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Politics and Modernist Poetry

In the early twentieth century, the political landscape of English-speaking countries, and indeed of the entire world, underwent a remarkable number of quite radical changes. Two new political systems emerged—Communism and Fascism—and many predicted that one or the other of these systems would take over the entire world. At roughly the same time, women gained the vote in England and the U.S., which promised a radical change in the body politic of those countries. In England, the 1918 act granting women the vote also removed a property requirement for voting, thereby bringing in large numbers of working-class voters as well. The net result of that act was that the number of voters in the 1922 election was triple the number who had voted in the 1908 election. It is hard to imagine what it must have felt like to have two-thirds of the voters persons who had never been allowed to vote before. A new party emerged, representing those new working-class voters, and that new party, the Labour Party, grew from a small start in 1896 into the largest party in England by 1922. There were other immense political changes occurring: Ireland gained independence, beginning what seemed to many the end of the English colonial system, hastened by the rise of pan-African and Indian Independence movements. In the U.S., immigration of a million persons a year seemed to be reshaping the country.

And then World War I left in nearly everyone’s mind a vision of vast horror without any clear sense that the victors were morally superior to the losers, even though the terms of the peace were quite draconian. So the “War to End All Wars” seemed to simply mark the End of All Previous Politics, but with no real vision of what might come next. The new political movements which brought millions of people into new political parties swept into the void, creating immense hopes and equally immense fears.

Newspapers in the first two decades of the century were full of dire predictions of what these changes would bring, and the various movements were often merged together. Thus, a 1913 article in the N.Y. Times titled “Suffrage appeals to Lawless and Hysterical Women” concluded that “women suffrage, if carried to its ultimate conclusions, could not but destroy those same sacred institutions which Socialism aims at.”[[1]](#endnote-1) A 1907 London Times editorial was equally hysterical about the results of the expansion of the vote: “Once remove the barrier [to] adult suffrage . . . Is the dyke strong enough to withstand the pressure of the oncoming flood? . . . AFTER THAT THE DELUGE” (emphasis in the original).[[2]](#endnote-2) The English women’s suffrage movement itself promoted the imagery of an unstoppable deluge by calling its journal *Time and Tide* (as in “wait for no man.”).

The sense of apocalyptic change about to occur within England and America could not help but be reflected in the arts, and Modernism certainly produced numerous apocalyptic images. Eliot’s poem, *The Waste Land*, creates vivid images of an untenable dryness everywhere, and ends with a “voice of thunder” preceding some kind of rain—as if there is about to be a deluge. I am not suggesting that Eliot is directly alluding to any particular “tide” but just a sense that something ominous is about to wash over the world—a sense of apocalypse he shares with political discourses.

To see politics in these poems we would usually try to to find direct references to political movements or some published statements by the poets about politics. There are in fact many such references: Eliot’s allusions to falling towers in The Waste Land is footnoted by him as a reference to political events in the East, which seems to be the Russian revolution; W.B. Yeats wrote poems naming martyrs and leaders of the Irish independence movement; Ezra Pound praises Mussolini in the Cantos; Louis Zukofsky copies out passages from Marx in “A”; Mina Loy writes a feminist manifesto. But searching out these specific allusions to politics in the words of modernist poets will never settle how much to say such references indicate that whole poems ought to be seen as serving political purposes. When is an allusion to a political event simply scene-setting? And should we say that poets are apolitical if they don’t directly allude to the same kinds of events? These references allow us to say that there certainly were political ideas in the minds of some modernist poets, but not to say that there is any particular relationship of modernism poetry and politics.

Perhaps what is most problematic is that the allusions to politics in modernist poems and in statements from modernist poets point in all directions: Pound declares himself fascist; Eliot calls himself a Monarchist; Yeats speaks of restoring an Irish aristocracy; Hugh MacDiarmid and Zukofsky support Communism; Gertrude Stein seems at times to support several different sides. So is politics simply a part of the many varied systems of values which poets bring to bear?

