Review

War saved in verse: Politics in Ezra Pound’s Canto XVI and T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land

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Modernist poetry is rarely examined in the light of the very social and political agitations which accompanied its production. Some theorists claim that modernist poetry is apolitical; neglecting the fact that the poet can never exist in vacuum. Unquestionably, the poet is the product of his immediate conditions of existence. No matter how he conceals his social reality, his words reveal it all. This paper looks at two prominent poets, namely Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot to find out where the two allude to World War One in their poetical productions. This paper is an attempt to understand these hidden mysterious allusions (names of soldiers, politicians, and places) which disturb the indecipherable stream of consciousness prevalent in the two poems. This paper brings to life dead corps; it brings back the memory of those who passed away fighting on the fronts. It implicitly says that war still needs close examination as it is still horrendously practiced by the so-called the modern man. The paper also looks at the psychological torments which the two poets experienced and which led to the production of a very unique work of art. It implicitly says that the ideology behind war is fallacious and it still needs to be closely examined so as to avoid any future clashes.

Key words: Modernism, poetry, politics society, war.

INTRODUCTION

Unquestionably, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot are two of the most prominent poets of the twentieth century. These two poets revolutionized the principles of Anglo-American poetry, suggesting that conventional poetic patterns and themes can no more encapsulate the complexities of the modern life of the twentieth century. They did not only revolutionize the themes, but they also revolutionized the form by adopting a free verse pattern. Eliot’s The Waste Land and Pound’s The Cantos are two of the most influential poems in the history of English poetry.

Modernist poetry is rarely examined from a political point of view because many theorists claim that modernist poetry is apolitical. The Waste Land and The Cantos can be both considered as war poems. Indeed, this is the very claim which this paper shall prove true. This choice of studying politics in The Cantos and The Waste Land is made because of one immediate impulse; the poetry of both Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot is rarely approached from political point of view. This work shows how these two epics are really representations of the politics of the period. Taking into consideration “the importance of local political and social context for the understanding of literary text.” (Wayne, 1990), the allusions to politics in “the Cantos XVI” by Pound and the “What the Thunder

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Said” by T. S Eliot are studied. In the first part of my paper, there is a short account of the major political changes which took place in Europe in the period between 1914 and 1920, which is the same period during which The Cantos and The Waste Land were written. In the second part, I shall examined exclusively the allusions to politics in both poems as a way to discover whether Pound and Eliot were influenced by the political upheavals of the period or not. As said earlier, for a better politically engaged understanding of modernist poetry, one needs to understand the major upheavals of the period during which this kind of poetry was produced. Unquestionably, poetry is the production of a poet who is the outcome of a set of interactions that take place within a broader social and political context. Thus, any poet, no matter how his words try to conceal or obliterate reality, somehow there is always a link between his words and his world. A poem then is a representation of reality simply because is assumed that “no critical poet ever existed in a vacuum, but instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history” (Beasly, 2007). Therefore, what society, religion and politics provide the poet with is what he reproduces through his poetry.

Thus, one crucial step towards understanding Modernist poetry is to familiarize oneself with the biography and the historical background of its writers. To start with, Ezra Pound was born in Hailey in 1885. He wrote on literature, culture and economics. He was also a translator and music composer. Starting from 1945, Pound became a supporter of Mussolini’s fascist regime in Italy. For this reason, he was arrested for treason in 1945, but found medically unfit to stand trial and thus committed to St Elizabeth’s hospital for the criminally insane in Washington D.C. where he stayed until 1958. Pound died in 1972. In turn, T. S Eliot was born in 1888 in Hailey, Idaho. Eliot entered Harvard University in 1906, and graduated with a BA and MA in English literature in 1910. It was during this period that Eliot read about the French symbolists such as Baudelaire who shaped Eliot’s conceptions of the form and content of poetry. Eliot died in London in 1965.

