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Media, Propaganda, and the Intellectual: Re-Reading Ezra Pound in the Age of Neo-Fascism

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Abstract

In this paper, an explicit praise of the war-time propaganda and support of Benito Mussolini by Ezra Pound is re-read not as the bizarre deviation of a modernist genius but as a constituent of an ideological creation with immediate contemporary significance. In a time when the authoritarian leaders of all forms of democracy have come back, the case of Pound presents a critical approach to studying how intellectuals turn crisis into authoritarian desire by aestheticizing it, how media is turned into a means of propaganda, and how literary prestige itself may serve as an ideological disguise. Based on the theory of the aestheticization of politics by Walter Benjamin, Matthew Feldman as an archival theorist, and the recorded history of Pound in the Italian neo-fascist movement, CasaPound Italia, the paper contends that the Fascist activity of Pound was not a peripheral part of his aesthetics but a structural part of it. The paper further suggests that the modern revival of authoritarian populism reinstates exactly the process that Pound enacted: transformation of economic and cultural crisis into spectacle and spectacle into political will.

Keywords: *Ezra Pound, fascism, propaganda, Walter Benjamin, aestheticization of politics, neo-fascism, CasaPound, authoritarian populism, modernism, media*

Introduction: The Modernist Who Would Not Be Excused:

The long and uncomfortable tradition in literary criticism is to detach the work of a writer and their politics. Antisemitism of T.S. Eliot, flirtation with Irish fascism of Yeats, active participation in the Nazi party of Heidegger: each has been emptied of all the criticism which has become heroic at the hands of the literary creation. Of all cases Ezra Pound is the most difficult. He did not just sympathise with fascism through a window. He made hundreds of paid radio propaganda broadcasts on behalf of Mussolini's Italy and a later Nazi puppet state against the United States government, Jewish finance and the Allied war effort between 1941 and 1945 (Ezra Pound" 2). In October 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself began treason charges against him (Feldman, Ezra Pound: Modernist" 5). These do not constitute peripheral biographical facts. They are the main activities of a man who made a personal decision, more than once and knowingly, to give intellectual sanction to mass murder.

Pound made hundreds of paid radio propaganda broadcasts on behalf of Mussolini's Italy between 1941 and 1945, culminating in a formal treason indictment by President Roosevelt in October 1942" (Ezra Pound" 2).

However, the literary scholarship has been long able to save the reputation of Pound by considering his politics to be a pathology. According to "Coming to Terms with Ezra Pound's Politics," the emergence of the New Criticism in American universities, which demanded the division of the biographical and ideological issues out of the analytical assessment of the literature, allowed studying the *Cantos* without looking at the fascist material. According to Matthew Feldman, the most respected authority on the radical right and the author of the book *Ezra Pound, Fascist Propaganda, 1935-1945* (Palgrave, 2013), this division is intellectually unsustainable (Feldman, "Ezra Pound's Enjambment" 8). The same position is demanded in this paper. It could no longer be a historical curiosity that Pound's case is in an age characterized by the emergence of authoritarian leaders in the known democracies. It should be understood as a form of model: a blueprint of the aestheticization of crisis into authoritarian desire, and the intellectual as the propagandist.

The Ideological Formation: Fascism As Aesthetic Commitment:

Pound was not just an ad hoc supporter of Mussolini. It developed during a period of ten years of ideological development. In 1924, he relocated to Italy and he was, according to his subsequent recognition, profoundly impressed by the project of the Duce within a year (Ezra Pound" 2). In 1933 he gained a personal audience with Mussolini in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome. It resulted in the meeting which led to *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), at which point Pound tried to insist that the founding vision of Thomas Jefferson and the fascist state of Mussolini were ideologically similar. According to Feldman (Ezra Pound: Modernist"), in 1942, Pound wrote to the Royal Finance Office of Italy that he composed the book on its behalf in the interests of Italy to serve as propaganda. The suggestion that Pound stumbled into fascism, or that he was too innocent to realize what he was approving, goes to pieces in the face of this sort of evidence.

Pound was not influenced to fascism by naivety, but by ideology. His economic theory of the evils of usury and of the corruption of financial capitalism brought him to the antisemitic by a logic that was not aberrant but perfectly consistent with that of the interwar European far-right thought. According to "Ezra Pound: Fascist Modernism," Pound used the next four years between 1938 and 1943 to publish essays in the major fascist literary magazine, *Meridiano di Roma*, spanning the familiar Poundian topics: the Jewish domination of the banking markets, financial reform, and literary criticism. There was not a distinction between the propagandist and the poet. As the scholar contends, the aesthetics and the ideology were interlaced: Pound had invested in fascism and his new modernism was a direct outcome of this investment.

