The impact of socio-Historical Events on British poetry of 1920

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ABSTRACT

The present article tries to examine and sketch the ways in which the poetry of 1920 has engaged with the events of the decade and to construct a narrative of the decade through the poetry. It attempts to plot connections between society, history, narration and poetry. The study will also show that poetry can be effectively used to explore questions of gender, national identity, social and political history, and philosophical issues. Moreover, this paper will reassert that all poetry is historically produced and consumed, and is part of the intertextuality wave of discourses that structure our understanding of society and identity.

Key words: poetry, socio-historical events.

Introduction

The relationship of poetry with social and historical issue is of great importance. Yet, to regard poetry as a distinct form, history has to an extent becomes an inevitable habit of reading in critical practices. On the other hand, among the literary genre, poetry is seen as the most personal, the most emotional and introspective, the least social or political. Terry Eagleton observes that "poetry is all of literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history, the one where 'sensibility' may play in its purest, least socially twined form" (Eagleton, 1983)

However, to take just the Romantics, this ahistorical view would obviously be frustrated. Peter Child quoted from T.S. Eliot that, "poetry is not turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (Eliot, 1965). Consequently this paper considers history alongside poetical texts. "If we can compare a poem, as a distinctive account of reality, with other contemporary accounts, we can begin to understand it…. as the embodiment of a partial view of the world in competition with other partial views” (Barrel, 1988).

Kenneth Baker's anthology, The Faber Book of English History in Verse, represents one attempt to place poems in terms of their reaction to social events and to construct a historical narrative through poetry. The aim of this study is to show how and to what extent the events of the 1920s influenced on the poetry in that particular historical moment.

Methodology

This paper builds a narrative of the British 1920s history and poetry that is broadly chronological and necessarily selective. The study is based upon focusing on poetry in the glare of the events of the decade, rather than in the light of aesthetic judgment, formal changes, and biographies of individual poets.

Discussion

In the Twentieth Century in Poetry, (1965) Peter Child demonstrates that in 1922, over 120 years after the Rosetta Stone's discovery, the Egyptologist Jean-Francois Champollion finally succeeded in deciphering the inscription on the Pre-Christian stone slab, written in two languages and three scripts: Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphic and, like Mr. Eugenie's French, demotic. Also, in the same year, Hermann Rorschach died. The Swiss psychiatrist had become famous for a psychological test which consisted of ten complex inkblots, the interpretation of which by any individual would suggest her or his character. The coincidence of these two events at first serves only to illustrate the hunger for interpretation in the early twentieth century and to decode texts, societies, minds and personalities.

In terms of political change, Bill Schwarz in Crises in the British State, (1985) asserts that the Empire was rocked by the Amritsar massacre in 1919. In which a British officer ordered the brutal killing of hundreds of Indian civilians. The emancipated, liberal world that World War I had supposedly been fought for didn't seem to have emerged in the colonies.

In The Norton Anthology of English Literature it is illustrated that imperial fragmentation was most forcefully demonstrated in the Partition of Ireland in 1921. The Irish question caused a great deal of excitement from the beginning of the period until well into the 1920s. A steadily rising Irish nationalism protested with increasing violence against the
political subordination of Ireland to the British Crown and government and this exacerbated feeling on both sides. "No one can fully understand William Butler Yeats or James Joyce without some awareness of the Irish struggle for independence. Elsewhere, the Russian revolution of the 1917 showed that communism was much more than a theoretical possibility in Europe. Also Hitler found the Nazi Party in Germany."

(Abrams, 1986)

Amrolah Abjadiani's Survey of English Literature II, (2006) writes that the general strike of 1926 and the ensuing depression resulted in a temporary loss of confidence in the Labor Party. The socialists, who had gained the public support, formed their first government in 1924, but lost the 1931 election.

Socially, there were lots of changes. The position of women was rapidly changing during the period. "the Married Woman's Property Act allowed married women to own property in their own right; the admission of women to the universities; the fight for women's suffrage, which was not won until 1918 - these events marked a change in the attitude to women and in the part they played in the national life as well as in the relation between sexes, which is reflected in a variety of ways in the literature of the period." (Humm-Maggie, 2196).