From this brief biography, it can be easily understood that the period during which Eliot and Pound lived coincided with turmoil and agitation. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was a period of great changes. In this regards, Butler writes:

“The loss of belief in religion, the rise of dependence on science and technology, the expansion of markets and the commodification brought about by capitalism, the growth of mass culture and its influence, the invasion of bureaucracy into private life, and changing beliefs about relationships between the sexes (Butler, 2007).

By the advent of the twentieth century, the advances in science and technology and the expansion of markets concurred with the imperialist ambitions of European countries which looked for overseas colonies. Along with the rise of this imperialist drive, European countries suffered from internal problems which were basically political and thus lead to the outbreak of the First World War. This war was a result not only of these internal political problems, but it was also a result of the alliances that European countries started to form. Europe was divided into two opposing alliances; the central powers which included Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and the Triple Entente which included Britain, France, and Russia. Each of these two alliances tried permanently to make a balance of power. Consequently, both alliances were heavily armed.

The direct cause of the war was the Austro-Hungarian conflict. Since Austria was made of different minorities and ethnic groups which included Austrians, Hungarians, Germans, Czechs, Serbs and many others, each of these desired to gain its independence. As a result of this unrest, Serbs were the first to rebel. Gavrilo Princip, who was a Serb nationalist, assassinated Franz Ferdinand, who was the heir-presumptive of the Austro-Hungarian throne. Immediately after this incident, a local war started between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. This war started local but ended global. Since the alliances were already formed, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand led to the outbreak of the war. The alliances started fighting at different fronts. The two warring alliances used damaging weapons which included tanks used by the British for the first time, and poisonous gas used by Germans. Many new damaging technologies were used so as to bring as much damage as possible for the enemy.

The war was brought into an end after the defeat of Russia (which was already having an internal revolution led by Trotsky and Lenin in 1917) by Germans in 1918. Unfortunately, war left extremely dire consequences. Because of war, Europe lost more than 186 billion dollars. More than that, less than 20 million troops were killed, and less than 3 million civilians were assassinated too. Along with these, numerous cities were completely destroyed by the ravaging war.

War was the century’s shock, and the poets were no exception. Europeans’ perception of life and their beliefs changed immensely, opening the door to mingled feelings of astonishment and shock. Poets were in the midst of the conflict and thus their poetry portrayed the events in ways which show unconscious pain. A new pattern emerged and with it emerged undefined representations of the world. Meaning starts to fade and only allusions are used to decode the poems.

It is worth knowing that most of Pound’s Cantos XV was written between 1915 and 1962. Going through the whole Cantos XV, it is discovered that this epic does not only allude to politics, but at times, it alludes to historical figures like Confucius, and at others it alludes to geographical locations. Cantos can even be considered as a religious poem due to the range of religious allusions.
that it contains.

1. Canto XVI

2. And before hell mouth; dry plain
3. and two mountains;
4. On the one mountain, a running form,
5. and another
6. In the turn of the hill; in hard steel
7. The road like a slow screw’s thread,
8. The angle almost imperceptible,
9. so that the circuit seemed hardly to rise;
10. And the running form, naked, Blake,
11. Shouting, whirling his arms, the swift limbs,
12. Howling against the evil,
13. his eyes rolling,
14. Whirling like flaming cart-wheels,
15. and his head held backward to gaze on the evil
16. As he ran from it,
17. to be hid by the steel mountain,
18. And when he showed again from the north side;
19. his eyes blazing toward hell mouth,
20. His neck forward,
21. and like him Peire Cardinal.
22. And in the west mountain, Il Fiorentino,
23. Seeing hell in his mirror,
24. and lo Sordels
25. Looking on it in his shield;
26. And Augustine, gazing toward the invisible.