Here is just the point that makes Pound so practical as a case of criticism in our day. He was not just a bad opinionated artist. He is an artist whose aesthetics and whose politics grew in a mutual formation uninterrupted. His fascism is coded in the *Cantos*, which are not distinguishable. According to "The Politics of Aesthetics," the aesthetics of fascism are uncannily parallel to the politics of fascism - in Pound, fascism turns out to be the visible

and condemnable surface of a more comprehensive interlocking of politics and aesthetics. Mussolini was made fun to Pound, who appears in Canto XLI as The Boss. The poem does not have to deal with a problem that he is. He is an architectural object in it.

Aestheticizing Crisis: Benjamin's Warning and Its Application:

The essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by Walter Benjamin (1935) provides the most accurate theoretical explanation of what Pound was up to. As Benjamin might have argued, fascism tries to structure the newly formed proletarian masses but without a change in the property order that the masses are trying to remove. Fascism finds its redemption in not providing these masses with their right, but of providing them with an opportunity to express themselves. The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life (Benjamin qtd. in "Ezra Pound" 6). The radio broadcasts by Pound were the performance of this logic on miniature levels. They did not provide the American working classes with material redress. They provided them with an aestheticized version of conspiracy, cultural decadence, and the mighty leader who would restore order of things.

As Benjamin warned, "the logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (Benjamin qtd. in "Ezra Pound" 6), a warning that the radio broadcasts of Pound enacted with chilling precision.

It is impossible not to notice the modern topicality of this scheme. The diagnosis of fascism by Benjamin as put forward in "Benjamin's Warning" is painfully accurate when it comes to authoritarian aesthetics today. It is ruled by a small elite that dominates the political and economic system; that has caused the recurrent destruction of the lower classes; and that has created a reactionary force to feed the lower classes on aesthetics rather than structural changes. The staged rally, the social media show, the image-controlled strongman: these are not comparisons to the moment of Pound. They are continuations of the same mechanism. Authoritarian aestheticization, as the medium essay by Rodeux argues, refers to any regime that aestheticizes politics, fascist or otherwise.

The element that Pound puts into this system is the intellectual. Fascism has never lacked cultural legitimacy. The poet is needed by the strongman. Mussolini knew that is why cultural apparatus of his government as it is explained in the Oxford Academic article about Pound and Italian cultural nationalism (Paul 3) actively invited artists and writers to participate in it. Culture was not an ornament of the fascist state, but a means of shaping the national consciousness and of repressing the struggle between classes. Pound was aware of this as well, hence the reason why he did not simply write poetry during the war years. He penned political propaganda plans, communicated with fascist elites in Britain, Italy and Germany and strived to leverage his literary fame as a platform of political propaganda (Feldman, "Ezra Pound: Modernist" 5). The status of modernism was an aesthetic disguise.

The Posthumous Life: Pound And Contemporary Neo-Fascism:

The thesis that the fascism of Pound was a historical deviation is disproved beyond any reasonable doubt by a single fact: there is now an active neo-fascist movement in Italy in the

twenty-first century which has identified itself with his name. CasaPound Italia (CPI), which was officially formed in 2008, is named after the *Cantos* against usury of Pound and his radio talks about the Italian Social Republic (CasaPound" 1). According to the records provided by Kenes, CPI clearly mentions Pound as an example of implementing fascist ideology to modern political issues. The visual propaganda of the movement combines the images of Mussolini and fascist iconography with the allusions to Pound, Marinetti, Sorel, Yeats and Nietzsche and creates what researchers Castelli Gattinara and Froio describe as a hybrid form of communication. This eclectic style in its turn is a Poundian bequest: the juxtaposition of a high art and political brutality is precisely what the *Cantos* do.

The article by Matthew Feldman in *New American Studies Journal* is a case study of three people who visited Pound in his institutionalization period at St. Elizabeths hospital in Washington, namely, Eustace Mullins, John Kasper, and Matthias Koehl. The three of them all played important roles in postwar American fascism. The hospital room that Pound stayed was a point of fascist connection. Rejecting the politics of Pound as an aberrant eccentricity on the reason that he was not only a fascist is unsustainable (Feldman 4). Mussolini used to be a journalist as well. Hitler was also a painter. These multitudes do not nullify the political decisions, nor do they nullify the outcomes. The place of Pound in the establishment of the postwar American fascism, as Feldman research proves, is real and recorded.