There is another way to understand the connection between poetry and politics in the early twentieth century, which is by seeing that politics itself in the early twentieth century developed a distinctive aesthetic dimension. I do not mean that politics became merely aesthetic in the sense of creating illusory images rather than policies. Rather, the sense of imminent and radical change meant that politics needed to generate images of a new reality, of new cultural forms. Politics itself was driven to reject “realism” because it was necessary to develop policies for governing bodies that had never existed before and which were going to exist in a matter of a few years. Politics became “aesthetic” in the sense of seeking to produce representations of imaginary social structures.

And the images of the future had decidedly poetic qualities. For example, all the early-twentieth century movements sought to alter the kinds of bodies which make up and govern the state. Communism would eliminate the upper classes; Fascism would eliminate the non-Aryan races; Adult Suffrage would bring in women and workers; Decolonization would turn government over to the ex-colonized; Immigration reform in the U.S. in the 1920s sought to restore the “original” ethnic heritage of the country. Even when groups used to governing (e.g., upper-class men) stayed in power, they felt they had to alter their speech and imagery to engage other kinds of persons (e.g., women and working-class voters). Movements often devoted less energy to defining policies to be put in place and much more energy to defining the kind of persons they thought should control or at least have a large say in the government. The vast expansion of suffrage led to projections that politicians would have to appeal to the “crowd,” and theories of the “crowd mind” emerged, most derived from a French writer, Gustave Le Bon, who said that the crowd “is perpetually hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness” and declared that a “crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Le Bon rather remarkably presents two of the basic formal features of modernist literature---the image and the stream of consciousness—as essential traits of the crowd mind. What this shows it not that politics had to speak in modernist forms, but that there was a general sense that some new form of communication was emerging as a corollary of the new political structures, and in particular as the voice of the new kinds of persons who were entering the political arena.

Hence there emerged a politics of imaginary institutions and imaginary bodies, a politics of cultural mixture or of rejection of cultural mixtures, of an effort to reach beyond consciousness, of concerns about language itself as no longer able to perform its previous functions, of utopian hopes and fears of the end of all civilization. And there emerged a poetry similarly breaking with realism, invoking and mixing together myths from the past and from multiple cultures, juxtaposing fragments of past and imaginary future structures, creating visions of strange new kinds of bodies, exploring the unconscious—in other words, Modernism. Politics did not cause the new art, though many poets were involved in political movements, but politics and art were implicated with each other as competing or complementary visions of what was impending in the near future. Words and art became political in new ways, because any cultural object was either supporting or resisting cultural change.

One common trope of poetry at least since Romanticism played a particularly large role in early twentieth century political movements: the idea that humans had lost their relationship to nature. Almost every movement declared in one way or another that the current social order had caused humans to lose some of their natural qualities, which would be restored with the radical new forms of government proposed. Probably the most common such claim was the representation of the movement as saving the nation from biological degeneration. Such a claim was most evident in fascist literature, with Jews identified as the degenerate race that had to be removed to restore human nature. But the sense of degeneration was much broader. William McDougall, a Harvard professor of psychology, wrote in the NY Times in 1911: “As I watch the American Nation speeding gayly, with invincible optimism, down the road to destruction, I seem to be contemplating the greatest tragedy in the history of mankind . . . When the primal stock is extinguished there is an end of the civilization it created.”[[4]](#endnote-4) McDougall was arguing for restrictions on immigration, which the U.S. put in place in the 1920’s, in particular to keep out eastern Europeans, but the fear of change in the biological makeup of the nation was also prevalent in comments about expanding the vote. A 1911 article suggested that the vote should never be expanded to the poorest because “while opportunities to progress should be offered to all classes and peoples, equality between all men was not only impossible but undesirable . . . Mental characteristics of the majority of the peasant class throughout Europe are essentially the same as those of primitive communities.”[[5]](#endnote-5) As the vote expanded, it could then seem that cultures that had been called “primitive” were mixing in with the European, and it became important to try to imagine what might result. So Picasso’s modeling his Modernist paintings on African masks was not unrelated to political changes. We might even see political ramifications in Marianne Moore’s famous call for poets to try to show us “real frogs in imaginary gardens.” It was important politically to try to imagine new structures in which real natural bodies could exist.