27. And past them, the criminal
28. Lying in the blue lakes of acid,
29. The road between the two hills, upward
30. Slowly,
31. The flames patterned in lacquer, crimenestactio,
32. The limbo of chopped ice and saw-dust,
33. And I bathed myself with acid to free myself
34. of the hell ticks,
35. Scales, fallen louse eggs.
36. PaluxLaema,
37. The lake of bodies, aqua morta,
38. Of limbs fluid, and mingled, like fish heaped in a bin,
39. And here an arm upward, clutching a fragment of marble,
40. And the embryos, in flux,
41. New inflow, submerging,
42. Here an arm upward, trout, submerged by the eels;
43. And from the bank, the stiff herbage
44. The dry nobbled path, saw many known, and unknown,
45. For an instant;
46. Submerging,
47. The face gone, generation.

48. Then light, air, under saplings,
49. The blue banded lake under æther
50. an oasis, the stones, the calm field,
51. the grass quiet,
52. and passing the tree of the bough
53. The grey stone posts,
54. and the stair of gray stone,
55. The passage clean-squared in granite:
56. Descending,
57. and I through this, and into the earth,
58. paet terra,
59. entered the quiet air
60. The new sky,
61. The light as after a sun-set,
62. and by their fountains, the heroes,
63. Sigismundo, and MalatestaNovello,
64. And founders, gazing at the mounts of their cities.

65. The plain, distance, and in fount-pools
66. The nymphs of that water
67. Rising, spreading their garlands,
68. Weaving their water reeds with the boughs,
69. In the quiet,
70. and now one man rose from his fountain
71. And went off into the plain.

72. Prone in that grass, in sleep;
73. et j’entends des voix:…
74. wall .  .  . Strasbourg
75. Galliffet led that triple charge. . . Prussians
76. And he said [Plarr’s narration]
77. It was for the honour of the army.
78. And they called him a swashbuckler.
79. I didn’t know what it was
80. But I thought: This is pretty bloody damn fine.
81. And my old nurse, he was a man nurse, and
82. He killed a Prussian and he lay in the street
83. there in front of our house for three days
84. And he stank. . . . .
85. Brother Percy,
86. And our Brother Percy…
87. Old Admiral
88. He was a middy in those days,
89. And they came into Ragusa
90. . . . . . . place those men went for the Silk War . . . .
91. And they saw a procession coming down through
92. A cut in the hills, carrying something
93. The six chaps in front carrying a long thing
94. on their shoulders,
95. And they thought it was a funeral,
96. But the thing was wrapped up in scarlet,
97. And he put off in the cutter,
98. He was a middy in those days,
99. To see what the natives were doing,
100. And they got up to the six fellows in livery,
101. And they looked at it, and I can still hear the old admiral,
102. “Was it? it was Lord Byron
103. Dead drunk, with the face of an A  y  n. . . . . .
104. He pulled it out long, like that:
106. the face of an a y n . . . . . . . . . . gel."

107. And because that son of a bitch, 
108. Franz Josef of Austria. . . . . . .

109. And because that son of a bitch Napoléon Barbiche…
110. They put Aldington on Hill 70, in a trench
111. dug through corpses
112. With a lot of kids of sixteen,
113. Howling and crying for their mamas,
114. And he sent a chit back to his major:
115. I can hold out for ten minutes
116. With my sergeant and a machine-gun.
117. And they rebuked him for levity.
118. And Henri Gaudier went to it,
119. and they killed him,
120. And killed a good deal of sculpture,
121. And ole T.E.H. he went to it,
122. With a lot of books from the library,
123. London Library, and a shell buried 'em in a dug-out,
124. And the Library expressed its annoyance.
125. And a bullet hit him on the elbow
126. …gone through the fellow in front of him,
127. And he read Kant in the Hospital, in Wimbledon,
128. in the original,
129. And the hospital staff didn't like it.

130. And Wyndham Lewis went to it,
131. With a heavy bit of artillery,
132. and the airmen came by with a mitrailleuse,
133. And cleaned out most of his company,
134. and a shell lit on his tin hut,
135. While he was out in the privy,
136. and he was all there was left of that outfit.

