

EZRA POUND AND THE ART OF VORTICISM

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Abstract: The article's purpose is to investigate the concept of *vorticism* developed by an ex-pat American poet Ezra Pound, within his activity as a revolutionary poet, critic, art historian, translator and prominent figure of the avant-garde bohemian circle of London before and after WWI. In fact, an important movement that sprang at the time took his concept as its name. *Vorticism* is considered to be the first real modern expression of the artistic rebellion residing in London in the 20th century. While the so-called *Bloomsbury* circle that shared the same central London environment succumbed to the free lifestyle and unlimited aestheticism as a response to the roar of the industrial age and the Victorian morale, *Vorticists* (possibly due to their lower classes upbringing) were adamant at changing the consciousness of the masses utilizing effects that questioned the pre-established social identities of the British citizen. So, while the *Bloomsburies* were passive, *Vorticists* acted their beliefs. They crashed like a comet on the London intellectual scene. Sadly, very soon, the much bigger crash in the form of the Great War foreshadowed their efforts. Many got killed, some came back disappointed. Pound and Wyndham Lewis never surrendered their fight. As a result, they paid a very high price. An observation into their work as critics of the art and of the society might reveal their influence in London at the time and could scotch the reasons behind their downfall.

Keywords: Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Bloomsbury group, Vorticism

1. INTRODUCTION: POUND'S CRITICISM

Pound was the model of an ideal poet, both in looks and in behaviour. He didn't appear, talk or behave like the man of the 20th century. He had been a time traveller from the past, from the age of Homer, or of Troubadours, a visitor from outer space on his way to eternity, just happening to be here. The literary history of the 20th century mentions Pound not for his critical contributions, but mainly as a person of authority in the literary circles of London. Most importantly, he became famous for the drastic cutting of the most important poem of the century – T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Not only that, in gratitude for the editing of *The Waste Land*, Eliot devoted the poem to Pound, with the inscription – *il miglior fabbro* (the better craftsmen than me). That is how the literary world remembers Pound, but this article's objective is to investigate Pound's work in a larger context. The idea is to prove that his intervention as a critic, a poet and even an amateur philosopher and economist was of much larger, if not vital, influence for some of the most important poets and artists of his generation. In *The Pound Era* – Hugh Kenner's study of the epoch – the survey accentuates the power and the influence of Pound's work for his contemporaries, out of which Eliot, Hemingway, Robert Frost and e. e. cummings became great poets and writers, partly because they followed Pound's dictum about the role of historical memory and the myth in the process of the restoration of the healthy society. Of course, these positions are conflictual: memory of the past suggests that something is forever gone, unlike the mythological ritual that celebrates the repeat and rebirth of something that was lost. Being aware of both positions is what Pound prescribes for a good poetry. His critical work constantly alludes to the importance of such an awareness.

In 1913, at the Eve of the Great War, Pound wrote his most comprehensive work of criticism. *Serious Artist* was a transitional piece of work that listed the basic tendencies of the literary experimentations of the period (French Symbolism) and, at the same time, their continuation into the British version of the tradition with movements like Imagism and later, Vorticism. In particular, the essay explores several key topics that were to become the standard idioms of almost every respectable criticism of the 20th century and beyond. The importance of the historical knowledge and the need to re-evaluate the past literary histories was given special prominence. In Pound's view (what would later become crucial critical stance for Eliot), every serious artist should be aware of the history of the specific artistic practice (in his case, the history of literature). One should carefully investigate the often-neglected aspects of literary history (forgotten poets or poetic sensibilities) that can be extremely useful in shedding a new perspective on the problems that are of concern to the modern epoch. In the language of medicine, one should consult the old prescriptions to cure modern diseases. The actual cure is the revelation of the spiritual energy – a universal cure that was given to humans to make their earthly life not only bearable, but supremely enjoyable. These two aspects of the journey into the past histories are actually leading to the same conclusion: modern life is utterly boring and meaningless; in order to rejuvenate the desire for life and escape the ennui, the artist has to explore the ways (the forms, the contexts and the sensibilities) that will serve him unlock the hidden spiritual energy that was inhabiting the ancestors at the time of the creation of their works.