The movement most directly invoked in claiming that modern society was leading and should lead to a new human biology was Eugenics, an outgrowth of Darwinian theory. Eugenicists proposed controlling the breeding of “undesirables” and encouraging the breeding the “best people”; they believed that morality and intelligence—indeed, entire personalities--derived from the “blood” that people inherited. To see such notions as seeping into Modernist poetry, consider how an article in a 1920 issue of the *Eugenics Review* is strangely similar to Yeats’ vision of the world in his poem, “The Second Coming.” Here is the article:

Great men are scarce; the group personality is becoming indistinct and the personality of the race, by which success was attained in the past, is therefore on the wane, while the forces of chaos are once more being manufactured in our midst, ready to break loose and destroy civilization.[[6]](#endnote-6)

And here is Yeats’s poem:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

The Eugenicists speak of “group personality”; Yeats refers to a ‘blood-dimmed tide”; both are alluding to a collective genetic quality. When Yeats ends his poem with the vision of a “rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born,” he is creating a Second Coming as a new biological basis for humanity. We cannot pin down Yeats’s “rough beast” to what any particular political movement was advocating, but we can see that his poem is picking up on anxieties and projections in politics which were as uncertain and vague as his “rough beast.”

The vague projections of possible social changes in Modernist poems led to many of them having political ramifications unrelated to the actual political beliefs or allegiances of the poets. One place to see this is the remarkable influence of Modernist poetry on postcolonial writers. There was in effect a second efflorescence of Modernist writing in English when African and South Asian nations broke free of colonial rule—once again, a moment of definite, radical change in the composition of the persons who would govern the state. The tide of decolonization went far beyond the English-speaking countries, and was epitomized in the phrase “the third world” which suggested a new totality about to emerge everywhere. And from that “third world,” poets such as Derek Walcott and A.K. Ramanujan credited T. S. Eliot with providing poetic methods which they saw as useful for pursuing political ends, even though the ends the postcolonial poets represented in their poems often seemed antithetical to the ends Eliot would have supported.

One could, of course, simply say that poetic techniques—or artistic techniques in general-- are apolitical and can be used for many ends. But the methods developed by Modernist writers, the methods often used to define the movement, seemed to many postcolonial writers to have direct political implications. This is a general point that can be made about European modernism in all the arts, and Charles Pollard, writing in particular about Eliot’s relationship to Caribbean poets, has made the broader claim quite eloquently:

Consider . . . how many of the distinctive innovations of European modernism—Eliot’s structural use of fertility myths, Matisse’s shockingly bright colors, Picasso’s cubist dislocations, and Stravinsky’s dissonance and asymmetrical rhythms, to name a few—were deeply influenced by the non-European cultural forms being brought back to Paris and London by colonial anthropologists, ethnographers, missionaries, and administrators. These modernist strategies of “making it new” by making it exotic and of substituting aesthetic for political domination clearly implicate European modernism in the cultural imperialism of its age, but these strategies do not irrevocably bind all of modernism’s aesthetic innovations to colonialism’s ideology. Subsequent postcolonial writers have transformed these strategies into different forms of innovation and inclusiveness that bring together the cultural fragments left by colonialism.[[7]](#endnote-7)