137. Windeler went to it,
138. and he was out in the Ægæan,
139. And down in the hold of his ship
140. pumping gas into a sausage,
141. And the boatswain looked over the rail,
142. down into amidships, and he said:
143. Gees! looka theKept'n,
144. The Kept'n's a-gettin' 'er up.

145. And Ole Captain Baker went to it,
146. with his legs full of rheumatics,
147. So much so he couldn't run,
148. so he was six months in hospital,
149. Observing the mentality of the patients.

150. And Fletcher was 19 when he went to it,
151. And his major went mad in the control pit,
152. about midnight, and started throwing the 'phone about
153. And he had to keep him quiet
154. till about six in the morning,
155. And direct that bunch of artillery.

156. And Ernie Hemingway went to it,
157. too much in a hurry,
158. And they buried him for four days.
159. Et ma foi, vous savez,
160. tous les nerveux. Non,
161. Y a une limite; les bêtes, les bêtes ne sont
162. Pas faites pour ça, c'est peu de chose un cheval.
163. Les hommes de 34 ans à quatre pattes
164. qui criaient "maman." Mais les costauds,
165. La fin, là à Verdun, n'y avait que ces gros bonshommes
166. Et y voyaient extrêmement clair.
167. Qu'est-ce que ça vaut, les généraux, le lieutenant,
168. on les pèse à un centigramme,
169. n'y a rien que du bois,
170. Notr' capitaine, tout, tout ce qu'il y a de plus renfermé
171. de vieux polytechnicien, mais solide,
172. La tête solide. Là, vous savez,
173. Tout, tout fonctionne, et les voleurs, tous les vices,
174. Mais les rapaces,
175. y avait trois dans notre compagnie, tous tués.
176. Y sortaient fouiller un cadavre, pour rien,
177. y n'serainet sortis pour rien que ça.
178. Et les boches, tout ce que vous voulez,
179. militarisme, et caetera, et caetera.
180. Tout ça, mais, MAIS,
181. l'français, i s'bat quand y a mangé.
182. Mais ces pauvres types
183. A la fin y s'attaquaient pour manger,
184. Sans orders, les bêtes sauvages, on y fait
185. Prisonniers; ceux qui parlaient français disaient:
186. “Pooquah? Ma foi on attaquait pour manger.”
187. C'est le cor-ggras, le corps gras,
188. leurs trains marchaient trois kilomètres à l'heure,
189. Et ça criait, ça grincait, on l'entendait à cinq kilomètres.
190. (Ça qui finit la guerre.)
191. Liste officielle des morts 5,000,000.
192. I vous dit, bè, voui, tout sentait le pétrole.
193. Mais, Non! je l'ai engueulé.
194. Je lui ai dit: T'es un con! T'a raté la guerre.
195. voui! tous les homes de goût, y conviens,
196. Tout ça en arrière.
197. Mais un mec comme toi!
198. C't homme, un type comme ça!
199. Ce qu'il aurait pu encaisser!
200. Il était dans une fabrique.
201. What, buryingsquad, terrassiers, avec leur tête
202. en arrière, qui regardaient comme ça,
203. On risquait la vie pour un coup de pelle,
204. Faut que ça soit bein carré, exact…
205. Depuy a bolchevikidere, und deydease him:
206. Looka vat youah Trotzsk is done, e iss
207. madehdezhamefulbeace!
208. "He is madeh de zhamefulbeace, iss he?"
209. "He is madeh de zhamevullbeace?"
211. "He vinneh de vore.
212. "De droobsiss released vrom de eastern vront, yess?"
213. "Unvenndeygetts to dehvesternvront, iss it"
214. "How many gettsdere?"
215. "And dose doaatgettsdereiss so full off revolutions"
216. "Venn dehvrench is come dhru, yess;"
217. "Deysay, "Vot?" Un de posch say:"