In the language of the myths, to attain the spiritual guidance, the artists have to invoke the muses. The well of inspiration that unleashes a massive amount of energy, well beyond the power of an ordinary human, produces within the poets the state of mind that can be designated clinically as a state of delirium, schizophrenia or any other form of lunacy (remember Theseus's comments about poets in *The Midsummer's Night Dream*). Now, let's consider the two key concepts of Pound's criticism in more details. First, let's dwell a bit more into his concept of historical knowledge.

Though not obvious on the first reading, Pound makes a clear difference between a sheer historical knowledge and what we may loosely call spiritual knowledge. The knowledge of the latter should not be mixed with the religious understanding of the holy scriptures although, in principle, they both gravitate towards the same object of investigation. For that reason, I find it more appropriate to call it knowledge of eternity. The historical knowledge gives any artist, who seriously craves to learn the nature of his craft, valuable insights into the history of ideas and sensibilities that were paradigmatic for certain ages. Put into another perspective, the knowledge of the history of art equips the individual artist with the necessary perception of the standpoints, techniques and ideas that shaped the great works of art in the past. In political terms, historical knowledge is vital for the creation of the identity of the nations: history is used as a vehicle for the release of the patriotic energy that should unite the mass of disparate individuals under the same agenda. Being a witness of the abrupt production of nation states in Europe, Pound was obviously very critical of the way historical knowledge, as an ideological construct, was subjected to fabrication and falsification by the media on a daily basis. In practice, the historical knowledge, as a process of collection, recording and preservation of the past experiences in the form of a collective memory, offers universal perspective to humanity. When the collective memory is lost, the humanity loses contact with the universe. As a result, society is sick, and life has no meaning. Imagine now, from this perspective, the dangers of the introduction of AI (as our cybernetic collective memory saver) on the future generations who will not even bother to read the news or to know the world, as the machine will do the job for them. No more books, no more newspapers and soon, no more schools, no more exams – just ask Chat GPT, and it will tell you the truth.

I hope it is clear now why Pound despised historical knowledge that, though healthy for the artists, is poisonous for the masses. It is obvious then that a serious artist should pursue the knowledge of eternity, of the universal truths that hold the spiritual wisdom of all ages. The knowledge of eternity requires a deeper inquiry into the universal truths that engender the spiritual foundation of the societies.

2. VORTICISM, OR THE ART OF FRAGMENTATION

The typical British university elite that always proffered to propagate new ideas about life in the closed circles of clubs, secret societies and other forms of restricted groups of the bohemian circuits, suddenly got together in a geographical proximity to each other. London was the place to be if you cared to discuss and experience new sensibilities. The same territory that had earlier been inhabited by the likes of Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens and Alexander Bell, to name the few, was at the time of the Bloomsbury group also inhabited by many international outcasts (not of upper-class heritage) like W. B. Yeats, Tommaso Marinetti, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis. They were not treated with contempt as would one expect from a British class society, but were welcomed to participate in the social life and activities of the group. In fact, many of them got supported either by the promotion and publication of their works or, in some cases, financially (there is a popular story that, in order to relieve T. S. Eliot from the tedious work at the bank that would allow him to concentrate on writing poetry, the members of the group offered to grant him an annual fund of 500 pounds which was more than what he could earn at the bank; Eliot politely declined the offer).

Although they did not share their promiscuous, decadent art-for-art sake philosophy, Pound and Wyndham Lewis (an infamous modernist painter and critic) were frequent visitors to the group. After a dispute with the core of the Bloomsburys, they formed the obscure British avant-garde movement – Vorticism, in Great Ormond Street, just few blocks from Gordon Square. Inspired by the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson, and intended as a reaction to the Bloomsbury Group, the movement soon equally opposed Italian Futurism of Marinetti and Picasso's Cubism.

Regardless of their rant against Futurism, Pound and Lewis were obviously to a large extent, influenced by its aesthetics. After all, Marinetti, the leader of the Futurist movement, had been living in their neighbourhood in London before WWI, which resulted in a constant communication between him and the Vorticists. Not only that, Wyndham Lewis's article from 1914 – *Futurism, Magic and Life* was in Chessa's words, "imbued with the spirit of Italian Futurism." Lewis praised Leonardo da Vinci as the first Futurists, whose paintings did not imitate life but created life anew: the distinction between imitation and creation would become one of the cornerstones of Vorticist's aesthetics.