What Pollard is indicating is that modernist artworks had political consequences due to their innovations in form which were at times unrelated to the politics held by those who constructed those works. When Modernist poets bring non-European cultural forms into their poetry, they are initiating a mixing of cultures that has political effects. Pollard emphasizes just this mixing of cultures. But there are other features which postcolonial writers found useful as well. Kamau Brathwaite says in “History of the Voice” that he and other Caribbean writers learned from Eliot to use colloquial speech—the “riddims of St. Louis,” which inspired them to use lower-class dialects.[[8]](#endnote-8) When Lil in *The Waste Land* speaks in rough English to explain that her teeth have gone bad because of “them pills I took to pull it off,” she creates an image of an uneducated person whose body has been destroyed by poverty and doctors, and her dialect provides a model for using language of those consigned to lower class status in colonial countries. Eliot was not in any way in favor of enfranchising people like Lil, but his poem, for all its stature as high art, has ended up serving as a model for poets who wish to support movements to challenge the hegemony of upper class culture. *The Waste Land* mixes high and low class voices, European and Indian myths and languages, allusions to dozens of literary and religious and even anthropological texts, and its dominant image, as the title indicates, is of a dead world, but with hints of resurrection throughout. Is the mixture of classes and cultures the cause of death or the potential cure?

Some modernist poems seemed to recognize the confusing politics of their own formal experiments. In “Cubes,” Langston Hughes writes that in Paris “In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso,” he met an “African from Senegal” who was brought there to “amuse” the French. “For fun,” they introduce the man to “sick” European culture, with the result that he carries “disease” back to Senegal with him. Hughes connects Picasso’s cubes to this small story by saying

It's the old game of the boss and the bossed,

boss and the bossed,

amused

and

amusing,

worked and working,

Behind the cubes of black and white,

black and white,

black and white

Hughes implies a corrupt politics behind cubism: while it can seem simply amusing (or aesthetic) to bring African cultural forms into European art, as Picasso does, it is an expression of European power and generally destructive. Yet Hughes’s own poem is constructed as a cubist array of words on the paper, with repetitions creating geometric patterns of black and white on the page. He is thus joining a movement he has condemned, but as the critic Seth Moglen concludes, “Hughes will [not] reject a tainted modernism . . . For modernism, he suggests, can perhaps alone reveal to us the “disease” that has brought it into being.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Modernist poetry and art can thus have conflicting political implications, but that does not mean they are apolitical: such conflicts are inherent in the poetics of early twentieth-century politics. There is an instability in the attempt to envision new cultural forms, new political systems, new human bodies: the actual effect of the changes one advocates can end up serving ends completely unexpected, in particular because one is trying to change the mind that is creating the new vision, the poet’s own mind. As Mina Loy writes in *Aphorisms on Futurism* in the 1920s, "CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form, for however great a period of time it may remain a mere irritant that molds consciousness to the necessary amplitude for holding it."[[10]](#endnote-10) Loy may be attempting to credit great geniuses for creating new forms of consciousness, but even those geniuses cannot know what they are creating: their own “consciousness” will be altered from whatever it thought it was doing. “New forms” have the potential to press a person or an entire culture to go beyond what could previously be understood or conceived even by those creating those new forms.

Loy provides a striking example of the attempt to understand how a new form of consciousness gets created from the mixing and rearranging of old forms in a poem which is in effect about the creation of her own body and mind from the mixture of the cultures of her parents. “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose” characterizes her parents as bringing together nearly all the various cultural and political elements circling about the movements of the early twentieth century. Her mother is

“Conservative Rose

storage

Of British Empire-made pot-pourri

of dry dead men

This Rose is thus a living version of Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, a collection of fragments of the ideas of dead men and dying British culture. And this Rose, though Conservative, is drawn to the political challenge to Empire,

“whirling itself

deliriously around the unseen

Bolshevik”.

Rose’s whirling avoids contact with the Bolshevik but does not avoid contact with another alien cultural force, Loy’s father, described as

Exodus

Oriental

mad to melt with something

softer than himself

clasps with soothing pledges

his wild rose of the hedges

Loy’s father is a Hungarian Jew, but she represents him as bringing to the dry dead ideas of British empire all that is in the Orient and the ancient past (Exodus). Out of this combination arises Loy herself, whom she characterizes using a term from eugenics: she is “Mongrel Rose” who starts life as a strangely nonhuman body,

A clotty bulk of bifurcate fat

they pull from [Rose’s] loins.