219. That’s the trick with a crowd,
220. Get ‘em into the street and get ‘em moving.
221. And all the time, there were people going
222. Down there, over the river.
223. There was a man there talking,
224. To a thousand, just a short speech, and
225. Then move ‘em on. And he said:
226. Yes, these people, they are all right, they
227. Can do everything, everything except act;
228. And go an’ hear ‘em but when they are through
229. Come to the bolsheviki…

230. And when it broke, there was the crowd there,
231. And the cossacks, just as always before,
232. But one thing, the cossacks said:
233. “Pojalouista.”
234. And that got round in the crowd,
235. And then a lieutenant of infantry
236. Ordered ‘em to fire into the crowd,
237. in the square at the end of the Nevsky,
238. In front of the Moscow station,
239. And they wouldn’t,
240. And he pulled his sword on a student for laughing,
241. And killed him,
242. And a cossack rode out of his squad
243. On the other side of the square
244. And cut down the lieutenant of infantry
245. And there was the revolution…
246. as soon as they named it.
247. And you can’t make ‘em,
248. Nobody knew it was coming. They were all ready,
249. the old gang,
250. Guns on the top of the post-office and the palace,
251. And there were some killed at the barracks,
252. But that was between the troops.
253. So we used to hear it at the opera
254. That they wouldn’t be under Haig;
255. and that the advance was beginning;
256. That it was going to begin in a week.

The Cantos XVI describe Dante’s journey from hell to paradise. In this part, Dante is approached by souls which claim that Dante belongs to their country. Hell burns their features, which makes them unrecognizable. These souls reveal their names to Dante, who, in turn, calls back their names from his time in Florence and expresses great pity for them. The souls ask Dante if their city still keep its arrogance and glory. Dante disappoints the souls by telling them that their city is characterized by evil. Before leaving, Virgil, who is Dante’s guide in this journey, makes an unusual request. He asks for the cord that Dante wears as a belt, and then throws one end of it into a ravine filled with dark water. Dante watches disbelievingly as a horrifying creature rises up before them.

Seemingly, the aforementioned account is maybe what Cantos XVI is about, yet the range of allusions the speaker uses proves that it is more than just a journey from hell to paradise. In “et j’entendis des voix” (line 75), The Cantos XVI pictures the political complexities of modern life. Obviously, it is at this particular stanza in The Cantos XVI that the speaker alludes to the Franco-Russian war, Silk War, First World War and the Russian revolution. In the “the wall…Strasburg” (line 76), the speaker alludes to city of Strasburg where the Silk War of XV Century took place. The speaker does not only allude to places, but to the political figures who took part in the Silk War. One concrete example is “Gallifet (who) led the army with honor against Germany in Battle of Sedan (Franco-Prussian War (1870)).

Furthermore, what shows that this part of the The Cantos XV contains allusions to politics is the explicit reference to the Silk War especially in”…….place those men went for the silk war” (line 92), whereby the speaker alludes to the war between Venice and Ragusa at the beginning of the 15th century when Randolfo led the Venetians against Ragusa in 1420, but did not capture it. The speaker tells the story of the soldiers of this Silk war; as they fight and go through hills; they see some men carrying unknown things on their shoulders.

By the end of poem there are some explicit allusions to “Frantz Joseph of Austria” (line 110) and some friends of Ezra Pound who participated in the First World War. Frantz Joseph, as have already stated in the first part, is the emperor who contributed to outbreak of the First World War. He declared war on Serbia on the 18th of July 1914. The speaker in this poem pictures the evilness of Frantz Joseph and it causes a lot of terror to soldiers and children especially that he is the first to declare war on Serbia. Some friends of Ezra took part in this war, what

1 An Italian poet famous for writing the Divine Comedy that describes a journey through Hell and purgatory and paradise guided by Virgil and his idealized Beatrice (1265-1321)
2 A Roman poet; author of the epic poem ‘Aeneid’ (70-19 BC)
Aldington, who was one of Pound’s friends, who served as a junior officer in the British army (1915-1917). Aldington took part in war especially in the French warfare where he escaped death several times. Another soldier that the speaker alludes to is Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), who is a friend of Pound as well, Henri, is killed with extreme cruelty in the war. Additionally, in line 123, the speaker alludes to “ole T.E.H. he went to it”; T. E.H is an allusion to Pound’s friend Thomas Ernest Hulme (1883-1917). Hume was an English philosopher and poet who was too killed in the First World War.