Furthermore, with the boom of technology, mass car production reached Britain in 1922, the year the BBC also started its daily broadcast. Trade union membership was still rising rapidly. On the one hand, service industries were employing more clerks, assistants, and shop staff; on the other hand, the older industries, coal mining, shipbuilding, and cotton, were in decline. Ragtime and gramophones gas houses and synthetic perfumes, commuters and commerce, cardboard boxes and cigarette ends, and Brighton holidays became common. So, "the search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language" (Friedman, 1981)

Also, While "film was emerging as an alternative form of expression and storytelling simulating literary techniques such as montage, flashback, fast-cutting, and rapid dialogue" (Childs-Peter, 1965).

According to Peter Childs, single perspectives were becoming increasingly untenable philosophically and aesthetically, if not politically. Einstein's theory of Relativity had been confirmed experimentally in 1919, rocking faith in all kinds of absolutes, to be followed in 1927 by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which, because it implied randomness was constructing the universe, would make the physical world would seem not more but less comprehensible and also less comprehensible secure. Such changes in the perception of the physical word were accompanied by alternations in representation. Art had been redirected by works such as Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon' (1907) and Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (1912).

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Newbolt's committee decided that English studies constituted a temple at which all should worship and that university lecturers were missionaries sent to promote social unity and national values through the examples of English literature.

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In Survey of English Literature II, 2006b Abjad computer declares " The English literary canon, which is still largely intact seventy years later, was assembled in this decade as the criteria of judgment changed from the rather undiscriminating principle of good writing ( a direct 'masculine style) to questions of complexity, seriousness, richness, sensitivity, and organic form." Fine literature no longer promoted simple patriotic feeling but uplifted reader and placed her or him in the vanguard of civilized manners and morality.

The prevailing view of the twentieth century, since the interventions in the 1920s of critics such as T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, is that a poem's meaning exists in the words on the page. Which means that no outside or extraneous knowledge, such as the author's biography, is needed to uncover a poem's significance or quality; as a distinct artifact the self-sufficient poem stands aside from author, reader, and history. The belief underlying this view is that " a well -made poem , like a good detective novel, contains in itself all the clues necessary for the reader's understanding- a theory which actually , though denying it, locates the truth in the author once again: in the author's success in embodying his or her intended meaning in the poem's language and form. It is assumed that the poem has a common subject and the author's task is to achieve a complex unity of all the poem's aspects in expressing that the universal theme, while the reader's task is to assess the poem's methodology and success. New Criticism despite its valorization of irony and paradox, seems both to fix the poem's meaning too rigidly and to ignore the conditions of its material production and consumption" (Childs- Peter.

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1965: 2). Pound argued that the first task of the new poetry was to break he hold of the iambic pentameter. The fragmentation of meter that resulted, as witnessed by Eliot's poem, can be seen as a sign of the times: evidence of a world breaking free from the constraints of Edwardian society.

The years leading up to World War I saw the start of a poetic revolution. "The imagist movement, influenced by the philosopher-poet T.E. Hulme's insistence on hard, clear, precise images and encouraged by the modernist American poet, Ezra Pound, who was then living in London, fought against romantic fuzziness and facile emotionalism in poetry" (Abrams-M.H, 1986).

As Flint explained in an article in March 1913, "Imagist insisted on direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective, on the avoidance of all words that didn't contribute to the representation, and on a freer metrical movement than a strict adherence to the sequence of a metronome could allow." All this encouraged precision in imagery and freedom of rhythmic movement, but more was required for the production of poetry of any real scope and interest.

Other new ideas about poetry helped to provide this technique. Sir Herbert Grierson's great edition of the poems of Donne in 1912 both reflected and helped to encourage a new enthusiasm for seventeenth metaphysical poetry. The revival of interest in metaphysical wit brought with it a desire on the part of some pioneering poets to introduce into their poetry a much higher degree of intellectual complexity than had had been found among the Victorians or the Georgians. "The full subtlety of French Symbolism poetry also now came to be appreciated: it had been admired in the nineties, but for its dreamy suggestiveness rather than for its majestic precision and complexity. At the same time a need was felt to bring poetic language and rhythms closer to those of conversation, or at least to spice the formalities of poetic utterance with echoes of the colloquial and even the slangy... Symbolism differs from the anti-Romantic approach of imagism in the poet's attempt to transcend materiality and reach spiritual planes through the symbol, a concentrated moment or vision in which the experience of life is expressed" (Abrams-M.H, 1986).