Although short lived, being abruptly stopped by the WWI, Vorticist movement, as an association of rebel artists in Great Britain, became an inspiration to many subsequent reactionary artists, both in Britain and in France. But what does Vorticism represent? The first edition of the *Blast*, the official publication of the movement, states the basic intention of Vorticism:

Long live the great art vortex sprung up in the centre of this town. We stand for the Reality of the Present—not for the sentimental Future, or the sacripant Past. We want to leave Nature and Men alone. We do not want to make people wear Futurist Patches, or fuss men to take to pink and sky-blue trousers. We are not their wives or tailors. The only way Humanity can help artists is to remain independent and work unconsciously. WE NEED THE UNCONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMANITY- their stupidity animalism and dreams. We believe in no perfectibility except our own. Intrinsic beauty is in the Interpreter and Seer, not in the object or content. We do not want to change the appearance of the world, because we are not Naturalists, Impressionists OF Futurists (the latest form of Impressionism), and do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art. WE ONLY WANT THE WORLD TO LIVE, and to feel its crude energy flowing through us.

At first glance, the debt towards the Bloomsbury ethos is evident: Vorticism advocated the same ethical stance of the inherent value of beauty that cannot be objectively judged (it cannot be projected as an object or represented as a content). Their attack on the sentimentality of the art from the previous century is also in line with the Bloomsbury group aesthetics. What was different though was their insistence of the value of the energy that is released when the work of art is abstracted, cut into small pieces and glued together in an illogical, dream-like design. Wyndham Lewis proclaimed that, “Good art must have no inside. Good art betrayed no sign of its fluid interior, it was all exteriority, sharp lines and sharp contrast.” In that respect, the language should be taken to its limits, beyond representation, beyond words, outside of the culture, outside of every ideology. In his view, you learn the language and got stuck in the rules and habits that define its use. Pound declared to his friends that he wanted to destroy the crust of dead English. But to do so one has to undergo changes in the perception of the world as the scope of your use of language defines the scope of your understanding of the world. Poetic English then has to be deconstructed and if needed, replaced with other languages until it is being cleansed of its habitual use. And this is exactly what many avant-garde movements of the 20th century all the way to Lettrism, Situationism and punk strove to achieve. If we use modern distinction close to the readers of this text, we may safely say that compared to Bloomsbury’s group classic rock stance, Vorticists were more of a punk rocker.

Their manifesto clearly announced an aggressive stance against the mass culture and the stagnation of the public life. As a predecessor of many subsequent artistic movements (Dada, Surrealism), and very much like punk rockers in mid-70s, they advocated a lifestyle and practice of art that will be free of the politics and ideology of the future. Their slogans almost precede Situationism and Punk ethos,

Our vortex is not afraid of the Past: it has forgotten it’s existence. Our vortex regards the Future as as sentimental as the Past. The Future is distant, like the Past, and therefore sentimental. With our Vortex the Present is the only active thing. Life is the Past and the Future. The Present is Art. The Past and Future are the prostitutes Nature has provided. Art is periodic escapes from this Brothel.

As noted earlier, the energy release is crucial for the aesthetics of Pound. He considered vortex as an energy drill that demolishes the compactness of the sentimental representational art that was designed to please the masses,

[The vortex was] that point in the cyclone where energy cuts into space and imparts form to it ... the pattern and angles and geometric lines which is formed by our vortex in the existing chaos.

Wyndham Lewis similarly attacked the artists who focused their work on the faithful representation of the physical appearance of the world. In line with the Futurist’s stance, he declared that the artists should not imitate nature as it appears to our senses but should imitate “its creative force.” In that respect, Pound conceives of the abstract geometry that holds the secret of the energy release on Earth. In Pound’s view, “the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy.” Following this line of thought, Materer states that, “The creative artist arranges his forms much as the ‘lines of force’ or ‘moving energies’ (Pound’s phrases) of the physical universe give form to nature.” All the energized past, all that makes life worthy to live, all experiences pours into this vortex. As Materer, in his book, *Vortex: Pound, Eliot and Lewis* notes, Pound,

briefly defined the vortex as ‘the point of maximum energy’ and, in a fuller definition, related it to the image: ‘The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is a . . . vortex, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.’