The range of allusions that are used in this epic demonstrate that Pound is deeply influenced by the upheavals of the twentieth century. Hence, while alluding to the First World War and its horrible consequences, the speaker also alludes to the Russian Revolution which had broke out some time before the end of the war. What proves this is “Looka vat youahTrolloz is done, e iss” (Line 206). This alludes to Leon Trotsky (1979-1940), who was an aid to Lenin during the Russian revolution of 1917. Trotsky accepted the humiliating conditions of the treaty of “Brest Litovsk” (line 212) so as to obtain peace with the central powers so that “Bolsheviki” (line 229) referring to Bolsheviks could promote the revolution in Russia.

*The Waste Land* well entails allusions to politics. Yet, unlike The Cantos XVI *The Waste Land* is difficult. The difficulty lies in finding explicit allusions to politics. Ezra Pound uses names of soldiers, geographical locations, and historical figures. This, as read, is lacking in *The Waste Land*, but in its meaning, and in its use of some names and figures, some allusions to political events can be depicted. Its first section “The Burial of the Dead” is an account of the childhood of a Bavarian woman who could undoubtedly allude to the pre-war period. Moreover, it entails a reference to “sprouting corpses”, which are an allusion to the cost and horrible consequences of the First World War. In the second part, “A Game of Chess”, there are some allusions to war preparations, especially in Lil’s preparation for her husband Albert coming back from war. But, the most significant allusion to The First World War is in *The Waste Land*’s Last part “What The Thunder Said”. These lines depict the speaker’s deep worry about the dramatic change of Europe after the end of the war.

- What is the sound high in the air
  Murmur of maternal lamentation
- Who are those hooded hordes swarming
- Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
- Ringed by the flat horizon only
- What is the city over the mountains
- Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
- Falling towers
- Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

A woman drew her (lines 367-377)

The speaker is deeply concerned with the decay of Western Europe after the First World War. With this collapse, the speaker recognizes that many other problems may occur; Europe sees a moral and a financial ruin, and war brings the breakdown of spiritual values. Financially, Europe lost billions of dollars in making guns and paying soldiers, and lost millions of soldiers and innocent civilians. The above mentioned lines may also allude to the rise of population in Europe, and the raise of the consciousness that later on led to the outbreak of the Russian revolutionat that time.

It is evident that T. S Eliot could not escape the influence of political upheavals of the twentieth century on his poetry. Accordingly, he uses a range of allusions to moments in the period before and after the First World War. Via allusions, Eliot as well as Pound “question and severely criticize the religious, social and political ideology that structures our lives” (Beasley, 2007). For Eliot, The First World War left nothing but a damage of civilization. A damage in which the Bavarian Woman in “The burial of the dead” and Lil and her husband Robert in “A Game of Chess” are all victims of; a war that degraded civilization to the utmost peak.

For Pound, the range of political allusion thoroughly examined in his “Bolsheviki” proves that he could not too escape the influence of The First World War and the Russian revolution on his thinking and then his poetry. Via his epic, Pound alludes to the disastrous consequences of the war especially that he lost many of his friends during that war. Allusions to political events and political figures show Pound’s deep engagement with the politics of the period.

The poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S Eliot is not messy or meaningless. It rather is meant for the intelligent reader who is able to make that connection between poetry and the world. As said earlier, poetry is personal, yet it can never be set apart from the political and social change during which it is produced. Modern society of the twentieth century, along with its complexities brought two horrific wars which were a burden that the poets could not bear, and then reproduce that complex life via the use of complicated terms.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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