Ian Hamilton in The Oxford Companion to twentieth-century poetry in English declares irony, which made possible several levels of discourse simultaneously, and wit with the use of pun helped to achieve that union of thought and passion which T. S. Eliot, in his view of Greisens' anthology of metaphysical poetry (1921), saw as characteristic of the metaphysical and wish to bring back into modern poetry. A new critical and a new creative movement in poetry went hand in hand, with Eliot the high priest of both. It was Eliot who extended the scope of imagism by bringing the English metaphysics and the French Symbolism to the rescue, thus adding new criteria of complexity and allusiveness to the criteria of concreteness and precision stressed by the Imagists. It was Eliot who introduced into modern English and American poetry the kind of irony achieved by shifting suddenly from the formal to the colloquial or oblique allusions to the objects or ideas that concentrated sharply with those carried by the surface meaning of the poem.

By the end of the decade there had been many literary re-creation of the war. David Jones collected his memories of war, called In Parenthesis, which didn't appear until 1937. It is one of the most distinguished of war books. "The experience of war is presented as both transcendent and recurrent. It consists of both prose and verse. It is an allusive work of high Modernist art that is much influenced by Joyce and Eliot" (Hamilton Ian, 1970).

In contrast to the social realist writers of the nineteenth century, modernist writers focused on psychology, introspection, and individual consciousness. Also, "while realists depicted history using a similar set of tools to histiography, the modernists felt that authorial omniscience and third person narration were misleadingly 'objective' techniques which did not allow for the position of the storyteller. Similarly, the present always stood in the way of any clear and direct explanation of the past" (Childs-Peter, 1965).

Peter Child in The twentieth Century in Poetry is written that in two ways, modernist criticism engages with this issue as forcefully as modernist writing: the New Critics similarly turned away from historicism, but other theorist were staging the debate in terms not of morality and the importance of 'the words on the page' but of the ideology and society. This debate is frequently contextualized in terms of the opposed stance of the Marxist writers George Lukas and Bertolt Brecht.

Lukas (1972) position is best outlined in his last essay The Ideology of Modernism from 1957, where he argues that "modernism involves a negation of history". By this he means that modernist writers are interested in the personal, spiritual, or mystical transcendence of their surroundings, and so the social environment in their texts is little more than a backdrop.

"The dramatist Bertolt Brecht countered that the purpose of art was not to reflect social conditions but to attempt to change them- and this could only be done through the shock tactics of Avant-grade modernist aesthetics. Real social conditions such as poverty and inequality should not be shown as either fixed or acceptable, as suggested by their naturalized depiction in most realist writing, but as abhorrent, outrageous, an unjust" (Childs-Peter, 1965).

"Theodor Adorno, a major figure in the Frankfurt School of critical theorists, maintained that art and literature, and particularly modernist art, could function as a kind of negative or contradictory criticism of society, in thought provoking experimental texts"

(ilibid: 69). With theories that parallel some of Eliot’s ideas, Adorno argued that difficult text provoked new, unfamiliar, estranged conception of life. Which is to say that the dissonances and fractures of modernist art expressed the individual's loss of control, centeredness, and harmony in the contemporary world?

Fredric Jameson is another critic who has discussed in this connection. In his 1982 book, the political Unconscious, Jameson again takes up the issue of modernism's relation to history. In particular, he is interested in the division between realism's transparent representation of history, based on a principle of verisimilitude, and modernism's insistence on the
difference of each individuals’ experience and interpretation of life. Jameson argues that all interpretations are in fact transcendent and ideological.

**Conclusion**

The findings reveal that there are connections between the poetry of British 1920s and social-historical events. In fact, there are other ways of linking the poetry of the decade and socio-historical events than through an attention to a poem's overt message or its social performance. The belief that pervades twentieth century western culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and distinction, the shattering of cultural symbols and norms, technologies of science, the epistemology of logical positivism, the relativism of functionalist thought- in short, major aspects of the philosophical perspectives that Freud embodied, and the rationalism of science and philosophy insert a great influence upon poetry. On the other hand, the poetry of the decade may not frequently comment on the historical situation in which it was written but its subject matter will nevertheless be a product of that moment, of the ideologies, beliefs, convictions, and attitudes of its time.

It is imperative here to penetrate to the text's political unconscious, to the historical contradictions and the social conflicts it has repressed. In fact, it is only through this analysis of the ideological subtext that history can approach – history is the absent cause of the text which must be read back into it. In reality, certain interpretations of the poem will gain currency within such a community and texts will therefore not generate meaning for them so much as fit into their conceptual models. In other words, text comes to have meanings within, and only within, contexts. The contexts for poetry are history and society.

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