The logic that states that the artist’s task was to drill into the chaos of modern life with this vortex, cutting away sentimental excess to impart a hard, clear, geometric form, and treating the poem like a sculpted object,

complements Nietzsche's idea that the role of the artist is to use the Dionysian force to smash down (or drill) into the frozen mass of pre-packed narratives of the religious morality. The Vorticist's conclusion that the representational art produces frozen, demagnetized force fields that, while suitable for the control of the masses (something like popular songs nowadays) actually destroys the spiritual core of the society, advocates for the release of the magnetic force so that the individual free-floating fragments may start attracting or repulsing each other into new compounds (a characteristic operation of Apollo). Adhering to the Futurist's idea of continuity, Pound refutes the notion that the broken fragments are isolated from each other. A continuity runs through everything in the cosmos, therefore, the space between the crashed forms is not empty but is pregnant with the relational force. Following the logic of the whole universe being magnetically charged, the new relations of forms are of erotic origin. The force of eroticism employs the magnetism of forms to creatively release the energy by endlessly combining the elements into new, *rich and strange* combinations. Materer argues that at the core of the Vorticist's philosophy is the notion that,

Because the poet's mind is one with the "germinal universe," he can perceive the ultimate reality of the "universe of fluid force." These "fluid forces" may assume the shape of a vortex, or of a rose pattern such as a magnet may enforce in metallic dust. The poet perceives such shapes, unlike the scientist, for whom "energy has no borders, it is a shapeless 'mass' of force.

Thus, the poet reflects the operations of the cosmic designer who, immersed in the creative dance of the universe, forms and deforms out of pleasure. And in the great parable of Nietzsche, the very cosmos is presented as a child that while playing, destroying and reforming the world at every moment, enjoys and laughs. Pound learned from a fellow member of the group, a Polish-French sculptor Gaudier Brzeska, the art of cutting the large pieces of work into fragments, the radical technique that Pound later mercilessly employed when editing the poem of T. S. Eliot, his new protégée. Taking examples from Brzeska's experience as a sculptor and in line with the Vorticist's philosophy, Pound realized that in order to energize the poem to the maximum one has to treat it like a Cubist picture: in other words, to cut all the descriptive, reflexive parts, to let the reader use his imagination and knowledge of literature and art to fill the massive representational gaps in the structure of the poem. The result: the poem is given an avant-garde boost of energy: the disharmony and the noise of the disparate elements that constitute the verses ask for the expert knowledge of literature, art, music, mythology, esoteric philosophy, magic and world history, in an attempt to piece together in some sort of a recognizable pattern the content and the mood of the poem. A chance for the practical application of his theory came soon when Pound befriended young and promising T. S. Eliot. Sensing Eliot's talent but remaining true to his critical concept about the energy release, Pound decided to employ his radical experimentation. Amidst the vortex set on full force, the most important poetic work of the century was beginning to take shape.

3. CONCLUSION

Ezra Pound stands as a giant of Anglo-Saxon's Modernism. He endeavoured to produce a thorough reevaluation of the literary and art tradition by inserting the practices of experimentation with time (Imagism) and space (Vorticism). With the latter, he combined the frantic pace of Futurism with the immobility of Cubism to form a potent tool for the critique of modernity. Being active in the intellectual vortex of London, he created a separate Pound vortex that poured the creative energy to the most prominent artists of the century. Hemingway remarked, "Ezra was the most generous writer I have ever known ... he helped poets, painters, sculptors and prose writers that he believed in and he would help anyone whether he believed in them or not if they were in trouble." It is sad to acknowledge that nowadays he is mainly remembered by his flirting with Mussolini and the Fascist's party. In 1948, while Pound got institutionalized, Eliot received a Nobel Prize in literature. Commenting on the success of Eliot, and the misery that befell Pound, Wyndham Lewis (as noted by Timothy Materer) wondered what could draw Eliot "up into so brilliantly sunlit a position" and Pound "down into such portentous shadows." It was time that Eliot and many other writers to return their debt to the bard. Pound answered the riddle himself, "You cannot be as intelligent, in that sort of way, without being prey to the furies." After a pressure exerted to the public by his fellow poets, one of the most vocal being T. S. Eliot, Pound got released. He immediately went to Italy. In a telegram sent for Pound's birthday, Eliot wrote, "You are the greatest poet alive and I owe everything to you."

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