society and the individual self are moulded by economic and historical circumstances. His writing was engaged in the process of understanding and also transcending those circumstances. Throughout his career, not only as a poet, but also as a critic, Auden encouraged “a broadly applicable recognition and wariness of the interpretative paradigms that would deny individual freedom” (BOLY, 2004, p. 151). The pursuit of a knowledge, or awareness, that would enable the individual to understand and transcend the social and cultural paradigms that limit his freedom is, according to Stan Smith, “a predicament that links early and late Auden” (SMITH, 1997, p. 3).

In his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, Auden is concerned with matters of perspective, with how things are framed, drawing our attention to the relativity of any point of view. In the poem, he invites us to look at Brueghel’s pictures and reflect on art’s relation to suffering, and also on how human suffering is positioned in life:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;

(AUDEN, 1994, p. 32)
The “Old Masters” in the above extract are the classical artists who worked before 1800 and of whom Breughel is one. In the painting, the dramatic event of Icarus’ fall into the water is not in the centre of the picture. The ploughman, who does not notice as Icarus plunges into the water, and is pictured with his back turned to the fall, has greater prominence in the picture than Icarus’ fall:

In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; (AUDEN, 1994, p. 32)

Perspectivism is an important word for Auden. In Auden’s 1936 autobiographical poem Letter to Lord Byron (AUDEN, 1994, p. 102), the poet compares the artist to the secret agent. The secret agent, its duality and ambiguity, its position of indeterminacy and danger, works as a suitable metaphor for an artist who, in his life and also in his work, in different ways, occupied the indeterminate, indefinite place of the frontier. As an artist, the point of view of the secret agent as one who looks in from the margin, or as a stranger, was a position that Auden defended as having a valuable critical perspective. In his life, the poet’s experienced the position of hovering on the frontier not only for being an artist, but also due to the context of his homosexuality and of his British/American nationality, on the account of his 1939 emigration to the US. “On the frontier” became “one of Auden’s most famous motif” (SMITH, 1997, p. 19) one that provides a precious “double focus”:

The double focus makes it possible to look at one’s self and one’s world with the eye of a stranger. According to the poet, without this self-estrangement “we would never have become fully conscious, which is to say that we would never have become, for better or worse, fully human” (AUDEN apud SMITH, 1997, p. 29).

For Auden, becoming “fully conscious” is the same as becoming “fully human” (AUDEN apud SMITH, 1997, p. 29). According to his view, only consciousness will give us the possibility of an existential freedom, without which the poet believes it is not possible to be “fully human”. He claims that we have to be conscious of the circumstances in which we make our moral choices, and conscious that these circumstances are determined by necessity. Thus, being conscious is the only way to find an existential freedom in recognition of necessity. Although Marxism and Existentialism played an important role in the way Auden sought to understand
himself and his age, the Freudian psychology is probably the earliest and most powerful influence in Auden’s pursuit of consciousness. Auden believed that the Freudian psychology and poetry shared the common mood of disillusionment, thus potentially making individuals more conscious, and consequently, more human:

Auden found his earliest ally in Freudian psychology. The two shared a common component, in the cultural manipulation of individuals to act against their own interests, and a common strategy, “to dissipate a reaction by becoming conscious of it”. [...] Elsewhere he added that psychology and poetry share a common mood, disillusionment, and a common hope, that individuals can become more free and thus more human by discovering the hidden forces that rule them without their knowledge or consent. (BOLY, 2004, p. 144)

Auden’s poetry, in different ways, brings the dimension of the Freudian unconscious. His 1928 poem, later entitled “The Secret Agent”, has as a protagonist the figure of the spy or secret agent. In his interpretation of the poem, John Fuller takes into account the Freudian notion of the unconscious as dominated by repressed sexuality. The dimension of the unconscious is especially suggested by the fact that the trained spy “walk[s] into a trap”, “seduced by old tricks”, that is, is deceived by the hidden forces of the unconscious that rule us against our will:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into a trap
For a bogus guide, seduced by old tricks. (AUDEN, 1994, p. 32)

Guided by the last line of the poem, which was taken from an Old English love poem, and the context of Auden’s homosexuality, Fuller provides a possibility for contextualizing the poem, which addresses to the failure of the individual as emotionally and sexually frustrated:

Thus the situation is one of unconsummated love. The spy represents the individual’s emotional urge to make contact with another human being (“This new district”); he is forced to act as a secret agent because the individual does not consciously recognize his love (the spy) and represses it. “They”, who ignore his wires, and eventually shoot him, represent the conscious will, the Censor, which represses the individual’s emotional desires” (FULLER, 1970, p. 34).

Considering the British context of a social crisis in the 1930s, it is possible to infer that the poem alludes not only to the failure of
the individual frustrated by social convention, but also to the British failure, its historical reckoning of crisis, its national paralysis.

In various ways, Auden opens the over-sized cultural ambitions of Modern poetry to critique. Auden’s poetry is concerned with the present, it is beyond the nostalgia of a modernism that reflects a state of cultural decay and crisis, and it also refuses the Romantic promise and celebration. Also, Auden is an anti-mythological poet who considered “the cohesive structures of myth... a dangerous force” (BOLY, 2004, p. 147). The role of myth as truth and its anti-historical pretensions were incompatible with his concern with the social effect of poetry. The constant revision and censorship of his own work is revealing of his commitment in writing a poetry that could be in accordance with his beliefs and that he could take responsibility for.

One of Auden’s most drastic self-revisions was eliminating from his work one of the most famous poems of the thirties, “Spain 1937”, written in response to the Spanish Civil War anti-Fascist struggle. In the poem, Auden is calling us to do the work of revolution and postpone utopian projects such as “the rediscovery of romantic love”3. The poem powerfully affirms the precedence of political over individual commitments. Auden cut the whole poem out of his work because he rejected the validity of the notion of a “necessary murder” in order to advance a cause.

Another celebrated poem of the thirties was also censored by Auden, “September 1, 1939”, written on the occasion of the beginning of the Second World War, had a whole stanza cut out because Auden dismissed the line “We must love one another or die” as “incurably dishonest” (SMITH, 1997, p. 78):

There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.4

The forms of rhetoric that characterise both “Spain” and “September 1, 1939” would be mistrusted and later abandoned by Auden. This kind of poetry was related to what he came to think as utopian political goals. Instead, his claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” in the same year poem “In Memory of W.B.Yeats” gained more resonance in the face of the historical wrongs. By “poetry makes

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3 Poem not published in Collected.
nothing happen” Auden meant not only that his politically engaged poems made nothing happen, but also that putting art to one cause was far from what he considered to be a poet’s proper task.

However, the famous line of “In Memory of W.B.Yeats” is not “Poetry makes nothing happen”, but it continues, “Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives”:

Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth. (AUDEN, 1994, p. 248)

Auden’s poem is a powerful claim for what poems can do. Poetry certainly does not direct a future, but it survives as a perpetual speaking presence. It is also “a way of happening”, a symbol. The image of the mouth evokes the mouth of a river or the mouth of a poet, through which language flows. Auden’s poem itself is a happening, it is a lesson in how to praise:

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. (AUDEN, 1994, 248 – 249)

Auden’s elegy for his fellow poet reveals a great faith on poetry. Auden’s belief in the capacities of poetry can be extended to his belief on the capacities of language to rise above the constructions that he so much wanted to become conscious of and to free himself from.

BIBLIOGRAPHY