According to "Reading Ezra Pound in the Neofascist Age of Trump," in its media approach, CasaPound Italia is breathtakingly cunning. It has rendered it normal to talk about fascism as a practicable political possibility in the present time. The essay suggests that fascism prefers to seem to be on the march when it is actually on the creep, and is more difficult to notice. That is what the career of Pound is all about. He never came to fascism in a dramatic conversion. He had been floating there over ten years of ideological development, through correspondence networks, through journal publication, through the gradual naturalisation of antisemitic tropes and economic conspiracy theory. The mechanism is recognisable in the present.

The Intellectual and the Strongman: Crisis, Legitimacy, And Desire:

It is not just a historical question that this paper has been building up to. It is structural. Why do intellectuals go to fascism? According to the case made by Pound, it is not necessarily that the failure of reason is the answer, but rather the temptation of order. He lived to see the carnage of World War I, which in his opinion was caused by finance capitalism. He witnessed the precariousness of the interwar period, the inefficiency of liberal democratic institutions in bringing about economic stability, and the seeming vitality and integrity of the fascist project. According to "Ezra Pound: Fascist Modernism," Pound had adhered to fascism because he had felt that the original project of the Western civilisation was exhausted and corrupted. Fascism did not appear to him as barbarism but as a rebirth.

This is not a crazy reaction as explained by Benjamin but a reaction that is politically created. According to the Medium essay (Rodeux 3), when reading Benjamin in the present day: authoritarian aestheticization offers the paradigm of a form of politics that alters lawful economic dissatisfaction into spectacular fantasy, giving the people a sense of expression without altering the order of things. Pound was not an inactive spectator of this conversion.

He was a producer of its active ones. His radio talks were manipulated with emotion instead of argument. Pound, as Feldman observes (*Ezra Pound: Modernist* 6), was successful in adhering to the theory of Hitler who posited that emotion, and to a higher degree, hatred, was a much more powerful tool in propaganda than reason, balance, or probity.

Feldman observes that Pound adhered to the theory of Hitler who posited that emotion, and to a higher degree, hatred, was a much more powerful tool in propaganda than reason, balance, or probity" (Feldman, *Ezra Pound: Modernist* 6).

This is the model that is still active today. The contemporary strongman does not argue. He performs. He transforms the justifiable complaints of a deindustrialised working population to a show of national shame and cultural renewal. He provides the masses with the feeling of being angry but does not offer a way to alter the actual property relations. This mechanism was determined by Benjamin in 1935. Pound enacted it from 1935 to 1945. Since 2003, CasaPound Italia changed it to serve social media. The chain of transmission is not symbolic. It is documented.

It is not that Pound was a uniquely evil man that makes his case instructive to the present but rather that he was uniquely placed. He was culturally authoritative. He had an international network. He possessed a fine idiom of aesthetics capable of taking on political content without seeming to be obnoxiously partisan. It is this combination, the highbrow intellectualism giving credibility to authoritarian politics, that is exactly the formula that authoritarian movements today are striving to imitate. They have discovered in Pound not merely a symbol, as CasaPound shows, but a method. According to *Coming to Terms with Ezra Pound's Politics* (7), the specific mixture of economic populism, conspiracy theory, and outright racism of Pound, rather than appearing odd and out-of-date, sounds alarmingly modern.

Conclusion: Reading Against the Grain, Reading Against the Present:

This paper has maintained that the support of Mussolini by Ezra Pound cannot be put aside in his modernism. It was not a regrettable extravagance to an otherwise commendable career. It was the rationalization of an ideological formation which started with economic crisis, passed through antisemitism and cultural nationalism, and culminated in wartime treason. The process that led to this creation is not limited to the 1930s Europe. Structurally, it can be found in any instance when economic unsteadiness is transformed into aesthetic spectacle by the leaders who assure order and restoration, and maintain the very structures that create instability.

Re-reading Pound in the era of neo-fascism involves a number of things at once. It refers to the rejection of the comfortable distinction between the aesthetic and the political. It consists in being serious about the recorded movement of Poundian ideology to postwar fascism and to CasaPound Italia. It does not imply the historical commentary in the warning which Benjamin gives to us but a live diagnosis. It suggests questioning, without the spacing of time, what the present equivalents of the radio broadcast would be, what sorts of media transmit aestheticized authoritarian desire nowadays, and who in the current generation of intellectuals are playing the role that Pound played at that moment. The response to the latter question will not be comfortable. Yet this is the question that the career of Pound, not canonised, but to be taken seriously, requires scholarship to answer.

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