The body that will eventually produce this Modernist poem thus starts as a mere “clotty bulk” of “fat” that bears only one distinct mark: it is bifurcated, divided, unable to be a single coherent thing because it is attached to Empire, Bolshevism, Judaism, and the Orient. It is partly of aristocratic blood and partly a mongrel mixture.

Loy is of course being satiric, mocking her parents and herself, but her poem gets at the crucial politics surrounding modernism: that which has been left out of our conception of the cultural norm, that which seems a political and cultural challenge to what we are, is eerily attractive and about to replace or merge with “us,” creating a new kind of human being who will take over the political systems we have known.

Modernist poetry has in the last few decades not been thought of in such political terms: and that is due to the historical canonization of the artform in the 50’s, when instead of feeling that cultural and political change were imminent, European and American politicians were deeply devoted to resisting and denying change. During those years, Communism and Fascism were demonized, women’s movements slipped underground, and even the decline of imperialism seen in such things as India achieving independence could be interpreted as a return to traditional European culture---as cutting off the ties to the “foreign.” In other words, modernism was canonized as part of the 1950’s vast defense of a universal Western liberalism. To achieve that goal, modernism was recast an art of abstraction, created by individual geniuses escaping from everything as mundane as politics.

The canonization of modernism as abstraction, as an art of pure form, is one with a loss of belief that a truly radical change in culture is imminent. In the 50’s, that largely took the form of a strong belief that the Western world needed to be preserved. But by the 1970’s, there emerged a new sense of political and cultural change: the local wars and local revolutions around the world shattered any sense of a unified “third world” and eventually broke up the “second world” Communist block; the rise of civil rights, feminist and queer movements suggested that all states would contain diverse collections of different kinds of persons; and the advent of computers and the internet multiplied the kinds of writing and publishing available. These changes seemed to mark the demise of any total political system anywhere. There have continued to be momentous changes, to be sure, but many changes at once in various parts of the social order. What early twentieth-century politicians and modernists believed they faced—and what postcolonial politicians and writers also seemed to experience--was a vast and singular change about to happen, that would transform human nature, bringing new kinds of humans into political power. In recent decades, we no longer envision the imminent arrival of a new overall culture and a new kind of human being; instead we now tend to conceive of human beings as constantly changing and never settling in any one form at all, even reaching the extreme possibility of changing bodies at will via virtual existence. Postmodernism is a literature of such constant change, permeated by a sense of instability and uncertainty and yet also full of a sense that the fluctuations are just part of everyday life.. Perhaps there will be another phase of modernism, when a distinct “new” total social order and distinct new type of new human being becomes imaginable and seems about to be brought into reality by political change. Or perhaps we will continue floating in our constantly shifting cultural seas, and Modernism will just seem an ethereal historical moment of impossible dreams.

1. *NY Times*, Mar 30, 1913. 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Times* (London, England), Friday, Nov 29, 1907. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. 2nd ed., New York; Macmillan, 1897. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. NY Times, June 12, 1921: “American Civilization on the Brink.” 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A. C. Haddon, The Universal Races Congress. *The Times* (London, England), Tuesday, Aug 08, 1911. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. G. P. Mudge. “The Menace to the English Race and Its Traditions of Present-Day Immigration and Emigration.” *Eugenics Review*. 1920 January; 11(4). 202–212. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. # Charles Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. 2004. 25.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kamau Brathwaite, “History of the Voice,” in *Roots.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1993. 286n34. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Seth Moglen, “Modernism in the Black Diaspora: Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso**.”** Callaloo, Volume 25, Number 4, Fall 2002. 1199. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism.” *The Lost Lunar Baedeker.* Ed. Roger L. Conover. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 1996. 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)